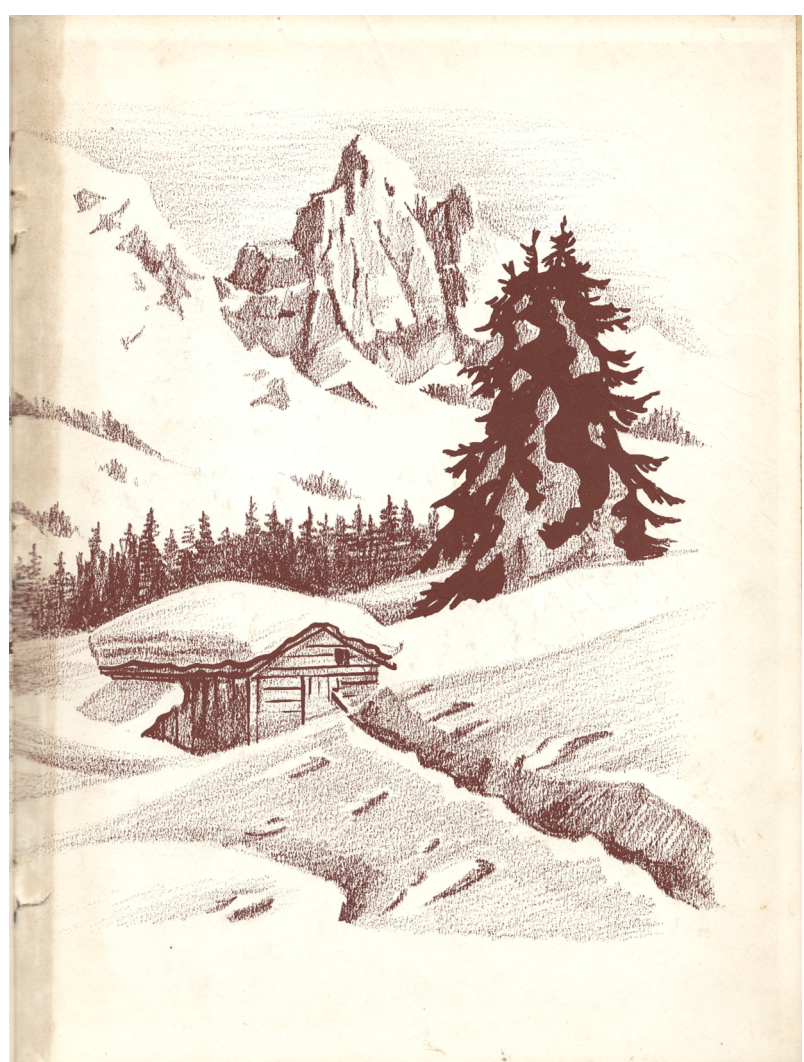


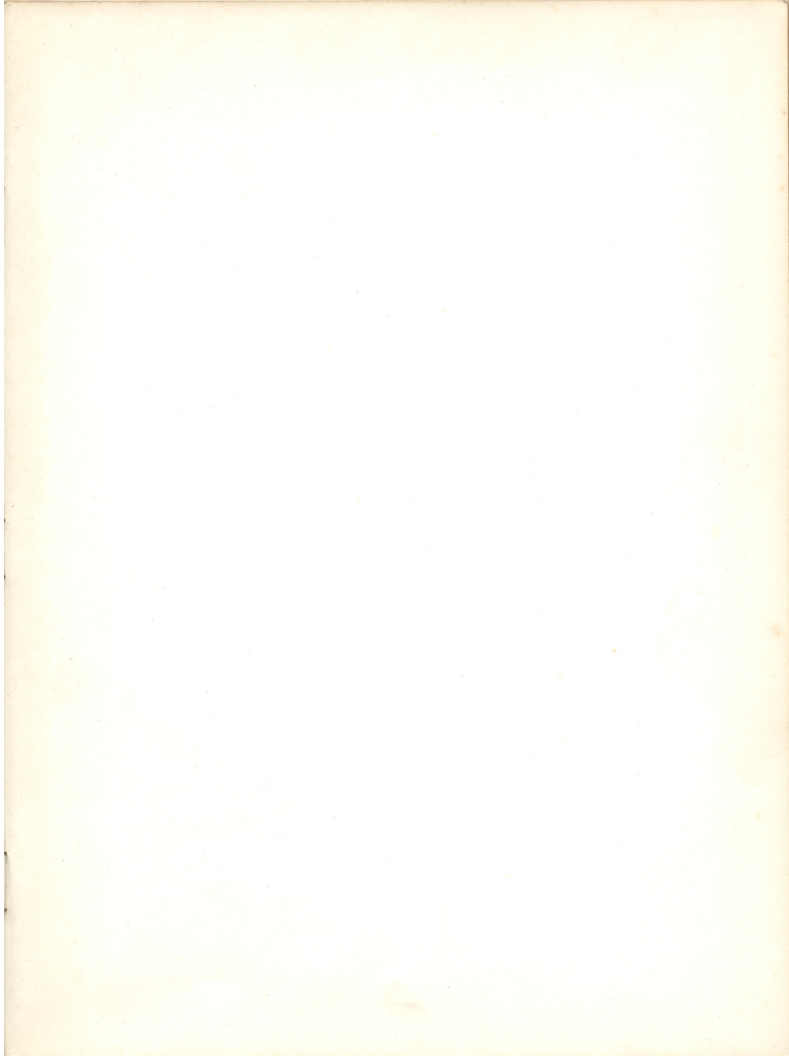


THE WALDENSES

By JOE MANISCALCO







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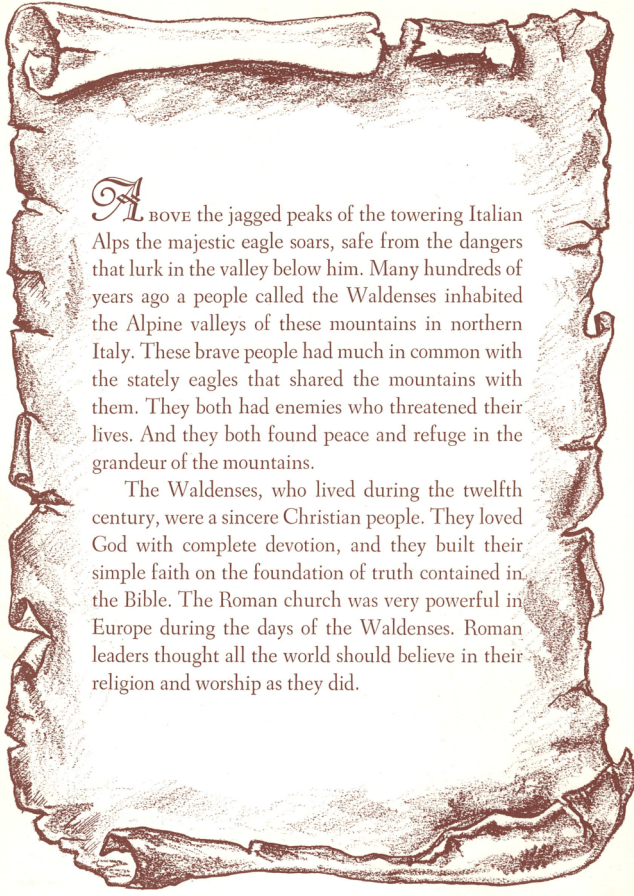


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Text and Illustrations
by
JOE MANISCALCO

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SOUTHERN PUBLISHING ASSOCIATION
Nashville, Tennessee



ABOVE the jagged peaks of the towering Italian Alps the majestic eagle soars, safe from the dangers that lurk in the valley below him. Many hundreds of years ago a people called the Waldenses inhabited the Alpine valleys of these mountains in northern Italy. These brave people had much in common with the stately eagles that shared the mountains with them. They both had enemies who threatened their lives. And they both found peace and refuge in the grandeur of the mountains.

