

When You Go to War

Deuteronomy 20

Expository Lessons from the Book of Deuteronomy

I. Introduction

- a. The **Book of Deuteronomy** consists of a few speeches that Moses gave to the Israelites near the end of their 40 years of wandering in the Wilderness.
- b. Here we continue in Moses' second address, which provides some interesting instructions for the Jews to follow after Moses dies and they move into Canaan, the Promised Land.
- c. This chapter is devoted to laws related to warfare against other nations, after they enter Canaan. This includes:
 - i. How the Israelites should attack their enemies, even when outnumbered.
 - ii. How they should treat their enemies, including captives.
 - iii. Which men should be exempt from fighting.
 - iv. What to do when besieging an enemy city. Also, how to build battering rams to break down the city gates and other fortifications.
- d. **Questions:** Why should these things matter to us Christians today? After all, Jesus and the apostles have told us we should now love our enemies (rather than fight them). Aren't we to stop warring against enemies?
 - i. **Possible Answer:** Paul said, "For whatever things were written before were written *for our learning*...." (**Romans 15:4**, NKJV)
 - 1. Jesus did not call us to passivity. We are in a kingdom that is now locked in a different war, with a different type of enemy, calling for different types of weapons!
 - 2. **Question:** Given that we are engaged in spiritual warfare, could there be important lessons for us in the Mosaic Law with its instructions on going to war?
 - 3. Let's first take a look at passages that speak of the warfare we as Christians are engaged in.
- e. New Testament passages that allude to the (spiritual) war we are called to fight in, include the following:

“Do not think that I came to bring peace on earth. *I did not come to bring peace but a sword.* For I have come to ‘set a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law’; and ‘a man’s enemies will be those of his own household.’” (**Matthew 10:34–36**, NKJV)

- i. “And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the *gates of Hades shall not prevail against it.*” (**Matthew 16:18**, NKJV)
 1. Here, I see the image of a heavily fortified city (Hades) that is being stormed by Christ and His followers.
- ii. “And He said to them, “I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. Behold, I give you the authority to trample on serpents and scorpions, and *over all the power of the enemy*, and nothing shall by any means hurt you.” (**Luke 10:18–19**, NKJV)
- iii. “Beloved, I beg you as sojourners and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts *which war against the soul...*” (**1 Peter 2:11**, NKJV)
- iv. “Be sober, be vigilant; because *your adversary the devil* walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour. Resist him, steadfast in the faith, knowing that the same sufferings are experienced by your brotherhood in the world.” (**1 Peter 5:8–9**, NKJV)
- v. “For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh. *For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds*, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, *bringing every thought into captivity* to the obedience of Christ, and being ready to punish all disobedience when your obedience is fulfilled.” (**2 Corinthians 10:3–6**, NKJV)
- vi. “Therefore let us not sleep, as others do, but let us watch and be sober. For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk are drunk at night. But let us who are of the day be sober, *putting on the breastplate of faith and love, and as a helmet the hope of salvation.*” (**1 Thessalonians 5:6–8**, NKJV)
- vii. Read **Ephesians 6:10–20**.
 1. This may be the most famous passage in the entire New Testament that describes the spiritual war that Christians are called to fight. It speaks of our powerful enemies, as well as the offensive weapons and defensive armor we will need in the battle.

- f. Let us never forget that we are called to be fighting in a war. Christians are not called to be just passive people. We have powerful enemies fighting to destroy us. We are called to repel their assaults, and to defeat them.
 - i. Paul called Timothy to “*wage the good warfare*” (**1 Timothy 1:18**) and “*fight the good fight*” (**1 Timothy 6:12**).
 - ii. **Question:** Should Christians view themselves as warriors engaged in a fight against a powerful enemy?
 - 1. **Answer:** Yes; Paul certainly thought so
 - iii. We have powerful enemies and spiritual forces who are out to destroy each one of us.
 - iv. Also, the desires of our own flesh are warring against our spirits.
 - v. We need to utilize powerful offensive and defensive weapons to demolish the strongholds of Satan, to liberate those who have been taken captive, and to stand in the face of deadly attacks upon us.
 - vi. The Old Testament battles offer great lessons about battle and war, and provide instructions that can help us in our own spiritual battles. Pay attention closely to these things, including the text we are reading today. Do not waste this opportunity to learn strategies and tactics to use in our own war!
 - 1. Celsus, a Neoplatonist philosopher, wrote *The True Discourse*, a work criticizing the Christian faith, c. 175-180 AD. About sixty years after Celsus’ work (which has not survived) was written, early Christian writer Origen wrote a refutation, entitled *Against Celsus* (c. 240 AD). The following quote is taken from *Against Celsus*:
 - a. “Celsus urges us ‘to help the king with all our might, and to labour with him in the maintenance of justice, to fight for him; and if he requires it, to fight under him, or lead an army along with him.’ To this our answer is, that we do, when occasion requires, give help to kings, and that, so to say, a divine help, ‘putting on the whole armour of God.’ (**Ephesians 6:11**)
 - b. “And this we do in obedience to the injunction of the apostle, ‘I exhort, therefore, that first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks, be made for all men; for kings, and for all that are in authority’ (**1 Timothy 2:1-2**); and the more any one excels in piety, the more effective help does he

render to kings, even more than is given by soldiers, who go forth to fight and slay as many of the enemy as they can.

