

January 6, 2019
Sunday Evening Service
Series: Deuteronomy
Community Baptist Church
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To Ponder . . .

Questions to ponder as you prepare to hear from Deuteronomy 20.

1. Why did God make a difference in how Israel should respond when a city surrendered, or when a city was outside Israel, or when a city was within the boundaries of the Promised Land?
2. Why did God require complete destruction of everything that breathed within the borders of the Promised Land?
3. Is there really any difference between God's plan for Israel and the Islam Jihad?
4. How is God's plan for the Church distinct from His plan for Old Testament Israel?
5. Why is it foolish for Christians to try to establish "Christian" nations on earth?
6. Is there anything wrong with establishing laws that are based on Bible truth?

POSSESSING THE LAND **Deuteronomy 20**

This chapter is difficult for modern, moral, ethical people to grasp. It seems so barbaric, so unchristian, so out of character for the loving God. In order to understand what is taking place, we need to look at a very brief historical sketch of life up to this point.

God created all things according to His will including placing humans in His creation to care for it and to honor Him. The care and honor part fell on hard times very early in human history. By his disobedience, Adam brought sin into the world which impacted every person who comes into the world as part of Adam's race. When we read through the first few chapters of 1 Chronicles, we get a thumbnail sketch of who populated the Mediterranean regions. Adam's descendants proliferated, and as they did, sin proliferated until God finally destroyed all living beings through the flood. The only survivors were on board the ark with Noah and his family. And the whole modern world wonders how God could be angry enough with people to drown them in a universal cataclysmic flood. God hates sin.

Noah's posterity set out to repopulate the earth. In particular the sons of Shem and Ham populated the area we refer to as the Middle East. And early on in the repopulation process, sin gained a foothold. It wasn't long before the people were worshiping elements of nature and attempted to build a tower into heaven to make a name for themselves. God confounded the languages, scattered the people who formed various families, tribes, and nations based on common characteristics.

Various nations lived in modern day Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Israel, and what has been called Palestine during Roman days. God picked out one special man named Abraham who lived in the land of the Chaldeans, modern day Iraq. God promised to bless Abraham and led him from Iraq to the land that was occupied by people groups like the Cannanites, Perrizites, Amorites, Hittites, Amalekites, and many other smaller groups. As Abraham walked with God in the midst of that geographical region, God promised to give all that land to Abraham's descendants.

Abraham's son Isaac lived in the land and reared two sons, Esau and Jacob. God chose Jacob to be the recipient of the blessing He had promised through Abraham. Jacob had twelve sons, all of whom ended up in Egypt. While living in Egypt for 400 years, Jacob's relatives were enslaved by the Pharaohs. Finally, after Jacob's relatives numbered in the millions, God raised up Moses to lead them out of captivity into the same land He had promised to give Abraham's descendants.

Moses led the people out of Egypt. But they were so stubborn and rebellious that God left them wandering around in the wilderness for forty years. In the years of wandering, all the people of that generation either died or God killed them through judgments. That is where we find ourselves in our study in Deuteronomy. The second generation of Israelites were preparing to enter and possess the land God promised to give to Abraham's descendants. Deuteronomy is a record of Moses's last instruction to the people as they were going to possess God's blessing.

But herein does the problem lie. Our text speaks rather graphically of how God intended for His people to wage war against the inhabitants of the land. God instructed the people in detail about how to lay siege to cities, how to destroy the people if they did not surrender, how to burn, destroy, and plunder.

When you confess that you are a Christian, a lover of God and the Bible, it is not unusual for someone to bring up this past. What kind of God would encourage His people to plunder, pillage, and destroy? Why do we criticize the Muslim Jihad (holy war) when they are simply mimicking what God told His people to do? What's the difference?

The difference rests on the foundation that God the Creator is not only sovereign and all-powerful, able to do whatever He chooses to do. But God is also holy, which impacts all that He does. God told His people to destroy the inhabitants of the land because they were so wicked. They were sexually perverse, they were dishonest and unfaithful, and worst of all, they invented all kinds of gods and idols to worship in place of the true God and Creator. God's judgment against them had two purposes. First, God ordained their destruction as judgment against their sin and perversion. Second, God ordained their destruction so that they would not be a sinful influence on God's people.