The Waldenses, who lived during the twelfth century, were a sincere Christian people. They loved God with complete devotion, and they built their simple faith on the foundation of truth contained in the Bible. The Roman church was very powerful in Europe during the days of the Waldenses. Roman leaders thought all the world should believe in their religion and worship as they did.



AT FIRST, life in the Alpine valleys was pleasant for the Waldenses. The rich earth yielded bountiful crops—wheat, grapes, chestnuts, and figs—to feed their families. In springtime the melting snows watered the gardens and refreshed the flocks of sheep and goats.

In the summertime men and boys led the flocks to pastures high on the mountainsides. But as winter approached and the icy winds swept across the Alpine glaciers and through the higher pastures, they drove them to the lower valleys, where food was easier to find. In all seasons the canyons resounded with their songs of praise to God for His love.





Waldensian children learned about the Bible as soon as they could talk. Wise parents realized that their community would not always be free to worship God as they wished, so they taught their children the importance of being true to their beliefs. The young people were taught to cope with the stern difficulties of mountain life, to endure extreme hardships, and to think independently. They learned that they must never confide in strangers, for many who seemed friendly were actually persecutors in disguise.

There were no public schools for the Waldensian children to attend, no playgrounds, no books with pretty pictures. Careful Christian mothers taught their boys and girls everything they needed to know. They learned how to care for their animals, how to protect themselves from the dangers of the mountains, how to grow the fruits and vegetables they needed for food. But more important, they learned to love and serve the God of heaven.

Eventually Satan gained complete control over the minds of many of the Roman church leaders. These men firmly believed that they were practicing true religion and that they must force other people to agree with them. Although in the beginning the Romans were sincere in their beliefs, they used many cruel methods to bring people into their church.

Messengers published a decree stating that unless the Waldenses renounced their religion and joined the Roman church, they would be killed. But the brave Waldenses refused to give up their faith in God. They felt that every man should be free to worship God according to his own beliefs, and they would rather die than give up this precious freedom.





The attitude of the Waldenses angered the Roman officials. Soldiers arrested many of these faithful people and brought them before the church leaders. They were threatened and beaten, and those who refused to give up their faith in the Bible were killed.

Because the Waldenses had been taught true faith in God from childhood, the tortures they had to endure were less painful. Even those who were burned at the stake died praising God for His goodness.

It would have been impossible for the Romans to destroy all the Waldenses, although that is what they wanted to do. Some of the soldiers persecuted the Waldenses only because they were told to. But some soldiers actually seemed to enjoy it.

When the Roman soldiers saw that the Waldenses were not going to give in, they became angry. They were more determined than ever to make the Waldenses believe or be destroyed, and they offered rewards to the villagers for capturing the Waldenses or destroying their property. Most of the villagers did not realize what they were doing. Money tempted them to betray their neighbors and friends.

Captives whose faith seemed weak were not killed. Instead they were sent as galley slaves to the seacoast, where they were forced to row huge ships across the seas. Church leaders hoped this would weaken their faith, and they would be converted to the Roman faith.



