

Dr. Kevin E. Frederick, Waldensians, Lecture 10, The Centrality of Trouble, Joshua Jonavel

© 2024 Kevin Frederick and Ted Hildebrandt

This is Dr. Kevin Frederick in his teaching on the history of the Waldensians. This is session number 10, The Centrality of Trouble, Joshua Jonavel.

This sermon is entitled, The Centrality of Trouble. Joshua Jonavel, Lion of the Valleys. The scripture passage for today's sermon is on Hebrews 11, starting with verse 32 and going through 12, verse 2. And what more shall I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel, and the prophets, who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight.

Women received their dead by resurrection. Others were tortured, refusing to accept release in order to obtain a better resurrection. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment.

They were stoned to death. They were sawn in two. They were killed by the sword.

They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, and tormented, of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains and in caves and holes in the ground. Yet all of these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised since God had provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect.

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the pioneer, and perfecter of our faith, who, for the sake of the joy that was set before him, endured the cross, regarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God. This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

We are surrounded by a cloud of witnesses, and the words of the writer of the Letter of Hebrews were written about an early Christian community, reflecting back on the Old Testament at the start of the second century A.D. But they could have easily been written about the Waldensians, not only in regards to the kinds of persecution and tortures they faced as a people, but in the very nature of their response of faith, which endured century after century of persecution by the Roman Catholic Church, and by numerous other hardships as well. The enduring determination of faith, the faith of our fathers and mothers as people, whether we be Waldensian by blood, Presbyterian or Baptist, these forebearers of the faith demonstrated the deepest

resolve of faith of any group of Christian people who have ever faced hardship. In studying the 800-plus-year history of the Waldensian people, it is quite clear that there is no century more devastating to the Waldensian people and their existence than the 17th century.

Before we focus on the man, John of El, let me offer a brief overview of some critical events that collectively came close to destroying the very existence of the Waldensians. In 1629, a great drought occurred in northern Italy, resulting in a dreadful famine that killed many in the valleys. During the following spring, about the time that farmers were planting and were hoping for a much better growing season, an even greater catastrophe hit the valleys.

Along with the arrival of occupying French troops came the dreaded Black Plague that was rapidly spreading across Europe. Nearly 50 percent of the Waldensian population was decimated by the plague, and alarming 14 out of 16 Waldensian pastors that served every parish in the valley were killed by the plague, leaving the remaining two Waldensian pastors stretched thin and the whole Waldensian faith community almost completely bereft of pastoral leadership during a long season of grief. Through it all, the faith of our fathers and mothers lived on.

The Waldensians, reeling still from the great devastation of the Black Plague in the 1630s, had not fully recovered yet when the Duke of Savoy ordered the Duke of Savoy to apply excessive economic hardships and financial fines upon the remaining Waldensians and exorbitant 20,000 crowns. But the Waldensians remained proud in their faith, and even peacefully loyal to the Duke, and wanted nothing more than to be left alone so that they could worship and live unobstructed by the larger Roman Catholic community that surrounded them. Alas, this is not to be.

Hatred of the Waldensians had hardened so much since the Reformation a century earlier that during the 1650s, Louis XIV, King of France, and Charles Emmanuel, the Duke of Savoy, who was driven by the Duke's mother's vociferous disdain of the Waldensians, began to seek their total annihilation. The Duke's mother's name was Catherine Marie. She was a daughter of the French king and a granddaughter of the famous Roman Catholic Medici family of Florence.

This plan of annihilation was also urged on by the Bishop of Turin, Andrew Gestaldo. As a result, an edict of expulsion was ordered and carried out by the French king and the Savoyard Duke, Catherine Marie's son, in January 1655. On January 25th that year, in the middle of a particularly brutal winter, those Waldensians who would not renounce their faith and convert to Catholicism were forcefully evicted from their secure valleys and relocated into more accessible and less defensible valleys.

They were driven out by the Savoyard troops into the deep snows, where many women, children, and older members of the community froze to death or perished

from illness. Those who remained in their homes were looted by their Roman Catholic neighbors, and by February of that year, the Duke had sent over 1,000 troops to be garrisoned in the home of the Waldensians. These troops were under the command of the Marquis de Pianesa.

