DEUTERONOMY

Chapter 20

*Going to War*

**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. 2 When you are about to go into battle, the priest shall come forward and address the army. 3 He shall say: “Hear, O Israel, today you are going into battle against your enemies. Do not be fainthearted or afraid; do not be terrified or give way to panic before 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.” 5 The officers shall say to the army: “Has anyone built a new house and not dedicated it? Let him go home, or he may die in battle and someone else may dedicate 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 any man afraid or fainthearted? Let him go home so that his brothers will not become disheartened too.” 9 When the officers have finished speaking to the army, they shall appoint commanders over it. 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. 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. 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. 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 of the field 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.**

**Ch 20** Treats three aspects of conduct during war: before the battle (vv 1–9), at the siege of a city (vv 10–18), and the treatment of forests and orchards near the city (vv 19–20). (TLSB)

**20:1** When Israel crossed the Jordan into Canaan, they faced the great psychological disadvantage of confronting horses, chariots, and greater numbers of warriors (Jsh 11:4–9; 17:16; Jgs 1:19). But when faced with superior numbers and equipment, they were not to fear but to be mindful of the Lord and His mighty deed of delivering them from Egypt (cf Ex 14:26–28; Jgs 4:13–16). Luther: “What walls, what arms, what powers, what multitude will resist those for whom God fights?” (AE 9:202). (TLSB)

**20:2–4** Priests remind the people that the Lord will go with them into battle to fight for them and give them the victory (TLSB)

**20:2** *priest shall … address.* Not merely a recitation of ritual. Priests sometimes accompanied the army when it went into battle (see, e.g., Jos 6:4–21; 2Ch 20:14–22). (CSB)

**20:3** *Hear, O Israel.* See note on 4:1. (CSB)

**20:4** See note on 3:22. (CSB)

**20:5–8** *Let him go home.* See the curses in 28:30. Israel was not to trust in the size of its army but in the Lord. Exemptions from military duty were sometimes extensive (see, e.g., Jdg 7:2–8). (CSB)

There are two classes of exemptions from military service: humanitarian situations and those of simple unsuitability for service (those who lack courage). (TLSB)

**20:9** Israel had no standing army at this time, but a militia was mobilized when needed. (TLSB)

**20:10–18** Two different cases of warfare are addressed here: besieging a distant city (vv 10–15) and besieging a city in the land Israel is to possess (vv 16–18). (TLSB)

**20:10–15** Rules regarding warfare against nations outside the promised land. (CSB)

**20:10–11** Israel is to offer peace (Hbr *shalom*), with terms of surrender and a promise to spare the city and its inhabitants if they agree to serve Israel. If peace is accepted, the inhabitants are spared and put to forced labor. (TLSB)

**20:11** *subject to forced labor.* A fulfillment of Noah’s curse on Canaan (see Ge 9:25 and note). (CSB)

**20:12–14** If peace is rejected (v 10), then a siege is mounted. All males are put to death, and all women, children, and plunder are taken as Israel’s possessions. God’s orchestrating of the victory is taken for granted. (Cf 21:10–14 for restrictions on treatment of captives.) (TLSB)

**20:15** Cities outside the Promised Land were treated differently because they posed a different threat to Israel’s well-being (politically and spiritually). (TLSB)

**20:16–17** Cities within the Promised Land were not offered the option of surrender but were to be utterly destroyed. This was the Lord’s command. Cf 2:34. (TLSB)

**20:17** *Hittites … Jebusites.* See 7:1; see also notes on Ge 10:6, 15–18; 13:7. (CSB)

**20:18** The influence of the wicked could (and did) lead Israel to forsake the Lord. The Israelites were instruments of the Lord’s judgment against the wicked Canaanites (9:4–5). Luth: “Therefore He wants the Jews [Israelites] to proceed against the Gentiles, not with the greed of the avenger or the lust of the sword but in obedience to His command, that they may fulfill His wrath against those godless people” (AE 9:204). (TLSB)

**20:19** *do not destroy its trees.* The failure of later armies to follow this wise rule stripped bare much of Palestine (though the absence of woodlands there today is of relatively recent origin). (CSB)

**20:19–20** A warfare ethic: the purpose of war was not to destroy the land; i.e., there was to be no scorched-earth policy. Only trees without fruit were to be cut down for siege purposes (battering rams, towers, walls, ladders, etc.). The land was to be preserved for future generations. (TLSB)

 **Ch 20** God gives statutes governing warfare. God’s moral will is not to be suspended but is to guide and direct our actions, even in matters of war. In the face of danger, God encourages His people with the promise of His presence and the assurance that He fights for them to give them the victory. We, too, have been given the promise of our Savior’s constant presence with us, even on the battlefields we tread. In your struggles, call on Him, for He has promised grace, wisdom, and every blessing in your hour of need. • Lord Jesus Christ, clothe us, we pray, with the whole armor of God that we may stand firm in every assault and never lose sight of Your victory on our behalf at the cross and empty tomb. Amen. (TLSB)