

Deuteronomy 7:17-26

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“If you should say in your heart [engage in self-talk; cf. Deut 8:17; 9:4; 18:21], ‘These nations are greater than I; how can I dispossess them?’ [expressing human viewpoint] <sup>18</sup> you shall not be afraid of them [challenging their perspective]; you shall well remember what the LORD your God did to Pharaoh and to all Egypt [calling his audience to take control and redirect their thoughts, recalling God’s past acts of deliverance]: <sup>19</sup> the great trials which your eyes saw and the signs and the wonders and the mighty hand and the outstretched arm by which the LORD your God brought you out [displaying His great power; cf. Deut 4:34; 6:22]. So shall the LORD your God do to all the peoples of whom you are afraid [directing Israel to apply God’s past faithfulness to their current situation]. <sup>20</sup> “Moreover, the LORD your God will send the hornet against them [i.e., use other forces against their enemies; cf. Josh 24:12], until those who are left and hide themselves from you perish. <sup>21</sup> “You shall not dread them [i.e., don’t let fear dominate their thoughts], for the LORD your God is in your midst, a great and awesome God [again, Moses challenges their perspective, revealing God was personally present to help]. <sup>22</sup> “The LORD your God will clear away these nations before you little by little [in gradual stages]; you will not be able to put an end to them quickly [sometimes the big project takes time], for the wild beasts would grow too numerous for you [i.e., secondary problems would overwhelm them; plus, God would use gradual advance as a means of testing His people; see Judg 2:21-23]. <sup>23</sup> “But the LORD your God will deliver them before you [in His time and way], and will throw them into great confusion until they are destroyed [cause psychological disequilibrium that will help bring about their destruction]. <sup>24</sup> “He will deliver their kings into your hand so that you will make their name perish from under heaven [be expunged from historical memory]; no man will be able to stand before you until you have destroyed them. <sup>25</sup> “The graven images of their gods you are to burn with fire [destroy the vestiges of their pagan culture]; you shall not covet the silver or the gold that is on them, nor take it for yourselves, or you will be snared by it [and experience spiritual defeat], for it is an abomination to the LORD your God [an abomination – תועבה *toebah* – a detestable thing, commonly associated with idolatry; cf. Deut 12:31; 13:12-15; 17:2-5; 32:16-18; 1 Ki 11:5-7; Isa 44:17-20]. <sup>26</sup> “You shall not bring an abomination into your house [no idols in the home], and like it come under the ban [חֵרֵם *cherem* - devoted to destruction]; you shall utterly detest it and you shall utterly abhor it, for it is something banned.

**Summary:**

This pericope presents Israel with a theology of warfare, both physical and spiritual. The main point of this passage is that Moses promises defeat of the many nations before them, who are greater and more numerous than Israel (Deut 7:17-24), and then calls them to destroy the images of idolatry that brought God’s judgment upon Canaan, warning them

not to bring the idols into their homes, lest they be defeated spiritually and destroyed (Deut 7:25-26).

Moses opens this section by addressing the mental concerns of his audience, saying, “If you should say in your heart, ‘These nations are greater than I; how can I dispossess them?’” (Deut 7:17). Here, Moses addresses the humanistic self-talk of the Israelites, knowing they are mentally evaluating the Canaanites as numerically superior, and are concerned about how, by their own resources, they can defeat their enemy. Moses addresses their fear by injecting divine viewpoint into the stream of their consciousness, saying, “you shall not be afraid of them; you shall well remember what the LORD your God did to Pharaoh and to all Egypt” (Deut 7:18). As their godly leader, Moses provided a faith-strengthening technique intended to prevent the crippling effects of fear. Moses called God’s people to bring their thoughts into captivity and redirected them to think on God and His past faithfulness; specifically, His defeat of their greatest foe, which was Pharaoh and Egypt. This past victory included “the great trials which your eyes saw and the signs and the wonders and the mighty hand and the outstretched arm by which the LORD your God brought you out” (Deut 7:19a). God’s past faithfulness and deliverances were to strengthen their thinking regarding their present situation, as Moses said, “So shall the LORD your God do to all the peoples of whom you are afraid” (Deut 7:19b). As God had done before, so He promised to do again. And Israel would not be fighting alone, as Moses revealed, “Moreover, the LORD your God will send the hornet against them, until those who are left and hide themselves from you perish” (Deut 7:20). The truth was, the residents of Canaan were afraid of Israel, and God would affect their destruction, even using hornets to attack them in hiding places too small for others. Warren Wiersbe writes:

Bible students don’t agree on what is meant by “the hornet” in Deuteronomy 7:20 (Ex. 23:27–30; Josh. 24:12), but it’s likely that it was the familiar stinging insect that swarmed into the land and attacked the people. The Canaanites were a superstitious people who saw omens in every unusual happening and they may have interpreted this strange occurrence as an announcement of defeat. Insects are sometimes used as metaphors for nations (Isa. 7:18), and some students understand “hornets” to refer to invading nations that God sent into Canaan prior to Israel’s arrival. These local wars would weaken the Canaanite military defenses and prepare the way for Israel’s invasion. Whatever the interpretation, and the literal one makes good sense, two facts are clear: God goes before His people and opens the way for victory, and He can use even small insects to accomplish His purposes.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Equipped*, “Be” Commentary Series (Colorado Springs, CO: Chariot Victor Pub., 1999), 55.