One farmer named Joshua Janavel alone recognized this action as the forerunner of a harsh wave of persecution. Janavel began that month collecting a corps of 11 volunteers dedicated to defending their homes in the small community of Rora. Many of the Waldensians scoffed at Janavel's preparations as being rash and overly provocative, and violent, and as a result, no provisions for a general defense were made.

But in mid-April of that year, Pianesa led a force of Savoyard troops, 15,000 strong, into the valleys, and on Easter Sunday, before the sun rose, the Duke's troops carried out a well-organized attack in every home where the Savoyard troops were garrisoned. What followed that Easter morning was a particularly brutal assault involving many forms of torture upon men and women and even Waldensian children. One particularly brutal torture involved binding the victims' arms and their legs and rolling them over the cliffs.

The Savoyard troops were even more brutal in the torturous persecution against Waldensian children and babies. Many of the French officers who were assigned command of these troops were so horrified by the brutality of their troops that a number of them resigned their commission in protest. By nightfall of that Easter, the valleys echoed with the cries of the tortured and surviving victims of the massacre.

Only one tiny hamlet remained intact, the town of Rora, comprised of some 50 dwellings, which was defended by John of El and 11 volunteer farmers. Over the next four days, the Marquis de Pianesa sent wave after wave of his troops in ever-increasing numbers to kill the defenders of Rora. Each time they were repulsed with heavy casualties and fled the field of battle in panic.

John of El demonstrated calming faith. Before and after each attack was repulsed, he would gather his men and pray. After the attacks, he would recite the 11th Psalm, thanking God for the protection given them.

On the one hand, Pianesa was by this time filled with so much rage and shame that he ordered a full attack of 8,000 men to take the small village of Rora. The Waldensian defenders were overrun this time, and 126 citizens of Rora were killed. Many others were taken prisoner, including John of El's 8-year-old son.

After realizing that he had John of El's wife and daughters, the Marquis de Pianesa wrote a letter to John of El and released one Waldensian prisoner to carry the letter directly to John of El. The contents of the letter indicated that if John of El renounced

his faith and embraced the Catholic religion, he would be indemnified of all his losses, and his wife and children would be immediately released. In addition, he was offered a commission in the Duke of Savoy's army.

However, if John of El refused these terms, his wife and children would be put to death, and a steep bounty would be put on his head, tempting even the strongest allies to betray him. In response, John of El sent back the following letter: My Lord Marquis, there is no torment so great or death so cruel, but what I would prefer the abjuration of my religion, so that promises lose their effects, and menaces only strengthen me in my faith. With respect to my wife and children, my Lord, nothing can be more afflicting to me than the thought of their confinement or more dreadful to my imagination than their suffering a violent and cruel death.

I keenly feel all the tender sensations of a husband and parent. My heart is replete with every sentiment of humanity. I would suffer any torment to rescue them from danger.

I would die to preserve them. But having said this much, my Lord, I assure you that the purchase of their lives must not be the price for my salvation. You have them in your power, it is true, but my comfort is that your power is only a temporary authority over their bodies.

You may destroy the mortal part, but their immortal souls are out of your reach and will live hereafter to bear testimony against you for your cruelties. I therefore recommend them and myself to God, and pray for a reformation in your heart. Joshua Janavel, faith of our fathers, holy faith, we will be true to thee till death.

Who amongst us would take such a stand in faith in the face of the imminent deaths of one's own family? Janavel's wife and daughters were summarily executed by Pianesa after having received this letter. Janavel and his son fled to the Alps with his followers and were soon joined by a growing number of other fugitive Protestants who were willing to fight and, if need be, die for their cause. A series of skirmishes and battles continued for months, including the attack of San Zacondo, which was heavily fortified and defended by Catholic troops.

Nevertheless, outnumbered again, Janavel and his troops overran the resistance, defending themselves in the open by carrying thick wooden planks over their heads to shield themselves from musket fire. In this battle, the Protestants lost 17 killed and 26 wounded, while the Catholics lost 450 killed and 511 wounded. It was clear to Janavel and the Waldensians that God was protecting them in their attempts to defend their valley homes.

