



Provided by the Church of the Lutheran Confession - Board of Missions

Church History – Part One (100-1500 AD)

Lesson 29 – The Foolishness of the Crusades against Islam

Jesus said that His kingdom was not of this world. These words of Jesus were almost totally forgotten in the era of the crusades. Even more troubling was that the true Gospel of Jesus was also being negated in the hearts of many by the prevailing notion that one could obtain forgiveness of sins and eternal life by participating in warfare against the Muslims. The chief culprit in this tragic foolishness was the supposed head of the church and vicar of Christ on earth, the pope. This is what Pope Urban II declared in the name of Christ: “I say it to those who are present. I command that it be said to those who are absent. Christ commands it. All who go thither (on this crusade) and lose their lives, be it on the road or on the sea, or in the fight against the pagans, will be granted immediate forgiveness for their sins. This I grant to all who will march, by virtue of the great gift which God has given me” (Gonzalez: *The Story of Christianity*, Part 1, p. 292).

The apostle Paul wrote in Galatians 5:4-5: **“You have become estranged from Christ, you who attempt to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace. For we through the Spirit eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness by faith.”** When we compare what Paul wrote to this papal decree, we can begin to understand the full extent of this tragedy. Many people not only lost their lives by participating in the crusades; they lost their eternal lives as well by believing the pope’s lies concerning the forgiveness of sins. What had happened to the clear words of Peter (who they claim as the first pope): **“We believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved”** (Acts 15:11)?

The aim of the crusades was to take back the Holy Land from the Muslims, save the Eastern Roman Empire and its capital Constantinople from Muslim hands, to reunite the Western and Eastern churches in the process, and at the same time to gain entrance into heaven itself. The pope had become a secular ruler as well as religious head, and in that capacity, he persuaded other European rulers to join in his crusade against the Muslims. Pope Gregory VII had already considered retaking the Holy Land from the Muslims, but it was Pope Urban II who addressed the Council of Clermont in 1095 AD with the words quoted above.

Peter the Hermit was one of the first to respond. His followers had to eat, however, so on the way to Jerusalem they pillaged the lands of other Christians, killed thousands of Jews, and lost their lives long before they attained any goal. A few survived to join a more organized group led by Bishop Adhemar, Godfrey, Raymond, Bohemund, and Tancred. Together with the Byzantine forces in Constantinople, this group took back Nicea from the Muslims and headed to Syria. In their religious fanaticism they were able to take Antioch and then reached Jerusalem in June of 1099 AD. By this time Adhemar had died, and Godfrey

became the new leader. By July they managed to enter Jerusalem and take the city from the Muslims. This so-called Christian army showed no mercy. They killed not just the Muslim soldiers but the residents as well. They raped the women, slaughtered the infants, and set fire to buildings housing Jews. Godfrey and the other leaders took over the rule of Jerusalem and the neighboring lands, calling their conquered land the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem.

This First Crusade was followed by others. In fact, during this period in history, many individual European warriors traveled to Palestine to strengthen the forces already there. When the Muslims recaptured the city of Edessa from the Christians, the Christian leaders in the West again called for action. Bernard of Clairvaux called for an army to relieve and replenish those defending Jerusalem. Other leaders were more interested in military victory. Louis VII of France and Conrad III of Germany led an army of 200,000 into Jerusalem (this was the Second Crusade), but they were repeatedly defeated by Muslim forces. Nevertheless, the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem remained in power for some time, even extending its control to Cairo in Egypt for a time. But finally, the Muslim leader Saladin of Egypt recaptured Jerusalem from the Christians in 1187 AD.

This led Pope Gregory VIII to call for a Third Crusade. Three European sovereigns led the way: Holy Roman Emperor Frederick Barbarossa, Richard the Lionhearted of England, and Philip II Augustus of France. Even with such leadership from the top, this Crusade was a failure. Frederick drowned, Philip went back home, and Richard was kidnapped until the payment of a large ransom.

Pope Innocent III called for a Fourth Crusade. But instead of heading to Egypt to overpower the Muslim leader Saladin, the crusaders took Constantinople away from the Eastern Emperor and established the Latin Empire of Constantinople, which continued in power from 1204 to 1261 AD. The Byzantines drove out the Latins in 1261 AD. Thus, instead of unifying the East and the West, this crusade increased the friction and hostility between the Byzantine Empire and the Eastern Orthodox Church, on the one side, and the papacy and the Holy Roman Empire, on the other side.

Four more crusades followed in short order. Excommunicated Emperor Frederick II recaptured Jerusalem and for a time gained control also of the holy cities of Nazareth and Bethlehem. But Pope Gregory IX, who had excommunicated Frederick II, was not happy.

King Louis IX of France was unsuccessful in two crusades against the Muslims. In the first he was kidnapped and had to pay a large ransom. In the second he died of fever.

Perhaps the worst tragedy in the era of the crusades involved the so-called children's crusades. Since it was believed that God would protect innocent children, various groups of very young people were marched towards the Holy Land, only to die on the road or be captured and made slaves by the people whose lands they were invading.

By 1270 AD the crusades came to an end. What had they accomplished? There was now more hostility between Christians and Muslims than before. There was now more hostility

between the East and the West. The papacy gained more secular strength by their authoritative involvement. The trips to the Holy Land increased the people's knowledge of the holy history of the Israelites and Jesus, the Messiah, but it also increased their superstitious devotion to the sacred relics the crusaders brought back from Palestine.

Meanwhile another struggle between Christians and Muslims was taking place in Spain. The Muslim Moors had controlled almost all of Spain for a time. But because it was believed that the apostle James was buried in northern Spain (Santiago), many pilgrims went to Spain, and James became the patron saint of the Christians battling the Moors. The Christians gradually recaptured Spain from the Moors. They recovered the city of Toledo by 1085 AD and defeated the Moors decisively at the battle of Navas de Tolosa. As a result of this reconquest, the Muslim Moors retained only the kingdom of Granada, which finally fell to the Spanish King Ferdinand in 1492 AD.

The crusades led some of the monks to form military companies. Instead of meditating, praying, or copying Scripture, these monks devoted themselves to fighting against the supposed enemies of Christ using military power. For example, Pope Innocent III called for military action in France against the Cathari (Albigensians), who were considered heretics by the papacy. Atrocities were committed in the name of Christ against these heretics, just as had occurred in the Holy Land during the wars against the Muslims.

The learning and culture of the Muslims in Spain and in other places was no doubt superior to that of the Christians at that time. In those days both the Jewish philosopher Maimonides (1135-1204 AD) and the Muslim philosopher Averroes (1126-1198 AD) studied and promoted the writings of the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle (384-322 BC). Many Christians were influenced by these writings, but not necessarily for the better.

Another outcome of the crusades was increased trade between European countries and Asian countries. Some farmers left their lands and moved to the cities where they became traders and merchants.

Questions:

1. What antichristian promise did Pope Urban II make to the crusaders?
2. In what way were the crusades contrary to the will of God?
3. What is the only way to attain salvation and eternal life?
4. Prove your answer to the previous question from the Bible.
5. What was the aim of the crusades?
6. To what extent were these aims fulfilled?
7. What kind of atrocities did the crusaders commit?
8. What is the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem and how long did it retain power?
9. How was tension between East and West increased by the Fourth Crusade?
10. What was the theory behind the children's crusades?
11. What struggle was taking place in Spain during these years?

12. What can we learn from the crusades and the crusaders?

