

*The following sermon was preached at Redemption Baptist Church on Sunday, 29 September 2019. We encourage you to look up the Scriptures that are referenced. May the Lord speak to your heart as you study His Word.*

## **The Waldenses: Lights in the Dark Ages**

Next Sunday, we will begin our missions conference, with our theme, “Bearing Much Fruit.” As we are preparing our hearts for the conference, I would like, once again, to examine the testimony of some people who bore much fruit for the Lord.

Now, as I said at the beginning of last week’s message, the ultimate Fruit-Bearer of all times is the Lord Jesus Himself! He is the ultimate Servant, and the ultimate Missionary. He made the longest missionary journey of all times! He left His throne in Heaven to come to earth, so that He could purchase our salvation. Just as a grain of wheat brings forth much fruit when it falls to the ground and dies, so Christ, through His death, brought forth the fruit of salvation for all who will believe on Him. Christ is also the One who enables *us* to bring forth fruit for *Him*. He is the Vine, and we are the branches. As we abide in Him, and draw our spiritual nourishment from Him, we are enabled to bring forth fruit for Him.

We also examined the testimony of the Apostle Paul. From the moment of his conversion, Paul had one driving, consuming goal in his life. That goal was to bring forth fruit for the Lord. Remember how, in Jesus’ parable of the good seed, He said that the seed that fell upon good ground brought forth fruit, “*some an hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty*”? Well, Paul was not content to bring forth thirtyfold: he wanted to bring forth “*an hundredfold*”—all the time! Because Paul planted the seed of God’s Word in people’s hearts all over Europe, we are here this morning, with Bible in hand, hearing the Good News of salvation!

Now, this morning, we will learn about another group of fruit bearers, who preached the true Gospel of Christ during extremely dark times. They are known in history as the Waldenses. These people received their name from the Italian word *waldesi*, which means “valley.” They were also called by similar names, such as “Valdes,” “Vallenses,” “Vallis,” “Valdeci,” and “Vaudois.”

Who were these Christians? Well, they were not one particular nationality. They lived deep in the valleys of the Italian Piedmont; and they spoke Italian and French. Some historians trace the churches of these valleys all the way back to about A.D. 120.<sup>1</sup> The members of these churches translated the Bible from Greek to Latin in the year A.D. 157; and they continued to use this version (which was called the *Itala*) for centuries.<sup>2</sup>

By the way, the Waldenses were Baptist in their beliefs. Many non-Baptist historians have admitted that the Waldenses were the Baptists of their times. For example, **the Lutheran historian von Mosheim wrote in 1726**, “...the origin of... the Anabaptists... is lost in the remote depths of antiquity... Before the rise of Luther and Calvin, there lay concealed in almost all the countries of Europe, persons who adhered tenaciously to the principles of the modern Baptists.”<sup>3</sup> **The Dutch Reformed historians Ypeij and Dermout wrote in 1829**: “We have now seen that the Baptists, who were formerly called Anabaptists... were the original Waldenses, and who have long in history received the honour of that origin. On this

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<sup>1</sup> David Sorenson, *Touch Not the Unclean Thing* (Duluth, MN: Northstar Baptist Ministries, 2001), p. 78.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Institute of Ecclesiastical History*, II, pp. 119-120.

account the Baptists may be considered as the only Christian community which has stood since the days of the Apostles, and as a Christian society which has preserved pure the doctrine of the Gospel through all ages.”<sup>4</sup>

The Waldenses were amazing servants of God. The Waldenses accepted the Bible, and not tradition, as their only authority. They rejected infant baptism. They baptised by immersion, and not sprinkling. They baptised only people who professed faith in Christ. They taught that salvation is by faith in Christ’s sacrifice alone, and not by works, sacraments, or rituals. They rejected the church of Rome, and maintained independent, congregational churches. They baptised people who were saved out of the Catholic Church, since they did not consider Catholic baptism to be legitimate. [For this reason, they were often called “Anabaptists,” or “re-baptisers.”] They believed in separation of church and state. They rejected the Catholic teachings of purgatory, Transubstantiation (the Mass), and so on. Make no mistake about it: the Waldenses *were* Baptist in doctrine.

