

# Deuteronomy 20 - Holy War and Military Service

II. Second sermon: What Israel must do for God (Deut 4:41—26:19)

(3) Exposition of the Decalogue (Deut 12:1—25:19)

(F) Laws arising from the sixth Commandment (Deut 19:1—22:14)

(d) War (20:1-20)

(i) Command not to be afraid (20:1-4)

(ii) Those exempted from warfare (20:5-9)

(iii) Terms of surrender (20:10-11)

(iv) Instructions regarding when a city would not capitulate (20:12-15)

(v) Instructions regarding holy war (20:16-18)

(vi) Instructions regarding trees (20:19-20)

## Deuteronomy 20

(d) War (20:1-20)

(i) Command not to be afraid (20:1-4)

**1** "When you go out to battle against your enemies and see horses, 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.

**1** "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.

**1** "When you go to war against your enemies and observe more horses, chariots, and soldiers than you have, don't be afraid of them, for the LORD your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt is with you.

**1** When thou goest out to battle against thine enemies, and seest horses, and chariots, and a people more than thou, be not afraid of them: for the LORD thy God is with thee, which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt.

**2** When you are approaching the battle, the priest shall come forward and speak to the people.

**2** When you are approaching the battle, the priest shall come near and speak to the people.

**2** As you draw near for battle, let the priest approach and speak to the army.

2 And it shall be, when ye are come nigh unto the battle, that the priest shall approach and speak unto the people,

- Similar principles for battle and legislation on holy war were given earlier (2:24—3:11) and the subject was addressed again later in Moses' speech (21:10-14; 23:9-14; 24:5; 25:17-19)

- Israel was never to fear an enemy's horses and chariots because the outcome of a battle would never be determined by mere military strength (Cf. Is 31:1-3; Hosea 14:3)

— The command not to be afraid of them was based on the fact of God's faithfulness. He had already been proved faithful to the nation in bringing her up out of Egypt.

— In times of adversity believers today ought also to recall God's past faithfulness to them for this helps alleviate fear in their present circumstances

3 He shall say to them, 'Hear, Israel, you are approaching the battle against your enemies today. Do not be fainthearted. Do not be afraid, or panic, or be terrified by them,

3 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,

3 He will say to them, 'Listen, Israel! You're about to go into battle today against your enemies. Don't be faint-hearted. Don't be afraid, don't panic, and don't be terrified to face them.

3 And shall say unto them, Hear, O Israel, ye approach this day unto battle against your enemies: let not your hearts faint, fear not, and do not tremble, neither be ye terrified because of them;

4 for the LORD your God is the One who is going with you, to fight for you against your enemies, to save you.'

4 for the LORD your God is the one who goes with you, to fight for you against your enemies, to save you.'

4 For the LORD your God will be with you, fighting on your behalf against your enemies in order to grant you victory.'

4 For the LORD your God is he that goeth with you, to fight for you against your enemies, to save you.

- The role of the priest in battle was not only to care for the ark, which symbolized the Lord's presence with Israel's army, but also by God's Word to encourage the soldiers to be strong in faith

- A lack of trust in God's ability to fight for them (Cf. 1:30; 3:22) would affect the strength of their will, that is, they could easily become fainthearted

— If a weak will was not controlled by faith from the very first, it would lead to fear, terror, and even to panic before their enemies

— So if the soldiers failed to listen to the priest they would become fearful and experience defeat

(ii) Those exempted from warfare (20:5-9)

5 The officers also shall speak to the people, saying, 'Who is the man that has built a new house but has not dedicated it? Let him go and return to his house, otherwise he might die in the battle and another man would dedicate it.

5 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.

5 "Furthermore, let the officials ask the army, 'Is there a man here who has built a new house but has not yet dedicated it? Let him go back home. Otherwise, he may die in battle and another man dedicate it.

