

## SET THE RECORD STRAIGHT THE CRUSADES

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The Crusades were a series of religious wars that were initiated and supported by the Latin church between 1095 and 1291. They were fought in the Holy Land and were intended to recover Jerusalem and the surrounding lands from Islamic rule. At the same time other wars were being fought against pagans and heretics around Europe. The term Crusade comes from the French “croisade” or way of the cross, the term was not used at the time but came into use the 17th century. There are generally reckoned to have been seven major Crusades, which had various objectives and results.

To understand them we have to look at what the world, and life, was like nine hundred years ago. Firstly, life was hard, brutish and short. Life expectancy was 43 years, if you survived childhood. Most people were not free in the sense that we would understand today as the feudal system was in operation for much of this period, which meant that people were tied into serving a particular lord and working his land, they were not free to decide what they wanted to do or where they would live. Most people would never travel more than 50 miles from where they were born in their entire lifetime. Few people could read and there was no printing press so nothing to read in any case. There was no radio, television, internet, social media.

Apart from the decisions of the ruling lords the other major influence on life was the church. This was the Roman Catholic church, as Protestantism was in the future, and the Western church had recently split from the Eastern, Byzantine, church. The church had a monopoly on people’s beliefs, as there were no Bibles to be read, so all the people knew about God is what the priests told them. The church was a large landowner, and had great power and wealth. The church taught that everybody was in danger for their mortal souls unless they had confessed all of their sins, and this could only come through the church, so fear of eternal damnation was ever present. At a time when sudden death was an ever-present reality this gave the church, and especially the pope, great power. This also led to great corruption, and the church sold indulgences, basically forgiveness of sins, for a payment to the church. One way of trying to ensure that one’s soul was safe was to go on a pilgrimage, and a visit to the Holy places in Palestine was the ultimate pilgrimage to undertake. There was also the philosophy of chivalry which ran through society and lords and rulers were obliged to provide military service for holding their lands from the king, so fighting was a duty as well as a way of advancing in society.

The Holy land at this time was under the control of the Seljuk Turks, having been taken by Islamic forces in 638. In 1095 Pope Urban II delivered a sermon declaring that Christianity was in peril and that the city of Jerusalem was in Muslim hands and there was a need to go to the aid of the Byzantine empire in fighting Islam, and also to free the holy places so that pilgrims could freely go there. It was also claimed that atrocities were being carried out against pilgrims. Anybody who embarked upon this armed pilgrimage would obtain full remission for their sins.

- The First Crusade began in 1096 and the crusaders took Jerusalem in July 1099 and spent two days sacking the city. Jerusalem was returned to Christian control and a number of kingdoms were set up to rule the area. The city fell to the Muslims again in 1187, when it was taken by Saladin. It was returned to Christian rule between 1229 to 1244, as a result of negotiations at the end of the sixth Crusade, but fell to the Tatars after this.
- In 1144 the Second Crusade took place to try and free the city of Edessa, which had fallen to the Moslems. It failed in this objective but did save Antioch from a similar fate.
- After Jerusalem was captured by Saladin in 1187 the Third Crusade was launched to recover it, but even Richard the Lionheart could not achieve this, although he did come in sight of the city in June 1192.
- 1202 saw the Fourth Crusade, which started in Venice and was aimed at the Byzantines, and led to the sacking of Constantinople.
- The Fifth Crusade in 1217-1221 tried to free Jerusalem by conquering Egypt, rules by Saladin’s brother. This ended in failure.
- The Sixth Crusade 1228-9 was an attempt to recapture Jerusalem and ended in negotiations and the Treaty of Jaffa led to a ten-year truce and the surrender of Jerusalem to Frederick II, the Holy Roman Emperor. Jerusalem was lost again in 1244.

The attempt to recover Jerusalem, the Seventh Crusade, started in 1248, but resulted in defeat in 1250 and Louis IX, King of France was taken prisoner and not released until 1254, which is taken to be the end of the Crusades. The Christian kingdoms in the Holy Land finally ended with the fall of Acre in 1291.

It is always difficult to judge historical events without being influenced by hindsight. These were very bloody wars, fought for what we may see as very dubious reasons, but to the people involved they were serious endeavours undertaken at great personal cost, and much hardship, because of their belief in the church and the Christian faith. At the time they were seen as armed pilgrimages rather than the military campaigns we would see them as now, seeking forgiveness of sins and military glory. They were a symptom of the power of the church, and it was the ongoing corruption and excess in the Roman Catholic Church that eventually led to the Reformation, especially once the printing press was invented and men were able to read the Bible and its truths for themselves, rather than through the interpretation of the Catholic Church and its vested interests.

The crusaders were an example of men seeking salvation by works rather than faith, and I think this is an important lesson for us. The Bible makes it clear that salvation is by faith alone, and is a personal decision.

*Can we boast, then, that we have done anything to be accepted by God? No, because our acquittal is not based on obeying the law. It is based on faith. So we are made right with God through faith and not by obeying the law... There is only one God, and he makes people right with himself only by faith, whether they are Jews or Gentiles.*  
(Romans 3:27-28, 30, NLT)

We do not need to go on crusade to gain salvation, indeed that is the last thing we should do:

*You have heard the law that says, 'Love your neighbour' and hate your enemy. But I say, love your enemies! Pray for those who persecute you! In that way, you will be acting as true children of your Father in heaven. For he gives his sunlight to both the evil and the good, and he sends rain on the just and the unjust alike. If you love only those who love you, what reward is there for that? Even corrupt tax collectors do that much. If you are kind only to your friends, how are you different from anyone else? Even pagans do that. But you are to be perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect.* (Matthew 5:43-48, NLT)

The crusades also show us how important it is that we, both as individuals and also as a church, test our thoughts motives and actions against the scriptures, which are freely available to us.

*But you must remain faithful to the things you have been taught. You know they are true, for you know you can trust those who taught you. You have been taught the holy Scriptures from childhood, and they have given you the wisdom to receive the salvation that comes by trusting in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It corrects us when we are wrong and teaches us to do what is right. God uses it to prepare and equip his people to do every good work.* (2 Timothy 3:14-17, NLT)

This is something that the crusaders were unable to do, and thus led to them undertaking the crusades.

Finally, the crusades are an area of contention with other faiths. The historical facts have been used by rulers and politicians down through the ages to push people into acting certain ways for their own interests, and the Crusades are no different. In the Muslim world they are seen as a sign of the aggressiveness of Christians, not helped by recent statements about the "War on Terror" being a Crusade. It is also seen as a justification for a Jihad, or Muslim holy war. The Holy land at the time was home to Byzantines, Latin Christians, Jews, Muslims and many other peoples. The crusades were a tragedy for all of them as well as the crusaders themselves. War brings suffering to everyone involved, and we do not need to defend the actions taken by men in a different situation from us 900 years ago. Instead, we should seek to preach the gospel of Jesus in a peaceful way to all men, as Jesus commands us to do.

*Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.* (Matthew 28:19, NLT)