However, the thing about the Waldenses that I wish to focus on this morning was their passion for preserving the Word of God; for *translating* the Word of God into modern languages; and for *spreading* the Word of God, and the Gospel of Christ. These Christians were simple cowherds, farmers, and peddlers; yet, they sent out missionaries all over Europe. They were mercilessly persecuted by the Roman Catholic Church. They were tortured and slaughtered in huge numbers. The Holy Roman Empire waged whole Crusades against these people. They wiped out entire towns and provinces of these people. Yet, the Waldenses kept reproducing themselves, by preaching the Gospel in other regions. One Catholic historian named Cardinal Hosius admitted in the year 1557: “Were it not for the fact that the Anabaptists [“re-baptisers”] have been grievously tormented and cut off with the knife during the past 1200 years, they would swarm greater than all the Reformers [the Protestants].”<sup>5</sup>

The Waldensian churches believed in and practiced the Great Commission of Jesus Christ; and they were prepared to give their lives for Him. It is my prayer that if you do not have a passion for missions, you will be convicted by this message. The title of this message is *The Waldenses: Lights in the Dark Ages*.

## I. The Waldenses were lights for Christ in very dark times.

### Read John 1:1-5.

In the Scripture that we just read, the Apostle John calls Jesus Christ three things. First, He calls Jesus “the Word.” He calls Jesus “the Word” because Jesus is God. He is co-equal in essence, power, and glory with God the Father and God the Holy Spirit; and as God, He is the Author of every word of Scripture. That is why He is called “the Word.” John also calls Jesus “the Life.” As God, Jesus is the origin of all physical and spiritual life.

Now, please notice what else John calls Jesus. John calls Jesus “the Light”—because it is Jesus who illumines our minds and hearts, and imparts spiritual understanding, so that we might be saved. Furthermore, John says that the Light (Jesus Christ) “*shineth in darkness.*” Yet, sadly, he also says that the “*darkness comprehended it not.*” What does this mean? This means that mankind does not understand Jesus Christ, because their eyes and hearts are blinded by their sin. Jesus’ words are like riddles to sin-blinded men. The world does not understand Christ, nor do they understand His Word. Furthermore, they do not desire to get close to Christ or His Word—because when they do, their sin is exposed, and their hearts are

<sup>4</sup> *Geschiedenis der Netherlandsehe Hervomke Kerk*, I, p. 148.

<sup>5</sup> Hosius, *Letters Apud Opera*, pp. 112-113.

pricked, prodded, and convicted of sin. Christ's words make lost men, women, and children feel guilty; therefore, they recoil from Christ.

**Read John 3:14-20 and 12:35-40**

These are frightening words! Because we are sinners and rebels against God, we are, in our natural condition, lost in darkness, and do not even *desire* to come to the Light of Christ. Men prefer to remain in their sin. Yet, there *are* some who come to the Light. There *are* some who respond to Jesus' invitation to be saved. As we saw in the above verses, Jesus said, "***While ye have light, believe in the light, that ye may be the children of light.***" That is a sincere invitation. Christ has given us His Word; and by His Spirit, He helps us to *understand* His Word, so that we might understand what we need to be saved. Sadly, most men, even when they come to understand what they need to be saved, still choose to turn away from the Light, because they are too stubborn to admit their guilt. Yet, there are *some* who come to Him.

**Read John 3:21.**

Jesus is the Light of the World. Jesus said, "***I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life.***" That is an amazing promise! Yet, do you know what I find equally amazing? God has chosen His redeemed ones—those of us whom He has saved—to be lamps, to bear His light to others! He *could* have chosen the holy angels to preach the Gospel to the lost world; and they would have done a much better job than we have done. Yet, He has chosen the people whom He has *redeemed* from the darkness of sin to bear His light to others! Weak, sinful, and unfaithful though we often are, He has chosen us who are saved to bear His light to those who are still in darkness.

**Read Acts 26:14-18.**

**Read Matthew 5:14-16.**

Think of this! Jesus said that believers are "***the light of the world.***" That is a powerful statement! That word "light" is translated from the Greek word *phos*. *Phos* means "something that produces light in and of itself" (such as the sun, or a flame). This word *phos* is the same word that Jesus used for Himself when He called Himself "the Light of the world."