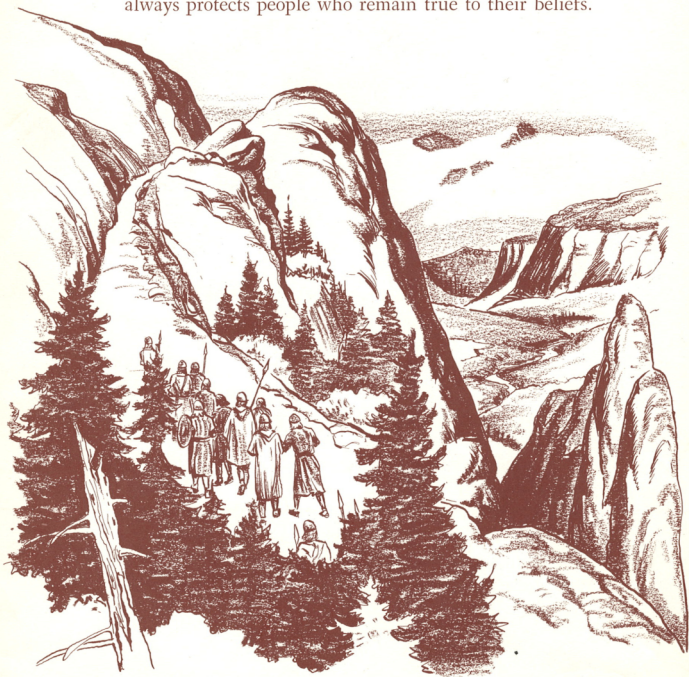


The Waldenses realized that their peaceful life was over. Quickly they packed what clothes and food they could carry and left their valley homes for the safety of the rugged mountains. Although they knew that their existence there would be the most primitive, they felt this was the only way they would be able to worship God in peace.

It was hard for them to give up their comfortable homes, their peaceful pastures and pretty gardens. I'm sure many of the boys and girls, and grown-ups too, were afraid and unhappy as they trudged up the rough pathway. Probably they wondered if they would ever see their homes again. Maybe they would even be killed. Who could tell?

Still the Roman soldiers were not satisfied. They followed the Waldenses into the mountains.

The Book of Revelation says, "And the serpent cast out of his mouth water as a flood after the woman, that he might cause her to be carried away of the flood. . . . And the earth opened her mouth, and swallowed up the flood." The serpent is Satan, and the flood represents the soldiers who wanted to destroy the Waldenses. But the earth swallowed up the flood of wicked soldiers. God always protects people who remain true to their beliefs.





The Waldenses made crude new homes in the rock-bound caves. They sent scouts to patrol the mountain pathways, but still many of them were captured.

One day a Christian named Girard was to be burned at the stake. As the executioner prepared the wood, Girard demanded, "Give me a stone."

The executioner refused.

"I will not throw the stone," Girard assured him, so the executioner handed him a rock.

"When it is in the power of a man to eat and digest this solid stone," Girard declared, "the religion for which I am about to suffer shall have an end, and not before."

He threw the stone to the ground as the fire flamed around his body.

In Rome the pope became more determined than ever to destroy these stubborn people who would not join his church. He issued a proclamation saying that he would forgive the sins of anyone who would join in the war against these "unbelievers." Naturally, everyone was anxious to have his sins forgiven. Thousands of soldiers from France and Italy joined in the search for the Waldenses. These men did not realize that the God of heaven was the only one who could really forgive their sins.

Even today many people believe they can be saved by doing certain things. They give lots of money to the church, or do good deeds that everyone will see. But the Bible tells us, "By grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God." Salvation is free to everyone.





Soon the mountain canyons were almost overrun with anxious soldiers searching for the faithful Waldenses. Every day the Waldenses moved higher and higher. The steep, boulder-strewn paths were dangerous. One false step on a narrow pathway would have meant certain death. Still the Waldenses remained true to their faith. All the soldiers of Rome could not silence their songs of praise.

The Waldenses knew those mountains well. They knew the easy paths and the hard ones, too. They knew the secret places, the little rockbound caves where they could hide and be safe.

One day as a troop of soldiers was searching some caves on a steep mountainside, a thick blanket of fog suddenly covered their path. The soldiers were not familiar with the rugged mountains, and they wandered around in hopeless confusion, unable to see where they were going. Some of them slipped from the narrow path and fell to their death in the canyon below. Many were lost in the rocky caves and were never found. Only a few escaped.

