



## Deuteronomy - Chapter Twenty

### III Deuteronomy 12:1-26:19 - Moses' Second Speech: Specific Covenant Stipulations (continues)

#### III.j Deuteronomy 19:1-21:14 - Protecting life (continues)

#### Summary of Chapter Twenty

Whereas the OT usually describes war through narrative, this chapter legislates what ought to happen in warfare. This law limits the conduct of warfare and occurs in a section that could be headed 'You shall not murder,' devoted to ensuring no unnecessary loss of life. The concern is to minimise casualties in war. This law also distinguishes between enemy towns outside the boundaries of the Promised Land (vv.10-15) and those within the boundaries (vv.16-18). Even the latter case, however, need not result in total annihilation.

These laws on warfare, especially vv.16-18, create an ethical dilemma for Christians. However, three things should be considered:

1. The limits and restraint of these laws.
2. Their context in securing the Promised Land.
3. The priority of offering terms of peace to towns before attacking them.

In the NT, the Christian inheritance is a heavenly land: <<*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time*>> (1 Peter 1:3-5), not an earthly one, and the language of warfare is used spiritually, as confirmed in Ephesians 6:10-17.

### III.j.iv Deuteronomy 20:1-20 - Rules of Warfare

Refer to the chapter summary above.

<sup>1</sup> When you go out to war against your enemies, and see horses and chariots, an army larger than your own, you shall not be afraid of them; for the Lord your God is with you, who brought you up from the land of Egypt.

#### Deuteronomy 20:1

The first command regarding warfare is you shall not be afraid of them if the enemy's army is larger than Israel's, if they have superior technology or superior equipment. The reason for not fearing is the presence of God; refer to Deuteronomy 1:19-45. Rather, the enemy's strength highlights God's greater power in defeating them: <<*Some take pride in chariots, and some in horses, but our pride is in the name of the Lord our God*>> (Psalm 20:7), and: <<*Alas for those who go down to Egypt for help and who rely on horses, who trust in chariots because they are many and in horsemen because they are very strong, but do not look to the Holy One of Israel or consult the Lord!*>> (Isaiah 31:1). The priest reinforces the command not to fear and reflects the presence of God in the midst of Israel's army.

When you go out to war against your enemies, and see horses and chariots, an army larger than your own. Israel, a small nation surrounded by great empires, was rarely in a strategically superior position. In battle, they usually encountered superior forces.

God did not deny that the enemies of Israel would usually have more horses, chariots, and people than Israel. However, God asked them to recognise a greater fact: for the Lord your God is with you. As Paul wrote: <<*What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us?*>> (Romans 8:31). One with God makes an unbeatable majority.

Who brought you up from the land of Egypt. Israel was also given evidence for faith. God did not ask Israel to have absolute trust in him. They could trust him as they went into battle because he had proven himself mighty and faithful before. He had a track record which could be trusted.

<sup>2</sup> Before you engage in battle, the priest shall come forward and speak to the troops, <sup>3</sup> and shall say to them: 'Hear, O Israel! Today you are drawing near to do battle against your enemies. Do not lose heart, or be afraid, or panic, or be in dread of them; <sup>4</sup> for it is the Lord your God who goes with you, to fight for you against your enemies, to give you victory.'

### Deuteronomy 20:2-4

Before you engage in battle. At this critical time, it was the job of the priest to encourage the soldiers to trust in God. Although the priests were not normally to go into battle themselves, for they were not numbered among the fighting men of Israel (Numbers 1:47-53), the priests still had an important role when Israel went to war, to spiritually teach and encourage the soldiers! This is a reminder of the role of church leaders and the need for others to pray when the church undertakes any work in the name of God.

Do not lose heart, or be afraid, or panic, or be in dread of them. The men are encouraged by the words they hear before going into battle. These are not just the words of an earthly king or general rousing his troops, these are the words of the great King: <<*Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who are of a fearful heart, 'Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. He will come and save you'*>> (Isaiah 35:3-4)

For it is the Lord your God who goes with you, to fight for you against your enemies, to give you victory. This was the reason for courage. When Israel was obedient, and trusting in God, they could never lose. However, when they were disobedient, or were lacking in faith, they could never win, even if they had superior forces.

