

CHAPTER 20

This chapter settles the militia, and establishes the laws and ordinances of war,

I. Relating to the soldiers.

1. Those must be encouraged that were drawn up to battle (v. 1-4).
2. Those must be dismissed and sent back again whose private affairs called for their attendance at home (v. 5-7), or whose weakness and timidity unfitted them for service in the field (v. 8, 9).

II. Relating to the enemies they made war with.

1. The treaties they must make with the cities that were far off (v. 10-15).
2. The destruction they must make of the people into whose land they were going (v. 16-18).
3. The care they must take, in besieging cities, not to destroy the fruit-trees (v. 19, 20).

DEUTERONOMY 20:1-9

DIRECTIONS CONCERNING WAR

Israel was at this time to be considered rather as a camp than as a kingdom, entering upon an enemy's country, and not yet settled in a country of their own; and, besides the war they were now entering upon in order to their settlement, even after their settlement they could neither protect nor enlarge their coast without hearing the alarms of war. It was therefore needful that they should have directions given them in their military affairs; and in these verses they are directed in managing, marshalling, and drawing up their own forces. And it is observable that the discipline of war here prescribed is so far from having any thing in it harsh or severe, as is usual in martial law, that the intent of the whole is, on the contrary, to encourage the soldiers, and to make their service easy to them.

I. Those that were disposed to fight must be encouraged and animated against their fears.

1. Moses here gives a general encouragement, which the leaders and commanders in the war must take to themselves: “*Be not afraid of them,* v. 1. Though the enemy have ever so much the advantage by their numbers (being more than thou), and by their cavalry (their armies being much made up of horses and chariots, which thou art not allowed to multiply), yet decline not coming to a battle with them, dread not the issue, nor doubt of success.” Two things they must encourage themselves with in their wars, provided they kept close to their God and their religion, otherwise they forfeited these encouragements: —

(1.) The presence of God with them: “*The Lord thy God is with thee,* and therefore thou art not in danger, nor needest thou be afraid.” See ²⁹¹⁰Isaiah 41:10.

(2.) The experience they and their fathers had had of God's power and goodness in *bringing them out of the land of Egypt*, in defiance of Pharaoh and all his hosts, which was not only in general a proof of the divine omnipotence, but to them in particular a pledge of what God would do further for them. He that saved them from those greater enemies would not suffer them to be run down by those that were every way less considerable, and thus to have all he had done for them undone again.

2. This encouragement must be particularly addressed to the common soldiers by a priest appointed, and, the Jews say, anointed, for that purpose, whom they call *the anointed of the war*, a very proper title for our anointed Redeemer, the captain of our salvation: This priest, in God's name, was to animate the people; and who so fit to do that as he whose office it was as priest to pray for them? For the best encouragements arise from the precious promises made to the prayer of faith. This priest must,

(1.) Charge them not to be afraid (v. 3), for nothing weakens the hands so much as that which makes the heart tremble, v. 3. There is need of precept upon precept to this purport, as there is here: *Let not your hearts be tender* (so the word is), to receive all the impressions of fear, but let a believing confidence in the power and promise of God harden them. *Fear not, and do not make haste* (so the word is), for he that believeth doth not make more haste than good speed. “Do not make haste either rashly to anticipate your advantages or basely to fly off upon every disadvantage.”

(2.) He must assure them of the presence of God with them, to own and plead their righteous cause, and not only to save them from their enemies,

but to give them victory over them, v. 4. Note, Those have no reason to fear that have God with them. The giving of this encouragement by a priest, one of the Lord's ministers, intimates,

[1.] That it is very fit that armies should have chaplains, not only to pray for them, but to preach to them, both to reprove that which would hinder their success and to raise their hopes of it.

[2.] That it is the work of Christ's ministers to encourage his good soldiers in their spiritual conflict with the world and the flesh, and to assure them of a conquest, yea, more than a conquest, through Christ that loved us.

II. Those that were indisposed to fight must be discharged, whether the indisposition did arise,

1. From the circumstances of a man's outward condition; as,

(1.) If he had lately built or purchased a new house, and had not taken possession of it, had not dedicated it (v. 5), that is, made a solemn festival for the entertainment of his friends, that came to him to welcome him to his house; let him go home and take the comfort of that which God had blessed him with, till, by enjoying it for some time, he become less fond of it, and consequently less disturbed in the war by the thoughts of it, and more willing to lie and leave it. For this is the nature of all our worldly enjoyments, that they please us best at first; after a while we see the vanity of them. Some think that this dedication of their houses was a religious act, and that they took possession of them with prayers and praises, with a solemn devoting of themselves and all their enjoyments to the service and honour of God. David penned the 30th Psalm on such an occasion, as appears by the title. Note, He that has a house of his own should dedicate it to God by setting up and keeping up the fear and worship of God in it, that he may have a church in his house; and nothing should be suffered to divert a man from this. Or,

