

February 24: 20:1-20

**Laws concerning war with distant enemies and more local enemies (distant verses 1-15, local verses 16-20)**

- I. Intro to warfare with distant enemies (verses 1-4)
- II. Reasons by which people can leave (verses 5-8)
- III. Appointment of commanders (verse 9)
- IV. Offer of peace (verses 10-12)
- V. The battle (verses 13-15)
- VI. Laws concerning war with Canaanite nations (verses 16-18)
- VII. The trees (verses 19-20)

The ESV Study Bible:

*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 minimize casualties in war. This law also distinguishes between enemy cities 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 (see note on vv. 16–18). These laws on warfare (esp. vv. 16–18) create an ethical dilemma for Christians. But three things should be considered: (1) the limits and restraint of these laws; (2) their context in securing the Promised Land; and (3) the priority of offering terms of peace to cities before attacking them (see v. 10). See Gen. 15:16; and notes on Deut. 7:2; 18:12. In the NT, the Christian inheritance is a heavenly land (1 Pet. 1:4), not an earthly one, and the language of warfare is used spiritually (cf. Eph. 6:10–17).*

Moody Bible Commentary:

This chapter includes the only legislation on the conduct of war. The chapter follows after 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 passage does not provide any information regarding the circumstances that justify when war should be waged on foreign soil. The verses only provide some general guidelines to govern it when it does occur. Elsewhere the OT does acknowledge that there is "a time to kill" (Ec 3:3), and throughout their nation's history, God commanded the Israelites to attack their enemies (i.e. 1Sm 23:4; 2Ch 20:15). Yet it was always with the recognition that peace (vv. 10-12) is the goal to be desired.<sup>1</sup>

- I. Intro to warfare with distant enemies (verses 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, who brought you up from the land*

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<sup>1</sup> The Moody Bible Commentary (Kindle Locations 11324-11327). Moody Publishers. Kindle Edition.

of Egypt, is with you. <sup>2</sup> When you are approaching the battle, the priest shall come near and speak to the people. <sup>3</sup> He shall say to them, 'Hear, O Israel, you are approaching the battle against your enemies today. Do not be fainthearted. Do not be afraid, or panic, or tremble before them, <sup>4</sup> for the Lord your God is the one who goes with you, to fight for you against your enemies, to save you.'

- a. We have seen instructions about battle before. These are instructions regarding battles that are distant.
- b. Verses 1-9 have a repeating theme of not being afraid.
- c. These are all passages about NOT being afraid: Deut 3:22; 7:18; 31:6, 8; Ps 20:7; Is 31:1<sup>2</sup>
- d. 2 Ch 32:7 "Be strong and brave! Don't be afraid and don't panic because of the king of Assyria and this huge army that is with him! We have with us one who is stronger than those who are with him.
- e. 2 Ch 32:8 He has with him mere human strength, but the LORD our God is with us to help us and fight our battles!" The army was encouraged by the words of King Hezekiah of Judah.
- f. Ps 23:4 Even when I must walk through the darkest valley, I fear no danger, for you are with me; your rod and your staff reassure me.
- g. Is 41:10 Don't be afraid, for I am with you! Don't be frightened, for I am your God! I strengthen you— yes, I help you— yes, I uphold you with my saving right hand!
- h. Jos 23:10 One of you makes a thousand run away, for the LORD your God fights for you as he promised you he would.
- i. Dt 1:30 The LORD your God is about to go ahead of you; he will fight for you, just as you saw him do in Egypt
- j. Dt 3:22 Do not be afraid of them, for the LORD your God will personally fight for you."
- k. They go out to battle and they see horses and chariots and people that are more numerous than them, they are not to fear.
- l. It would be natural to fear wouldn't it?
- m. You see more people, you see horses and chariots, the fear response may go up.
- n. But verse 1 reminds them that the Lord is with them. This is the same Lord who brought them out of Egypt.
- o. The reason for not being afraid is God. God protects them. God fights for them.
- p. Verse 2: the priest speaks to the people.
- q. The reference to *the priest* suggests also the presence of the ark of the covenant, the visible sign of God's presence. The whole setting is clearly that of "holy war" or "Yahweh war," in which God himself takes initiative as the true commander of the forces of Israel (cf. Exod 14:14–18; 15:3–10; Deut 3:22; 7:18–24; 31:6, 8).<sup>3</sup>
- r. IVP BBC: **priest addressing the army.** Since warfare was considered a religious enterprise, it was expected that priests and other religious functionaries would accompany the army. Assyrian texts and reliefs depict the roles performed by priests accompanying the troops. They carried or attended the images and emblems of the gods (see Josh 6:4–5; 1Sam 4:4), performed religious rituals and sacrifices, and undoubtedly addressed the army in the name of the gods. This latter task may have involved interpreting of omens,

<sup>2</sup> [New American Standard Bible: 1995 Update](#) (La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 1995).

