

# DEUTERONOMY

## Chapter 20

### *Laws Concerning Warfare*

**“When you go out to war against your enemies, and see horses and chariots and an army larger than your own, you shall not be afraid of them, for the LORD your God is with you, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt. 2 And when you draw near to the battle, the priest shall come forward and speak to the people 3 and shall say to them, ‘Hear, O Israel, today you are drawing near for battle against your enemies: let not your heart faint. Do not fear or panic or be in dread of them, 4 for the LORD your God is he who goes with you to fight for you against your enemies, to give you the victory.’ 5 Then the officers shall speak to the people, saying, ‘Is there any man who has built a new house and has not dedicated it? Let him go back to his house, lest he die in the battle and another man dedicate it. 6 And is there any man who has planted a vineyard and has not enjoyed its fruit? Let him go back to his house, lest he die in the battle and another man enjoy its fruit. 7 And is there any man who has betrothed a wife and has not taken her? Let him go back to his house, lest he die in the battle and another man take her.’ 8 And the officers shall speak further to the people, and say, ‘Is there any man who is fearful and fainthearted? Let him go back to his house, lest he make the heart of his fellows melt like his own.’ 9 And when the officers have finished speaking to the people, then commanders shall be appointed at the head of the people.10 “When you draw near to a city to fight against it, offer terms of peace to it. 11 And if it responds to you peaceably and it opens to you, then all the people who are found in it shall do forced labor for you and shall serve you. 12 But if it makes no peace with you, but makes war against you, then you shall besiege it. 13 And when the LORD your God gives it into your hand, you shall put all its males to the sword, 14 but the women and the little ones, the livestock, and everything else in the city, all its spoil, you shall take as plunder for yourselves. And you shall enjoy the spoil of your enemies, which the LORD your God has given you. 15 Thus you shall do to all the cities that are very far from you, which are not cities of the nations here. 16 But in the cities of these peoples that the LORD your God is giving you for an inheritance, you shall save alive nothing that breathes, 17 but you shall devote them to complete destruction,[a] the Hittites and the Amorites, the Canaanites and the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites, as the LORD your God has commanded, 18 that they may not teach you to do according to all their abominable practices that they have done for their gods, and so you sin against the LORD your God. 19 “When you besiege a city for a long time, making war against it in order to take it, you shall not destroy its trees by wielding an axe against them. You may eat from them, but you shall not cut them down. Are the trees in the field human, that they should be besieged by you? 20 Only the trees that you know are not trees for food you may destroy and cut down, that you may build siegeworks against the city that makes war with you, until it 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 ... say to them.* 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)

**20:5–8** *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** *shall do forced labor.* A fulfillment of Noah’s curse on Canaan. (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)

**20:18** 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** *shall 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)