Now let's consider the instruction God gave His people for how to wage war in the process of securing the blessing God promised to Abraham.

Encouragement for the Battle (vv.1-8).

Moses encouraged the people not to be afraid in the battles that lay ahead of them (vv.1-4). They would not be afraid if they remembered that God who was sending them into the land, is mightier than the enemy. *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 (v.1).*

There is no question that the well-established nations would have impressive war machines. This reality is what frightened their forefathers into retreat and disobedience. When the spies came back from making a sortie into the Promised Land forty years earlier, ten of them pointed out how impossible it seemed to go against such firmly rooted nations. *However, the people who dwell in the land are strong, and the cities are fortified and very large. And besides, we saw the descendants of Anak there. The Amalekites dwell in the land of the Negeb. The Hittites, the Jebusites, and the Amorites dwell in the hill country. And the Canaanites dwell by the sea, and along the Jordan (Numbers 13:28-29).*

Actually, the ten spies were right. It really was humanly impossible for the ragtag Israelites to defeat well-established nations. But the same God who overpowered the mighty Egyptians and released them from slavery was with them. Were any of the nations in the Promised Land, or all of the nations together, mightier than the Egyptians? No.

Therefore, God's leaders need to encourage God's people to go forward into battle relying on God. Moses instructed, *And when you draw near to the battle, the priest shall come forward and speak to the people 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, for the LORD your God is he who goes with you to fight for you against your enemies, to give you the victory" (vv.2-4).*

The priest mentioned in verse two would be Aaron's son. He would have been a well known leader among the people. He was obviously a person who demonstrated God's choice of leaders. Therefore, he would have had an important influence over God's people. Probably the presence of the priest implied the presence of the Ark of the Covenant which implied the presence of Yahweh Himself.

The presence of the Ark was intended to be a great reminder that God Himself was fighting against His people's enemies. It would be a reminder that God had already promised victory (v.4).

Having stirred the people's hearts to do God's battle, Moses then stated that there would be reasons for some men to be deferred from battle (vv.5-8). Not everyone was required to enter the battle. These exceptions might be an indication that the leaders were expected to share God's understanding and considerate heart. But also, if a warrior had a divided heart, he would not show whole-hearted devotion and could be a liability to others. Yes, but wouldn't more warriors be better than fewer? No. Especially, in God's work strength in numbers is not necessary. How many human warriors does God require to accomplish His will? Gideon learned this important lesson when *the LORD said to Gideon, "The people with you are too many for me to give the Midianites into their hand, lest Israel boast over me, saying, 'My own hand has saved me'"* (Judges 7:2).

Therefore, God allowed for people with certain kinds of obligations to be exempted from war. The officers would announce these exemptions (v.5a). These officers might have been military commanders. Or, more probably, they were Levites who were in charge of recruiting soldiers for the army. The general rule was that every able-bodied adult man was expected to volunteer. But here we see that some would be exempt from service.

For example, if a man built a new house, he was exempt from battle. *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"* (v.5). The word translated *dedicated* may not require a particular ceremony but only that he had not lived in the new house for a period of time. According to Josephus, it was a period of one year. There was a danger the man might be killed in battle before living in the house he built.

Another exemption would be for the man who planted a new vineyard. *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* (v.6). God's law required that the people not harvest the fruit of a vineyard for use until after five years. That is still generally a good rule when you plant a fruit tree.

However, a five year exemption seems unlikely. The Hebrew word for *vineyard* also includes orchards, which did not require the five year hiatus.

A man who had a "wife to be" was also exempt from going into battle. *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* (v.7). The typical one year engagement period was in view here. However, there is also the one year exemption after the marriage was consummated (Deut. 24:5). That would amount to a two year exemption from the army.

Verse eight introduces an exemption that seems almost impossible to maintain. The fearful was exempted. *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"* (v.8). Who wouldn't be afraid to march into battle against an army that wanted to kill you? There is probably a principle at issue here. In the previous exemptions, the interest of the individual was the issue. Here the matter is the good of the whole army. It would not be good to have cowards on the front line of battle. One person running could spark a retreat and the enemy would rout the army. An example of this exemption was when God told Gideon to send home "anyone who trembles with fear."

