

Second Baptist Church of Doylestown
Bible Study Notes
8-31-22

Deuteronomy 20

The Command To Trust In God – Verse 1

¹ When you go to war against your enemies and see horses and chariots and an army greater than yours, do not be afraid of them, because the LORD your God, who brought you up out of Egypt, will be with you.

20:1 Just like the Israelites, we sometimes face overwhelming opposition. Whether at school, at work, or even at home, we can feel outnumbered and helpless. God bolstered the Israelites' confidence by reminding them that he was always with them and that he had already saved them from the potential danger. We, too, can feel secure when we consider that God is able to overcome even the most difficult odds.

The Command To Encourage People Before Battle – Verses 2-4

² When you are about to go into battle, the priest shall come forward and address the army. ³ He shall say: "Hear, Israel: Today you are going into battle against your enemies. Do not be fainthearted or afraid; do not panic or be terrified by them. ⁴ For the LORD your God is the one who goes with you to fight for you against your enemies to give you victory."

20:2 When you are on the verge of battle: At this critical time, it was the job of the priest to encourage the soldiers to trust in God. Though the priests were not normally to go into battle themselves (they were not numbered among the fighting men of Israel, Numbers 1:47-53), the priests still had an important job when Israel went to war - to spiritually teach and encourage the soldiers!

20:4 The LORD your God is He who goes with you, to fight for you against your enemies, to save you: This was the reason for courage. When Israel was obedient, and trusting in God, they could never lose. But when they were disobedient, or not trusting, they could never win - even if they had superior forces.

How To Shrink An Army, And Make It More Effective – Verses 5-9

⁵ The officers shall say to the army: "Has anyone built a new house and not yet begun to live in it? Let him go home, or he may die in battle and someone else may begin to live in it. ⁶ Has anyone planted a vineyard and not begun to enjoy it? Let him go home, or he may die in battle and someone else enjoy it. ⁷ Has anyone become pledged to a woman and not married her? Let him go home, or he may die in battle and someone else marry her." ⁸ Then the officers shall add, "Is anyone afraid or fainthearted? Let him go home so that his fellow soldiers will not become disheartened too." ⁹ When the officers have finished speaking to the army, they shall appoint commanders over it.

20:5 What man is there who has built a new house and has not dedicated it? God first told the officers of the army of Israel to send home all the soldiers who had unfinished business at home: a home he has not used, a vineyard he has not harvested, or an engaged woman he has not married - let them go home.

20:8 What man is there who is fearful and fainthearted? Next, the officers of Israel were to send home all who were fearful and fainthearted. They might just make the others fearful also! In the spiritual army of God, He only wants willing, brave soldiers.

20:9 When the officers have finished speaking to the people: 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 wasn't important; the heart of the army was far more important. He didn't want people who might be distracted from the real battle by worrying about the cares of everyday life (their home, their vineyard, their fiancée'); nor did He want people who were not really trusting 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.

20:9 Make captains of the armies to lead the people: God commanded that His army have leadership. No matter how good the soldiers were, they needed to have good leadership.

The Offer Of Peace – Verses 10-11

¹⁰ When you march up to attack a city, make its people an offer of peace. ¹¹ If they accept and open their gates, all the people in it shall be subject to forced labor and shall work for you.

20:10 When you go near a city 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. Proclaim an offer of peace: It was important that Israel did not fight unnecessarily. If the city would agree to terms of peace, then they should come to an agreement.

20:11 It shall be placed under tribute to you: The conquered city would be made a tribute city to Israel, subservient to the nation of Israel.

Conquering A City Through Siege And Battle – Verses 12-15

¹² If they refuse to make peace and they engage you in battle, lay siege to that city. ¹³ When the LORD your God delivers it into your hand, put to the sword all the men in it. ¹⁴ As for the women, the children, the livestock and everything else in the city, you may take these as plunder for yourselves. And you may use the plunder the LORD your God gives you from your enemies. ¹⁵ This is how you are to treat all the cities that are at a distance from you and do not belong to the nations nearby.

20:12-15 "Put to the sword" means to kill. How could a merciful and just God order the destruction of entire population centers? He did this to protect his people from idol worship, which was certain to bring ruin to Israel (20:18). In fact, because Israel did not completely destroy these evil people as God commanded, Israel was constantly oppressed by them and experienced greater bloodshed and destruction than if they had followed God's instructions in the first place (see 7:2-6).

The Command To Utterly Destroy The Canaanites – Verses 16-18

¹⁶ However, in the cities of the nations the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance, do not leave alive anything that breathes. ¹⁷ Completely destroy them—the Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites—as the LORD your God has commanded

you. ¹⁸ Otherwise, they will teach you to follow all the detestable things they do in worshiping their gods, and you will sin against the LORD your God.

20:16 You shall let nothing that breathes remain: 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 cities, but they were also to destroy everything, not only the adult males. This was a unique war of judgment, more than a war of conquest or defense.

20:18 Lest they teach you to do according to their abominations which they have done for their gods: 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 judgment. In this unique war, the armies of Israel were to bring that judgment upon the Canaanites.

The Command To Save Trees For Food During A Siege – Verses 19-20

¹⁹ When you lay siege to a city for a long time, fighting against it to capture it, do not destroy its trees by putting an ax to them, because you can eat their fruit. Do not cut them down. Are the trees people, that you should besiege them? ²⁰ However, you may cut down trees that you know are not fruit trees and use them to build siege works until the city at war with you falls.

20:19 When you besiege a city for a long time: When an army surrounded a city 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 city.

20:20 Only the trees which you know are not trees for food you may destroy and cut down: However, God commanded Israel against cutting down trees for food when they besieged a city. 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.

20:20 Archaeologists have uncovered the remnants of many well-fortified cities in Canaan. Some had tall walls (up to 30 feet high), ramparts, moats, and towers. Accustomed to fighting on the open plains, the Israelites were going to have to learn new battle strategies to conquer these massive fortresses.