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**BIBLE STUDY**

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**“MILITARY RULES OF ENGAGEMENT”**

**Deuteronomy 20:1-20**

***Deuteronomy 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."***

Moses’s next message for Israel concerned how to conduct themselves during war, especially in the forthcoming battles for the promised land. The chapter follows instructions regarding homicide (chap. 19), so it relates to the subject of when it is appropriate to take a human life. This section also seeks to clarify further the sixth commandment (“you shall not kill” or “murder”). This message was as much for General Joshua as it was for the people and their military commanders. It seems that every army Israel met was larger than they were in number, and yet God constantly commanded and assured his people, “Do not be afraid of them, for the Lord your God is with you.” This would be unusual teaching for a nation who belonged to God, but they are about to go in and take the promised land. God wants them to have faith in Him, and not fear the military of the countries they are to fight. Moses often used the deliverance from Egypt to encourage his people to live for God and accomplish His will. Pharaoh had a large army with horses and chariots, and God destroyed them. They must remember that and go out in faith to battle. They must not be overwhelmed by the physical strength of their enemies. They must have faith that God will fight for them.

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

***Deuteronomy 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;"***

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

Since war was not just a military issue but also a religious and theological one, priests had a major part in preparing the people for war. Priests were employed to encourage the troops just before battle by strengthening their will to fight. The priest stood as a tangible reminder to the troops that the Lord was with them and that they could trust Him for a favorable outcome in battle. The priest was to lead the way into battle and give the troops a divine pep talk beforehand, reminding them not to fear the enemy because the Lord would fight against their enemies and give Israel victory. This exhortation was extremely important. The previous generation of Israelites died in the wilderness because they had succumbed to fear of Canaan’s inhabitants and failed to trust that God would provide for them (Numbers 13:1–14:45). Therefore, the current generation needed to learn from the mistake of their ancestors. We too often fail to follow the Lord and do as his Word commands because we fear the world, what they will think of us or do to us. Instead, we must trust that our King will provide the means to accomplish the kingdom agenda that he commands of us. When the priest speaks to the people, it means this is a holy war. This is a war God has sent them to. God will be with them in battle. This speech of the priest is to encourage the heart of Israel. They must place their faith in God, not earthly power. It is such a shame that many of our later song books have removed the song, Onward Christian Soldiers. That is exactly what Moses is explaining to them here. They are not fighting out of hate, but as a soldier of God. They are carrying out the will of God on the earth. God is leading the battle. A good soldier of the cross will follow Him into battle.

***Deuteronomy 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."***

God permitted soldiers exemption from a given battle if they met any one of four conditions. The first three were related: The first exemption is stating that a man who has just built a house could be exempt from the immediate battle, to go and dedicate the home he built. The officers were the ones who took the roles of the soldiers available and decided who would fight in each battle. This exemption is for a short time, so the person could enjoy dedicating his own house.

***Deuteronomy 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."***

***Deuteronomy 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."***

The second exemption is the same as the house above. This exemption is for just a short period of time, so he can enjoy his own vineyard. The third exemption was in the case of the betrothed (engaged) wife, he was to be exempt from war for the period of one year.

***Deuteronomy 24:5 "When a man hath taken a new wife, he shall not go out to war, neither shall he be charged with any business: [but] he shall be free at home one year, and shall cheer up his wife which he hath taken."***

Each of these exemptions involves a lack of fulfillment in pursuing one of life’s basic pleasures. They may have been chosen by God to illustrate the ways in which he intended his people to enjoy the good land he was giving them.

***Deuteronomy 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."***

***Deuteronomy 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."***

The fourth exemption involved a soldier with a cowardly heart. He was sent home, not for his own sake, but so that he wouldn’t demoralize his brothers, which could have disastrous consequences. God did not want His army to include the fainthearted, or afraid. Notice, this same situation in the following Scriptures about Gideon.

***Judges 7:2-3***

***2"And the LORD said unto Gideon, The people that [are] with thee [are] too many for me to give the Midianites into their hands, lest Israel vaunt themselves against me, saying, Mine own hand hath saved me."***

***3 "Now therefore go to, proclaim in the ears of the people, saying, Whosoever [is] fearful and afraid, let him return and depart early from mount Gilead. And there returned of the people twenty and two thousand; and there remained ten thousand."***

If we were to read on in this book of judges, we would find that God used only 300 brave men for the battle against the thousands, and the Israelites won. God and one is a majority. After it was determined that there was a faithful army, then the officers were to appoint commanders to lead the troops in actual battle. The officers choose out brave men of each group to lead them in battle. They are made captains.

