

Deuteronomy 20: Exemption from War

Deuteronomy chapter 20 (our first Old Testament reading for today), describes certain particulars regarding Israel's warfare against the nations. We also are called upon to wage a spiritual warfare: to "Fight the good fight of faith" (1 Tim. 6:12), and so these particulars should be of great interest to us in relation to our warfare.

The chapter begins by giving a reminder that Yahweh had already saved the people from the hand of the oppressor, when they left Egypt. They were therefore to "be not afraid" of the enemies armies, as He was able to deliver them again. So it was that when they went out to war, the priest was given a form of words he was to speak, to encourage the Hosts:

"... 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; For Yahweh your God is he that goeth with you, to fight for you against your enemies to save you" (Deut. 20:3-4).

However, when the time came to engage the enemy in battle, the people soon forgot the admonition. The twelve spies came back to give their report of the land, and ten of them gave a negative assessment of the situation: "We be not able to go up against the people; for they are stronger than we ... there we saw the giants, the sons of Anak, which come of the giants: and we were in our own sight as grasshoppers, and so we were in their sight" (Num. 13:31-33).

These men did fear and tremble, and they were terrified because of the enemy. Indeed, they weakened the hand of Israel as a whole, who lacked the necessary faith to wage a victorious warfare. As the Apostle later expressed it:

"to whom sware he that they should not enter into his rest, but to them that believed not? So we see that they could not enter in because of unbelief" (Heb. 3:18-19).

Because of unbelief, the nation was excluded from the land, until the murmurers perished from amongst them. But it was "not all that came out of Egypt" who lacked faith. The other two spies, a Jew and a Gentile – Joshua and Caleb were strong in faith, and trusted in the power of their God to save. So it was that even 40 years later, Caleb was able to say:

"As yet I am as strong as I was in the day that Moses sent me: as my strength was then, even so is my strength now, for war, both to go out, and to come in. Now therefore give me this mountain, whereof Yahweh spake in that day; for thou heardest in that day how the Anakim were there, and that the cities were great and fenced: if so be Yahweh be with me, then I shall be able to drive them out as Yahweh said" (Josh. 14:11-12).

Here is the voice of faith, and trust in Yahweh: when Israel as a nation lacked the faith to take up their promised inheritance, Caleb - a Gentile - had the confidence in Yahweh to save him, and drive the enemy out as promised.

We have a similar situation in the time of Saul, the first king of Israel, who stood head and shoulders above the people (1 Sam. 9:2). 1 Samuel 17 describes another giant of a man who challenged Israel, Goliath the Philistine. But again the people and their king were too afraid to take him on: "they were dismayed and greatly afraid" (1 Sam. 17:11). Saul was the greatest in stature among his people, and Goliath the greatest of his. Yet rather than to be strong in faith, and destroy the enemy like Caleb did, Saul was greatly afraid.

David, however, who was not afraid said:

“... who is this uncircumcised Philistine that he should defy the armies of the living God?”
(1 Sam. 17:26)

So it was that a mere stripling overcame the Philistine’s giant, and prevailed with a stone in a sling, because of the faith and trust he had in Israel’s God.

By contrast to Saul the Lord Jesus Christ was not afraid to wage a warfare against the power of Sin. He is “the captain of our salvation” (Heb. 2:10), and will lead us into victory. We must not therefore be downcast at our own personal limitations: he has gone before us, and has the power to overcome all enemies, even death itself.

DEDICATING A HOUSE

Following the exhortation of encouragement by the priest, Deuteronomy 20 describes how that there were certain circumstances in which men would be exempt from going to the war. The first of these is to do with the building and dedication of a house:

“the officers shall speak unto the people, saying, What man is there who 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” (Deut. 20:5).

This description of dedicating a new house does not occur elsewhere: it would seem to be a religious ceremony that marked the beginning of a new house being used as a dwelling place. A similar idea, however, is seen in the dedication of Yahweh’s House, the Temple. So the record informs us: “so the king and all the children of Israel **dedicated the house** of Yahweh” (1 Kings 8:63). An interesting link with Deuteronomy 20, is that during the prayer of dedication, Solomon prays for those who would be carried away captive by their enemies (see verses 46-48). These were those who did not have the faith to overcome, but who were overtaken by their sins, being terrified by their adversaries. Solomon prays that in the event of their repentance, they would be forgiven and brought back to the land once again. So just as the House of Yahweh was “dedicated”, so the houses of the people were also to be dwelling places for people after the spirit.

The Title of Psalm 30 is “A Psalm and Song at the dedication of the house of David”, and the theme of this Psalm continues the idea of being saved from the enemy: “I will extol thee, O Yahweh; for thou hast lifted me up, and hast not made my foes to rejoice over me”. The rest of the Psalm is also highly significant, with David making his petition for blessing at the hand of his God – but that is beyond the scope of our present considerations.

The Lord Jesus Christ is the builder of a family house: “whose house are we, if we hold fast the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope firm unto the end” (Heb. 3:6). We are built up of living stones (1 Pet. 2:5), and we look forward to the dedication of this spiritual house when the Master comes again.

PLANTING A VINEYARD

A second condition for discharge from the army was the recent planting of a vineyard:

“... 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” (Deut. 20:8).

This situation would come about as part of the curses that were to come upon Israel subsequent to their disobedience. Notice the words of chapter 28 in relation to this: “Thou shalt betroth a wife, and another man shall lie with her: thou shalt build an house, and thou shalt not dwell therein: thou shalt plant a vineyard and shalt not gather the grapes thereof” (Deut. 28:30).