<sup>5</sup> Then the officials shall address the troops, saying, 'Has anyone built a new house but not dedicated it? He should go back to his house, or he might die in the battle and another dedicate it. <sup>6</sup> Has anyone planted a vineyard but not yet enjoyed its fruit? He should go back to his house, or he might die in the battle and another be first to enjoy its fruit. <sup>7</sup> Has anyone become engaged to a woman but not yet married her? He should go back to his house, or he might die in the battle and another marry her.'

### Deuteronomy 20:5-7

Has anyone built a new house, planted a vineyard, become engaged to a woman. Exemption from military service is extended to three groups of people. See the parallel covenant curses in Deuteronomy 28:30. The priority is on enjoying the blessings from God in housing, crops, and marriage. The exemptions show that Israel did not need to depend on every last man fighting and that warfare was not to be an end in itself but a means to a greater end. Those who fight serve the interests of the whole community.

The concept of a new home and a new bride-to-be are fairly straight forward. However, culturally, for a man to have his own vineyard was seen as the

**fulfilment of the promises of peace, safety and comfort:** <<*I searched with my mind how to cheer my body with wine – my mind still guiding me with wisdom – and how to lay hold on folly, until I might see what was good for mortals to do under heaven during the few days of their life. I made great works; I built houses and planted vineyards for myself; I made myself gardens and parks, and planted in them all kinds of fruit trees*>> (Ecclesiastes 2:3-5), <<*Again you shall plant vineyards on the mountains of Samaria; the planters shall plant, and shall enjoy the fruit*>> (Jeremiah 31:5), and: <<*They shall live in safety in it, and shall build houses and plant vineyards. They shall live in safety, when I execute judgements upon all their neighbours who have treated them with contempt. And they shall know that I am the Lord their God*>> (Ezekiel 28:26).

<sup>8</sup> The officials shall continue to address the troops, saying, ‘Is anyone afraid or disheartened? He should go back to his house, or he might cause the heart of his comrades to fail like his own.’ <sup>9</sup> When the officials have finished addressing the troops, then the commanders shall take charge of them.

#### Deuteronomy 20:8-9

Is anyone afraid or disheartened? Next, the officers of Israel were to send home all who were fearful and fainthearted. Psychologically, fearfulness could be contagious throughout the whole army. More significantly, fear is disobedience and God does not allow such disobedient warriors to fight. In the spiritual army of God, he only wants willing, brave soldiers, brave in the sense of having faith in him. An example of this exemption comes in the account of Gideon’s army: <<*The Lord said to Gideon, ‘The troops with you are too many for me to give the Midianites into their hand. Israel would only take the credit away from me, saying, “My own hand has delivered me.” Now therefore proclaim this in the hearing of the troops, “Whoever is fearful and trembling, let him return home.”’ Thus Gideon sifted them out; twenty-two thousand returned, and ten thousand remained*>> (Judges 7:2-3).

When the officials have finished addressing the troops. God was perfectly willing to use those who were left after the officers had excused all of those under the previous two conditions. Both of these exemptions, remarkable among any army, were a powerful testimony that Israel trusted in God for military victory, not in their own ability to raise a mighty, large army.

To God, the size of the army was not important; the heart of the army was far more important. He did not want people who might be distracted from the real battle by worrying about the cares of everyday life: their home, their vineyard, or their fiancée; nor did he want people who were not really trusting in him. God could do more through a smaller army that was really committed to him than through a bigger army that was full of compromise.

The story of Gideon in Judges Chapter 7 is a powerful illustration of this; Gideon started with an army of 32,000, but it was too big, so he sent home those who were afraid, and 22,000 left! However, it was still too big for God's purposes, so God had him send home 7,700 more, so he only had an army of 300 to fight against a Midianite army of 135,000! Yet God gave him the victory.