<sup>3</sup> Biblical Studies Press, [The NET Bible First Edition Notes](#) (Biblical Studies Press, 2006), Dt 20:2.

assuring the aid of the gods and exhorting the troops to fight for the god's chosen king (as in the annals of Tukulti-Ninurta I [1244–1208 B.C.] and Ashurnasirpal II [883–859 B.C.]).<sup>4</sup>

- s. Verse 3 tells us what the priest says. We see 4 commands and then in verse 4 we see why: He is encouraging them not to fear. 1) Do not be fainthearted. 2) Do not be afraid. 3) Do not panic. 4) Do not tremble.
- t. Verse 4: The Lord fights...

## II. Reasons by which people can leave (verses 5-8)

<sup>5</sup>The officers also shall speak to the people, saying, 'Who is the man that has built a new house and has not dedicated it? Let him depart and return to his house, otherwise he might die in the battle and another man would dedicate it. <sup>6</sup>Who is the man that has planted a vineyard and has not begun to use its fruit? Let him depart and return to his house, otherwise he might die in the battle and another man would begin to use its fruit. <sup>7</sup>And who is the man that is engaged to a woman and has not married her? Let him depart and return to his house, otherwise he might die in the battle and another man would marry her.' <sup>8</sup>Then the officers shall speak further to the people and say, 'Who is the man that is afraid and fainthearted? Let him depart and return to his house, so that he might not make his brothers' hearts melt like his heart.'

- a. I find this section interesting.
- b. This is showing that God was not dependent on every last man.
- c. Actually, God did not need any of them (see Judges 7 and Gideon).
- d. 1) A man with a new house could leave. 2) a man with a new vineyard can leave. 3) a newly engaged man can leave. 4) the man that is afraid can leave.
- e. Dt 24:5 *When a man is newly married, he need not go into the army nor be obligated in any way; he must be free to stay at home for a full year and bring joy to the wife he has married.*
- f. Jdg 7:3 *Now, announce to the men, 'Whoever is shaking with fear may turn around and leave Mount Gilead.' "* Twenty-two thousand men went home; ten thousand remained.
- g. Psychologically fear could be contagious.
- h. IVP BBC: **exemptions from military duty.** While every able-bodied free man was expected to serve in the military, in practice exemptions were allowed for special categories, such as priests (in the Mari texts), newlyweds (Deut 24:5) and those who have religious duties to perform (see Lev 19:23–25). Conscription of troops was necessary to fulfill feudal obligations to kings and took various forms, including census taking and coercion (at Mari). The biblical injunction to allow the "frightened" to leave the army may have had its basis in maintaining discipline in the ranks, but it is also an assurance that those who fight are certain

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<sup>4</sup> Victor Harold Matthews, Mark W. Chavalas, and John H. Walton, [\*The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament\*](#), electronic ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), Dt 20:2.

of Yahweh's aid in battle (see Judg 7:1–3). The law codes are at times contradictory on the matter of hiring substitutes for service in the military. The Hittite code allows this practice, but it is outlawed in the Code of Hammurabi. This latter case is based on a direct order to join the king's campaign. It is possible that arrangements could be made for members of the nobility that would preempt any awkward legal problems. In the Canaanite *Keret Epic* the king raises an army in a cause so important that normal exemptions (newlywed among them) are abandoned.<sup>5</sup>

### III. Appointment of commanders (verse 9)

<sup>9</sup> *When the officers have finished speaking to the people, they shall appoint commanders of armies at the head of the people.*

- a. They are developing their command structure so that they can go to battle.
- b. This is an orderly way of going into battle.

### IV. Offer of peace (verses 10-12)

<sup>10</sup> *“When you approach a city to fight against it, you shall offer it terms of peace.<sup>11</sup> If it agrees to make peace with you and opens to you, then all the people who are found in it shall become your forced labor and shall serve you. <sup>12</sup> However, if it does not make peace with you, but makes war against you, then you shall besiege it.*

- a. These are cities that are distant, we must remember that.
- b. They offer peace first.
- c. Even if they offer peace, they become forced laborers.
- d. Verse 12: if they do not make peace then they besiege it.
- e. There was a history channel documentary about presidents who were in WWII and they talked about Eisenhower entering the French North Africa. Before going to war he met with them to negotiate peace.
- f. *The ESV Study Bible shares: The application of vv. 10–14 is limited to cities that are very far from you (v. 15), i.e., outside the boundaries of the Promised Land. If the city rejects the terms of peace and initiates war against Israel, victory over the city is assured because God gives it into Israel's hand.*

### V. The battle (verses 13-15)

<sup>13</sup> *When the Lord your God gives it into your hand, you shall strike all the men in it with the edge of the sword. <sup>14</sup> Only the women and the children and the animals and all that is in the city, all its spoil, you shall take as booty for yourself; and you shall use the spoil of your enemies which the Lord your God has given you. <sup>15</sup> Thus you shall do to all the cities that are very far from you, which are not of the cities of these nations nearby.*

- a. They are to strike all the men with the sword.
- b. Verse 14: they are to take captive all the women, children and animals.
- c. They are to take all the spoil.

