HERandHIStory in Black

PRESERVING HISTORY THROUGH STORYTELLING, RESEARCH & CONVERSATION

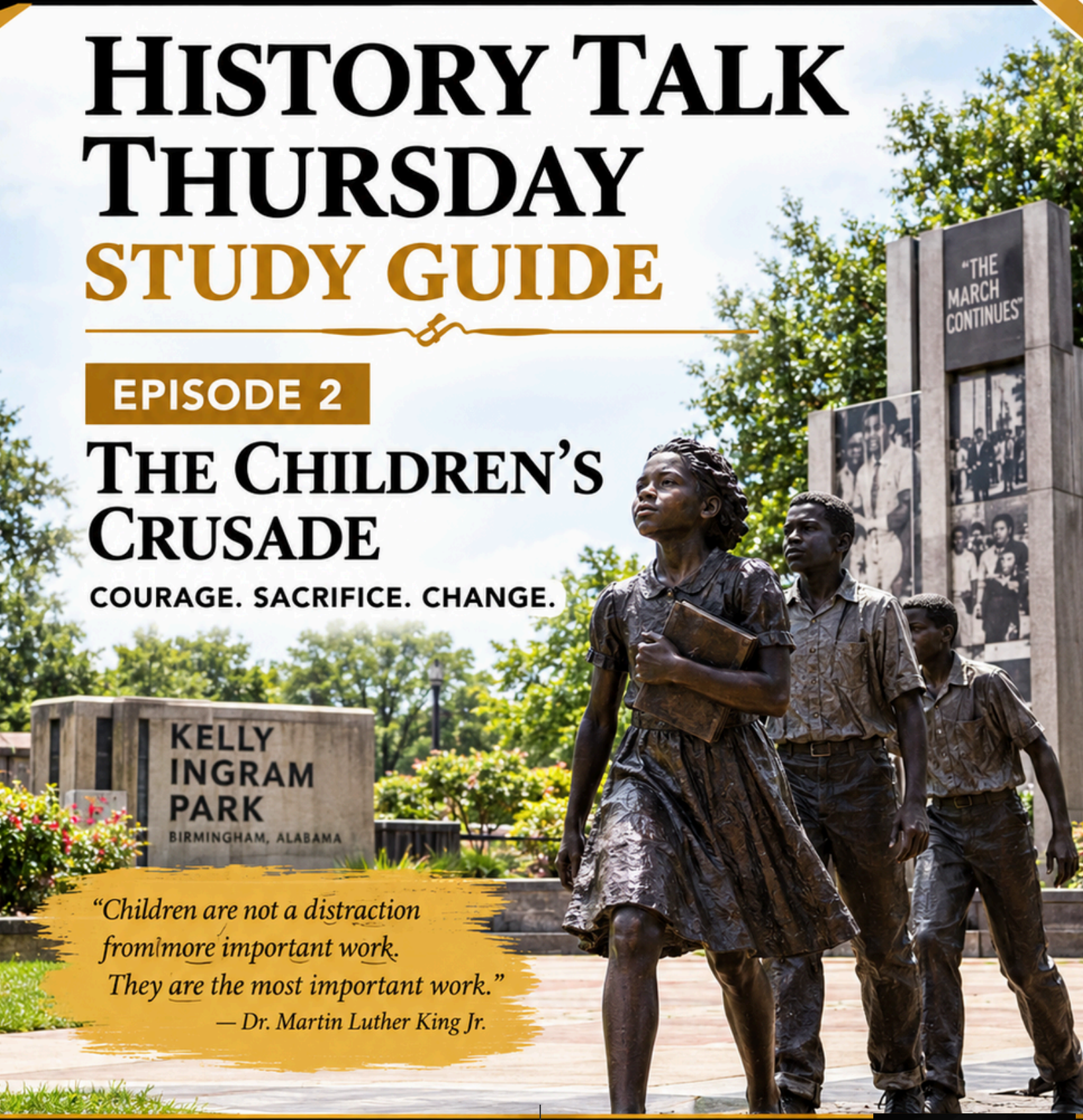
HISTORY TALK THURSDAY

STUDY GUIDE

EPISODE 2

THE CHILDREN'S CRUSADE

COURAGE. SACRIFICE. CHANGE.



"Children are not a distraction from more important work. They are the most important work."

— Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

HISTORY TALK THURSDAY STUDY GUIDE

EPISODE 2: THE CHILDREN'S CRUSADE

PRESENTED BY HERANDHISTORY IN BLACK

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

What Was the Children's Crusade?

In May 1963, thousands of young people in Birmingham, Alabama, participated in demonstrations against racial segregation. The demonstrations were part of the larger Birmingham Campaign, a coordinated effort to challenge segregation in one of the most segregated cities in the United States.

Young people left their classrooms and gathered at 16th Street Baptist Church before marching into downtown Birmingham. Many were arrested and taken to jail.

As the demonstrations continued, Birmingham authorities responded with police dogs and high-pressure fire hoses. Images of young demonstrators facing this treatment appeared in newspapers and on television, bringing national and international attention to Birmingham.

The courage of these young people became an important part of the Birmingham Campaign and the larger Civil Rights Movement.

Key Facts

- Location: Birmingham, Alabama
- Date: May 1963
- Movement: Birmingham Campaign
- Key Leaders: James Bevel, Fred Shuttlesworth, Martin Luther King Jr. and other local organizers
- Participants: Primarily Black children and teenagers
- Goal: Challenge racial segregation and discrimination in Birmingham

HISTORICAL TIMELINE

Timeline of the Children's Crusade

Before May 1963
Civil rights leaders organize the Birmingham Campaign to challenge segregation in businesses and public spaces.