Then the commanders shall take charge of them. Only after the spiritual encouragement had been given to the men would the officers take charge of the army and prepare for battle. God commanded that his army should have both spiritual and military leadership. No matter how good the soldiers were, they needed to have good leadership, just as the church does today.

<sup>10</sup> When you draw near to a town to fight against it, offer it terms of peace. <sup>11</sup> If it accepts your terms of peace and surrenders to you, then all the people in it shall serve you in forced labour.

#### Deuteronomy 20:10-11

When you draw near to a town to fight against it. The following verses describe the normal battle procedures for Israel. There were many times when God gave specific instructions which would supersede these normal instructions, such as with the battle of Jericho or the conquest of Canaan in general.

Offer it terms of peace. It was important that Israel did not fight unnecessarily. If the town would agree to terms of peace, then they should come to an agreement, one that preserved the people but was favourable to Israel. As with many other ways of the world, Jesus turned this concept on its head: *<<Or what king, going out to wage war against another king, will not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to oppose the one who comes against him with twenty thousand? If he cannot, then, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for the terms of peace. So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions>>* (Luke 14:31-33).

All the people in it shall serve you in forced labour. The conquered town would be made a tribute town to Israel, subservient to the nation of Israel. In the ancient Near East, it was common for such towns to be allowed to continue to live relatively free lives but they were obliged to pay taxation to their new masters, either through cash payment or in goods and services. At times, though, the people were taken away from their homes to work as slaves for their new masters or were sold on to others.

<sup>12</sup> If it does not submit to you peacefully, but makes war against you, then you shall besiege it; <sup>13</sup> and when the Lord your God gives it into your hand, you shall put all its males to the sword. <sup>14</sup> You may,

however, take as your booty the women, the children, livestock, and everything else in the town, all its spoil. You may enjoy the spoil of your enemies, which the Lord your God has given you. <sup>15</sup> Thus you shall treat all the towns that are very far from you, which are not towns of the nations here.

#### Deuteronomy 20:12-15

You shall besiege it. Typically, a walled town was conquered by use of a siege. Enemy armies surrounded a town and cut off all their supplies and contact with the outside world. When the town was sufficiently weakened through hunger or thirst, they either surrendered or were conquered. Sometimes a siege would last for years. There are a few horrific sieges described in the Scriptures, such as a siege of Samaria in 2 Kings 6:24-33.

You shall put all its males to the sword. It was simply understood in the ancient world that any surviving male would be a perpetual enemy of the people who had conquered his town. Prisoners of war were often not taken in ancient warfare; enemies were simply slaughtered.

You may enjoy the spoil of your enemies. Although the victory and the spoils belong to the Lord, he freely gives them to his people in recognition that they were willing to trust him and go into battle. The spoils included the women, children, livestock, and anything else they considered of value.

Thus you shall treat all the towns that are very far from you, which are not towns of the nations here. It is clear that the stipulation of vv.10-14 apply to towns outside of the Promised Land. Those inside the land were commanded to be devoted to destruction and all the people were to be killed or driven from the land, and were not to be offered the chance to surrender as the following verses will indicate.

<sup>16</sup> But as for the towns of these peoples that the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance, you must not let anything that breathes remain alive. <sup>17</sup> You shall annihilate them – the Hittites and the Amorites, the Canaanites and the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites – just as the Lord your God has commanded, <sup>18</sup> so that they may not teach you to do all the abhorrent things that they do for their gods, and you thus sin against the Lord your God.

#### Deuteronomy 20:16-18

But as for the towns of these peoples that the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance. These verses concern towns within the boundaries of the Promised Land and may presuppose that these towns have refused the invitation to

surrender (v.10). Israel's action is much more severe in these cases, as they are not to let anything that breathes remain alive. The previous commands regarding warfare did not apply to the upcoming conquest of Canaan. There, not only was Israel not to offer peace to the towns, but they were also to destroy everything, not only the adult males. This was a unique war of judgement, more than a war of conquest or defence.