**5** And the officers shall speak unto the people, saying, What man is there that hath built a new house, and hath not dedicated it? let him go and return to his house, lest he die in the battle, and another man dedicate it.

6 And who is the man that has planted a vineyard but has not put it to use? Let him go and return to his house, otherwise he might die in the battle and another man would put it to use.

6 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.

6 And is there a man here who has planted a vineyard and not yet benefited from it? Let him go home. Otherwise, he may die in battle and another man use it.

6 And what man is he that hath planted a vineyard, and hath not yet eaten of it? let him also go and return unto his house, lest he die in the battle, and another man eat of it.

- The priests were responsible for encouraging the army by God's Word (v2-4)

- The officers were responsible for making sure that the army was composed of qualified men. However, the most qualified were not necessarily those most gifted for battle. They were rather the men most committed to the Lord and free from any distractions that might dampen their spirits for battle.

- Therefore for humanitarian reasons as well as for the morale of the army anyone who had built a new house and not begun to "use" (this sense of the Heb. word *hòanak* is preferable to "dedicated") it was granted an exemption. The same exemption was granted to anyone who had planted a vineyard and not begun to enjoy it.

— This particular exemption could last up to five years (Cf. Lev 19:23-25)

7 And who is the man that is betrothed to a woman and has not married her? Let him go and return to his house, otherwise he might die in the battle and another man would marry her.'

7 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.'

7 And is there a man here who is engaged to a woman and has not yet married her? Let him go back home. Otherwise, he may die in battle and another man marry her.'

7 And what man is there that hath betrothed a wife, and hath not taken her? let him go and return unto his house, lest he die in the battle, and another man take her.

8 Then the officers shall speak further to the people and say, 'Who is the man that is afraid and fainthearted? Let him go and return to his house, so that he does not make his brothers' hearts melt like his heart!'

8 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.'

8 "Let the officials also speak to the army, 'Is there a man here who is afraid and fainthearted? Let him go back home. Otherwise, he may demoralize his fellow soldier.'

**8** And the officers shall speak further unto the people, and they shall say, What man is there that is fearful and fainthearted? let him go and return unto his house, lest his brethren's heart faint as well as his heart.

- A man engaged to be married was also exempt from military service. The length of the exemption for a newly married man was one year (24:5)

— These exemptions (20:5-7) bring one of the basic purposes of holy war into sharp focus. Though it was waged as a punishment for the wickedness of the Canaanite population, it was also fought so that Israel might have a land in which to live a stable and peaceful life—building homes, planting crops, and raising families under God's rule.

— Since God was fighting for Israel it was not necessary for the war to take total priority over all domestic functions.

Whereas the previous exemptions had been granted for compassionate reasons, the exemption of a fainthearted soldier was given for reasons of army morale. Since the best army was the one most committed to the Lord, anything or anyone who might affect the faith and confidence of the Israelite troops was to be removed. Cowardice here was reckoned to be a spiritual problem. Since there was no court-martial, the officers removed a fainthearted soldier before he had opportunity to defect in battle and/or cause other soldiers to become disheartened too. Moses' instruction that the officers appoint

commanders over the army implies that Israel's army was not yet permanently organized with officers of every rank.

9 And when the officers have finished speaking to the people, they shall appoint commanders of armies at the head of the people.

9 When the officers have finished speaking to the people, they shall appoint commanders of armies at the head of the people.

9 "When the officials have finished speaking to the army, they must appoint officers to lead the troops."

9 And it shall be, when the officers have made an end of speaking unto the people, that they shall make captains of the armies to lead the people.

### (iii) Terms of surrender (20:10-11)

**10** "When you approach a city to fight against it, you shall offer it terms of peace.

**10** "When you approach a city to fight against it, you shall offer it terms of peace.

**10** "When you approach a city to wage war against it, extend terms of peace.

**10** When thou comest nigh unto a city to fight against it, then proclaim peace unto it.

11 And if it agrees to make peace with you and opens to you, then all the people who are found in it shall become your forced labor and serve you.

