

Module 204: The Crusades

The Conquest of Jerusalem by Raymond d'Aguiliers. Trans. August. C. Krey; Modernized and abridged by Stephen Tomkins. Edited and prepared for the web by Dan Graves.

“The city was filled with corpses.”

Module Introduction

The Crusades were, or at least they seem from a modern perspective, a nightmarish atrocity and one of the worst crimes ever committed in the name of Christ.

Just at the time that Europe was regaining its strength and confidence, the Pope received an appeal from the Eastern Emperor to come and help him liberate Jerusalem. Though it had been in Muslim hands for centuries, its latest ruler would not let Christian pilgrims enter the city. The Pope called all the rulers of Europe to take their armies East and reconquer Jerusalem and the rest for the church. By the time that they got there, Jerusalem was admitting pilgrims again, but they carried out the war anyway.

The First Crusade was a great success in taking Jerusalem, Antioch and other biblical cities. But the barbaric violence with which it was done was simply horrific. It was not too long before the cities started falling back into Muslim hands. Many more Crusades followed, but they achieved less and less. Ultimately the Crusades achieved little more than demonstrating what a gulf there is between the teachings of Jesus and the actions of his followers.

This account is by Raymond d'Aguiliers, chaplain to Count Raymond of Toulouse who led one of the two French armies, and who naturally figures prominently in the account.

If such things and Raymond describes - and his attitude to them - seem thankfully unthinkable today, try to imagine what would have made people think and act like that then.

We loaded our camels and oxen, and then all our baggage animals and horses, and marched on to Jerusalem.

However, we forgot what Peter Bartholomew had commanded us - that we should not approach Jerusalem except with bared feet. [This is how pilgrims were supposed to travel.] Everyone ignored the instruction, out of ambition to occupy castles and villas before the rest. It was our custom that whoever got to a castle first placed his standard there with a guard, and no one else took it. Everyone got up at midnight and, without waiting for anyone, took everything along the Jordan. However, a few who respected God's command walked barefoot, sighing heavily for this contempt of God's word.

Duke Godfrey and the Counts of Flanders and Normandy besieged Jerusalem from the north side. Count Raymond and his army, besieged the city from the west, but his men could not get to the wall because of the valley in front of it. So, he wanted to move his camp. One day, while he was reconnoitering, he came to Mount Zion and saw the church there. When he heard of the miracles that God had performed there, he said to his leaders, "If we neglect to take this holy gift which the Lord so graciously offers us, letting the Saracens occupy this place, what will become of us? What if, out of hatred for us they destroy and pollute these sacred things? Maybe God is giving us this opportunity to test our regard for him. What I know for sure is that if we do not protect this holy place carefully, the Lord will not give us the others within the city."

And so Count Raymond, against the wishes of the leaders of his army, ordered his tents to be moved to that spot. There are sacred treasures in that church - the tombs of the kings David and Solomon, as well as that of the first martyr, St. Stephen. There the Blessed Mary departed from this world; the Lord supped there and, after rising from the dead, appeared there to his disciples and to Thomas. And on this spot the disciples were filled with the Holy Spirit.

When the siege had been set up, some of the leaders of the

army met a hermit on the Mount of Olives, who said to them, "If you attack the city tomorrow till the ninth hour, the Lord will deliver it into your hands." They replied, "But we do not have the necessary machinery for storming the walls."

The hermit said, "God is all powerful. If he wills, we will storm the walls even with one ladder. The Lord aids those who labor for the truth." So, with whatever machinery they could construct during the night, they attacked the city in the early morning, and it lasted till the third hour. The Saracens were forced to retreat behind the inner walls when our men broke down the outer wall, and some even climbed the inner walls. But when the city was about to be captured, in the confusion of desire and fear the attack was interrupted, and many of our men were killed. The following day no attack was attempted.

After this, the whole army scattered throughout the surrounding country to collect provisions, and no one even talked about preparing the machinery needed to capture the city. Each man was serving his own stomach. What was worse, they did not even ask the Lord to free them from such great evils, and so they were fatally afflicted.

Just before our arrival, the Saracens had filled up the springs, destroyed the cisterns, and dammed up the brooks. The Lord himself had turned rivers into wilderness and water springs into thirsty ground because of the wickedness of those who lived there. So we could only get water with great difficulty.

There is a fountain at the foot of Mount Zion, which is called the Pool of Siloam. It is a large spring, but water flows out of it only once every three days. We do not know how to explain this, except that the Lord willed it to be so. But when, on the third day the water flowed, it was consumed with such great crowding and haste that the men pushed

one another into it, and many baggage animals and cattle died in it. And even when the pool was filled with the crowd and with the bodies of dead animals, the stronger forced their way to the opening in the rocks through which the water flowed, while the weak got only the water which had already been contaminated. Many sick people fell down by the fountain, with tongues so parched that they were unable to utter a word, stretching out their hands with open mouths toward those who had water.

There were many horses, mules, cattle, and sheep in the field, most without enough strength to move. And when they had died of thirst, they rotted where they stood, and there was a sickening stench throughout the camp. But why say so much about these troubles? None, or few, were mindful of the Lord, or of the work needed to capture the city, nor did they bother to beseech the Lord's favor. We not recognize God in the midst of our affliction, nor did he show favor to the ungrateful.

