

Deuteronomy 20:1-9
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In our current section on case laws (Deut 19:1—26:19), we are considering how the nation of ancient Israel was to practice righteous living after they entered the land of Canaan (Deut 16:20), and how righteousness was measured by conformity to God’s laws (Deut 6:24-25). Having discussed unjust killing in the previous section (Deut 19:11-12), Moses now addresses God’s regulations for holy war—justified killing by divine mandate—and encourages his people to be strengthened mentally in times of conflict (Deut 20:1-4), and provides valid exemptions for military service (Deut 20:5-9). Moses will address the subject of war in later verses as well (Deut 21:10-14; 23:9-14; 24:5).

Moses opens this section, saying, “When you go out to battle against your enemies and see horses and chariots and people more numerous than you, do not be afraid of them; for the LORD your God, who brought you up from the land of Egypt, is with you” (Deut 20:1). The pericope opens with a temporal clause, *when* (כִּי *ki*), which assumes a future reality orchestrated by God. It’s not a question of *if* Israel would face military conflicts, but *when*. This verse implies offensive action against the Canaanites, whom God had already judged as worthy of death, and His judgment was to come by the hands of His people, Israel (see Deut 7:1-2). The enemy under consideration here is the Canaanites, who were extremely corrupt and under divine judgment. Eugene Merrill writes:

The wicked nations as a whole were viewed as under hostile and even demonic leadership and so they had to either capitulate to Yahweh’s lordship or face his wrathful judgment. The peoples of Canaan in particular were to be eradicated, for they occupied the land of Israel’s inheritance and, furthermore, constituted a never-ending threat to Israel’s purity and separateness as a kingdom of priests. The biblical witness is unambiguous that the Canaanites were beyond hope of redemption and had to be placed under the merciless *hērem* of the Lord.¹

War was inevitable and God’s people needed to have courage. Naturally, when the Israelites saw “horses and chariots and people more numerous” than themselves, they would be tempted to feel overwhelmed in their souls, which would lead them to fear. However, Moses told them, “do not be afraid” of the enemy, and then provided them divine viewpoint to stabilize their souls, saying, “for the LORD your God, who brought you up from the land of Egypt, is with you.” Moses had spoken previously to Israel about not fearing their enemies (cf., Deut 3:22; 7:17-24), and he would do so again (Deut 31:6-8). Repetition is necessary to learning, and also for strengthening one’s faith in the Lord. To help strengthen their faith, Moses told them to recall God’s faithfulness forty years

¹ Eugene H. Merrill, *Deuteronomy*, vol. 4, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), 282.

earlier when He delivered them from Pharaoh and his army, which was the greatest military superpower of their day. When standing at the edge of the Red Sea, Moses said to his people, “Do not fear! Stand by and see the salvation of the LORD which He will accomplish for you today; for the Egyptians whom you have seen today, you will never see them again forever. The LORD will fight for you while you keep silent” (Ex 14:13-14). There were times when God called His people to do nothing, but watch Him fight their battles. And the Lord fought alone, killing the Egyptian soldiers who were pursuing His people (see Ex 14:22-31).²



However, there were times when God required His people to take up arms and engage their enemy, and in those moments, He would fight with them, ensuring their victory. For example, David, when standing against Goliath, said, “the battle is the LORD’S and He will give you into our hands” (1 Sam 17:47), and then picked up his sling and stone and struck his enemy with a blow that killed him (1 Sam 17:48-49). God’s Word was intended to help His people frame the situation in such a way that they factored God into their circumstances, as He would be the One who would fight with them. Divine viewpoint always gives confidence when facing difficulties, whatever they may be (2 Ki 6:11-17).

² The destruction of Pharaoh and his army caused Moses to sing a war song of victory, singing, “The LORD is a warrior; the LORD is His name. Pharaoh’s chariots and his army He has cast into the sea; and the choicest of his officers are drowned in the Red Sea” (Ex 15:3-4). Moses’ sister, Miriam, led the women in song and dance, as she “took the timbrel in her hand, and all the women went out after her with timbrels and with dancing” (Ex 15:20). This victory song is a natural response to God for His mighty deliverance on behalf of His people. David wrote similar victory songs that extol God for His deliverance (Psalms 18 & 24).

