

### Conduct in Warfare

#### Deuteronomy 20

**Deuteronomy 20:1-4** - *“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 is with you, who brought you up from the land of Egypt. <sup>2</sup> So it shall be, when you are on the verge of battle, that the priest shall approach and speak to the people. <sup>3</sup> And he shall say to them, ‘Hear, O Israel: Today you are on the verge of battle with your enemies. Do not let your heart faint, do not be afraid, and do not tremble or be terrified because of them; <sup>4</sup> for the Lord your God is He who goes with you, to fight for you against your enemies, to save you.”*

#### Background Notes

In the early chapters of Deuteronomy we learned that the children of Israel had already done a lot of fighting, even before Moses gave them the Deuteronomy 20 manual for warfare. Deuteronomy 2:32-34: *“Then Sihon and all his people came out against us to fight at Jahaz. And the Lord our God delivered him over to us; so we defeated him, his sons, and all his people. We took all his cities at that time, and we utterly destroyed the men, women, and little ones of every city; we left none remaining...”*

And chapter 3:3-6: *“So the Lord our God also delivered into our hands Og king of Bashan, with all his people, and we attacked him until he had no survivors remaining. And we took all his cities at that time; there was not a city that we did not take from them: sixty cities, all the region of Argob, the kingdom of Og in Bashan. All these cities were fortified with high walls, gates, and bars, besides a great many rural towns. And we utterly destroyed them.”*

All of that fighting took place on the east side of the Jordan River, before the people of Israel crossed the Jordan, and before Moses gave these sermons on the plains of Moab. Deuteronomy 20 gave formal instructions on how warfare should be carried out when confronting cities in the Land that God had given them, as well as cities outside the land of Canaan. These instructions were good for the Conquest, and for any time Israel was engaged in warfare.

#### Doctrinal Points

##### 1. When Israel went to war, dedicated soldiers were encouraged by the priests.

Before every battle, one of Israel's priests was to give an encouraging and challenging talk to the troops before they went into battle (v1-4). Maybe the best illustration for us would be that of a football coach giving a pep talk to his team before the big game. In essence, the priests would say: “You can do it! The Lord is on our side and He has promised us victory.

The enemy may look bigger and be more numerous than we are, and they may have more advanced weapons than we do. But we have the Lord on our side - and '1 + God' is always a majority. Now let's go out and fight in the strength of the Lord!"

The priest who gave this motivational talk was not necessarily the high priest, and I don't think he was similar to a typical military chaplain today. No. He was a **motivator** who exhorted the dedicated soldiers to go out to battle, and fight in the strength of the Lord. An example would be the priest Phinehas in Numbers 31:6, where we read, *"Then Moses sent them to the war, one thousand from each tribe; he sent them to the war with Phinehas the son of Eleazar the priest, with the holy articles and the signal trumpets in his hand."* When Israel went to war, dedicated soldiers were encouraged by the priest.

## 2. When Israel went to war, domestic duties were still of primary importance.

**Deuteronomy 20:5-9** - *"Then the officers shall speak to the people, saying: 'What man is there who has built a new house and has not dedicated it? Let him go and return to his house, lest he die in the battle and another man dedicate it. <sup>6</sup> Also what man is there who has planted a vineyard and has not eaten of it? Let him go and return to his house, lest he die in the battle and another man eat of it. <sup>7</sup> And what man is there who is betrothed to a woman and has not married her? Let him go and return to his house, lest he die in the battle and another man marry her.'*

<sup>8</sup> *"The officers shall speak further to the people, and say, 'What man is there who is fearful and fainthearted? Let him go and return to his house, lest the heart of his brethren faint like his heart.'* <sup>9</sup> *And so it shall be, when the officers have finished speaking to the people, that they shall make captains of the armies to lead the people."*

There was no military draft in Israel. In fact, when Israel went to war, there were four categories of men who were **not** to go into battle:

Category #1: A man who had built a new house, but had not yet dedicated it (v5).

Category #2: A man who had planted a new vineyard, but it was not yet productive (v6).

Category #3: A man who was engaged to a woman, but had not yet married her (v7). (You can imagine the rash of engagements that probably took place in Israel when it looked like the nation was on the brink of war!)

Category #4: Any man who didn't want to go into battle because he was faint-hearted and afraid was free to go home. He didn't have to run away and hide, and he didn't have to leave the country. We can certainly see the wisdom in this regulation. A coward in the midst of battle will instill fear and uncertainty in the rest of the troops, and bring down the morale. It's better to have fewer soldiers than to have cowards in your army!