But by contrast, the future blessings will see a reversal of this:

“they shall build houses and inhabit them, and they shall plant vineyards and eat the fruit of them. They shall not build and another inhabit: they shall not plant and another eat: for as the days of a tree are the days of my people, and mine elect shall long enjoy the work of their hands” (Isa. 65:21-22-

To enjoy the product of one’s labour is “the gift of God” according to Solomon: “also that every man should eat and drink, and enjoy the good of all his labour, **it is the Gift of God**” (Eccl. 3:13). So it was that men would be excused from participating in the war, so that he could enjoy that “gift”. Of our Master also, it is written that: “He shall see of the travail of his soul, **and shall be satisfied**” (Isa. 53:11). He is “the True Vine” (Jno. 15:1), and will indeed produce fruit to the glory of Yahweh, and be personally “satisfied” with what he accomplished: salvation extended to a great multitude which no man can number.

Interestingly, these two aspects come together again in 2 Timothy chapter 2. Here, the believer is likened to a soldier in Messiah’s army:

“Thou therefore, endure hardness as a good soldier of Jesus Christ. No man that warreth entangleth himself with the affairs of this life; that he may please him who hath chosen him to be a soldier. The husbandman that laboureth must be first partaker of the fruits” (2 Tim. 2:3-6).

As soldiers of Jesus Christ, we must earnestly contend for the faith, but we must also tend to the spiritual vineyard (cp. Luke 20:9). Both aspects are needful: being warriors for the Truth, but also a husbandman nurturing the developing fruit.

BETROTHED TO A WIFE

A third reason to be excused from military service, was being betrothed to be married:

“... what man is there that hath betrothed a wife, and hath not taken her? Let him go and return to his house, lest he die in the battle, and another man take her” (Deut. 20:7).

Chapter 24 places a time limit on this excuse: “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” (Deut. 24:5). There is an interesting similarity here with the circumstance of Uriah the Hittite. Although we don’t know if he had recently been married to Bathsheba (although it should be noted that they had no children as yet), he did die in the battle, and another man did take his wife. Uriah was a true single-minded soldier, he did not become entangled with the affairs of this life: he refused to go home to enjoy his house and wife:

“Uriah said unto David, The ark, and Israel, and Judah, abide in tents: and my lord Joab, and the servants of my lord, are encamped in the open fields; shall I then go into mine **house to eat and to drink**, and to life with my wife? As thou livest, and as thy soul liveth, **I will not do this thing**” (2 Sam. 11:11)

So it is that Messiah is betrothed to be married, to a spiritual multitudinous bride. So Paul spake concerning the ecclesia:

“... I am jealous over you with godly jealousy: for I have espoused you to one husband, that I may present you **as a chaste virgin** to Christ ...” (2 Cor. 11:2).

And again:

"Husbands, love your wives, **even as Christ also loved the ecclesia**, and gave himself for it ..." (Eph. 5:25)

It would appear that there will be a period of time from the Marriage Supper and the union of Christ with his Bride, before the judgements will be carried out upon the earth. He will be united as "one spirit" (1 Cor. 6:17) with his ecclesial bride first, and then following the marriage feast, he will go forth to smite the nations with a rod of iron, and bring the entire world into subjection before him.

BEING FEARFUL AND FAINTHEARTED

The final circumstance which gave a man an acceptable reason to be excused from the Israelitish army, was if he were fearful and fainthearted: this disqualified him from service:

"... 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" (Deut. 20:8).

Notice the reason given for this condition: fearfulness, like murmuring, is contagious, and if the fearful went to the front line, the hearts of those who were with them could also fail. In fact this actually happened in the example referred to above: the "evil report" of the 10 spies caused Israel as a nation to lose faith, and be afraid of the enemy: "and all the congregation lifted up their voice, and cried; and the people wept that night. And all the children of Israel murmured against Moses and against Aaron ..." (Num. 14:1-2). The impact of the faithlessness of a minority – 10 individuals – meant that the nation had to wander in the wilderness for 40 years until the carcasses of those who lacked faith fell in the wilderness (Heb. 3:17).

Another occasion where the fainthearted were excluded is the case of Gideon. He was told: "... 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" (Jud. 7:3). Notice, that it was a majority who were fearful, yet the victory would be accomplished with those who remained after a further reduction in Gideon's army.

For those who are fearful, there is hope however. Isaiah presents us with a vision of the establishment of the Kingdom Age:

"Strengthen ye the weak hands, and confirm the feeble knees. Say to them that are of a **fearful heart**, Be strong, fear not: behold your God will come with vengeance, even God with a recompense; he will come and save you ..." (Isa. 35:3-4).

So it was, that under the Law of Moses, there were these 4 conditions whereby men could be discharged from the Israelitish army. They were merciful provisions that met individual needs, but they also ensured that those who were distracted by the things of this life would not undermine the rest of the army. Those who had a new house, new wife, new vineyard, or who were simply afraid would have been unable to render single-minded service – and particularly in the last situation – could undermine morale in the army. But we are also called upon to wage a warfare of faith – and in our warfare there are no conditions for discharge. As we read in Ecclesiastes 8:8, "there is no discharge in this war". We must be ready to "endure hardness as a good soldier of Jesus Christ". We must be strong and of good courage, and looking to the day when the Captain of our Salvation will lead us into victory.

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