

Deut. 20:1 ¶ 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.

The focus of all the instruction that Moses delivered to the people from the LORD centered on trusting God to provide for them as they followed Him in faith and obedience. Back in chapter 17 we read a prophecy regarding the fact that the people would one day want to have a king. This would come to pass a few hundred years in the future, but already the LORD was instructing them that their king should never accumulate horses (which would preclude chariots). Although He would accede to their request for a king, the LORD is emphasizing that their security should be centered in His provision for them. They had first hand experience concerning the superior power of God vs the horses and chariots of Pharaoh's army. They had no reason to fear any enemy, no matter how great or how well equipped, with the LORD on their side. It reminds me of an oft heard formula: God + me = victory; though more accurately stated would be "God for me equals victory." As Paul stated in his letter to the Romans:

Romans 8:31 "...If God be for us, who can be against us?"

Deut. 20:2 And it shall be, when ye are come nigh unto the battle, that the priest shall approach and speak unto the people,

Deut. 20:3 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;

Deut. 20:4 For the LORD your God *is* he that goeth with you, to fight for you against your enemies, to save you.

It's interesting to note that the priest is to address the military before they engage in battle with their enemies—not their military leaders. They are to remind the troops that the "LORD your God" will be with them and will fight for them. God never loses a battle. They should be confident and without fear with the knowledge that YHWH is with them; they had plenty of firsthand experience as to His authority and power over His creation. These verses remind me of the Lord's message to the church through the Apostle Paul in his letter to Timothy.

2Timothy 1:7 "For God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind."

Deut. 20:5 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.

Deut. 20:6 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.

Deut. 20:7 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.

Deut. 20:8 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.

This is an interesting section and certainly in great contrast to how things are done in our military forces. After the priests exhort the troops from a spiritual perspective, the military leaders are to assess the troops from a physical perspective.

Before taking troops out to battle, the military leaders were to exempt from service those who fell into one of four categories. It was interesting to note that the Hebrew for *dedicated* in verse 5 stated “to initiate or discipline...train up.” This seems to me to be speaking of a man with young children who need his spiritual leadership. A father’s first responsibility before God is to his family, and the people were to respect that priority.

Also to be exempt were those who had planted a garden or vineyard and had not yet enjoyed the fruits of his labor. That is extremely interesting to me since the nation of Israel was basically an agricultural society, and it would seem that would eliminate many men. I would assume this would apply only to those who had actually had to work their crops themselves—not those who had servants to do their work for them. This would go along with God’s teaching that we will reap what we sow.

The next group to be exempt included those who were betrothed to be wed but had not yet consummated their marriage. I would assume that would be in reference to God’s instruction that man should not dissolve a union of two people before Him. In that culture the marriage was binding from the time of the betrothal. Physical consummation did not occur until after the man had prepared a home for his bride. To endanger a man’s life in battle before he was able to take his bride home and become one in flesh would destroy the spiritual type of the relationship of the bride to Christ. That Christ will come and take his bride to a home prepared in the Father’s house is a sure thing; nothing can or will prevent the consummation of our marriage to Him so to speak.

The final group of men to be exempt from battle included those who were fearful and lacking courage. Point is made that fear is contagious, and you wouldn’t want those in the ranks who might provoke insurrection in the ranks. Courage inspires courage; fear inspires fear.

Deut. 20:9 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.

Once the numbers available to fight were determined, the military officers were to divide them up into smaller groups and appoint captains for each group. It is far easier to direct large groups using this method. There has to be a recognized line of authority for giving direction according to their military objectives.

Deut. 20:10 ¶ When thou comest nigh unto a city to fight against it, then proclaim peace unto it.

Deut. 20:11 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.

The reference in these verses has to apply to cities located outside the Promised Land. God had already given instruction that the people of cities in the Promised Land were to be completely destroyed.

