

The Great Controversy Series

08 The Church in the Wilderness

Revelation 12:1-6 Now a great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a garland of twelve stars. ² Then being with child, she cried out in labor and in pain to give birth. ³ And another sign appeared in heaven: behold, a great, fiery red dragon having seven heads and ten horns, and seven diadems on his heads. ⁴ His tail drew a third of the stars of heaven and threw them to the earth. And the dragon stood before the woman who was ready to give birth, to devour her Child as soon as it was born. ⁵ She bore a male Child who was to rule all nations with a rod of iron. And her Child was caught up to God and His throne. ⁶ Then the woman fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God, that they should feed her there one thousand two hundred and sixty days.

Revelation 12:13-17 Now when the dragon saw that he had been cast to the earth, he persecuted the woman who gave birth to the male *Child*. ¹⁴ But the woman was given two wings of a great eagle, that she might fly into the wilderness to her place, where she is nourished for a time and times and half a time, from the presence of the serpent. ¹⁵ So the serpent spewed water out of his mouth like a flood after the woman, that he might cause her to be carried away by the flood. ¹⁶ But the earth helped the woman, and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed up the flood which the dragon had spewed out of his mouth. ¹⁷ And the dragon was enraged with the woman, and he went to make war with the rest of her offspring, who keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus Christ.

In symbolic prophecy a woman represents God's people. A pure woman represents a faithful church and a prostitute represents an unfaithful church. In places where the papacy ruled, God's people could not worship openly according to their conscience for a period of 1260 years. It was forbidden to own a Bible. People who did not accept the universal authority of the pope, the rite of the mass, the rite of confession, worship of idols, celibacy of the clergy or the doctrine of purgatory were persecuted. Those who steadfastly refused were in the end condemned to death.

Revelation 17:3-6 So he carried me away in the Spirit into the wilderness. And I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast *which was* full of names of blasphemy, having seven heads and ten horns. ⁴ The woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet, and adorned with gold and precious stones and pearls, having in her hand a golden cup full of abominations and the filthiness of her fornication. ⁵ And on her forehead a name *was* written: MYSTERY, BABYLON THE GREAT, THE MOTHER OF HARLOTS AND OF THE ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH. ⁶ I saw the woman, drunk with the blood of the saints and with the blood of the martyrs of Jesus. And when I saw her, I marveled with great amazement.

We see from the passages that we read that the true believers escaped from the papacy and hid. O.K. does that mean the way of salvation could not be found for all those centuries? No. God did

not leave people helpless but the situation was difficult and dangerous. In another prophecy we see this truth described.

Revelation 11:3 "And I will give *power* to my two witnesses, and they will prophesy one thousand two hundred and sixty days, clothed in sackcloth."

God's two witnesses, the Old and New Testament would testify from 538 to 1798 A.D. clothed in sackcloth. As we said, the circulation of the Bible was prohibited. But on the borders of the papal dominion and beyond, in the mountains and in secluded places, God's people copied the Scriptures and secretly distributed them.

For example, in Britain, a pure Christianity existed in early times. The persecutions of pagan Rome reached there but in the first centuries the heresies of Papal Rome had yet not spoiled the gospel that had been received by the Britons. The persecutions of pagan Rome had caused some Christians to escape to Scotland and from there the gospel passed to Ireland. When the pagan Saxon's invaded Britain, the Christians fled and stayed in the mountains and in the country. One hundred years later in Ireland a devout man named Columba appeared. Together with friends on the secluded island of Iona they established a center of missionary activity. Scattered believers assembled from all around and they formed a school. Among them was someone who kept the Sabbath. Thus the Sabbath truth was broadcast from there. They multiplied copies of the Scriptures. Trained missionaries from there went not only to Scotland and England but to Germany, Switzerland and even Italy.