***Deuteronomy 20:10 "When thou comest nigh unto a city to fight against it, then proclaim peace unto it."***

***Deuteronomy 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."***

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

This section deals with wars on foreign soil because Israel was to eliminate any nation in the land of Canaan. Israel’s approach to war was not indiscriminate, as Moses’s instructions make clear. The first thing they are to do before they enter a city is offer them a peaceful surrender. If they surrender, they will not die. "Tributaries", in this verse means forced labor. The people of that city would perform forced labor on their behalf. They will be servants to the Israelites if they surrender peaceably. If they do not surrender peaceably, then Israel shall fight against them.

***Deuteronomy 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:"***

***Deuteronomy 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."***

Since they did not surrender, but chose to fight, all the men of the city will be killed, when Israel takes the city. The LORD God will deliver every one of the cities to Israel. The women, children, and animals will be spared. The wealth of the land will go into the hands of Israelite. All the spoil will belong to them. Now, we see that the sparing of the women and the children, is only if the cities are far away from the place of inheritance of the Israelites. Perhaps, they would be far enough away that the Israelite men would not take them to wife. The purpose in killing every living thing is to wipe out the false religion in this area. Even the women would bring the worship of false gods to the Israelites, if they were allowed to live. God wants the land of inheritance to be a holy land.

***Deuteronomy 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."***

***Deuteronomy 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:"***

***Deuteronomy 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:"***

***Deuteronomy 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 list of the people of the promised land who are to be “utterly destroyed” in compliance with the Lord’s command. No offer of peace was to be made to these Canaanites. Israel was to completely destroy every living thing among them. The emphasis is provided by a Hebrew construction indicating the thoroughness of their destruction. Within the boundaries of the promised land, as the conquest of the land progressed and the battles were fought with those who occupied the land, the Jewish people were to leave nothing alive. This command appears not to be fair. Why offer peace to one group and no peace to another? God is sovereign and His freedom is absolute. He is only “Good” and never makes mistakes. It is essential to understand that, before God, humans have no rights or privileges. God’s freedom to demonstrate mercy is not limited by anything but His own divine will, foreknowledge and justice.

***Romans 9:15 “For he saith to Moses, I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion.”***

Complete eradication was necessary so that they would not have opportunity to teach you to do according to all their detestable things. Their abominations are revolting sins in the sight of God. Israel must stay pure. They must not worship false gods. This matter was crucially important because Israel had already demonstrated a propensity to adopt the false religious practices of the surrounding nations (Numbers 25:1-18). If the nations were left alive, then they would have the ability to influence the Israelites to participate in idolatry, which would be a sin against the LORD your God.

***Deuteronomy 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:"***

***Deuteronomy 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."***

Here Moses gave additional information about the rules of engagement when Israel was besieging a city, presumably whether inside or outside the promised land. Often armies were ruthless in seeking to conquer resistant cities, so that the entire area was laid waste. This was not to be the case with Israelite warfare. They were not to cut down any fruit trees when besieging a city. The tree that produces food is a friend to man. They could be a source of food for the soldiers during that time. To destroy these trees, would not help win the war. They could certainly be useful to Israel, after they have taken the city, and even before they take the city to sustain them. In that sense, they are the man's life. The value of fruit trees is heightened by Moses’ question, for is the tree of the field a man, that it should be besieged by you? This may seem hypocritical for God to command that fruit trees be spared and children and infants be exterminated, but remember Canaan (the land not the people) was to be Israel’s possession. Leaving people leaves concerns of assimilation, hence the need for total annihilation (men, women, and children) of these nations. However, with trees there is no danger of assimilation or cultural transference, so they can and should be spared. Respect for God’s creation was to be maintained even in a time of war. However, in times of war, trees that do not produce fruit, or nuts of any kind, could be cut down to build bulwarks against the city they are at war with. "Bulwarks", in this verse, mean hemming in. This just means they have stopped their way of escape.

**QUESTIONS**

1. Why should they not fear?
2. How does it help to remember Egypt?
3. The speech of the priest is to \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ the people.
4. What special privilege does someone, who has just built a house, have?
5. Who decided who would go into battle?
6. How long is a man exempt from war, who has taken a wife?
7. Who else will the officer send home, and not go to war?
8. How many brave men with Gideon won the battle?
9. God and \_\_\_\_\_\_ is a majority.
10. Who did the officers set up as leaders?
11. What was the first thing they were to do when they came to a city?
12. What does "tributaries" mean?
13. What is Israel to do, if they do not surrender?
14. Who in the city shall be killed?
15. What was the purpose in killing every living thing?
16. Verse 18 explains why they were utterly destroyed, why was it?
17. Abominations are \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_.
18. What must they not destroy, when they besiege a city a long time?
19. What will they do with the trees, which do not produce food?
20. What does "bulwarks" mean?