(2.) If a man had been at a great expense to *plant a vineyard*, and longed to *eat of the fruit* of it, which for the first three years he was forbidden to do by the law (^{ORDE} Leviticus 19:23, etc.), let him go home, if he has a mind, and gratify his own humour with the fruits of it, v. 6. See how indulgent God is to his people in innocent things, and how far from being a hard Master. Since we naturally covet to eat the labour of our hands, rather than

an Israelite should be crossed therein, his service in war shall be dispensed with., Or,

(3.) If a man had made up his mind to be married, and the marriage were not solemnized, he was at liberty to return (v. 7), as also to tarry at home for one year after marriage (^{<BIB>}Deuteronomy 24:5), for the terrors of war would be disagreeable to a man who had just welcomed the soft scene of domestic attachment. And God would not be served in his wars by pressed men, that were forced into the army against their will, but they must all be perfectly volunteers. ^{<BIB>}Psalm 110:3, *Thy people shall be willing*. In running the Christian race, and fighting the good fight of faith, we must *lay aside every weight*, and all that which would clog and divert our minds and make us unwilling. The Jewish writers agree that this liberty to return was allowed only in those wars which they made voluntarily (as bishop Patrick expresses it), not those which were made by the divine command against Amalek and the Canaanites, in which every man was bound to fight.

2. If a man's indisposition to fight arose from the weakness and timidity of his own spirit, he had leave to return from the war, v. 8. This proclamation Gideon made to his army, and it detached above two-thirds of them, ^{<BIB>}Judges 7:3. Some make the fearfulness and faintheartedness here supposed to arise from the terrors of an evil conscience, which would make a man afraid to look death and danger in the face. It was then thought that men of loose and profligate lives would not be good soldiers, but must needs be both cowards in an army and curses to it, the shame and trouble of the camp; and therefore those who were conscious to themselves of notorious guilt were shaken off. But it seems rather to be meant of a natural fearfulness. It was partly in kindness to them that they had their discharge (for, though shamed, they were eased); but much more in kindness to the rest of the army, who were hereby freed from the incumbrance of such as were useless and unserviceable, while the danger of infection from their cowardice and flight was prevented. This is the reason here given: *Lest his brethren's heart fail as well as his heart*. Fear is catching, and in an army is of most pernicious consequence. We must take heed that we *fear not the fear of those that are afraid*, ^{<BIB>}Isaiah 8:12.

III. It is here ordered that, when all the cowards were dismissed, then captains should be nominated (v. 9), for it was in a special manner necessary that the leaders and commanders should be men of courage.

That reform therefore must be made when the army was first mustered and marshalled. The soldiers of Christ have need of courage, that they may quit themselves like men, and endure hardness like good soldiers, especially the officers of his army.

DEUTERONOMY 20:10-20

PROCLAMATIONS OF WAR

They are here directed what method to take in dealing with the cities (these only are mentioned, v. 10, but doubtless the armies in the field, and the nations they had occasion to deal with, are likewise intended) upon which they made war. They must not make a descent upon any of their neighbours till they had first given them fair notice, by a public manifesto, or remonstrance, stating the ground of their quarrel with them. In dealing with the worst of enemies, the laws of justice and honour must be observed; and, as the sword must never be taken in hand without cause, so not without cause shown. War is an appeal, in which the merits of the cause must be set forth.

I. Even to the proclamation of war must be subjoined a tender of peace, if they would accept of it upon reasonable terms. That is (say the Jewish writers), “upon condition that they renounce idolatry, worship the God of Israel, as proselytes of the gate that were not circumcised, pay to their new masters a yearly tribute, and submit to their government:” on these terms the process of war should be stayed, and their conquerors, upon this submission, were to be their protectors, v. 10, 11. Some think that even the seven nations of Canaan were to have this offer of peace made to them; and the offer was no jest or mockery, though *it was of the Lord to harden their hearts* that they should not accept it, Joshua 11:20. Others think that they are excluded (v. 16) not only from the benefit of that law (v. 13) which confines military execution to the males only, but from the benefit of this also, which allows not to make war till peace was refused. And I see not how they could proclaim peace to those who by the law were to be utterly rooted out, and to whom they were to show no mercy, Deuteronomy 7:2. But for any other nation which they made war upon, for the enlarging of their coast, the avenging of any wrong done, or the

recovery of any right denied, they must first proclaim peace to the. Let this show,

I. God's grace in dealing with sinners: though he might most justly and easily destroy them, yet, having no pleasure in their ruin, he proclaims peace, and beseeches them to be reconciled; so that those who lie most obnoxious to his justice, and ready to fall as sacrifices to it, if they make him an answer of peace, and open to him, upon condition that they will be tributaries and servants to him, shall not only be saved from ruin, but incorporated with his Israel, as fellow-citizens with the saints.