For a second time, Moses tells his audience, “You shall not dread them” (Deut 7:21a). Unwarranted fear can cripple God’s people from doing His will and advancing forward to receive His blessings. And again, Moses inserts divine viewpoint into their thinking, saying, “for the LORD your God is in your midst, a great and awesome God” (Deut 7:21b). The God who was in their midst, who has power to accomplish His word, would Himself guarantee the defeat of Israel’s enemies. However, God’s strategy of removing Israel’s enemy would not occur all at once, but rather in stages, little by little. Moses said, “The LORD your God will clear away these nations before you little by little; you will not be able to put an end to them quickly, for the wild beasts would grow too numerous for you” (Deut 7:22). There was practical wisdom to God’s plan of defeating Israel’s enemies gradually, as sudden depopulation would result in a secondary problem of wild animals—such as lions and bears—that would hinder their settling the land (a reading of the book of Joshua reveals it took about seven years to gain control of the land of Canaan). Though gradual, Israel’s enemies would surely be destroyed, as Moses wrote, “But the LORD your God will deliver them before you, and will throw them into great confusion until they are destroyed” (Deut 7:23). Part of God’s defeat of Israel’s enemies included disrupting their cognitive processes so that they would be confused. Clarity of thought is necessary for any endeavor, and that includes military campaigns. But God would cause Israel’s enemies to be confused, and this would help bring about their destruction. And the defeat of Canaan was a collaboration between God—the Divine Warrior—and the people of Israel. The battle started and ended with God, but He included Israel in the fight. From the divine side, God “will deliver their kings into your hand” (Deut 7:24a). From the human side, “you will make their name perish from under heaven” (Deut 7:24b). The end result would be, “no man will be able to stand before you until you have destroyed them” (Deut 7:24c).

Israel faced a primary enemy in the Canaanites, but then a secondary, and more dangerous enemy, regarding idols. After Israel defeated their enemies, they were to purge the land of the pagan idols, lest they fall into the trap of idolatry, which is seductive, contagious, and destructive of one’s relationship with God. Even the precious metals used for constructing the idols was to be regarded as unclean and destroyed. Moses wrote, “The graven images of their gods you are to burn with fire; you shall not covet the silver or the gold that is on them, nor take it for yourselves, or you will be snared by it, for it is an abomination to the LORD your God” (Deut 7:25). God understands the human heart and knows our sinful weaknesses. The greater threat to Israel—greater than the Canaanites themselves—was idolatry, and the immorality associated with it. The greater battle was spiritual, not physical. Moses concluded the pericope, saying, “You shall not bring an abomination into your house, and like it come under the ban; you shall utterly detest it and you shall utterly abhor it, for it is something banned” (Deut 7:26). Eugene Merrill comments:

So reprehensible are these objects that they contaminate those who use them or who even bring them into their homes (v. 26). Indeed, they render them to the same judgment as was appropriate to the objects themselves, namely, total eradication. This was illustrated most tragically but clearly in the episode of Achan; following Jericho's destruction, he seized some of the detestable goods of that city, brought them into his tent, and subsequently perished along with them (Josh 7:16–26).<sup>2</sup>

As Christians, we face ongoing battles in the devil's world. Constant troubles can dominate our thoughts and lead to crippling fear if we don't learn to operate from the divine perspective. Like Israel, God calls us to take control of our thoughts (2 Cor 10:5), to set our minds on Him (Col 3:1-2), and to let His Word saturate our thinking (Col 3:16). We are to live by faith (Heb 10:38; 11:6), as this allows us to gain victories that could not be won by any other means. Furthermore, we live in the present reality that "greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world" (1 John 4:4). Jesus said, "I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matt 28:20). And God Himself said, "I will never desert you, nor will I ever forsake you," and "the Lord is my helper, I will not be afraid. What will man do to me? (Heb 13:5-6). As Christians, we must not fall into the trap of loving the world (1 John 2:15), but rather, "like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all *your* behavior; because it is written, 'you shall be holy, for I am holy'" (1 Pet 1:15-16). Warren Wiersbe states:

Like Israel of old, the church today must move forward by faith, conquer the enemy, and claim new territory for the Lord (Eph 6:10–18; 2 Cor 2:14–17). But unlike Israel, we use spiritual weapons, not human weapons, as by faith we overcome the walls of resistance that Satan has put into the minds of sinners (John 18:36; 2 Cor 10:1–6; Eph 6:17; Heb 4:12). The apostolic church had no buildings, budgets (Acts 3:6), academic degrees (Acts 4:13), or political influence, but depended on the Word of God and prayer (Acts 6:4); and God gave them great victory. Can He not do the same for His people today? Jesus has overcome the world and the devil (John 12:31; 16:33; Eph 1:19–21; Col 1:13; 2:15); therefore, we fight from victory and not just for victory. "If God be for us, who can be against us?" (Rom 8:31).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Eugene H. Merrill, *Deuteronomy*, vol. 4, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), 184.

<sup>3</sup> Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Equipped*, "Be" Commentary Series, 58.