The Bishop (Adhemar) appeared before Peter Desiderius, saying, "Speak to the princes and all the people, and say to them, "You who have come from distant lands to worship God and the Lord of hosts, purge yourselves of your uncleanness, and let each one turn from his evil ways. Then march around Jerusalem with bare feet, invoking God, and you must also fast. If you do this and then make a great attack on the city on the ninth day, it will be captured. If you do not, all the evils that you have suffered will be multiplied by the Lord."

Although we have passed over many matters, this one we ought to record. While we marched around the city in Saracens and Turks made the circuit on the walls, procession, the ridiculing us in many ways. They placed many crosses on the walls in yokes and mocked them with blows and insulting deeds. We, in turn, hoping to obtain the aid of God in storming the city by means of these signs,

pressed the work of the siege day and night.

The appointed day arrived and the attack began. There were 60,000 fighting men in the city. We had no more than 12,000. I say this that you may realize that nothing, whether great or small, which is done in the name of the Lord can fail, as the following pages show.

Our men began to undermine the towers and walls. From every side stones were hurled from the catapults. Arrows fell like hail. The enemy bore this patiently, sustained by their own faith. There was no sign of the battle being won, but then the catapults got nearer to the walls, and we started to hurl burning wood and straw, dipped in pitch, wax, and sulfur. Neither swords nor walls were any protection from such fiery missiles. And so the fight continued from the rising to the setting sun in such a wonderful way that it is difficult to believe anything more glorious was ever done. Then we called on Almighty God, our Leader and Guide, confident in His mercy...

The next morning, our men rushed to the walls and dragged the catapults forward, but the Saracens had constructed so many machines during the night that they had ten times our number. Thus they greatly interfered with our efforts.

This was the ninth day, on which the priest had said that we would capture the city. Our catapults were now shaken apart by the blows of their stones, and our men flagged from tiredness. However, there remained the mercy of the Lord which is never conquered, but is always a source of support in times of adversity.

Our men began to take heart. Some began to batter down the wall, while others scaled it with ladders and ropes. Our archers fired burning arrows which drove the defenders from the walls. Then the Count quickly released the long drawbridge of the wooden tower next to the wall, making a

bridge over which the men began to enter Jerusalem bravely and fearlessly. The amount of blood that they shed on that day is incredible. Everyone climbed up after them, and the Saracens now began to suffer.

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Now that our men had possession of the walls and towers, we saw some wonderful sights. Some of our men - actually the more merciful ones - cut off the heads of their enemies. Others shot them with arrows, so that they fell from the towers. Others tortured them longer by casting them into the flames. Piles of heads, hands, and feet were to be seen in the streets of the city. One had to pick one's way over the bodies of men and horses. But these were small matters compared to what happened at the Temple of Solomon. You would not believe it if I told you. Suffice to say that in the Temple and porch of Solomon men rode in blood up to their knees and bridle reins. Indeed, it was a just and splendid judgment of God that this place should be filled with the blood of the unbelievers, since it had suffered so long from their blasphemies. The city was filled with corpses and blood.

Now that the city was taken, it was well worth all our labors and hardships to see the devotion of the pilgrims at the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. How they rejoiced and sang a new song to the Lord! Their hearts offered such prayers of praise to God, victorious and triumphant, as cannot be told in words. A new day, new joy, new and perpetual gladness, the outcome of all our labor and devotion, made us all utter new words and new songs. This day, I say, will be famous in all future ages, for it turned our labors and sorrows into joy and exultation. This day, I say, marks the justification of all Christianity, the humiliation of paganism, and the renewal of our faith. "This is the day which the Lord hath made, let us rejoice and be glad in it," for on this day the Lord revealed Himself to His people and blessed them.

Discussion Starters:

Do you think the idea of reclaiming the Holy Land for the Christian church was basically a good one that got out of hand, or was it misconceived from the start?

"If we neglect to take this holy gift which the Lord so graciously offers us, letting the Saracens occupy this place, what will become of us?' Does this account, as well as showing what evil was done by the Crusaders, help us to understand what motivated them? Can you explain why they believed they were right?

"If you will attack the city tomorrow till the ninth hour, the Lord will deliver it into your hands." Was this prophecy fulfilled? How can we judge whether such messages are genuinely from God?

According to the book of Joshua, God was happy for his people to use violence and mass killing to deliver the Holy Land from its occupants and their false religion. Is that any different to this crusade? If so, how? If not are they both right or both wrong? How do you know?

When, if ever, is it ever right to use violence to promote our faith? How do we decide?

"This day will be famous in all future ages, for it turned our labors and sorrows into joy and exultation. This day, I say, marks the justification of all Christianity."

Raymond is right about it being famous, though it is not necessarily remembered with the same sentiments as his. What are the views of modern day Christians about the Crusades? What opinions does Raymond express about the venture, and about his fellow Crusaders? What do you think the Crusaders would make of modern day Christian opinion, and how might they answer?

Some Christians these days talk of repenting, apologizing or atoning for the Crusades. Do think this is something we could or should do?

Bible Verses

Joshua 8

Psalm 2, 3

Psalm 137

Micah 4:1-5

Luke 6:27-36