Waging the Battle (vv.9-20).

Now we come to some instruction that is quite difficult for us to accept. To some of the cities, the Israelites were supposed to offer the chance for peaceful surrender (vv.9-11). But first, as a transition, we read about the appointment of the commanders. *And when the officers have finished speaking to the people, then commanders shall be appointed at the head of the people* (v.9). After the speeches that were part of the recruiting and the process of ferreting out exemptions, commanders were appointed. This is why we might conclude that the *officers* mentioned in the previous verses were Levites.

The rule was that Israel was to offer a chance to surrender to some of the cities. If the cities surrendered, then Israel would enslave the people. These rules are for cities outside the boundaries of the

Promised Land (v.15). First, the army would lay siege to the city and then offer terms of peace. *When you draw near to a city to fight against it, offer terms of peace to it (v.10).*

Upon surrender, the people would be enslaved. *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 (v.11).* This was essentially vassal service. Not that each Israelite now owned a slave, but that the population of the city would serve the government or national interest of Israel. It was quite a common practice in David's and Solomon's reign.

But what if the leaders of the city rejected the offer to surrender peacefully (vv.12-15)? In that case, Israel could be sure that the LORD will deliver the city. Again, this was the scenario if the people in the city rejected the overture of peace. *But if it makes no peace with you, but makes war against you, then you shall besiege it (v.12).* They had their chance for peace but rejected it. Israel was to set siege to the city to destroy it. The LORD promised to deliver it to the sword. *And when the LORD your God gives it into your hand, you shall put all its males to the sword (v.13).* God would intervene and deliver the city according to His design. The warriors of Israel were to kill every male.

Furthermore, God's plan was for His people to save and enjoy the spoils of war. In particular they were to save the women, children and spoil. They were to spare *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 (v.14).* Though it is difficult for us to accept, God's plan was for His people to sack the city, take the women, children, livestock, and all material possessions as spoil. And God said specifically that they were to enjoy it. God gave it to them.

Again, we must remember that this rule applied only to distant cities. *Thus you shall do to all the cities that are very far from you, which are not cities of the nations here (v.15).* A distant city would have been outside the boundaries God established for the land He promised to Abraham. Such as a city in the desert region south of Israel, or north beyond Mt. Hermon. The Gibeonites must have been aware of this rule because they presented themselves as people like

that. *And they went to Joshua in the camp at Gilgal and said to him and to the men of Israel, "We have come from a distant country, so now make a covenant with us" (Joshua 9:6).*

The Gibeonites were shrewd (and dishonest of course) in order to save their hides. They obviously knew this rule about distant cities. And they obviously knew the rule regarding how Israel was supposed to deal with cities within the boundaries of the Promised Land (vv.16-20). For those cities, God told His people to leave nothing alive. *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, but you shall devote them to complete destruction, the Hittites and the Amorites, the Canaanites and the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites, as the LORD your God has commanded (vv.16-17).* Everything and everyone was to be devoted to destruction. Nothing that breathed (all animals, all people) was to be left alive. To show mercy would have been contrary to God's command.

It is so hard for us to comprehend this, much less accept it. What was the reason for such destructive treatment? God required complete obliteration so *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 (v.18).* All of the people groups who were occupying Palestine had sold themselves to do abominable things. They were perverse beyond salvaging. In a way, they must have been like people Paul described who *will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons, through the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared (1 Timothy 4:1-2).*

Obviously God did not want His people to come under the abhorrent influence. The only way to avoid being influenced by evil is to be separated from it. Since the evil people were already in the land, and since God was giving the land to His people, the evil influence had to be destroyed completely. God's plan was to wipe the Promised Land completely clean from wicked abominable practices that attacked His character and authority. It was like purifying a dish that had been filled with rotten food that carried e-coli. The dish had to be thoroughly purged, cleansed of any trace of the disease.