But the papacy did not rest. In the sixth century they sent their missionaries to Britain and many pagan Saxons accepted Catholicism. In time, their leaders and converts came across the previous Christians. What a great contrast there was! One group lived a plain and humble life according to the Scriptures. The other group behaved proudly and had superstitious beliefs. When the representative of the pope demanded that these humble Christians accept the superiority of the pope, the Christians with a polite and humble attitude rejected the offer. The representative of the pope said, "If you will not receive brethren who bring you peace, you shall receive enemies who will bring you war. If you will not unite with us in showing the Saxons the way of life, you shall receive from them the stroke of death."--J. H. Merle D'Aubigne, History of the Reformation of the Sixteenth Century, b. 17, ch. 2. And thus it was. The papacy by using war, conspiracy and deception either forced the British churches to accept the authority of the pope or they destroyed them.

In places beyond the dominion of the papacy there were Christians who were not affected by papal corruptions. There were heathen around them and through the centuries Christians were influenced by the errors of their neighbors. But these Christians' only rule of faith was the Bible and they maintained many truths. They believed in the Ten Commandments and the Sabbath. There were such groups in central Africa and among the Armenians.

The Waldensians showed the most resistance against the papal corruptions and power. Who were the Waldensians? People living in the valleys in different countries became known as the "valley dwellers," or Vallenses. The original word is the Latin, *vallis*, Valdesi in Italian, Vaudois in

French, and Valdenses in Spanish. . (Benjamin George Wilkinson, *Truth Triumphant* p. 249).
When and where did they live?

If you go to the internet many websites will state that the Waldensian movement was established by Peter Waldo in 1173. Waldo had been a wealthy merchant in Lyon but after he accepted the gospel he gave his wealth to the poor and began to share his faith. Their doctrines came from the Bible and in a short time he was persecuted by the Catholic Church. Finally he escaped to the mountains and lived and worked among believers there. (Wilkinson p. 209). Did the Waldensian movement really begin with Waldo?

There are very few traces of the Waldensians. In general you can only find traces of them in the records of their persecutors because it was the policy of Rome to eliminate every record of those who were against her doctrines and decrees. But Matthew of Westminster (1087 AD) complained about Berengarius and the Waldensians who had corrupted all of France, England and Italy. This was a full century before Peter Waldo (reference from Wilkinson p. 221, Matthew of Westminster, *The Flowers of History*, vol. 2, p. 15). In the year 1096 Pope Urban II issued a bull against the Waldensians living on the French side of the Alps. The reason? The valley was full of heresy. This also happened before Peter Waldo. This simply shows that before Peter Waldo there were people in the valleys of the mountains who rejected the authority and beliefs of the papacy and were doing missionary work.

Actually for centuries before Peter Waldo, there were Christians who maintained a simple a pure faith living in the low valleys of Italy. They remained independent of the Catholic Church. But the time came when Rome commanded them to yield. After some time of struggle most of these church leaders accepted the Rome's authority. But not everyone yielded. Some escaped from persecution to go to other countries and others went to hidden valleys or retreated to rocky areas of the mountains.

Rome forced the churches under her control to keep Sunday as a holy day. At first many people were confused and kept Sabbath and Sunday. But the papacy was uncomfortable with this. The papacy commanded that not only Sunday would be kept holy but that Sabbath would be desecrated. Only those who escaped from Rome's power could keep God's commandments in peace.

Another issue made the Catholic Church uncomfortable. The Waldensians, hundreds of years before the Reformation, had the Bible in their native tongue which confirmed the errors of Rome. The Waldensians pointed to Rome as "Babylon the Great, the Mother of Harlots and off the Abominations of the Earth" (Revelation 17:5). They resisted the corruptions of the papacy at the risk of their lives. After a long period of persecution, many people, over time, compromised their faith but others rejected the worship of images as idolatry and kept the true Sabbath. Many people, by defending these truths, were burned alive or killed by the spear.

Copies of the Bible were rare. Therefore the words of the Scriptures were memorized. Many people could recited large portions of both the Old and New Testament.