Now, why would Jesus say that believers are "the light"? We are not God! We don't have any spiritual light in and of ourselves. The only reason we have spiritual light in us is that Christ, the Light of the World, has come into our hearts to live. We do not produce Light; we are merely like *candlesticks* that *carry* the light. Actually, that is precisely what Jesus says in **verse 15**. Jesus said, "***Neither do men light a candle, and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick.***" That word "candlestick" comes from Greek word *luchnion*. *Luchnion* means "something that *carries* light," such as a lamp stand, or a candlestick.

So, on one hand, Jesus says that Christians are not the actual Light. *Jesus* is the Light; and we are candlesticks, to *carry* the Light of Christ to a darkened world. Yet, on the other hand, Christ actually does call us *phos*—the light. Christ identifies Himself with His people so closely, that it is *as though* we ourselves were "light." When lost people see the Light of Christ shining forth from our lives, it is as though they are seeing Christ Himself. It is in this

sense that Christians are called “the light.” A lost world can know that Christ is real when they see Christ in *our* lives. They can know Christ is real when they see that Christ is controlling our words, thoughts, and actions, and enabling us to live holy lives.

Christian, *you* are a candlestick, bearing the light of Christ. However, the question is: *How much* are you allowing His light to shine from your life? Do others see Jesus in you? Do you open your mouth regularly to testify of Him? Does your mouth speak constantly of Jesus Christ? Are your *words* about Christ backed up by true faith, and by actions springing forth from that faith? Are you so concerned about shining the light of Jesus Christ, that you are willing to do your part to send out missionaries to regions where you are not able to go? (In other words, are you involved in giving to missions?) Is shining the light of Christ so important to you, that you yourself would be willing to get up and go to a culture that you don’t know, so that you can bear the light to them, if God were to call you to do so?

The “Middle Ages” weren’t called “the Dark Ages” for nothing. They were very dark times. The authorities burned every copy of Scripture that they could find; and they burned anyone who dared to read it. Yet, in that dark world, the Waldenses were bright and shining lights. In fact, the Waldenses had a motto for themselves, which came straight from Scripture. Their motto was “*Lux lucet in tenebris.*” This means, “The light shineth in darkness.” (This is from **John 1:5.**) Their emblem for themselves was a burning flame on a candlestick.

Christian, do you have the deep passion for missions that the Waldenses had? Are you allowing the Light of Jesus Christ to shine brightly from your life, unhindered by self or sin? Missions isn’t merely a program in your church, toward which you give money; it is a *lifestyle*. It is a heart obedience to the Great Commission, lived out in your life every hour of every day!

## II. **The Waldenses were faithful servants of Christ.**

Just like the Apostle Paul, the Waldenses were faithful servants of Christ. Now, before we examine the Waldenses’ witness for the Lord, let’s look at a Scripture that talks about service.

### **Read Matthew 24:45-46.**

In last week’s message, I emphasised the fact that anytime you read a parable, you need to know *to whom* that parable was given. In this passage, Jesus spoke these words not merely to His followers, but to the *whole Jewish nation*. In **Matthew 24-25**, Jesus is giving warning to the Jewish people who will be living in the period between His first coming to earth, and His Second Coming to earth. In others words, He is addressing all Jews who would live during this present church age, *and* during the coming Tribulation period (right up to the Battle of Armageddon). He is warning the Jewish people that they need to prepare themselves spiritually for His return to earth—first of all, by believing on Him as their Messiah, and then by serving Him with their lives. *Everything* that Jesus said in these chapters is addressed to the Jewish people.

Now, even though this verse is addressed to the Jewish people, we Gentile Christians living in the New Testament age can find *application* in this verse. Though none of us in this room this morning is Jewish, and though we definitely will not go through the Tribulation period, we

*will* take part in Christ’s coming 1,000-year Kingdom. We will meet the Lord in the air seven years *before* His return to earth, when He takes us up to Heaven in the Rapture. We will stand before the Judgment Seat of Christ immediately following the Rapture, and will give account of our service to Christ. Then, when the Tribulation is over, and we return to earth with Christ on white horses, we will receive *reward* in the 1,000-year Kingdom on earth. We will literally rule with Him in His Kingdom. How much authority we will be given to us will depend upon how *faithfully* we served Christ here on earth.

Sadly, faithfulness is a quality that is rare these days—even for Christians. What does it mean, exactly? Well, to be “faithful” means to be true to a promise you have made, or to a trust that has been committed to you by someone else. What is the trust that our Master has given to us who know Him? It is the Great Commission.