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<sup>5</sup> Victor Harold Matthews, Mark W. Chavalas, and John H. Walton, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament*, electronic ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), Dt 20:5–9.

d. Verse 15 is a summary.

e. IVP BBC: **normal warfare practices.** In the ancient world, the standard procedure was not to pay soldiers a wage. Instead they were given a portion of the loot taken in the capture of villages and towns. Because warfare was also seen as a divine mission, ordered by the god(s) and facilitated by divine intervention, all plunder taken in battle was technically the sacred property of the god(s). As a result strict procedures had to be followed in its division in order to prevent a violation of sacred taboos. For instance, in the Mari texts officers took an oath not to “eat the *asakkum*” (i.e., infringe on the rights) of their peers or of lesser ranks. Violators were punished with heavy fines. Following this pattern, Mesopotamian as well as Israelite armies commonly took women and children as spoils, along with animals and moveable property, while the men were killed (see Gen 34:25–29; Assyrian Annals of Sennacherib). In this way the efforts of the victorious were rewarded, and the psychological effect of the sight of devastated cities served the purpose of enhancing the reputation of the conquering nation and its god(s).<sup>6</sup>

VI. Laws concerning war with Canaanite nations (verses 16-18)

<sup>16</sup> Only in the cities of these peoples that the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance, you shall not leave alive anything that breathes. <sup>17</sup> But you shall utterly destroy them, the Hittite and the Amorite, the Canaanite and the Perizzite, the Hivite and the Jebusite, as the Lord your God has commanded you, <sup>18</sup> so that they may not teach you to do according to all their detestable things which they have done for their gods, so that you would sin against the Lord your God.

a. Deut. 7:1-5 is a close cross reference.

b. Canaanite cities or cities that the Lord is giving them as part of their inheritance.

c. They are not to leave alive anything that breathes.

d. Verse 17: utterly destroy them. 1) the Hittite, 2) Amorite, 3) Canaanite, 4) Perizzite, 5) Hivite, Jebusite.

e. <sup>21</sup> **sn Hittite.** The center of Hittite power was in Anatolia (central modern Turkey). In the Late Bronze Age (1550–1200 B.C.) they were at their zenith, establishing outposts and colonies near and far. Some elements were obviously in Canaan at the time of the Conquest (1400–1350 B.C.).

f. <sup>22</sup> **sn Amorite.** Originally from the upper Euphrates region (Amurru), the Amorites appear to have migrated into Canaan beginning in 2200 B.C. or thereabouts.

g. <sup>23</sup> **sn Canaanite.** These were the indigenous peoples of the land of Palestine, going back to the beginning of recorded history (ca. 3000 B.C.). The OT identifies them as descendants of Ham (Gen 10:6), the only Hamites to have settled north and east of Egypt.

h. <sup>24</sup> **sn Perizzite.** This probably refers to a subgroup of Canaanites (Gen 13:7; 34:30).

i. <sup>25</sup> **sn Hivite.** These are usually thought to be the same as the Hurrians, a people well-known in ancient Near Eastern texts. They are likely identical to the Horites (see note on “Horites” in Deut 2:12).

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<sup>6</sup> Victor Harold Matthews, Mark W. Chavalas, and John H. Walton, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament*, electronic ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), Dt 20:10–15.

ca. approximately (from Latin circa)