Throughout that spring and summer, as a result of that dreadful Easter, news of the torturous massacre of the Waldensians traveled all across Protestant Europe, as far

as England, and England's famous Protestant Lord Protector, Oliver Cromwell, encouraged parishes throughout the Protestant England to raise money for the cause of caring for and supporting the Waldensian exiles. Mercenary Protestants in small bands from across Europe began to rally to the aid of the Waldensians, forming an army of 500 men to face an enemy now 16,000 strong. More skirmishes and battles occurred that summer, most often resulting in the defeat of the larger Catholic forces.

Twice, Janavel was wounded, once in the leg, and the second time, he was shot in the chest, with the ball passing through his lung and exiting his body. This wound was not mortal, and he remarkably healed within six weeks and was back commanding his troops on the field of battle, the faith of our Father's holy faith. Repeatedly, the Waldensians outfoxed and outfought the Catholic troops throughout the spring and into the summer months, and finally, in August at Castellus, the Protestants soundly defeated the Catholic troops.

When the syndic of Lucerne, a Catholic bishop, saw the great number of wounded Catholic soldiers returning and hearing of the defeat by the Waldensians yet again, he remarked, ah, I thought the wolves used to devour the heretics, but now I see the heretics eat the wolves, the faith of our Father's. For Joshua Janavel and the defenders of the Waldensian people, faith was not simply a belief in God. Faith was a matter of life and death.

Faith was a grounding and a conviction that in the face of all odds, in the face of certain death, against such odds, God tells us and invites us to be faithful, and God rewards those who cling to their faith and seek God's direction. The faith of our forebearers did not waver when the valley was full of enemies, and the defenders were but a handful of men with muskets. The faith of our Fathers sought God's providential care and guiding spirit to keep them safe, knowing full well there was no other backup.

Such faith has a long memory that looks backwards to the hardships of forebearers who were pursued by Pharaoh's army with a sea of death in front of them and no way to cross. Such faith looked to a band of eleven disciples huddled in fear in the upper room on an Easter morning and discovered themselves empowered. If your blood this morning runs a little hot from hearing this dramatic faith story, then perhaps it is your faith that has been kindled into a deeper awareness of its power alive within you.

Yea, as the psalmist says, we have a goodly heritage. Chances are strong that none of us will ever face the kind of choices in life or death decisions and the resulting actions that Joshua Janavel faced and acted on. But all of us are called to live by the promises of God, not to allow our setbacks of any kind or threats against us to

dissuade us from acting on our faith in the face of insurmountable odds to live as God calls us to live.

What would happen to this church and to our lives today if we lived by the same level of conviction and strength of faith as evidenced in the faith of our fathers and mothers and Joshua Janavel? Janavel, accompanied by his son, retired to Geneva in the 1660s, banished by his own people, who once again thought he was too provocative against the Duke of Savoy and the Catholics. Janavel then lived for a number of years beyond that and was a source of information and developed even a set of guidelines that those guidelines are still studied. Military guidelines are still studied by West Point and the Army these days in the United States.

Such faith has led our fathers named Janavel and Michelin and the other Waldensians who stood with their backs to the mountains in an outgunned, out-provisioned, completely outnumbered enemy that had the death of their entire people as its goal to not only endure but to prevail against all odds. I selected the hymn Plouc-Couvent-Cour to be sung yesterday, which translated more than conquerors to demonstrate the faith of the Waldensians. Listen to the words of this hymn in English.

More than conquerors, such is our emblem. More than conquerors, even if persecuted, for the victory of our faith was acquired through the Savior who redeemed us. Let us follow Christ even to Calvary.

Let us always keep his death before us. If we suffer with him on earth, we shall reign with him in heaven. Let us challenge the wrong in order to confess the name of Jesus.

In him, only all our hope is built, and our hope will not be obscured. To his dying day there remained a price on Janavel's head, a particular set of instructions by every Savoyard officer to systematically torture the great Janavel if he was ever captured. Janavel left behind a military manual of tactics that would be used extensively by Henry Arnall in the Waldensian exodus to Switzerland and the glorious return.

It is to that that we will soon turn in our studies. This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

This is Dr. Kevin Frederick in his teaching on the history of the Waldensians. This is session number 10, the centrality of trouble.