But above the fog, where the sky was clear and blue and the eagle soared free toward heaven, the Waldenses were safe from their pursuers. Once again God had protected them from their enemies, as He had promised. Their faith had been rewarded. The Bible says, "Fear not, little flock; for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom," and "If God be for us, who can be against us?"





In the cities the members of the Roman church worshipped in beautiful stone cathedrals. But the Waldenses had a cathedral of their own. Their church was the peaceful green valley, surrounded by walls of majestic mountains.

In the caves where they made their homes, many of the young people spent long hours copying parts of the Bible. Daily Bible study was a very important part of their lives. As the young people grew up, many of them left their mountain homes to attend colleges and universities in the cities of Italy and France.



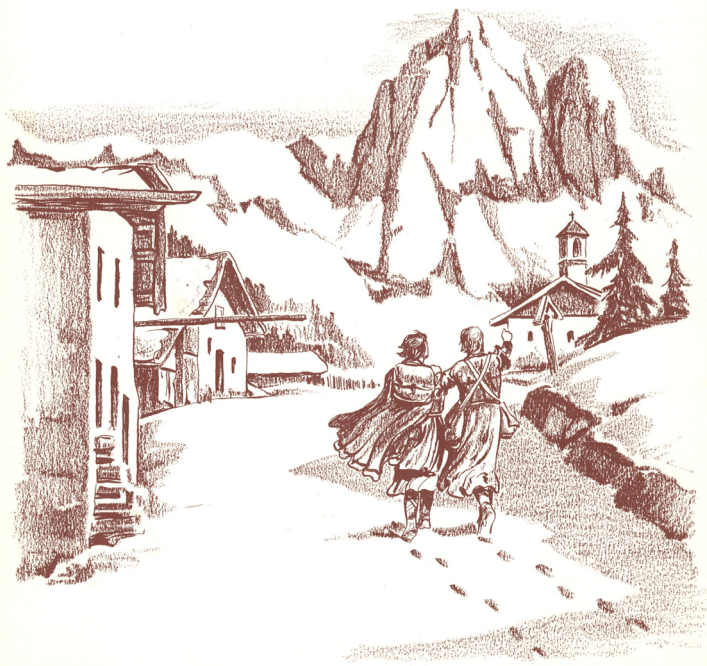


Waldensian parents were proud of these brave young people. As they said good-bye, they all realized the uncertainty and dangers which faced them. They believed that they must teach others of their faith in God. But they knew that if the Roman leaders discovered who they were and what they were doing, they would be killed. Many young students risked their lives to share their hope of heaven with their friends.

The Bible was a forbidden book in those days. Only priests and church officials were supposed to read it. Sometimes the Waldensian students would hide a few precious pages of Scripture in their coats. Then they would watch for a chance to share it with an interested friend. The danger of discovery was always with them. They never knew when a friend might turn out to be an enemy. But God's Word must live on, no matter what price was paid. Capture, torture, or fear of death did not stop them.

Each year the Waldenses sent missionaries out to the towns of Italy. They were sent in pairs; an older man accompanied a younger man.

These missionary journeys, which often lasted two or three years, were dangerous and tiring. In the winter, heavy snows made travel slow and uncomfortable. But the Waldenses had heard the call of Christ. They were missionaries to the world.





In every town they visited were people who welcomed them with secret joy. Even in Rome there were those who believed in the faith of the Waldenses.

Each day at sunset the missionaries returned to the homes where they were staying and prayed together for God's blessing and protection. The younger men looked for counsel and guidance to the older missionaries. After many months of working and praying together, the two became almost like father and son.

On many nights the missionaries were awakened by noisy pounding at their door. Then they knew that Roman soldiers had discovered them and they would be captured. Even though they faced death, they were happy because they knew that God would bless their work for Him.

The Waldenses wanted everyone to believe in God. They spent many nights in the homes of poor farm people. And they spent many hours in the castles of wealthy knights and noblemen. No matter where they went, however, they were welcomed by everyone who knew them because the message they brought was a message of happiness.