- c. "...And as we by our prayers vanquish all demons who stir up war, and lead to the violation of oaths, and disturb the peace, we in this way are much more helpful to the kings than those who go into the field to fight for them. And we do take our part in public affairs, when along with righteous prayers we join self-denying exercises and meditations, which teach us to despise pleasures, and not to be led away by them. *And none fight better for the king than we do. We do not indeed fight under him, although he require it; but we fight on his behalf, forming a special army—an army of piety—by offering our prayers to God.*"
 - i. (Source: Origen, *Against Celsus*; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 4, p. 667–668)
 - ii. Note that Celsus, a critic of the Christians, complained that the Christians refused to fight in the wars of the Roman Empire. Origen, in defending the Christian faith, agrees with the charge of Celsus (that Christians don't fight in wars). However, Origen explains the reason why, namely, because they are fighting for the king in a much better way than regular soldiers: they are praying to God on the king's behalf to vanquish the demons – the ones that stir up wars and conflicts!
 - iii. This is a reminder that we Christians do not involve ourselves in the physical wars of the nations by being normal soldiers.
 - 1. Rather, we serve the nations by putting on the full armor of God, taking our stations as prayer warriors, "a special army of piety," to fight as a different type of warrior using more powerful weapons.

II. Instructions Approaching Battle

a. Read **Deuteronomy 20:1-4**.

- i. Don't fear when going up against armies that are larger, with more horses (cavalry) than you have. This instruction is counterintuitive, as everyone knows, since the larger and better-equipped army generally has the advantage in a battle.
 1. God's people must remember that God is with them.
 2. Recall what the Lord did to the Egyptians.
 3. If the people are righteous and the Lord is with them, the Lord will deliver them; if they are not righteous, He is not with them.
- ii. We see this promise (and examples played out both ways) throughout the Old Testament.
- iii. Similar New Testament promises for us include:
 1. "Therefore I say to you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink; nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air, for they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? Which of you by worrying can add one cubit to his stature? So why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; and yet I say to you that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. Now if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is, and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will He not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For after all these things the Gentiles seek. For your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. *But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness*, and all these things shall be added to you." (**Matthew 6:25-33**, NKJV)
 2. "Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. *The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much*. Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain; and it did not rain on the land for three years and six months. And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth produced its fruit." (**James 5:16-18**, NKJV)

3. “For ‘He who would love life And see good days, Let him refrain his tongue from evil, And his lips from speaking deceit. Let him turn away from evil and do good; Let him seek peace and pursue it. For *the eyes of the LORD are on the righteous, And His ears are open to their prayers*; But the face of the LORD is against those who do evil.’” (1 Peter 3:10–12, NKJV; where Peter here quotes from Psalm 33/34)
- iv. **Challenge:** What are the biggest personal challenges you are facing in your life, at this time? Rather than being anxious in the face of various problems, double down on petitioning the Lord for deliverance and on being righteous (obeying all the teachings of Jesus and imitating His example).
- b. Read **Deuteronomy 20:5-9**.
 - i. Generally, when you are going to war against an enemy that is stronger than your forces, you want every eligible person on your side to be involved. However, that is not what the Lord instructs here.
 - ii. Yet, according to the Law of Moses, anyone who has just gotten married or planted a vineyard (who could die in the war without ever having enjoyed that) is released from serving.
 1. **Question:** What does that indicate about the Lord?
 2. **Answer:** He wants everyone to be able to enjoy at least some amount of happiness before dying in a war.
 - iii. Anyone who is afraid (in facing a more numerous enemy in battle) is dismissed.
 1. **Questions:** What percent of the prospective soldiers might that apply to? Did the Israelites ever actually do this?
 2. **Answer:** This directive is applied to dismiss the fearful soldiers in the story of Gideon, in **Judges 6-7**.
 - a. The Midianites, Amalekites, and “people of the east were as numerous as locusts... [and] as the sand of the sea”, and had “camels without number”.
- b. Read **Judges 7:1-3**.
 - i. All those men who were afraid were released from the battle. Out of 32,000 men, over 2/3 were afraid and deserted! That left only 10,000 (who were further reduced to 300 by the Lord).

3. **Question:** What does that tell us about the Lord?

- a. Large numbers of lukewarm, fearful, and fairly faithless people are less effective than a few courageous, faithful men fully devoted to the Lord!
- b. The Lord does not need a large army to win the battle. If He is on our side, regardless of how few we are, we can prevail against all odds.
- c. This reality applies to God's people past, present, and future!

III. When You Attack Other Cities

a. Read **Deuteronomy 20:10-18**.

