

Dr. Kevin E. Frederick, Waldensians, Lecture 12, Armed to the Teeth, Henry Arnold, The Glorious Return, 1685 to 1690

© 2024 Kevin Frederick and Ted Hildebrandt

This is Dr. Kevin Frederick in his teaching on the history of the Waldensians. This is session 12, Armed to the Teeth, Henry Arnold, The Glorious Return, 1685 to 1690.

The sermon is entitled Armed to the Teeth and is a story of the glorious return, which is celebrated in Waldensian communities around the world where there are Waldensian communities.

Every year in August. It was led by a man named Henri Arnold or Henry Arnold. Henri Arnold was a minister, so his leadership oftentimes included very strong spiritual leadership as well as military leadership.

And so I share with you an excerpt of a psalm that was written or actually read at the time on the last night before they looked at their imminent demise. And this psalm was read to them, and then a sermon preached to them on the basis of this psalm. Every day of the glorious return, starting in August of 1689 and concluding in May of 1690, Arnold would lead the fighters with a sense of spiritual focus.

He would lead them in prayer and the scriptures, preaching to them once a day, which is a remarkable feat for any minister. From Psalm 68, I'm reading excerpts from verses 1 through 6, 17 to 22, and 28 to 35. Let God rise up.

Let his enemies be scattered. Let those who hate him flee before him. As smoke is driven away, so drive them away.

As wax melts before the fire, let the wicked perish before God. But let the righteous be joyful. Let them exult before God.

Let them be jubilant with joy. Sing to God. Sing praises in God's name.

Lift up a song to him who rides upon the clouds. His name is the Lord. Be exultant before him.

Father of orphans and protector of widows is God in his holy habitation. God gives a desolate home to live in. He leads the prisoners to prosperity, but the rebellious live in a parched land.

With mighty chariotry twice ten thousand, thousands upon thousands, the Lord came from Sinai into the holy place. You ascended the high mount, leading captives in your train and receiving gifts from people, even from those who rebel against the Lord God's abiding there. Blessed be the Lord who daily bears us up.

God is our salvation. Our God is the God of salvation, and to God the Lord belongs escape from death. But God will shatter the heads of his enemies, the hairy crown of those who walk in their guilty ways.

The Lord said I will bring them back from Bashan. Summon your might, O God. Show your strength, O God, as you have done for us before.

Because of your temple of Jerusalem, kings bear gifts to you. Rebuke the wild animals that live amongst the reeds, the herd of bulls with the calves of the people. Trample underfoot those who lust after tribute.

Scatter the people who delight in war. Let bronze be brought before Egypt. Let Ethiopia hasten to stretch out its hands to God.

Sing to God, O kingdoms of the earth. Sing praises to the Lord. O writer in heavens, the ancient heavens, listen.

He sends out his voice, his mighty voice. Ascribe power to God, whose majesty is over Israel, whose power is in the skies. Awesome is God in his sanctuary, the God of Israel.

He gives power and strength to his people. Blessed be God. This is the word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God. Let God rise up, and the enemies be scattered. On the morning of May 14th, 1690, after a siege of nearly eight months, the Waldensians fighters gathered to hear their preacher and military commander, Henri Arnault, and to prepare themselves mentally, physically, and spiritually for the final assault of the enemy troops.

The defenses of the Waldensians had been relentlessly bombarded by cannon for days, and over a period of two weeks, the Waldensians had been driven back up the mountainside to their final line of defense, a place called the Pan de Zucara, the sugar loaf, a rock outcrop on top of a ridge which gave the appearance of being shaped like a loaf of bread. All the surviving 347 men who gathered to worship in the dawning light of that morning, nearly out of all provisions and ammunition, anticipated that May 14th, 1690, could very well be their last day on earth. They carried the weight that morning of knowing that if they were defeated and

destroyed, their wives, children, and other Waldensians would, in all likelihood, never return to resettle in their beloved homeland.

From a human point of view, all hope seemed lost. They turned to their leader, Henri Arnault, and to God on that fateful morning, singing Psalm 68, which is known as a psalm of thanksgiving and deliverance, hearing a sermon on God's providential grace and hoping against hope and insurmountable odds that they would survive this siege. Arnault sought once again to instill strength, guidance, and direction within a small band of fighting force by turning to God.

Arnault was born in 1641 in Latour, later called Torapelachi, and had started out as a teenager in the service of William of Orange as a soldier. Arnault would rise quickly to the rank of captain in the army of William of Orange. In his late thirties, he left the military and was trained as a pastor, and he was serving a congregation in the early 1680s.

