FREEDOM STORIES

The Crusades

August, 1096

To Fight For Christendom

Historical Spotlight

What would make a man leave his land, his wife, and his children for a journey of nearly three thousand miles, to fight for ground he would never own, knowing he might never come home? The First Crusade poses that question. To answer it honestly, we must recover the context modern textbooks often omit: the 485 years of bloodshed before it. Between 610, when Muhammad received his first revelations, and 1095, when a desperate Christian emperor sent word west, the ancient heartland of Christianity was steadily conquered. The First Crusade was not the beginning of a war. It was, instead, a very late answer to one.

Consider the map in the seventh century. Christianity had spread from Jerusalem across Syria, Egypt, North Africa, and Asia Minor, while taking root throughout Europe. These were the oldest Christian lands on earth, home to Athanasius, Augustine, great churches, monasteries, libraries, and families who had followed Christ for generations. Then the map changed. Within a decade of Muhammad's death in 632, Arab armies had taken Syria and Palestine, and by 642 Egypt had fallen. North Africa followed, then Spain in 711. Christians who remained under Muslim rule lived as dhimmis, paying the jizya tax and holding an inferior legal status, while captives faced ransom, slavery, or worse.

G. K. Chesterton, surveying this record, settled the chronology in a single sentence: "It was Islam that was the invasion and Christendom that was the thing invaded."

By 1095 Christendom had taken another blow. Seljuk Turkish armies had overrun most of Christian Asia Minor, and the Byzantine emperor Alexios I Komnenos, in desperation, appealed to Western Christians to send help. At Clermont in France, Pope Urban II relayed the cry of the Eastern church, and the crowd answered with a shout that became the watchword of the age: Deus vult! God wills it. It was similar to the plea Nehemiah once made from Jerusalem's broken walls: "Be not ye afraid of them: remember the Lord, which is great and terrible, and fight for your brethren, your sons, and your daughters, your wives, and your houses." (Nehemiah 4:14)

Europe answered. An estimated 60,000 to 100,000 people went east. They sold property, mortgaged estates, settled their debts, kissed their children goodbye, and "took the cross," sewing its emblem onto their garments as a vow. For most, this was not a crusade that would bring them wealth and glory. They knew before they went, the cost would mean their lives. Most would never return. Famine, disease, and battle consumed the great host mile by mile across four brutal years.

The Crossing of the Bosphorus; Godfrey of Bouillon and his brother, Baldwin, in 1097
Emile Signol, 1854

Just War Theory: A Case Study

By the summer of 1099, only a remnant remained: perhaps ten thousand under arms, and scarcely 1,200 knights. They had taken Jerusalem, and now word came that a vast Egyptian Fatimid army was advancing to take it back. One chronicler who marched with the crusaders reckoned the enemy at two hundred thousand men. Modern historians count a smaller army, but still roughly double the exhausted Christian force. The crusaders did not wait behind Jerusalem's walls. On August 12, 1099, carrying a relic of the cross before them, they marched south to Ascalon, struck at dawn, and scattered the army sent to destroy them. The long road to Jerusalem was ended, and the Christian East had been given, for a season, room to breathe.

Why it Matters Today:

The Crusaders were imperfect men in a rough and violent age. But strip away nine centuries of caricature, and a harder truth remains: they left homes, families, and fortunes because they believed their fellow Christians and the lands of Christendom were worth defending, even at the cost of their lives. We need not romanticize them to take that conviction seriously. Every generation must decide what it loves enough to preserve and what it is willing to sacrifice to defend. They believed Christendom was worth more than comfort, property, and even life itself. What, in our own age of inherited blessings and eroding liberty, are we willing to sacrifice for our brethren, our children, and our civilization?

The Crusaders inherited from Augustine an older Christian argument about war: it could never be justified by a desire for land, vengeance, or glory. It required just cause, legitimate authority, and right intention, with peace as its proper end. Medieval Christians used these principles to defend the Crusades as aid to Christians under attack and the recovery of conquered lands, even when their own conduct sometimes violated those ideals.

G. K. Chesterton was not arguing that every Crusader action was righteous when he said, "It was Islam that was the invasion and Christendom that was the thing invaded." He was asking readers to remember what came first.

C. S. Lewis gave a name to another danger: "chronological snobbery," the "uncritical acceptance of the intellectual climate of our own age." Every age has assumptions so familiar that they become difficult to see beyond. Ours is no exception.

Perhaps that is where the Crusades still speak to us. Before deciding whether a war is just, we must know where its story actually begins. Who attacked? Who is defending? What has been taken? What peace is being sought? What restraints remain when passions rise? Augustine's questions have not grown old. They remain pertinent because our own civilization is still under attack. If Christendom is to endure, we must be willing to wrestle with those questions again.

Taking of Jerusalem by the Crusaders, 15th July 1099
Emile Signol, 1847