The youth received education from their pastors. Not only did they memorize verses of the Scriptures but they copied the Bible. Sometimes these handwritten documents included the whole Bible, sometimes a portion. These and other faithful people in the Dark Ages preserved the Scriptures unadulterated.

Revelation 11:3 "And I will give *power* to my two witnesses, and they will prophesy one thousand two hundred and sixty days, clothed in sackcloth."

Some of the youth were sent to schools in France or Italy. Without telling anyone, they hid handwritten copies of the Bible in their clothing. When these youth found someone who had an interest, they would leave a portion of the Scriptures in a place where it could be found by them. Thus the gospel spread. The spirit of the Waldensians was a missionary spirit. If someone receives the Spirit of Christ, at that moment they want to share that salvation joy with others.

The Waldensian pastor were trained as missionaries. Before becoming a minister they worked in other places as missionaries. They went out two by two. Every youth was accompanied by someone older and with some experience. Although not together every moment, they would meet together for prayer and the more experienced one would give instruction. If they had gone out openly as missionaries they would certainly have been stopped. Many missionaries were killed. So they chose the guise as merchants and travelling salesmen. They kept with them silks, jewelry and other items. They carried with them the Bible, in whole or in part. They shared them with those that were interested.

Many people were shocked when they heard the gospel. This was because the people had been taught to look to the priests and the pope for salvation. They people believed their whole lives that by giving money, by making certain ceremonies, by going on a pilgrimage thus earning enough merits, perhaps, perhaps a stern and loveless God would forgive their sins. There is no assurance of salvation in such a belief system. There is always fear. There is always doubt. Have I earned enough merit to go to heaven? Will God send me to hell? Will I go to purgatory? Is my mother burning in flames? How can you love a God like that? Whether you are conscious of it or not, your motivations will always be fear. There is no peace. And a service that is not born from love isn't really keeping God's law anyway. These works are in vain!

But these Waldensians carried this message: God is love. God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him will not perish but have eternal life. The blood of Jesus cleanses us from all sin. I wrote this to you that believe in the name of the Son of God that you may know that you have eternal life. (1 John 4:8; John 3:16; 1 John 1:7; 1 John 5:13).

So what is your religion teaching you? In your religion can you cover your sins which are worthy of eternal death by working, paying money, going on a pilgrimage, making ceremonies, by doing so-called good works and earning merits? Or will you go to a place like purgatory and by burning there you will provide atonement for your own sins? If so, you would make a good Catholic in the Dark Ages. The system of salvation is the same. This system was present in Jesus' day. The Pharisees were attached to a similar system of salvation. They are all wrong. The Old Testament says:

Isaiah 64:6 But we are all like an unclean *thing*, And all our righteousnesses *are* like filthy rags; We all fade as a leaf, And our iniquities, like the wind, Have taken us away.

And the New Testament says:

Romans 3:23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,

This verse does not reflect the Greek completely. Everyone has sinned and are still, present continuous tense in the original, still falling short of the glory of God. We are not clean.

Romans 3:20-25 Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law *is* the knowledge of sin. ²¹ But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, ²² even the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe. For there is no difference; ²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, ²⁵ whom God set forth *as* a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed,

The Waldensians did not just work in France and Italy. The truths of God went to far away places. Churches were formed and many people were martyred. Why were they killed? Satan wants to destroy people and he knows that if they think that they can establish their own righteousness by works to get to heave that they will surely fall short and be destroyed. The righteousness that carries you to heaven is not 50%. It is not 90%. You must be 100 percent faultless. You cannot provide this. So the Lord in His mercy and love provided a sufficient righteousness in the sinless Jesus.

Do not look to your own righteousness for salvation. It is not enough. Do not look to your religious teachers. They can't get themselves to heaven much less you. The Lord provided in Jesus Christ a perfect sacrifice. Accept this and receive eternal life.