Then, in 1685, the French king, Louis XIV, revoked the Edict of Nantes, a settlement that gave Huguenot Protestants in France the right to worship God as they chose. Louis XIV viewed two religions within a state as a sign of weakness. As a result, in 1685, Louis sought to create a nation unified in the faith and order the total elimination of all Protestants in France.

Many Huguenots were put to death. Many more were exiled to Switzerland and Germany. The following year, 1686, with the alliance of the Duke of Savoy and his Savoyard troops, Louis XIV expanded his religious purge to include the Waldensians within the Alpine region of the Cottian Alps.

Under the leadership of Commander Nicholas Catinat, in May 1686, French troops purged the Waldensian homelands. Out of a total of 14,000 Waldensians, 8,500 men, women, and children were rounded up by the soldiers and imprisoned. 1,600 additional individuals were killed in three days of combat.

Another 2,000 converted to Catholicism, and several hundred escaped in exile to Geneva, leaving a relatively small band of less than 1,000 fighting men who came to be known by allies and enemies alike as the Invincibles. Of the 8,500 people who were imprisoned, more than 60 percent of them died from hunger, thirst, and disease over the next eight months. A treaty was agreed upon in the late fall of 1686 between the Invincibles and Louis XIV, along with his ally the Duke of Savoy.

The Invincibles promised to leave the valleys for Switzerland in exchange for the release of the surviving prisoners, who would also be exiled to Switzerland. Under the guard of the Savoyard troops, more than 3,000 prisoners, most of whom were deathly sick and emaciated, were released from their prisons only to make a long journey over the Alps by foot in the dead of winter to Geneva. Of the more than

3,000 prisoners who were freed to make the journey, less than 2,300 of them arrived alive.

In contrast, of the 14,000 Waldensians who had lived in the Cottian Alps in the spring of 1685, only 3,381 were still alive as exiles in Geneva less than a year later. And those survivors were lovingly received and cared for by the Calvinist citizens of Geneva. Within a month of arrival, the Waldensian leaders began planning to retake the valley from the French troops and began to solicit financial support and assistance from Protestant nations around Europe.

After two abortive attempts to return over the next two years, the time to act came on the night of August 16th and 17th of 1689. Henri Arnault, commissioned by William of Orange, now to the rank of colonel, had successfully raised monies from England and from Protestant nations to equip a military campaign to retake the Waldensian homelands. Arnault gathered 900 Waldensian and Huguenot men on the shores of Lake Geneva to begin the 130-mile trek over the Alpine Mountains.

Before they even left the lakeside region, more than 200 of their men and their chief military commanders were captured by Catholic civil authorities. They were imprisoned and later killed. Nearly 700 men began the arduous march south over numerous mountain ranges and at first met minimal resistance.

But word of their movement sometimes spread ahead of them, and ambushes and efforts by local Catholic officials to delay their march were becoming more and more numerous. Halfway home, they were confronted with the most substantial resistance, with an overwhelming French force of 2,500 French troops at the bridge at Salbertron. Under a withering fire of muskets, Arnault lost several dozen men.

Although the Waldensian fighters inflicted much heavier losses on the French troops and routed them from their defense of the bridge, along the journey home, Arnault lost several dozen of his men who were unable to keep up with the relentless pace of their forced march. And as they entered the Waldensian valleys, his fighting force was now down to 600 men.

A mere 11 days from the time they left Geneva, having traveled through driving rains and over mountain peaks deep in snow, the Waldensian fighters were back in their valleys. Frequently along the way, by the time the French had heard of their presence as being in a particular location, the Waldensians were already out ahead of the French troops before they could mount a credible attack. The speed of Arnault's army was one of their strongest tactics, which assured their successful return to their homeland.

Upon arriving back in the heartland of the Lucerne Valley, the 200 Huguenots from France who had fought alongside the Waldensians since leaving Geneva broke away

and returned to their homelands in the Dauphin region of France. Tragically, this group of fighters were later captured by the French army. To a man, they were either killed or forced to serve as galley slaves in French ships.

By late September, pursued by a force of 10,000 French troops under the leadership of one of the best French military commanders, General Nicolas Catinat, Arnault's fighting force now numbered approximately 400 men. Needing a naturally defensive position, Arnault discussed with his men the recommendation of the brilliant Waldensian military tactician John Avel, which was made of him back in Geneva while John Avel lived in exile. John Avel believed that a place called Basilia in the Germanosca Valley was the most defensible natural stronghold to be found within the borders of their homelands.