Some of the missionaries became traveling merchants. They carried packs of beautiful silks and costly jewelry with them. When they had shown their goods to the people of the house, they would pray silently to God for guidance. Then they would begin to talk to the people about their love for God and their belief in the Bible.





A missionary might say, "Friends, I have jewels far more valuable than the ones I have shown you. If you will protect me from the priests, I will tell you about them." The people were curious. What kind of jewels?

When the people promised protection, he would say, "I have a brilliant gem from God Himself, for through it comes true knowledge of God; and I have another that lights the fire of God's love in the heart of the one who owns it."

Then the missionary would show the people his precious handwritten Scriptures. If he had no Scriptures, he would recite parts of the Bible from memory. When the people saw the sincerity of simple faith, many of them believed. The missionaries left behind seeds of truth from which grew many churches and companies of worshipers.

The more the Roman church persecuted the Waldenses, the stronger their faith became. This was just the opposite of what the church leaders intended. Companies of Waldensian believers were growing like mushrooms all over Italy.

And like mushrooms, the harder the Romans tried to keep them from growing, the faster they grew. They appeared in unexpected places at very unexpected times. And they were happy people.

The Waldenses based all of their beliefs on the teachings of the Bible. They taught the people to worship on the Bible Sabbath and to believe in the soon return of Christ to the earth. Because of their disagreement with the Roman doctrines, they were branded as heretics, and many of them died for their faith.





The faith of the Waldenses was simple and easy to understand. Theirs was a religion of love which made their lives happy and free in Christ.

For many years the Roman church had taught the people that God was a stern, hard God. Their only happiness was in personal penance, and their only hope for the future was purgatory.

The Waldenses showed these people a brighter life. They taught that Christ alone could forgive their sins and that pardon was God's free gift of love.

Many members of the Roman church accepted the faith of the Waldenses. Although they faced death if their beliefs were discovered, they were happy in God's love.

Finally the Roman leaders had enough of trying to fight the faith of the Waldenses. They determined to destroy them completely. A decree was published. Either the Waldenses must get out of the country immediately, or they would all be killed. Soldiers came and drove the people from the villages into the rugged mountains. Winter's cold snows covered the mountains by this time, and many of the people didn't even have time to dress warmly enough to protect themselves against the storms. Even little children had to wander unprotected in the mountains or face the anger of the Roman soldiers.





Exile was a high price to pay for believing in God. But the Waldenses had their hearts set on a great reward, the reward of heaven.

Many bands of robbers and outlaws joined the war against the Waldenses. These were cruel men to whom religion meant nothing. All they were interested in was a good fight. But the Waldenses had no weapons with which to defend themselves. They were few in number, and many of them died, victims of the fierce cold or the unrelenting persecution of soldiers and outlaws.

As the Waldenses became less numerous, the church officials became happier. With these "Bible teachers" out of the way, they would have less competition for the minds of the villagers. Perhaps they would win their religious war after all.

Things looked pretty bad for the Waldenses that winter. But they were not discouraged. They felt it was God's will that many of them should die for their faith. In this way the gospel was spread.

Destroying the Waldensian believers was not enough, however. Now the church leaders determined to destroy their Scriptures as well. Many of the precious Bible scrolls were hidden in remote mountain caves, impossible for the Roman soldiers to discover.

The Waldenses retreated to their mountain hideouts. Here they continued to teach the Bible to their children. They kept a light of faith burning that has lighted a path of truth for thousands of people in the years that followed. Even the stony caves echoed with their songs of praise to the God who loved them.





The Waldenses were among the world's first believers in freedom. They wanted freedom to study; freedom to worship; freedom to teach others; and most of all, freedom to believe.

They are typical of believers of all ages who have had the courage to remain true to their faith. People who are in the minority have always suffered in one way or another for their unpopular actions. Even today people suffer for their beliefs. But the light of love that burns in the hearts of such people can light a flame of courage in every heart that will follow in their way.