- i. Regarding the Canaanites, whose land they would inherit, the Israelites were instructed to wipe out everyone.
 - 1. **Question:** Why was it necessary to call for such an *extreme* measure?
 - 2. **God's Answer:** The Canaanites had become so corrupt, involved in the occult, child sacrifice, orgies, cannibalism, and worshiping other pagan gods, that they would in turn corrupt the Israelites.
 - a. However, as it says in **Wisdom of Solomon 12**, even these wicked people were given "a chance for repentance", to avoid destruction. (However, they would ignore that last opportunity.)
- ii. However, the *other nations* (those who lived further away and were not the Canaanites) were to be treated differently.
 - 1. They were to be offered peace with a treaty to pay tribute.
 - 2. However, if they refused and instead made war against the Israelites:
 - a. The Israelites were to besiege the foreign city.
 - b. God would deliver it into their hands.
 - c. They were instructed to kill all the men. However, they were not to destroy the women and livestock, but rather take them captive instead.

3. Clement of Alexandria, writing c. 195, commented how passages like this *showed the kindness of God* even toward enemies, *even in the Law of Moses*.
 - a. “And enemies, although drawn up before the walls attempting to take the city, are not to be regarded as enemies till they are by the voice of the herald summoned to peace.”
 - i. (Source: Clement of Alexandria, *The Stromata, or Miscellanies*; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 2, p. 367)
- b. Read **Deuteronomy 20:19-20**.
 - i. This requirement at first struck me as rather odd. It is much more detailed, even granular, than most of the other ‘big-picture’ type instructions Moses is giving in this part of the Law.
 - ii. **Question:** When you are attacking another city and storming down its gates, *who cares* if you cut down one fruit tree to make a battering ram and destroy it? What difference does it make?
 1. This reminds me of some other seemingly obscure or minor requirements of the Law, such as:
 - a. Do not plow with an ox and a donkey together (**Deuteronomy 22:10**, alluded to in **2 Corinthians 6:14**); and
 - b. Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain (**Deuteronomy 25:4**, quoted in **1 Corinthians 9:9** and **1 Timothy 5:18**).
 2. **Question:** Could this possibly be another gem provided in the Law for our benefit (as is the case with both of the examples above)? Let’s consider that possibility.
 - iii. **Hint:** Moses says they must not cut down a tree that bears fruit, but it is fine to cut down a tree that does not bear fruit. *Does that remind you of anything else* in the Scriptures?
 - iv. Passages about fruit-bearing trees (in contrast with those that do not bear fruit) include:
 1. Read **Psalms 1:1-3**.

- a. The one who avoids evil company and their ways but instead meditates day and night on the word of God will be *like a tree that bears its fruit in season*. Whatever he does will prosper.
2. Read **Matthew 3:7-10** (John the Baptist)
 - a. “But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, ‘Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Therefore *bear fruits worthy of repentance*, and do not think to say to yourselves, “We have Abraham as our father.” For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones. And even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore *every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.*” (**Matthew 3:7-10**, NKJV)
3. Read **Matthew 5:15-20**.
 - a. “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves. *You will know them by their fruits*. Do men gather grapes from thornbushes or figs from thistles? Even so, *every good tree bears good fruit*, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. *Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire*. Therefore by their fruits you will know them.” (**Matthew 7:15-20**, NKJV)
4. Read **Matthew 12:33-37**.
 - a. “Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or else make the tree bad and its fruit bad; for *a tree is known by its fruit*. Brood of vipers! How can you, being evil, speak good things? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. A good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth good things, and an evil man out of the evil treasure brings forth evil things. But I say to you that for every idle word men may speak, they will give account of it in the day of judgment. For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.” (**Matthew 12:33-37**, NKJV)
5. Read **Luke 13:6-9**.

- a. "He also spoke this parable: 'A certain man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it and found none. Then he said to the keeper of his vineyard, "Look, for three years I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree and find none. Cut it down; why does it use up the ground?" But he answered and said to him, "Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and fertilize it. *And if it bears fruit, well. But if not, after that you can cut it down.*'" (Luke 13:6-9, NKJV)
6. Also consider the account in the gospels of Jesus cursing the fig tree that had no fruit on it, despite the fact that it was not the season for figs (**Matthew 21:18-20; Mark 11:12-14 and 11:20-21**). This story has an object lesson for all of us!
7. Read **Jude v. 12-13**, regarding corrupt teachers who will creep into the church.
 - a. "These are spots in your love feasts, while they feast with you without fear, serving only themselves. They are clouds without water, carried about by the winds; late autumn *trees without fruit, twice dead*, pulled up by the roots; raging waves of the sea, foaming up their own shame; wandering stars for whom is reserved the blackness of darkness forever." (**Jude 12-13**, NKJV)

v. **Take-Aways for Us, from Lesson of the Trees**

1. The trees that don't bear fruit *will be cut down* (in contrast with the fruit-bearing trees).
 - a. Good fruit includes repentance, helping the poor, obedience to Jesus' teachings, love, and what comes out of our mouths. It also includes bearing the fruit of the Spirit (**Galatians 5:22-23**).
 - b. There are some in the church who are trees that are not bearing fruit. They will be cut down.
2. Examine your life by its fruit. Jesus will give the fruitless trees some time and an opportunity to repent. Be urgent, since this offer is available for a limited time only!
3. Be a fruit-bearing tree, to avoid getting chopped down and turned into a battering ram!