As a result of these regulations, Israel's army would consist only of highly dedicated and committed troops – a very effective fighting force that was trusting in the Lord for victory!

There is a significant and important fact to notice in these regulations: on God's priority list, family-oriented duties such as building homes, raising families, and planting crops were more important than fighting wars. Waging war with Israel's enemies was important, and victory was guaranteed, but when Israel went to war, domestic duties were still of primary importance.

### 3. When Israel went to war, distant cities were offered terms of peace.

**Deuteronomy 20:10-20** - *"When you go near a city to fight against it, then proclaim an offer of peace to it. <sup>11</sup> And it shall be that if they accept your offer of peace, and open to you, then all the people who are found in it shall be placed under tribute to you, and serve you. <sup>12</sup> Now if the city will not make peace with you, but makes war against you, then you shall besiege it. <sup>13</sup> And when the Lord your God delivers it into your hands, you shall strike every male in it with the edge of the sword. <sup>14</sup> But the women, the little ones, the livestock, and all that is in the city, all its spoil, you shall plunder for yourself; and you shall eat the enemies' plunder which the Lord your God gives you. <sup>15</sup> Thus you shall do to all the cities which are very far from you, which are not of the cities of these nations.*

<sup>16</sup> *"But of the cities of these peoples which the Lord your God gives you as an inheritance, you shall let nothing that breathes remain alive, <sup>17</sup> but you shall utterly destroy them: the Hittite and the Amorite and the Canaanite and the Perizzite and the Hivite and the Jebusite, just as the Lord your God has commanded you, <sup>18</sup> lest they teach you to do according to all their abominations which they have done for their gods, and you sin against the Lord your God.*

<sup>19</sup> *"When you besiege a city for a long time, while making war against it to take it, you shall not destroy its trees by wielding an ax against them; if you can eat of them, do not cut them down to use in the siege, for the tree of the field is man's food. <sup>20</sup> Only the trees which you know are not trees for food you may destroy and cut down, to build siege works against the city that makes war with you, until it is subdued."*

A distinction was made between cities inside the land of Canaan, and cities that were located outside the land of Canaan. Cities in Canaan were to be totally wiped out (v16-18). Houses and fruit trees and crops were to be preserved, but all connections with idolatry and pagan life were to be completely eliminated.

"But," you may say – "why eliminate the babies?" Verse 18 gives the answer, *"lest they teach you to do according to all their abominations which they have done for their gods, and you sin against the Lord your God."* Baby Canaanites grow up to be adult pagan Canaanites. And you've heard me say this more than once before: "I'd rather be a Canaanite baby killed in the Israeli conquest and end up in heaven, than to grow up to be an idolatrous and immoral Canaanite and end up in hell." Do you agree?

Furthermore, the Israeli sword was a lot less painful for the Canaanite babies than the barbaric child sacrifice that the Canaanites practiced. We know that the nations within Canaan practiced a horrible form of child sacrifice, although some of the nations outside Canaan did not.

In reference to the cities outside the land, where the foreign culture was far enough removed so as not to influence God's people, Israel was permitted to make peace treaties with them. These cities would become vassal states, and they would pay annual tribute to Israel. If these foreign cities refused to make peace with Israel and chose rather to make war, then the Lord directed Israel to go to war with them. And once again God guaranteed the victory to Israel.

However, in the case of cities outside the Land, God directed Israel to keep the women and children alive. It's well documented that the nations outside the Land were not as degenerate as the nations listed here within the land of Canaan, so the threat of moral contamination by their paganism was not as great. When Israel went to war, foreign cities were offered terms of peace.

## Practical Application

### Let's motivate others to "fight the good fight"!

Scripture teaches that all believers are involved in spiritual warfare. Ephesians 6:12 says, *"For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places."* And verse 13, *"Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all to stand."*

When the apostle Paul wrote his final letter to Timothy, he said that he had "fought the good fight (2 Timothy 4:7)." He certainly wrote with the idea of motivating Timothy (and all believers) to fight a good fight as well! In fact, in 1 Timothy 1:18 and 1 Timothy 6:12, Paul told Timothy, *"Fight the good fight of faith."*

This biblical principle was illustrated in Deuteronomy 20 when the priests gave a motivational talk to the troops before they went into battle, just as God directed. In the same way, let us motivate other believers to fight the good fight! In fact, that's what preaching to believers is all about - it's motivation to be more committed to the Lord, and to fight the good fight. Notice that the past great victory of the Exodus was mentioned in verse 1. We too can remind believers of past victories. It will encourage and motivate them to continue to be strong in spiritual battle.

Let's motivate others to fight the good fight!