For example, when facing a conflict with an overwhelming Assyrian army (2 Ch 32:1), King Hezekiah “**spoke encouragingly**” to his people (2 Ch 32:6), telling them, “Be strong and courageous, do not fear or be dismayed because of the king of Assyria nor because of all the horde that is with him; **for the one with us is greater than the one with him. With him is only an arm of flesh, but with us is the LORD our God to help us and to fight our battles**” (2 Ch 32:7-8a). If the people of God’s kingdom were to be strengthened in their souls, they would need to place their focus on God rather than the overwhelming problem at hand. Apparently, the people had positive volition and received his words. And the result was, “**Hezekiah’s words greatly encouraged the people**” (2 Ch 32:8b). Now they were ready to face the enemy. Now they were ready to win.

Moses continued, saying, “When you are approaching the battle, the priest shall come near and speak to the people” (Deut 20:2). When approaching their enemies, the army would naturally factor in what they saw, and this might lead them to fear. Enter the priest, who would come near to the people and speak divine viewpoint thus offsetting any fears that would arise from what they saw. Furthermore, Moses provided the priests a script to follow, saying, “He shall say to them, ‘Hear, O Israel, you are approaching the battle against your enemies today. Do not be fainthearted. Do not be afraid, or panic, or tremble before them, ⁴ for the LORD your God is the one who goes with you, to fight for you against your enemies, to save you’” (Deut 20:3-4). Fear was to be the mental attitude of God’s enemies, not God’s people. Faith in God was the antidote to fear. Of course, this also assumed that Israel was living righteously as God directed. If they were walking with God and adhering to His directives (Deut 28:1-2), they could expect victory in every situation (Deut 28:7). However, if they failed to walk with God and were living disobedient to His will (Deut 28:15), then they would experience military defeat (Deut 28:25-26). Success or failure was contingent on their daily walk with God.

It should be noted that Israel did not have a standing army, but called up citizens for war when needed. And, in some situations, there would be exemptions from military service. The exemptions removed men from military service who might be distracted from their duties in a time of war. Such distractions would not only be a danger to themselves, but also to their fellow soldiers. God was more concerned about the quality of the army rather than the quantity of numbers. After all, success depended on the Lord, not the size of His military force. In Deuteronomy 20:5-8, Moses provided four such exemptions.

First, Moses said, “The officers also shall speak to the people, saying, ‘Who is the man that has built a new house and has not dedicated it? Let him depart and return to his house, otherwise he might die in the battle and another man would dedicate it’” (Deut 20:5). The reference to *officers* (שׁוֹטֵר *shoter*) reveals a hierarchical structure within the military, perhaps referring to men who had combat experience. These officers were responsible for

screening fellow Israelites to determine if they were eligible for short-term military service. Warren Wiersbe states:

The priest encouraged the soldiers to face the enemy without fear, but the officers told them to go back home if they had any unfinished business. No officer wants to lead distracted soldiers whose minds and hearts are elsewhere...Paul may have had this scene in mind when he wrote 2 Timothy 2:4, “No one engaged in warfare entangles himself with the affairs of this life, that he may please him who enlisted him as a soldier.”³

The first exemption was given to a man who had just built a house but not had time to live in it. God cares about property rights and establishing roots in one’s own home. Therefore, He permitted a man time to live in his own house and secure his roots there before being called up to war.

Second, Moses said, “Who is the man that has planted a vineyard and has not begun to use its fruit? Let him depart and return to his house, otherwise he might die in the battle and another man would begin to use its fruit” (Deut 20:6). Israel was primarily an agrarian economy, and the production of crops was necessary for the family as well as the community. According to Leviticus 19:23-25, the average time to plant a crop and expect a fruitful yield was four to five years, which could be the duration for the exemption. If such a man were called to battle, he might be distracted by his unfinished vineyard and the possibility that another man might benefit from his labor. God cares about compensation for work, and this extends to the man who has planted his vineyard and labored for its production, but not had time to enjoy it. God wanted that man to enjoy the reward of his labor before being called to military service.

Third, Moses said, “And who is the man that is engaged to a woman and has not married her? Let him depart and return to his house, otherwise he might die in the battle and another man would marry her” (Deut 20:7). God is concerned about the institution of marriage, as its proper function is foundational for a stable society. If a man were engaged to be married, but then died before being united to his wife, then he would have no offspring to continue his family name or to care for his inheritance. Later, Moses would grant a one-year exemption to the newly married man, as this would allow him time enjoy his newlywed wife and strengthen his marriage (Deut 24:5).