### **Read Matthew 28:18-20.**

The Great Commission has three distinct parts. First of all, we are to “*teach all nations*” (in other words, to teach people the Gospel, so that they might be saved). Secondly, we are to baptise them after they are saved (thus making them members of Bible-preaching churches). Thirdly, we are to teach them to “*observe*” all things that Christ has commanded them. Now, that word “*observe*” is very important. It is translated from the Greek verb *teiren*, which means “to keep, or to guard.” What is it that we are to “keep, or guard”? The things Christ has commanded. In other words, His commandments. His Word. The Scriptures. Christians have the responsibility to protect, guard, and safe-keep the words of Scripture!

Do you realise what a tall order this is? Think about it. Suppose that you were a Christian living in the Dark Ages, and that you were living under constant threat of being murdered by the Roman Catholic Church. Which would you care about more? Would you care more about your own life, or about preserving God’s Word? The Waldenses cared more for God’s Word than they did their own lives. Common farmers and peddlers committed whole books of the Bible to memory, so that if the authorities ever confiscated and burned their copies of Scripture, they would be able to reproduce them on parchment from memory, and make copies again. Ministers taught their young men Greek, and *translated* the original Greek New Testament into modern languages of their day—such as German, French, and Italian.<sup>6</sup> To this day, we still have some ancient copies of these translations, from as far back as the year 1100.<sup>7</sup> (By the way, please remember that the Waldenses made these copies by hand. There were no printing presses!) The Waldenses took their precious copies of Scripture to foreign countries, and preached the Gospel! These Christians were faithful servants of Christ!

Century after century, the Holy Roman Empire waged periodic slaughters against the Waldenses; but beginning in the year 1488, the Catholic Church began to wage all-out, endless war against them. The valleys of the Piedmont were filled with blood. By the early 1500’s, the Waldenses were on the verge of extinction; and many of them ran to the city of Geneva. Now, Geneva had come under control of the Protestant Reformer, John Calvin; and although the Waldenses didn’t agree with much of the Protestants’ teachings (especially infant baptism), they at least were safe from the Catholic Church there in Geneva. Now, when they

<sup>6</sup> J.A. Wylie, *History of the Waldenses* (London: Cassell & Co., 1860), chapter 10, p. 2, of internet edition (<http://www.pbtseminary.com/Baptists/J.%20Wylie/the-waldenses.htm>), September 9, 2000, quoted in *Touch Not the Unclean Thing*, p. 259.

<sup>7</sup> *Touch Not the Unclean Thing*, pp. 258-259.

fled to Geneva, the Waldenses brought copies of the Scripture with them. These were not just *recent* copies, either. Theodore Beza, a Greek scholar who lived in Geneva, reported that the Waldenses handed over *extremely ancient* copies of the Scripture to him, in the original Greek. One of the Waldenses' own pastors, named Leger, claimed that their Waldensian churches had *never* been without God's Word. Leger claimed that his forefathers had preserved the Greek New Testament for as long as the Gospel had been in their valleys. The people of Geneva were shocked at the ancient documents that these people produced.

Now, here is the best part. Theodore Beza used the Waldenses' Greek copies of the Scripture (at least in part) to compile a *complete* printed edition of the Greek New Testament. It is called "Beza's Text." Beza's Text was then used, in 1611, to translate the King James Version of the Bible.<sup>8</sup> In other words, our King James Bible is in our hands this morning, in part, because of the faithfulness of the Waldenses, who guarded and kept the Word of God!

Christian, how serious are *you* about this Book? Do you read it every day? Do you commit it to memory, so that you can use it to witness to people? Do you love these words more than you love your own *life*? If you do not have an intense love for this Book, then you certainly will not have an intense love for the Great Commission—because guarding His Word is a huge *part of* the Great Commission!

### III. The Waldenses were wise servants of Christ.

#### Read Matthew 10:16.

In this passage, Christ was sending out 70 disciples to preach the Gospel throughout Israel. He warned them that they were being sent out into great danger. Their very lives would be at stake. And so, He told them to be "*wise as serpents, and harmless as doves.*" In other words, "Don't use physical force to defend yourselves from persecution; and don't retaliate against those who harm you. Be harmless. Yet, at the same time, be cautious and wise. Don't compromise, or water down your message; but be wise in your presentation of the Gospel."