The men unanimously agreed, and by the third week of October, they arrived at Basilia and began erecting shelters and defenses on the mountain. Arnault sent out sorties of men to retrieve food supplies from the deserted villages and skirmished with Catholic settlers in the area in order to survive. During the fall of 1689, Catinat repeatedly attacked the stronghold of the Waldensians with his overwhelming army of 10,000 French troops, but the Waldensians defended themselves with bullets and boulders and unanticipated guerrilla tactics until the late fall snows set in.

The French withdrew in late October to winter quarters in Pinarola, some 40 kilometers away. A few Waldensians who had lived in this area prior to the expulsion to Geneva told Arnault of a millstone that had been removed from a nearby mill and buried in the sand to keep it safe from Catholic hands. A small team of men unearthed the millstone and soon returned it to its operating condition in the mill, which afforded the fighters the means of making flour out of the grains they had gathered from the abandoned villages.

During this time, the Waldensian men survived on a subsistence diet of any grains and herbs that they could gather, but by mid-February, almost all their foodstuffs had been depleted. About this time, a warm Chiraco wind melted the snow in the Alpine valleys to reveal beneath it unharvested fields of corn, rye, and oats that had remained there for months before. Just when they needed it most, they were miraculously supplied with enough grain to supply them for the duration of their siege.

By late April of 1690, the 10,000 French troops broke their winter camp in Pinarola and marched back to Basilia for a final assault. During the winter months, Louis XIV had persuaded the Duke of Savoy to supply an additional 12,000 Savoyard troops to the campaign, and victory against the Waldensian resistance felt assured by the French. With the return of spring to the region, 22,000 troops were amassed in the valley below Le Quatre dents, which is the Four Teeth, to defeat the remnant of less than 400 Waldensian men.

When I was over there a number of years ago, I was able to take pictures, and yes, those mountains there looked like four teeth, one after another, and that's where they get their name and the title of the sermon comes in. On April 30th, Catinat selected 4,000 of his best troops to conduct a frontal assault of the Waldensians. Two regiments were sent to higher mountains overlooking the Basilia, but the snow was many feet deep up there, and soldiers had a difficult time getting to these high ridges, causing most of the soldiers to suffer exposure and frostbite from the bitter weather conditions.

By mid-afternoon on May 2nd, a poorly coordinated attack was mounted against the Waldensian defenders by the French and Savoyard troops, at about the same time that a driving snowstorm hit the high peaks. The attacking columns were completely repulsed by the Waldensian defenders and were routed by a counterattack in the snowstorm. Hundreds of French and Savoyard troops lay dead without the loss of a single Waldensian defender.

Catinat and his commander spent the next ten days planning a final assault and waited while most of the snow in the lower elevations thawed in the spring sunshine. Artillery had been brought in, and cannon bombarded the defenses of the Waldensians, driving them back up to the mountain to their final fortress, Pan di Sucre. By May 14th, the remaining 347 Waldensians were completely surrounded, facing three regiments in the valley below on their front and flanks and two regiments that had positioned themselves in the high alpine ridges above and behind where the Waldensian lines of defense were.

Teams of mule-driven wagons, each mounted with portable gallows on them, awaited the inevitable defeat and capture of the Waldensian fighters. Any survivors were to be hanged, and their bodies paraded through the streets of towns and cities on the return to Torino. Both Arnaud and Catinat were well aware that the following day would see the defeat of the Waldensian resistance.

But that evening, a thick fog rolled in across the mountains, and as the Waldensians discussed their possible strategies, Captain Philippe Tran Poulat, a man who grew up playing and hunting in these mountains, suggested a plan of escape over the least traversable route down from their fortress, believing it to be the least likely patrolled of the surrounding armies. The Waldensians set their campfires ablaze so that the French would think they were still there. Meanwhile, Poulat led the band of men hand to shoulder through the dense fog, often resorting to crawl on hands and knees over the precipice through the well-defended French lines.

At one point in their escape, one of the Waldensians, who was suddenly required to use both his hands to steady himself, inadvertently allowed a metal kettle to fall out of his hands, and it clanged down the mountainside. The little band of men stopped

dead in their tracks and could hear a French sentry call out, Qui veve? Who's there? in the fog. But then there was no answer, and the sentry dismissed the noise, and the Waldensians, with their hearts in their throats, proceeded to make their way down the steep cliffs under the cover of the dense fog.

In the morning, the entire Waldensian army was spotted on a ridge half a day's journey away from their fort. All but a very few of the most critically wounded had escaped. Catinat and his army were once again denied the victory they felt was in their grasp, and the French pursued them for the following weeks, seeking a final resolution to the Waldensian problems by their total annihilation.

