



# Paula, the Waldensian

*A book review by Mike Atnip*

Note that to understand this review completely, it may be necessary to first read the article in this issue titled “Christian Eccentricity.”

I met Paula—of all places—in an elk-hunting camp in the Rocky Mountains. Far, far away from her beloved Italian Alps, yet Paula’s life spanned a century and two continents and spoke to me, the seeking young man in North America.

There I was, in the place I had dreamed of for years ... in a hunting camp in the Rockies! But since I had not lived in Wyoming long enough to be a legal resident, I could not buy a resident hunting license. So I just “went along for the ride” and to accompany another person on a bow hunt for elk. After all, it is not wise for someone to head up into the hills all by oneself. If an accident happens, you want someone else around. So I went along to “help.”

We packed the saddlebags and panniers for the horses and headed up to the ridge above the South Fork of the Shoshone River, about 50 miles to the east of Yellowstone National Park.

## But God ...

But God had been working on the heart of a self-centered young man in the previous weeks and months. Drawing, convicting, calling ... to His kingdom. To Christian eccentricity. To a life not centered in *self*. To a life away from sport hunting, and to a life of ... well, a life like Paula lived.

Having read a chapter or two before we left for the hills, I stuck *Paula, the Waldensian* (and a Bible, of course) in among the camp gear. We made the steep climb up to the ridge, found a spring among the timber, and pitched the teepee tent.

I must say that I found Paula’s story more engaging than the elk hunt! Elk hunting was losing its savor, and following Christ in service to others was tasting sweeter all the time. Although I did go out on the hunt some, I spent a good amount of time in those couple of days of camping

getting acquainted with a young Waldensian. Her life represented what I was longing for, even though at that time I don’t think I would have put it in those words. But there was a longing in my heart, a longing for real Christianity. A Christianity that worked and had practical applications.

A Christianity that had shoe leather in it. A Christianity that took Jesus’ teachings seriously and actually tried to practice them.

Almost 27 years have passed since I came off that mountain, deeply moved by Paula’s story. I don’t know if I have ever acknowledged it before, but her simple life of service made me cry in those hills. I have read parts of the book since then, if not the whole story, but now having a desire to introduce Paula to my own son, we have read and listened to the audio book just recently. Her simple-hearted service to others made tears come to my eyes again in several places. Such a simple life of serving and

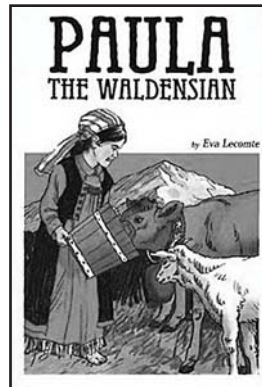
blessing others. So “eccentric”! So beside *self*, which is the center of all the unconverted. Being saved from a life of selfishness is what the gospel is all about!

## Paula’s story

Leaving now the testimony of how Paula has touched my life, I will give a brief overview of her story. Orphaned at 10 years of age, she is sent to live with a well-to-do uncle near Paris, in the late 1800s.<sup>1</sup> Life in this new family is quite different than with her father (her mother and two sisters had died earlier in her life) in the Italian Alps. Not only is the flat land, “cultured” lifestyle, and huge house different than what she knew, the spiritual atmosphere is on the other end of the spectrum as well. Her uncle has embittered himself against God, since God did not meet his demands.<sup>2</sup> He has forbidden his family to speak of God, pray, go to church, or sing hymns.

1 I cannot remember any date given in the story, but the earliest printing of the book was in the late 1890s, so that would give a time frame of mid to late 19<sup>th</sup> century for when the events occurred.

2 He had told God that he would serve Him if God would not let his wife die. Well, his wife died anyways. The moral of



Poor 10-year-old Paula knows nothing of this upon her arrival, but within days she finds out the hard way: her uncle angrily takes her Bible and forbids her to pray. In a quandary, the poor girl submits as much as she can; obviously though, she cannot submit to never praying, and prays when she is alone.

Written in first person, the author tells of Paula's trials and triumphs from the eyes of another 10-year-old girl, Paula's cousin and daughter of the embittered uncle. Lisita is, of course, thrilled to have another girl her age in the house to play with, but she gets more than she bargained for. The family doesn't quite know what to do with Paula's eccentricity. This poor girl acts so beside her *self*!

An example of this living beside one's *self* is when Paula receives a gift of money from someone back in her old home in the Alps. She, to the consternation of her uncle and the old servant of the home, Teresa, wants to spend it immediately. They try to discourage her from "letting the money burn a hole in her pocket," but Paula is determined. When the first chance comes to go to town, she takes her money along to buy things.

A gift for each cousin, postcards to write to her old acquaintances in the Waldensian valleys, a gift for uncle, a gift for old Teresa. When she arrives home, each receives his/her gift, a useful item they were needing (the gifts were neither trinkets nor useless adornments for the house). After admiring all the gifts, one of them asks Paula, "You have bought us all these gifts, so what did you buy for yourself?"

Paula seems a bit embarrassed. She hadn't thought of herself! "Oh, I have a few coins left, I can buy myself something sometime," she replies. Paula lived "beside her *self*," and the self-centered family can't figure her out!