The most likely reasons for these three exemptions include the necessity for keeping certain aspects a society undamaged and healthy—home, business, and marriage—as

³ Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Equipped*, “Be” Commentary Series (Colorado Springs, CO: Chariot Victor Pub., 1999), 135.

these provide national stability. Also, if a man were called to battle, he might be distracted from his service because of matters back at the home or the farm. Warren Wiersbe states:

These three exceptions suggest to us that God is more interested in our enjoying the common blessings of life—homes, harvests, and honeymoons—than devoting ourselves only to the battles of life. He didn't want any of the Jewish men to use their military responsibilities as an excuse to neglect their families, their vineyards, and their fiancées. Certainly, military service was important, but the Lord was more concerned that the men have the right priorities in life. What good was accomplished for the Jewish people if their army defeated the enemy on the field but things were falling apart back home?⁴

Lastly, Moses said, “Then the officers shall speak further to the people and say, ‘Who is the man that is afraid and fainthearted? Let him depart and return to his house, so that he might not make his brothers’ hearts melt like his heart’” (Deut 20:8). In this verse Moses returns to the topic of fear with which he started his discussion (Deut 20:1). If a person could not live by faith in the face of battle, such that fear of the situation was greater than his faith in God to deliver, he was excused from the conflict altogether, lest his fear negatively impact the mental attitude of other Israelites and thus weaken their souls in the face of conflict. There does not seem to be any condemnation given to those who are afraid. Though there is a sinful fear, it could also be that this fear is the result of spiritual immaturity, or that the person naturally had a psychologically timid disposition, and such men were not emotionally fit to face the pressures of war. Peter Craigie writes:

These people were not to be bullied into battle, scorned for their fear, or court-martialed; they were to be sent home along with the others who qualified for exemption. The reason is clear, for fear in an army is like an infectious plague, which can quickly cripple the ranks with its debilitating effect. The strength of the army, it is true, lay in God's presence; but to experience God's presence in battle, the people were to be wholly committed to him, and fear undermined the wholeness of commitment.⁵

Finally, Moses said, “When the officers have finished speaking to the people, they shall appoint commanders of armies at the head of the people” (Deut 20:9). After exempting certain men from military service, Moses instructs the officers to assign commanders to serve as leaders of regiments. This verse further demonstrates the hierarchical structure necessary for a military to function properly, as authority is delegated from one person to another.

⁴ Ibid., 135–136.

⁵ Peter C. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1976), 274–275.

Present Application

Israel was a theocracy, and God was their King (Isa 33:22). The Lord promised to give them physical land which was occupied at that time by the Canaanites. This was holy war, led by God Himself who was directing them into battle and promising victory over their enemies. God's command for holy war is not applicable for Christians, for God is not at this time working to establish a physical theocratic kingdom on earth as He was through Israel. For Christians, our battles are primarily spiritual, not physical. This is why the apostle Paul stated, "For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses" (2 Cor 10:3-4), and "our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places" (Eph 6:12).

Apart from justified self-defense, and the duty to serve one's country in military service, Christians are commanded to "**pursue peace with all men**, and the sanctification without which no one will see the Lord" (Heb 12:14). The apostle Paul stated, "If possible, so far as it depends on you, **be at peace with all men**" (Rom 12:18). As Christians, we generally live in obedience to the government as good citizens of the land (Rom 13:1-5). However, this does not mean blind submission, as we may engage in acts of civil disobedience when necessary (Ex 1:15-17; Dan 3:1-18; 6:1-23; Acts 5:27-29). In cases of civil disobedience, we disobey human government when it commands us to disobey God.

The Christian who is advancing to spiritual maturity by faithfully learning and living God's Word will prove most useful to God (2 Tim 2:15; 3:16-17; 1 Pet 2:2). But this takes time and commitment (Rom 12:1-2). The challenge for us as Christians is not to let the hostile people of this world intimidate us into silence or inaction. And, of course, we must be careful not to become bitter, fearful, or hateful like those who attack us. The Bible teaches us to love those who hate us (Matt 5:44-45; Rom 12:14, 17-21), and to be kind, patient, and gentle (2 Tim 2:24-26; cf. Eph 4:1-2; Col 3:13-14). This is accomplished by faith, not feelings. What we need is courage to share the gospel of grace and to speak biblical truth. The hope is that those who are positive to God will be rescued from Satan's domain of darkness (Col 1:13). We also live in the reality that God's plans will advance. He will win. His future kingdom on earth will come to pass. Christ will return. Jesus will put down all forms of rebellion—both satanic and human—and will rule this world with perfect righteousness and justice. But until then, we must continue to learn and live God's Word and fight the good fight. We are to live by faith (Heb 10:38; 11:6), share the gospel of grace (1 Cor 15:3-4), disciple others (Matt 28:19-20), be good and do good (Gal 6:9-10; Tit 2:11-14), and look forward to return of Christ (Tit 2:13).