- j. <sup>26</sup> **tc** The LXX adds “Girgashites” here at the end of the list in order to list the full (and usual) complement of seven (see note on “seven” in Deut 7:1).
- k. **sn** *Jebusite*. These people inhabited the hill country, particularly in and about Jerusalem (cf. Num 13:29; Josh 15:8; 2 Sam 5:6; 24:16).<sup>7</sup>
- l. As the Lord has commanded...
- m. Verse 18 gives purpose.
- n. God does not want His people corrupted. They would sin against the Lord.
- o. Ex 34:12–16 *Be careful not to make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land where you are going, lest it become a snare among you.* <sup>34:13</sup> *Rather you must destroy their altars, smash their images, and cut down their Asherah poles.* <sup>34:14</sup> *For you must not worship any other god, for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God.* <sup>34:15</sup> *Be careful not to make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land, for when they prostitute themselves to their gods and sacrifice to their gods, and someone invites you, you will eat from his sacrifice;* <sup>34:16</sup> *and you then take his daughters for your sons, and when his daughters prostitute themselves to their gods, they will make your sons prostitute themselves to their gods as well.*
- p. Dt 7:4 *for they will turn your sons away from me to worship other gods. Then the anger of the LORD will erupt against you and he will quickly destroy you.*
- q. Dt 9:5 *It is not because of your righteousness, or even your inner uprightness, that you have come here to possess their land. Instead, because of the wickedness of these nations the LORD your God is driving them out ahead of you in order to confirm the promise he made on oath to your ancestors, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.*
- r. Dt 12:30 *After they have been destroyed from your presence, be careful not to be ensnared like they are; do not pursue their gods and say, “How do these nations serve their gods? I will do the same.”*
- s. Dt 12:31 *You must not worship the LORD your God the way they do! For everything that is abhorrent to him, everything he hates, they have done when worshiping their gods. They even burn up their sons and daughters before their gods!*
- t. Ex 23:33 *They must not live in your land, lest they make you sin against me, for if you serve their gods, it will surely be a snare to you.”*
- u. **ESV Study Bible:** These verses concern cities within the boundaries of the Promised Land and may presuppose that these cities have refused the invitation to surrender (see [v. 10](#)). Israel’s action is much more severe in these cases, as they are to save alive nothing that breathes ([v. 16](#)). To devote them to complete destruction ([v. 17](#)) acknowledges that God is the victor and that to him belong the spoils of war (see [2:34–35; 7:2](#)); it also is a precursor of final judgment. 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 (e.g., [Josh. 6:22–25; 9:26–27](#)). On the nations listed in [Deut. 20:17, cf. 7:1](#). Cohabiting in the Promised Land with pagan nations makes Israel vulnerable to fall into their abominable practices, referring to idolatry as well as immorality.

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**tc** Text-critical Note—discusses alternate (variant) readings found in the various manuscripts and groups of manuscripts of the Hebrew Old Testament and Greek New Testament.

LXX Septuagint (the Greek Old Testament, translated between 250–100 BC)

<sup>7</sup> Biblical Studies Press, [The NET Bible First Edition Notes](#) (Biblical Studies Press, 2006), Dt 20:17.

v. IVP BBC: **holy war procedures.** In unusual circumstances, an army chose to forego taking prisoners or spoils and dedicated it entirely to the god who had given them the victory. This practice is known as *herem* in Hebrew and is used very sparingly as a method of warfare. Only in a few instances is the total destruction of a city called for: Jericho in Joshua 6:17–24, Hazor in Joshua 11:10–11, Zephath in Judges 1:17 and the Amalekites in 1 Samuel 15:3. There are several instances where some variation on utter destruction is allowed, as in Deuteronomy 2:34–35 and 3:6–7 (people killed, livestock taken as spoil). Outside the Bible, this perspective on war is attested as early as the ninth century B.C. in the war against the tribe of Gad by the Moabite king Mesha. A similar concept may be reflected in the annals of several of the Assyrian kings, who used total destruction as a psychological ploy to make revolting nations submissive.<sup>8</sup>

VII. The trees (verses 19-20)

<sup>19</sup> “When you besiege a city a long time, to make war against it in order to capture it, you shall not destroy its trees by swinging an axe against them; for you may eat from them, and you shall not cut them down. For is the tree of the field a man, that it should be besieged by you? <sup>20</sup> Only the trees which you know are not fruit trees you shall destroy and cut down, that you may construct siege works against the city that is making war with you until it falls.

- A. Verse 19 is instruction to make use of the trees by keeping them alive if they can find fruit off of them.
- B. Verse 20: is to make use of the trees by cutting them down if they are not fruit trees.
- C. ESV Study Bible: The law of protection of fruit trees acknowledges that Israel is to inherit trees that it did not plant (see 6:11). This law also puts a brake on human shortsightedness: the ultimate end of the land is to be a fruitful garden for God’s people to enjoy.
- D. IVP BBC: **siege works.** To capture a walled city, it was necessary to employ a variety of siege works, including ramps (2 Sam 20:15; 2 Kings 19:32), towers (Is 23:13; Ezek 21:22) or perimeter walls to prevent escape (Ezek 26:8; Mic 5:1). Battering rams (Ezek 26:9) as well as supports for tunnels undermining the walls also required the use of timbers. This explains the dispensation allowed in Deuteronomy for the cutting of trees during a siege. The Assyrian reliefs of Ashurnasirpal II (883–859 B.C.) at Nimrud portray many of these siege engines and simultaneous methods of warfare.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Victor Harold Matthews, Mark W. Chavalas, and John H. Walton, [\*The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament\*](#), electronic ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), Dt 20:16–18.

<sup>9</sup> Victor Harold Matthews, Mark W. Chavalas, and John H. Walton, [\*The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament\*](#), electronic ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), Dt 20:20.