Her love to the down-and-out and to the hurting—even to the cat being mistreated by the village bully—earns its way into the family members one by one. Uncle's heart is

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the story is that we don't "cut a deal with God" to serve Him if He will do something for us. We serve Him no matter what. Yet so many people get offended at God because God doesn't "cut deals": when we get ready to serve God no matter what, God already has the deal cut. There is only one deal ... serve God for better or for worse.

softened. He finds his little niece has a way of breaking down the walls against religion that he has constructed. And he is "floored" that when he finally decides to give her back her precious Bible, in a flood of love and concern for him, she offers it back to him! Her most precious possession on earth—the Bible her dying father had given to her on his deathbed, with all his personal notes in it—and Paula, totally beside her *self*, now wants to give it back to her uncle (he had hit her over the head with it, when he took it from her).



This 13th-century drawing depicts a "bon home" (good man) sharing his food and drink with the down-and-outs of society. Waldensian preachers were known as "Bons homes."

The author picks scenes from Paula's life that illustrate Paula's simple life of following the precepts of the gospel, the precepts of unselfishness. One story after another unfolds as opportunities present themselves to Paula to deny herself and live for the good of others. And the little Waldensian orphan grabs every last chance she can to be or give a blessing.

The book ends in a startling way. I will not spoil Paula's story by telling it all. But suffice it to say that the final words of the book are the verse about how a grain of wheat must fall into the ground and die if it wants to bear fruit. The scenes from Paula's life exhibit that daily dying ... and the bounteous fruit that it produced.

### The negative?

Overall, the book is excellent. However, the discerning reader may notice a few points that take away a little from an otherwise well-written piece of literature. Some of the dialogue between the characters in the book contains what I will call a certain triteness or shallowness when it comes to verbalizing the gospel message. If the book was about these scattered conversations, when one or another is telling someone else "how to get saved," the book would hardly be worth a read. But Paula lived the gospel of taking up the cross, and her life shines so vividly through her actions that one hardly "hears" some of the actual conversations. We must also take into account that, although the story is supposed to be true, the author most likely used literary license to fill in the gaps of conversations that she most assuredly did not remember word for word. Those conversations probably spring from the author's theology, not necessarily Paula's.

One sees in this inconsistency the “war” between the old original Waldensian faith of following Jesus and the “new” faith of the Protestant reformers that focuses on believing facts about Jesus as the way to salvation. The Waldensians as a group began several hundred years before the Reformation. After the Reformation was going a few years, a remnant of Waldensians living in the Italian Alps contacted the Reformers to see if they were of the same faith. Some of these Alpine Waldensians<sup>3</sup> wanted to join immediately with the Reformers. Some wanted to take it slow, as they were not sure they were of the same faith. Yet others saw that they were *not* of the same doctrine and practice as the Reformers and wanted no union with them.

Those who wanted an immediate union won the day. It must have been a sad day for those who saw that the original Waldensian faith was quite distinct from Protestantism. But that is history. These Italian Waldensians took up Reformed theology, throwing out nonresistance, and taking up the swearing of oaths along with the acceptance of wealth and interest.

The book about Paula does not tell of these events, but one can sense that Paula was living more to the ideals of original Waldensianism. Given her young age, the fruit of Paula’s life may well be the result of her godly parents more than from Paula’s own spirituality. Sad to say, the compromise has continued—as in many other movements—so that today the Waldensians are but just another Protestant denomination, complete with the acceptance of sodomy in their congregations.<sup>4</sup>

*Paula, the Waldensian* has been published by several conservative Christian publishers (Faith Publishing

3 This group in Italy represented only a small remnant of the Waldensians. At an earlier time, there were up to 400 congregations of Waldensians scattered across Europe.

4 In 2010, the Waldensian Synod voted 105-9 (with 29 abstentions) to allow blessings upon homosexual couples.

House, Rod & Staff, etc.), and some may have taken the liberty to drop a few sections that reveal the apostasy of Waldensianism in Paula’s time—like setting up and decorating a Christmas tree in the chapel. The public domain versions available online ([www.gutenberg.org](http://www.gutenberg.org) has several digital formats, and [www.librivox.org](http://www.librivox.org) has free audio book files) may contain these sections, while those from other publishers may not. Despite these few inconsistencies, you and your children will benefit greatly by reading *Paula, the Waldensian*.



Waldensians leaving an Alpine chapel in the early 1900s. Is one of those ladies the author of *Paula, the Waldensian*?

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### A final note

Paula’s story is, from all the sources I could find, supposed to be true. It seems almost too idealist at times ... too good to be true. Assuming that her story is at least based on real happenings—and allowing the author the necessity of a literary license to fill in gaps—there is still one little aspect of the books that speaks loudly to me. The author mentions it in passing in the preface.

She says that she is writing the book from Villar-Pellice, a little village down in one of those beautiful Italian<sup>5</sup> Waldensian valleys. She lives there, and invites anyone who reads the book to visit her.

Think about it. What is a girl from a wealthy French, atheist/agnostic family doing living in the Waldensian valleys? Obviously, Paula’s life has drawn her cousin to the faith. And instead of the poor, backwoods, religious girl who is sent to live among heathen getting sucked into the worldliness of upper-class France, the opposite happens. The rich atheist’s daughter gets sucked into the Waldensian faith and ends up moving to the valleys.

Living beside one’s *self* is that potent! ~

5 The free versions of the book found at [www.gutenberg.org](http://www.gutenberg.org) put Villar-Pellice in France, but that is a mistake of the person[s] who made that version. Villar-Pellice lies on the Italian side of the Alps.