11 If it agrees to make peace with you and opens to you, then all the people who are found in it shall become your forced labor and shall serve you.

11 If it agrees to peace and welcomes you, then all the people found in it will serve you as forced laborers.

11 And it shall be, if it make thee answer of peace, and open unto thee, then it shall be, that all the people that is found therein shall be tributaries unto thee, and they shall serve thee.

- Moses then gave instructions for Israel's foreign policy (v10-18)

- The people at a distance (v15) included those nations outside Canaan but within the extensive territory promised to Abraham and his descendants (Gen 15:18-21)

— The command make a city's people an offer of peace meant to offer them a vassal treaty

— In this way the city acknowledged the sovereignty of Israel's God and of Israel

— If a city became a vassal to Israel, then her people were to become forced laborers (Cf. Joshua 9)

### (iv) Instructions regarding when a city would not capitulate (20:12-15)

12 However, if it does not make peace with you, but makes war against you, then you shall besiege it.

12 However, if it does not make peace with you, but makes war against you, then you shall besiege it.

12 But if they refuse to make peace with you and instead choose war, then attack it.

12 And if it will make no peace with thee, but will make war against thee, then thou shalt besiege it:

13 When the LORD your God gives it into your hand, you shall strike all the men in it with the edge of the sword.

13 When the LORD your God gives it into your hand, you shall strike all the men in it with the edge of the sword.

13 The LORD your God will deliver it into your control, and you must execute every male.

13 And when the LORD thy God hath delivered it into thine hands, thou shalt smite every male thereof with the edge of the sword:

- But if a city refused terms of peace, the men were to be executed and everything else was to be taken as plunder for the Israelites

- Apparently then the women and children had opportunity to be introduced to Israel's religion (also see comments under Deut 20:16-18)

14 However, the women, the children, the animals, and everything that is in the city, all of its spoils, you shall take as plunder for yourself; and you shall use the spoils of your enemies which the LORD your God has given you.

14 Only the women and the children and the animals and all that is in the city, all its spoil, you shall take as booty for yourself; and you shall use the spoil of your enemies which the LORD your God has given you.

14 The women, children, all the livestock in the city, and all of the spoil and plunder will belong to you. Appropriate the spoil of your enemies, which the LORD your God will give you.

14 But the women, and the little ones, and the cattle, and all that is in the city, even all the spoil thereof, shalt thou take unto thyself; and thou shalt eat the spoil of thine enemies, which the LORD thy God hath given thee.

15 This is what you shall do to all the cities that are very far from you, which are not of the cities of these nations nearby.

15 Thus you shall do to all the cities that are very far from you, which are not of the cities of these nations nearby.

15 Do this to all the cities that are distant from you—that is, to those cities that are not in neighboring nations."

15 Thus shalt thou do unto all the cities which are very far off from thee, which are not of the cities of these nations.

- The women in the nations mentioned here (i.e., from the Aramean culture) were not as degenerate as those from the Canaanite culture
- Also Aramean women adopted the religions of their husbands
- Abraham, for example, insisted that his servant get a wife from the Aramean culture for Isaac and not a Canaanite woman (Gen 24)
- Thus the women and children of those nations could be spared
- But one only needs to remember the influence of Jezebel who brought her husband Ahab under the worship of Baal to see the destructive effects of marriage to a Canaanite wife

(v) Instructions regarding holy war (20:16-18)

16 Only in the cities of these peoples that the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance, you shall not leave anything that breathes alive.

16 Only in the cities of these peoples that the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance, you shall not leave alive anything that breathes.

16 "You are not to leave even one person alive in the cities of these nations that the LORD your God is about to give you as an inheritance.

