

Church History 101

Lesson 19

The Crusades

Key Concepts: The crusades (which is actually a relatively new name (first used in 1757) for the journeys undertaken in the Middle Ages) were a series of military pilgrimages intended to insure free access to and or wrest control of the Holy Land from the Muslims.

The Story: Both the Christian world and the Islamic world were undergoing great change in the period leading up to the crusades (1096 – 1487). The Christian world in the East (Byzantium) was slowly collapsing under the ongoing expansion of Islam. By 636 Byzantium had lost almost all of its territory to early Islamic dynasties. Yet, those dynasties (Abbasid and Fatimid) were open to not only trade with Christians, but pilgrimages by Christians to Holy sites. All of this changed when Great Seljuk Empire (1016-1141) took control of an area that includes modern day Turkey to Afghanistan. The Seljuks ended all friendly contacts with Christians. Europe on the other hand was a growing industrial and agricultural powerhouse. Thus two great growing powers, European Christianity and Middle Eastern Islam were bound to contest for not only the Holy Land but for control of the Western world.

The First Crusade (1096-1099) was launched at the behest of Byzantine Emperor Alexios I by Pope Urban II. The stated goal was securing access to Holy sites. In order to encourage people to go, the Pope promised forgiveness of sins to all who undertook the trek. The crusader armies and followers may have totaled as many as 100,000 people. Along the way the armies slaughtered thousands of Jews in the Rhineland, then thousands more Jews and Muslims in Antioch and Jerusalem.

The Second Crusade (1145-1149) was launched by Pope Eugene III as a holy war against Islam. The precipitating event was the loss of the County of Edessa (the first Crusader state in the Holy Land) to Islamic forces. The crusade was ill-fated from the beginning because it was opposed not only by the Muslims but by the Byzantines. The only success occurred not in the Holy Land but in Portugal where crusaders expelled the Moors from Lisbon.

The Third Crusade (1189-1192), often called the King's Crusade, was intended to recapture Jerusalem which had fallen to the Muslims in 1187. Knights and soldiers from England (Richard the Lion Hearted among them), France and Germany all participated. While the crusaders managed to recapture several key cities they were unable to retake Jerusalem. In the end Richard was able to negotiate the Treaty of Jaffa allowing unarmed Christian and Muslim pilgrims access to all holy sites.

The Fourth Crusade (1202-1204) was intended to retake Jerusalem by way of Egypt. Due to a series of events the crusading armies ended up outside of Constantinople, expecting payment from the Byzantine emperor and awaiting Venetian transport. When the payments did not arrive the crusaders and Venetians sacked Constantinople, killing thousands of Christians in the process. This event would ultimately lead to the end of the Byzantine Empire.

Continuing Crusades (1208 – 1487) focused not only on the Holy Land but on the subjugation of pagans and non-Roman Christians along with the defense of Europe from the continuing encroachment of Islamic armies. Crusaders went to Tunis, Spain, Bohemia, Hungary, southern France, northern Italy, Sicily, Albania and once again against Constantinople. The final attempt to regain the Holy Land failed in 1270 and the last Latins left the region in 1291.

Questions

1. Does this article offer you any fresh insights into the crusades? What would they be?
2. How would you characterize the crusades to your Muslim friends?
3. Do you see any parallels between these events and the events of today?