Deuteronomy 7:16, 23-25 “And thou shalt consume all the people which the LORD thy God shall deliver thee; thine eye shall have no pity upon them: neither shalt thou serve their gods; for that will be a snare unto thee.... But the LORD thy God shall deliver them unto thee, and shall destroy them with a mighty destruction, until they be destroyed. And he shall deliver their kings into thine hand, and thou shalt destroy their name from under heaven: there shall no man be able to stand before thee, until thou have destroyed them. The graven images of their gods shall ye burn with fire: thou shalt not desire the silver or gold *that is* on them, nor take *it* unto thee, lest thou be snared therein: for it *is* an abomination to the LORD thy God.”

Verse 15 below in fact specifies this to be the reference. I had not realized that God was basically giving His approval to future aspirations of extending their boundaries, but this seems to be the case.

Evidently, when it was determined to be to their benefit to take possession of other cities bordering the land actually defined as God’s gift to them, they were first to approach them with an offer of peace. If their offer is accepted and the gates are opened in surrender, the people are then expected to basically serve as slaves to the nation of Israel.

Deut. 20:12 And if it will make no peace with thee, but will make war against thee, then thou shalt besiege it:

Deut. 20:13 And when the LORD thy God hath delivered it into thine hands, thou shalt smite every male thereof with the edge of the sword:

Deut. 20:14 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.

Deut. 20:15 Thus shalt thou do unto all the cities *which are* very far off from thee, *which are* not of the cities of these nations.

If they refuse the offer of peace and stand in opposition to the armies of Israel, they were to “besiege” it—to surround it and seal it off until the people were forced to surrender. As usual, when following God’s direction, the people can expect victory—“when” the Lord delivers the city into their hands. They are then to kill every adult male, but they are allowed to take as spoil the women, children, cattle and all material wealth.

Deut. 20:16 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:

Deut. 20:17 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:

At this point Moses points out that all the peoples of the “Promised Land”—the Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites—are to be utterly destroyed; nothing that breathes is to be left alive.

Deut. 20:18 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.

This is a key verse to understanding God’s instructions. The LORD wants to eradicate everything from the land that would serve as a temptation to lead them into

disobedience and rebellion against Him. He wants to establish a fence of protection around them.

I read the scripture for years without really processing this instruction as a loving act of a loving God. It took me a long time to connect this instruction to the reason that Israel had to serve as slaves in Egypt for so long before God would allow them to take possession of the land.

Genesis 15:16 "But in the fourth generation they shall come hither again: for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet full."

It's not an easy thing to reconcile God's omniscience with His desire to give man the ability to make his own choices. God knew all along that the Amorites (as well as the other nations mentioned) were not going to turn to Him in repentance and faith. Still, He allowed them to continue as a people until they had gotten to the "point of no return" so to speak. Not one person of His creation will be able to stand in judgment before God with an excuse of "God isn't fair." In fact, He goes to the nth degree of longsuffering to prove His love and mercy. Peter expresses it well in connection to why the Lord Jesus is delaying His return to take His throne.

2Peter 3:9 "The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance."

I found a good illustration by Chuck Smith regarding this section.

"It would be much like you being a guard at a school watching over the kindergartners. And seeing them out there in the playground and observing a little dog running up the street with foam coming out of his mouth yipping and nipping at everything. And you immediately recognize the symptoms of this dog, its actions. You know that it has hydrophobia, rabies. Now, would you be justified in killing that little rabid dog before it could get on the school grounds? Or should you just sit there and say, "Oh, look at that dog. I think it has rabies. Look at it biting all of the children. My, that isn't nice. Little dog shouldn't bite children like that." Man I'd fire you so fast. The dog is rabid. It's going to die; it can't live if it's got rabies. It's doomed to die. But if you don't protect those children, many of those innocent, little children will also die because they'll be infected by that rabid dog. Therefore you would be totally justified in killing that rabid dog.

In fact, you would be at fault if you didn't kill that rabid dog. You would be responsible if you allowed that dog to bite the children. You would be responsible for the children's death. Therefore, for the sake of the innocent children, your obligation is to kill the rabid dog lest it infect the children."

Deut. 20:19 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:

Deut. 20:20 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.

These two verses resume the instructions regarding the cities outside the “Promised Land.” If in laying siege to a city it takes a long time before the people surrender, they are not to destroy the fruit bearing trees of the surrounding land. They are, however, allowed make use of all the other trees as necessary to facilitate the end of the siege.