**16** But of the cities of these people, which the LORD thy God doth give thee for an inheritance, thou shalt save alive nothing that breatheth:

- But inside Canaan absolutely nothing was to be spared
- Six nations are listed in v17 as representing all the nations living in Canaan
- These people were so degenerate and committed to evil that unless they were completely destroyed, they could easily influence (teach) the Israelites to follow their detestable ways in idolatry (Cf. 18:9-12)

17 Instead, you shall utterly destroy them, the Hittite and the Amorite, the Canaanite and the Perizzite, the Hivite and the Jebusite, just as the LORD your God has commanded you,

17 But you shall utterly destroy them, the Hittite and the Amorite, the Canaanite and the Perizzite, the Hivite and the Jebusite, as the LORD your God has commanded you,

17 You must completely destroy the Hittites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, just as the LORD your God commanded you,

17 But thou shalt utterly destroy them; namely, the Hittites, and the Amorites, the Canaanites, and the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites; as the LORD thy God hath commanded thee:

18 so that they will not teach you to do all the same detestable practices of theirs which they have done for their gods, by which you would sin against the LORD your God.

18 so that they may not teach you to do according to all their detestable things which they have done for their gods, so that you would sin against the LORD your God.

18 so they won't teach you to do all the detestable things that they do for their gods. If you do what they teach you, you will sin against the LORD your God."

18 That they teach you not to do after all their abominations, which they have done unto their gods; so should ye sin against the LORD your God.

- The Hittites were from Anatolia (Turkey) but some early migrants had settled in Canaan (e.g., Ephron the Hittite in Gen 23)

- The Amorites were hill-dwellers; their origin is uncertain (they are first referred to in ancient texts of the third millennium BC)

- Canaanites was a general term for the inhabitants of Palestine

- The Perizites were perhaps village-dwellers or nomads

- The Hivites were possibly in northern Palestine by the Lebanon mountains (Josh 11:3; Judges 3:3)

- The Jebusites lived in the hill country (Num 13:29) of and around Jebus, later known as Jerusalem (Joshua 15:8)

- Another nation not mentioned here but included in Deut 7:1 are the Girgashites, whose locality is unknown

(vi) Instructions regarding trees (20:19-20)

**19** "When you besiege a city for a long time, to make war against it in order to capture it, you shall not destroy its trees by swinging an axe against them; for you may eat from them, so you shall not cut them down. For is the tree of the field a human, that it should be besieged by you?

**19** "When you besiege a city a long time, to make war against it in order to capture it, you shall not destroy its trees by swinging an axe against them; for you may eat from them, and you shall not cut them down. For is the tree of the field a man, that it should be besieged by you?

**19** "When you attack a city and have to fight against it for many days, don't destroy its trees by cutting them down with an ax. You may eat from them, but you must not cut them down. Are the trees of the field human beings, that you would come and attack them?

**19** When thou shalt besiege a city a long time, in making war against it to take it, thou shalt not destroy the trees thereof by forcing an axe against them: for thou mayest eat of them, and thou shalt not cut them down (for the tree of the field is man's life) to employ them in the siege:

- In the ancient Near East military powers punished their enemies by indiscriminately laying waste to the land

— This practice made no sense in relation to the land of Canaan for it was to become Israel's own possession. Why should Israel cut down trees whose fruit she could eat? And why should trees, that were not men, be besieged?

— Even in lands outside Canaan the practice was to be avoided because it showed a lack of respect for God's creation and an infatuation with the harsh and excessive use of destructive power

20 Only the trees that you know are not fruit trees you shall destroy and cut down, so that you may construct siegeworks against the city that is making war against you until it falls.

20 Only the trees which you know are not fruit trees you shall destroy and cut down, that you may construct siegeworks against the city that is making war with you until it falls.

20 However, you may cut down the trees whose fruit you know isn't edible, in order to build siege works against the city that waged war with you, until it falls."

20 Only the trees which thou knowest that they be not trees for meat, thou shalt destroy and cut them down; and thou shalt build bulwarks against the city that maketh war with thee, until it be subdued.