

Unexpected Chivalry

As a Christian, there is no greater point I can disagree on than religion. The decision to follow or reject Christ is the most vital choice a person can make. It is no surprise, therefore, that I hold quite an opposite world view from the medieval Sultan of Egypt, Saladin. A Muslim general living during the Second and Third Crusades, he was devoted to Islam's jihad (holy war). I do not remotely agree with the beliefs of those who demote Jesus to a mere prophet, or are taught to slaughter non-Muslims. Yet despite this man's spiritual darkness, he is renowned for exhibiting Biblical character traits. Several times Saladin gave of his best supplies to help his key adversary, Richard I. The general even offered his own physician to cure Richard's fever. In a time when knights were respected for honorable deeds, Saladin put the crusaders to shame, demonstrating mercy to his conquered enemies. Although he followed a false god, this man is still a gleaming example of chivalry.

Bestowing horses upon the enemy marked one aspect of Saladin's benevolence. To the Muslim warrior, a horse was everything – wealth, companion, war mount. Saladin himself possessed many fine Arabian steeds of great swiftness and agility. Yet even these treasures were not too great to give up. Once, he saw his men retreating from the battlefield in a frenzy, and heard that Richard himself was driving them away. Saladin beheld an individual fighting on foot among his soldiers. The impropriety of this shocked him; a king should not be on the ground with his servants, but mounted! Immediately he sent one of his army's own Arabians as a war-horse for Richard. Another time, the Lion-Heart's mount was killed in battle, and Saladin again provided a charger. Of course this was actually aiding the opposing forces, but as far as Saladin

was concerned, gallantry was more important. Always generous, the Sultan showed how he esteemed his opponent by offering a creature he highly esteemed.

In another instance when Saladin proved his virtue, he could have easily taken advantage of the situation. Richard was ill with a fever. Naturally he might have pounced on this opportunity, but instead the general was concerned. Some claim Richard had requested fresh fruit and water from him, while others say Saladin took the initiative himself. Whether prompted or not, the Muslim *did* send the items – choice fruits of the land (unnecessary luxuries), and mountain snow. But Saladin was never one to do something halfway; he even offered his own physician to heal Richard. This story is strikingly reminiscent of Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan. Muslims were as despised by the Europeans as Samaritans were by the Jews; yet though it went against the grain, Saladin chose to do the honorable thing.

The most poignant example of Saladin's chivalry is a stark contrast to his enemies. After the crusaders captured a city, they were often overzealous, resulting in ruthless bloodshed. After Saladin captured a city, he forbade his men to massacre civilians, rob, or wreck the city. Jerusalem was taken by crusaders in 1099, and contemporary accounts boast of ankle-deep blood. On the other hand, when Saladin reclaimed Jerusalem, he permitted the occupants to pay a ransom price. Poor people who had no gold were allowed to go free, their debt forgiven. It is interesting that Saladin, a man of his word, did not follow through this time. He had vowed to avenge the Muslims killed there in 1099. However, he overrode that vow when the city's leaders appealed for their lives. If only the knights 'of Christ' had learned a lesson from Saladin!

Ultimately, this non-believer's genteel conduct earned him the admiration of allies and foes alike. If he possessed such sense of honor already, think what he could have done if the Holy Spirit were guiding him! For a general to provide wartime necessities—and luxuries—to his enemy is unthinkable, let alone desire the restoration of his health. Most incredible for a Muslim was his leniency toward conquered people, whom he could have enslaved or murdered. Although I shall never agree with Islam, I can still respect Saladin's laudable example of chivalry.