2. Let it show us our duty in dealing with our brethren: if any quarrel happen, let us not only be ready to hearken to the proposals of peace, but forward to make such proposals. We should never make use of the law till we have first tried to accommodate matters in variance amicably, and without expense and vexation. *We* must be for peace, whoever are for war.

II. If the offers of peace were not accepted, then they must proceed to push on the war. And let those to whom God offers peace know that if they reject the offer, and take not the benefit of it within the time limited, judgment will rejoice against mercy in the execution as much as now mercy rejoices against judgment in the reprieve. In this case,

1. There is a promise implied that they should be victorious. It is taken for granted that *the Lord their God would deliver it into their hands*, v. 13. Note, Those enterprises which we undertake by a divine warrant, and prosecute by divine direction, we may expect to succeed in. If we take God's method, we shall have his blessing.

2. They are ordered, in honour to the public justice, to put all the soldiers to the sword, for them I understand by *every male* (v. 13), all that bore arms (as all then did that were able); but the spoil they are allowed to take to themselves (v. 14), in which were reckoned the women and children. Note, A justifiable property is acquired in that which is won in lawful war. God himself owns the title: *The Lord thy God gives it thee*; and therefore he must be owned in it, ^{<DAB>}Psalm 44:3.

III. The nations of Canaan are excepted from the merciful provisions made by this law. Remnants might be left of the cities that were very far off (v. 15), because by them they were not in so much danger of being infected with idolatry, nor was their country so directly and immediately

intended in the promise; but of the cities which were given to Israel for an inheritance no remnants must be left of their inhabitants (v. 16), for it put a slight upon the promise to admit Canaanites to share with them in the peculiar land of promise; and for another reason they must be utterly destroyed (v. 17), because, since it could not be expected that they should be cured of their idolatry, if they were left with that plague-sore upon them they would be in danger of infecting God's Israel, who were too apt to take the infection: *They will teach you to do after their abominations* (v. 18), to introduce their customs into the worship of the God of Israel, and by degrees to forsake him and to worship false gods; for those that dare violate the second commandment will not long keep to the first. Strange worships open the door to strange deities.

IV. Care is here taken that in the besieging of cities there should not be any destruction made of fruit-trees, v. 19-20. In those times, when besiegers forced their way, not as now with bombs and cannon-ball, but with battering rams, they had occasion for much timber in carrying on their sieges: now because, in the heat of war, men are not apt to consider, as they ought, the public good, it is expressly provided that fruit-trees should not be used as timber-trees. That reason, *for the tree of the field is man's* (the word *life* we supply), all the ancient versions, the Septuagint, Targums, etc., read, *For is the tree of the field a man? Or the tree of the field is not a man, that it should come against thee in the siege, or retire from thee into the bulwark.* "Do not brutishly vent thy rage against the trees that can do thee no harm." But our translation seems most agreeable to the intent of the law, and it teaches us,

1. That God is a better friend to man than man is to himself; and God's law, which we are apt to complain of as a heavy yoke, consults our interest and comfort, while our own appetites and passions, of which we are so indulgent, are really enemies to our welfare. The intent of many of the divine precepts is to restrain us from destroying that which is our life and food.

2. That armies and their commanders are not allowed to make what desolation they please in the countries that are the seat of war. Military rage must always be checked and ruled with reason. War, though carried on with ever so much caution, is destructive enough, and should not be made more so than is absolutely necessary. Generous spirits will show

themselves tender, not only of men's lives, but of their livelihoods; for, though *the life is more than meat*, yet it will soon be nothing without meat.

3. The Jews understand this as a prohibition of all wilful waste upon any account whatsoever. No fruit-tree is to be destroyed unless it be barren, and cumber the ground. “Nay,” they maintain, “whoso wilfully breaks vessels, tears clothes, stops wells, pulls down buildings, or destroys meat, transgresses this law: *Thou shalt not destroy.*” Christ took care that the broken meat should be gathered up, that nothing might be lost. Every creature of God is good, and, as nothing is to be refused, so nothing is to be abused. We may live to want what we carelessly waste.