Within this context of gruesome and complete destruction of the cities and the inhabitants, Moses gave the people a common sense

principle. *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? 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 (vv.19-20).*

It would typically be necessary to lay siege to a city. At such times siege works should not be built with lumber from fruit trees. The people were to possess the land and live in it, so why destroy that which would produce livelihood and sustenance?

That this was a radical plan is inarguable. But how do we answer people who reject God and reject the gospel of Jesus Christ's atoning sacrifice because of these rules? What do we do when people accuse us Christians of being no different than radical Muslims who are engaged in Jihad, the holy war waged against the enemies of Islam?

Contrast the Church and the Nation of Israel.

We, the members of the Church universal, the Body of Christ, do spiritual battle not earthy, mundane, physical battle. We are not trying to build a nation on earth. Christianity is not a nation and should not attempt to establish a nation on earth. God established the Jewish nation as His special, chosen nation to exist as a nation within a particular piece of property on earth. That is not God's plan for the Church. That is why past efforts to establish the "kingdom of God" as a society on earth that competes with other earthly nations or cultures have always failed.

Attempts to establish a theocracy on earth fail because we are citizens of the spiritual kingdom of God. We are living as citizens of God's kingdom within the earthly kingdoms that are under Satan's influence. Our stay on earth is temporary. We are just passing through.

Instead of besieging real cities and destroying the inhabitants, our work is to offer the good news of salvation. While we are here, we offer people living under Satan's influence the good news of the gospel. We tell the story of how the loving, gracious God has

provided forgiveness of sins against Him through the blood of Jesus, God the Son. We encourage people to believe God, confess their sins, repent, and embrace the finished work of Christ by Faith.

But we don't demand that everyone become Christian. We realize that people can accept the good news we tell them or reject it. To attempt to force sinners to act like citizens of God's kingdom is futile or hypocritical. This is one of the dangers of the old "God and country" rallies back during the rise of the Moral Majority. There was a tendency to expect people to act like saints, even though they had rejected God's authority in favor of serving themselves (which is tantamount to serving Satan). It was as though Christians were determined to destroy all sin through legislation and human power. That is not the goal of the Church.

We desire for all people to be saved and conformed to Christ. But, knowing that salvation is the miracle of God's grace, we know that we cannot force people to embrace Christ. We expend our efforts in helping people who have received God's grace in salvation to become more and more like Christ. But we know we can't destroy the cities of people who are an abomination to God. Sometimes I grow weary of learning about the incredible abominations and sinfulness of cities like Los Angeles (Hollywood in particular), San Francisco, Portland, Seattle, Bolder, and most of the large cities in America. But it is not my responsibility as a citizen of Christ's kingdom to attack and destroy those bastions of perversion.

The difference is that our citizenship is in heaven. We are not trying to possess earthly property. Therefore, on a personal plain, we hold material possession lightly, knowing that we are not identified by what we own. As a local church, we build buildings to serve as tools or instruments to help come to Christ and become more like Christ. A religious organization that competes with earthly kings and kingdoms (like the Vatican) is not at all what Jesus Christ promised to build.

We are not focused on building earthly kingdoms because we live with an eye on eternity. All our efforts, our work need to be investments in the future. We are striving to enter the everlasting rest, not to establish spiritual rest and security in Satan's realm.

Therefore, a real and noticeable difference exists between true Christians and Islam. It is true that Islam teaches a doctrine about

future life. But most of their efforts are expended in fighting for physical property. They are attempting to force everyone into their religious demands so that Islam will be the one religion of the world. It is very possible that Islam will indeed be the one religion that Antichrist requires everyone to adopt in his world during the Tribulation. The Church won't be here to compete because our citizenship is in heaven.

We marvel at God's plan to thoroughly obliterate the abominable influences so His people would not be infected. We err greatly to assume that God's plan for Israel is somehow to be copied and applied with the Church. We do not harm, seek to destroy or even hate people who reject our telling of the Good News of salvation. We tell the Good News, we pray, we help, we sacrifice for sinners so that they will see the love of God. That is the difference between the physical kingdom of God and the spiritual kingdom of God. We who are the Church are the spiritual kingdom.