May 2, 1963 — D-Day
Hundreds of students leave school and gather at 16th Street Baptist Church. Groups of young demonstrators begin marching toward downtown Birmingham.
Many are arrested.

May 3, 1963
More young people participate.
Police Commissioner Eugene "Bull" Connor authorizes the use of high-pressure fire hoses and police dogs against demonstrators.

Following Days
Demonstrations and arrests continue as images from Birmingham spread across the country and around the world.

May 10, 1963
An agreement is announced that begins the process of desegregating certain Birmingham businesses and improving employment opportunities for Black residents.

1964
The Civil Rights Act of 1964 becomes federal law, prohibiting segregation in many public accommodations and discrimination in employment.

KEY HISTORICAL FIGURES

Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth

Fred Shuttlesworth was one of Birmingham's most important civil rights leaders and co-founder of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. He spent years challenging segregation in Birmingham and helped bring national civil rights leaders into the Birmingham Campaign.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Martin Luther King Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference joined Birmingham's local activists in the campaign against segregation. King was arrested during the campaign and wrote his famous Letter from Birmingham Jail.

Rev. James Bevel

James Bevel was an organizer with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference who played a major role in developing the strategy of involving young people in the Birmingham demonstrations.

Bull Connor

Bull Connor was Birmingham's Commissioner of Public Safety. His use of police dogs and high-pressure fire hoses against demonstrators became some of the most recognizable images of the Birmingham Campaign.

THE STUDENTS

The young participants are at the heart of this story. Children and teenagers risked arrest, intimidation, and violence to challenge segregation and demand change.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES & VOCABULARY

Learning Objectives

By the end of this guide, you should be able to:

- Explain what the Children's Crusade was and why it happened.
- Describe why young people became involved.
- Identify important people involved in the Birmingham Campaign.
- Explain how Birmingham authorities responded to the demonstrations.
- Discuss how media coverage affected national awareness.
- Reflect on the courage and sacrifices of the young demonstrators.

Important Terms

- Segregation — The enforced separation of people based on race.
- Nonviolent Protest — Protest that seeks change without using physical violence.
- Civil Disobedience — The deliberate, nonviolent refusal to obey laws considered unjust.
- Birmingham Campaign — The 1963 campaign organized to challenge segregation and racial discrimination in Birmingham.
- D-Day — The name organizers used for May 2, 1963, when large numbers of Birmingham students began demonstrating.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why do you think young people chose to participate in the demonstrations?
2. If you were a child or teenager living in Birmingham in 1963, would you have marched? Why or why not?
3. If you were a parent, would you have allowed your child to participate?
4. What risks did the students face by participating?
5. Why do you think images of children facing police dogs and fire hoses had such a powerful impact?
6. How did media coverage influence the way people outside Birmingham understood what was happening?
7. What can the Children's Crusade teach us about the ability of young people to create change?

PERSONAL REFLECTION

What is one thing you learned about the Children's Crusade that you didn't know before?

What part of this story affected you the most? Why?

HISTORY ON LOCATION

Experience the History

If you visit Birmingham, consider exploring:

16th Street Baptist Church
The church served as an important meeting place during the Birmingham Campaign and was where young demonstrators gathered before marching.

Kelly Ingram Park
Located across from 16th Street Baptist Church, the park contains memorials and sculptures that help tell the story of the Birmingham Campaign.

Birmingham Civil Rights Institute
The museum documents Birmingham's civil rights history and places the city's struggle within the larger Civil Rights Movement.

A.G. Gaston Motel
Civil rights leaders used the motel as a headquarters during the Birmingham Campaign.

Think About It
If you had the opportunity to stand in one of these places, which site would you visit first, and why?

LEARN MORE

Recommended Books

- We've Got a Job: The 1963 Birmingham Children's March — Cynthia Levinson
- The Young Crusaders: The Untold Story of the Children and Teenagers Who Galvanized the Civil Rights Movement — V. P. Franklin
- While the World Watched: A Birmingham Bombing Survivor Comes of Age During the Civil Rights Movement — Carolyn McKinstry

Final Reflection

The Children's Crusade demonstrates that young people were not simply witnesses to the Civil Rights Movement. They were participants who made decisions, took risks, and helped force the nation to pay attention to what was happening in Birmingham.

Explore More

- Continue your research through:
- Birmingham Civil Rights Institute
- National Park Service — Birmingham Civil Rights National Monument
- The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute at Stanford University
- Library of Congress
- Primary-source photographs, newspaper coverage, interviews, and oral histories from the Birmingham Campaign

CONTINUE THE JOURNEY

Thank you for exploring The Children's Crusade with HERandHIStory in Black.

History doesn't end when the discussion is over. We encourage you to keep asking questions, visiting historic places, and sharing these stories with others.

Our Mission

At HERandHIStory in Black, our mission is to preserve and share the stories, people, and places that shaped Black history and American history through storytelling, education, and historical travel.

Continue Exploring

📚 More study guides are available in the HERandHIStory Resource Library
🌐 www.kasualcloset.net

Coming Next

History Talk Thursday – Episode 3

Freedom Riders

Follow the journey of the Freedom Riders who challenged segregation in interstate travel and faced violence, arrests, and resistance along the way.