The Waldenses followed this command well. They did often preach in the open; but many times, preaching openly brought an immediate death sentence. Thus, they came up with very wise and ingenious ways to introduce the Gospel to people. In the year 1260, an anonymous writer (who was not a Waldensian) wrote about the Waldenses in his region. The Waldenses had been establishing churches in his province by the Danube River, in Austria, since 1231. He reported that the Waldenses were "content in poverty, avoided lying, profanity, and theft, and were diligent in business. They were shoemakers, weavers, and other artisans...and they lived godly lives. Their converts were made by the Bible and religious books. They went as peddlers to a cottage or a nobleman's castle, offering fabrics or jewellery for sale; and when asked if they had anything else, they answered: 'Yes, great rarities; I have one precious stone through which you can see God, and another that kindles love to him in the heart.' With that, these peddlers brought out the precious roll of Holy Writ."<sup>9</sup> Can you imagine being one of the Waldenses' clients, and suddenly seeing, for the first time in your life, a copy of the Scripture in your own language, and being able to read it for yourself?

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 256-261.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas Armitage, *A History of the Baptists*, vol. 1 (New York: Bryan, Taylor & Co., 1890; reprint edition, Paris, AR: Baptist Standard Bearer), p. 301.

The Waldenses were wise servants of Jesus Christ! First of all, the Waldenses were wise for endeavouring to win souls. The Bible says, **“he that winneth souls is wise” (Proverbs 11:30)**. They were also wise in that they used every talent and resource that they had (whether shoemaking, or weaving, or some other craft) to spread the Gospel to people. They were wise in that they prayed for wisdom to direct the conversation toward the Gospel. You know what, though? This wasn’t a new idea. They were merely following the example of their Master, Jesus Christ. Let’s look at an example of Jesus’ method of witnessing.

**Read John 4:7-29.**

As Jesus talked with the woman at the well, He knew that this woman’s heart was battered and hardened by sin. He knew that she was filled with bitterness and guilt, and that she had therefore erected a wall around herself, and withdrawn from society. He knew that she was not an approachable person. And so, Jesus used a common, everyday subject in order to bring up the subject of eternal life, and to pique her interest. He asked for “water”—the very thing that she had come to the well to get that day; and He then used the topic of water as an illustration to help her see her need of eternal life through Himself. He directed the conversation toward salvation; and once he got there, He didn’t let her change the subject! By the time the conversation was done, this sin-hardened woman had drunk from the water of eternal life; and her life was forever transformed.

In the same way, the Waldenses used their shoes, their clothing, their pieces of jewellery, and the other miscellaneous, everyday objects that they sold to people, to bring up the Gospel. They were **“wise as serpents, but harmless as doves.”** Through the wise use of their resources, coupled with loads of labour, and lots of prayer, they planted the seed of the Gospel in hearts all over Europe; and the seeds that they planted resulted in a tremendous amount of fruit. It is impossible to estimate how extensive their influence was, because most of the records that we have of them were written by their enemies. (Their enemies did their best to destroy the Waldenses’ books, records, and copies of Scriptures.) However, one thing is certain: we are here today, with the knowledge of the Gospel, because the Waldenses obeyed their Saviour, and took the Gospel as far as they could. Many of them were farmers; but spiritually, they were *fruit* farmers. They brought forth much fruit.

**Conclusion:** Christian, are you being a wise servant? Are you using every talent and resource you have to direct people toward Christ? Are you endeavouring to bear much fruit? Can you honestly say, “I’m doing *everything* I can do for Christ. I’m giving *everything* I have to serve the Lord”? Are you truly giving your all to the Great Commission?

I fear that if we were truly to search our hearts, we would find, to our shame, that we fall far short of giving Christ our all. Christian, serve the Lord with everything you have! This life will be over before you know it; and only what you do for Christ will last. The only things of this earth that you can bring with you to heaven are the souls of those whom you have won to Him.

Perhaps you have never truly been born again. You have no ability to bring forth spiritual fruit, because you are a dead branch, and are not receiving spiritual life from the Vine of Jesus Christ. If you think that you are O.K. with God because you are trying to live a good life, then you are lost, and do not understand

salvation. **Ephesians 2:8-10** says, ***“For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them.”*** God wants to produce good works in your life; but He cannot produce any spiritual fruit from your life until you repent of your sin, abandon your self-righteousness, and trust in what He did for you on the cross. Won't you believe on Him today, and be saved?