However, one final factor played a role in the rescue of the Waldensian forces. After months of private negotiation with the Protestant nations of England, the Netherlands, and Austria, the Duke of Savoy switched his allegiance from being an ally of France and unexpectedly joined forces with the Protestant nations in an effort to contain the most powerful monarch in all of Europe, Louis XIV. The Duke had sent emissaries to meet with the Waldensians and promise their freedom if they would unite with his efforts to help defeat the French.

The Waldensians did not hesitate to give their total allegiance once again to the Duke of Savoy and, over the next several years, were a tremendous help to the Duke in ridding the French of his kingdom. When all was said and done, not only had a small band of fighting men survived the glorious return back to their valleys, they had survived being dug into a mountaintop for eight months in the middle of a harsh winter on scavenged foodstuffs which they had found from deserted homes and villages. Not only had they survived repeated assaults from a vastly superior and far better-equipped army, but when all hope seemed lost, they had successfully escaped from the inevitable clutch of two superior armies that had outnumbered them more than fifty to one and had completely surrounded them.

Arnault asked of his readers in his own handwriting in the glorious return, he says: how else but by the hand of God can this be explained? It was most remarkable that the grains of the valleys surrounding Basilia were unharvested during the growing season in 1689 and were only discovered for harvest from February to April of 1690. Henri Arnault, who led his men each day as their pastor with devotional prayer in the morning and evening and throughout the campaign, preached to his men several times each week, years later in constructing his memoirs reflected back upon the siege of Brasilia. Can anyone, he asked, refuse to recognize the hand of Providence in this extraordinary circumstance that the Vadois were permitted to make their harvest not in the midst of summer but in the midst of winter? And we respond this morning with the first words of Psalm 68, which these men sang when all appearance of hope seemed lost, let God rise up and his enemies be scattered.

Again, Arnault asks, or could any but God have inspired such a handful of people, destitute of gold and silver, of all other earthly succor, with the courage to go and make war against a king who at that time made all of Europe tremble? Let God rise up, and his enemies be scattered. Arnault continues, is it possible to imagine that without a protection absolutely divine these poor people lodged in the earth almost like the dead and sleeping on straw after having been blockaded by eight months could at last have triumphed? Let God rise up and his enemies be scattered. Arnault also reflects on the providential hand of God in weather events in those mountains, including the snowstorm of May 2nd, the day of an assault by a coordinated event from the French and Savoyard troops, along with the fog rolling in to protect them on May 14th, when all hope seemed completely lost.

Let God rise up and his enemies be scattered. Does it not seem as if God said in preserving that grain on the earth during eight months, did so to feed these persecuted people during the hardships of the winter and the siege? These are my true children, my chosen and beloved, whom it is my pleasure to feed in my providence. Let their land of Canaan, to which I have brought them back, rejoice to see them again and make them an unusual and almost supernatural gift.

Arnault concludes, let God rise up and his enemies be scattered. And I might add, how are we to interpret these repeated military successes and endurance when often outnumbered anywhere between 10 and more than 50 to 1? Consistently the Waldensians prevailed, numerous times against the trained and disciplined troops of the most powerful army in Europe in its day. The casualty list of the French army was often in excess of 100 to 1 throughout the military campaign that began in August 1689 and continued through June of 1690.

Let God rise up and his enemies be scattered. Knowing these facts didn't mean that the Waldensians had it easy throughout the siege, nor did it mean that they didn't struggle with despair, but it did mean that as a people they would survive the inevitability of death at the hand of an enemy which was armed to the teeth. In closing, I again quote from the words of Arnault himself, surely it must be granted that in all their troubles and dangers the omnipotent delivered them, gave them victory in all their battles, supported them when they were faint hearted, supplied them with necessities when it appeared they must be destitute, and finally inspired their prince, the Duke, with the will to reinstate them in their heritage and suffer them to restore true devotion to their churches.

Events so surprising proved that the French and Piedmontese armies were aided only by the deceitful benediction of Rome, of her who would be God on earth, while those of the Vadois were blessed by the great God who is King of Kings and delegates his scepter to no earthly hands. Thanks then be to the Eternal who, in selecting the Vadois as instruments of such wonders, appears to have sanctioned their religion as

that in which he would be served, honored, and obeyed by all the redeemed. Amen and Amen.

This is Dr. Kevin Frederick in his teaching on the history of the Waldensians. This is session 12, Armed to the Teeth, Henry Arnold, The Glorious Return, 1685 to 1690.