You shall annihilate them acknowledges that God is the victor and that to him belong the spoils of war: <<*At that time we captured all his towns, and in each town we utterly destroyed men, women, and children. We left not a single survivor. Only the livestock we kept as spoil for ourselves, as well as the plunder of the towns that we had captured*>> (Deuteronomy 2:34-35), <<*and when the Lord your God gives them over to you and you defeat them, then you must utterly destroy them. Make no covenant with them and show them no mercy*>> (Deuteronomy 7:2); it also is a precursor of final judgement. Such a drastic threat could encourage surrender rather than resistance. Joshua's application of these principles made room for such Gentiles to surrender and survive: <<*Joshua said to the two men who had spied out the land, 'Go into the prostitute's house, and bring the woman out of it and all who belong to her, as you swore to her.'* So the young men who had been spies went in and brought Rahab out, along with her father, her mother, her brothers, and all who belonged to her – they brought all her kindred out – and set them outside the camp of Israel. They burned down the city, and everything in it; only the silver and gold, and the vessels of bronze and iron, they put into the treasury of the house of the Lord. But Rahab the prostitute, with her family and all who belonged to her, Joshua spared. Her family has lived in Israel ever since. For she hid the messengers whom Joshua sent to spy out Jericho>> (Joshua 6:22-25), and: <<*This is what he did for them: he saved them from the Israelites; and they did not kill them. But on that day Joshua made them hewers of wood and drawers of water for the congregation and for the altar of the Lord, to continue to this day, in the place that he should choose*>> (Joshua 9:26-27).

The Hittites and the Amorites, the Canaanites and the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites. Here, only six of the seven previously named nations are listed with no mention of the Girgashites. Refer to Deuteronomy 7:1-2 and the comments made there for more information about these nations and their intended fate.

Cohabiting in the Promised Land with pagan nations makes Israel vulnerable to fall into their abominable practices, the abhorrent things that they do for their gods, referring to immorality as well as idolatry. This explains why such a complete destruction was commanded. The culture of the Canaanites was so corrupt - socially, morally, and spiritually - that God considered it irredeemable, and ripe for judgement. In this unique war, the armies of Israel were to bring that judgement upon all the Canaanite nations.

<sup>19</sup> If you besiege a town for a long time, making war against it in order to take it, you must not destroy its trees by wielding an axe against them. Although you may take food from them, you must not cut them down. Are trees in the field human beings that they should come under siege from you? <sup>20</sup> You may destroy only the trees that you know do not produce food; you may cut them down for use in building siege-works against the town that makes war with you, until it falls.

#### Deuteronomy 20:19-20

If you besiege a town for a long time, making war against it in order to take it, you must not destroy its trees by wielding an axe against them. When an army surrounded a town during a siege, the army would forage around the countryside for supplies. Needing wood for building and fuel, it would be common for the besieging army to cut down trees in the area around the town. The law of protection of fruit trees acknowledges that Israel is to inherit trees that it did not plant: *<<When the Lord your God has brought you into the land that he swore to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give you – a land with fine, large cities that you did not build, houses filled with all sorts of goods that you did not fill, hewn cisterns that you did not hew, vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant – and when you have eaten your fill, take care that you do not forget the Lord, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery>>* (Deuteronomy 6:10-12). This law also puts a brake on human short-sightedness: the ultimate end of the land is to be a fruitful garden for God's people to enjoy.

You may destroy only the trees that you know do not produce food; you may cut them down for use in building siege-works against the town that makes war with you, until it falls. However, God commanded Israel against cutting down trees for food when they besieged a town. They had to take a long-term view, one good for the ecology, and see that their immediate need for wood was less important than the long-term good of the area.

**It should always be remembered that God set mankind as stewards over all creation: <<Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth'>>** (Genesis 1:26). He never intended them to engage in the wanton destruction of the land, the sea, and all the resources in the way that they have done and continue to do!