

Deuteronomy 20:1-9

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Moses commanded the Israelites not to fear their adversaries in the event of war because Yahweh, the great warrior, is the one who fights for them.

This section discusses the rules that the Israelites were to follow when they *go out to battle against their enemies*. The Suzerain LORD had told the Israelites to conquer the land of Canaan because He had given it to Abraham and their descendants ([Genesis 15:8 – 20](#)). Now, Israel must walk by faith to conquer and possess it. During their conquest of the Promised Land, they were sure to *see horses and chariots and people more numerous than they were*. Israel did not have horses or chariots, both of which were formidable instruments of war. And there would be times when they were outnumbered. In either case, they were to *not be afraid*.

Chariots were two-wheeled vehicles used throughout the ancient Near East for warfare, hunting, and travel ([Exodus 15:4](#)). Both *horses and chariots* served as equipment to launch arrows and spears because they provided rapid motive power. These tools were thus symbolic of military strength for ancient armies. As the psalmist David declared, *some boast in chariots and some in horses. But we will boast in the name of the LORD, our God* ([Psalms 20:7](#)).

The LORD through Moses told them that they should *not be afraid of them*. In spite of what they would see, they were not to tremble because Yahweh was on their side and would fight for them. Thus, the LORD was asking Israel to march into war undermanned and under-armed, according to what they could see. But God would fight for them from a spiritual realm that they could not see. This required great faith. The LORD had granted the land to Israel, but they would have to walk by faith, and contend for the land in order to possess what had been granted to them. They had an inheritance laid up for them, but would only possess that inheritance through the obedience of faith. This basic principle also applies to New Testament believers. Paul tells believers to awake each morning, put on their spiritual centurion uniform and go into spiritual battle:

“Therefore, take up the full armor of God, so that you will be able to resist in the evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm” ([Ephesians 6:13](#)).

Each New Testament believer has God as an unconditional inheritance, just as Israel does ([Romans 8:17](#)). But the reward of the inheritance is possessed through walking by faith, even if the world seems to throw overwhelming odds against us ([Romans 8:16-17](#); [Col 3:23](#)).

Therefore, knowing that the enemies might be stronger and mightier than the Israelites, Moses told them not to be afraid in the event of war. The reason that they should not fear the numbers and strength of their enemies was clear: *the LORD your God, who brought you up from the land of Egypt, is with you*. This statement served to remind the Israelites of their victory over the Egyptians when Yahweh threw the horse and rider into the sea ([Exodus 15:1](#)) and destroyed the entire Egyptian army ([Exodus 14-15](#)). The Israelites witnessed God's power at work when He destroyed Pharaoh (who thought he was invincible). The same God who destroyed Pharaoh and the Egyptians to redeem His covenant people (Israel) would also take them to the Promised Land. If the LORD could do all of this on Israel's behalf, He could ensure victory for His people against their foes. This was to be the basis of their faith.

Interestingly, the first generation of those who were fighting age (20 and above) who saw God part the Red Sea firsthand, refused to fight. It is those who saw this event as children or teens, or perhaps had not yet been born who were asked to have faith because of what had transpired forty years prior.

Moreover, in order to show the Israelites that the battle was the LORD's, the *priest* was expected to perform certain religious duties. Moses said that *when you are approaching the battle, the priest shall come near and speak to the people*.

The *priest* was to draw near to the armies of Israel *and say to them, "Hear, O Israel, you are approaching the battle against your enemies today."* The verb *hear* (Hebrew "shāma"), in addition to the sense of saying "pay attention," implies both the listening to what is being said as well as responding to what is being said in obedience ([Deuteronomy 6:4](#)). Thus, the purpose of this introductory statement was to prepare the minds of the Israelites so that they might pay close attention to the message, understand its importance, and respond in faithful obedience. It served to encourage God's vassals (Israel) to take the battle seriously as they obeyed the command of their Suzerain (Ruler) God.

After getting the attention of the Israelite warriors, the *priest* would then use four different expressions to command the Israelites to be strong and courageous. He would say to them,

–*Do not be fainthearted*. In the Hebrew text, this reads “Do not be gentle in heart.” In the Hebrew understanding, the heart was the seat of the intellect, will, and emotions. So, Israel’s soldiers were to be completely confident in their attitude toward the battle and the LORD’s presence with them.

–*Do not be afraid*. This is the typical word used for “fear,” to have concern about what someone thinks of you or might do to you.

–[Do not] *panic*. The Hebrew word (“ḥāpaz”) can also be translated “flee” or “be terrified.”

–[Do not] *tremble before them*. Similar to the previous term, this word (Heb. “āraṣ”) implies being in a state of dread and being terrified.

These expressions were intended to strengthen the faith of the people of God so that they might not display any fear in the presence of the enemy. They were not to *panic* at all when they saw the army of the adversaries, regardless of its fearful look. Even if the enemy was better armed or more numerous, God told Israel to fight, not to flee.

But why was Israel not to panic in the presence of the enemies who were well-equipped with multiple *horses and chariots*? The answer is that *the LORD your God is the one who goes with you, to fight for you against your enemies, to save you*. This was the LORD’s promise to Israel during the Exodus and the conquest of the Eastern part of Jordan. The context here indicates that the thing Israel is being saved, or delivered from, is the wrath of their enemies. The Suzerain (Ruler) God would fight against the Canaanites, just as He fought against the Egyptian army ([Exodus 14:14](#)) and against the two kings of the Amorites: Sihon and Og ([Deuteronomy 3:22](#)). Since Yahweh is the invincible Warrior, there was no reason for the Israelite soldiers to fear the enemy when they go to war.

But not all men were to engage in war. The law in vv. 5 – 9 listed four groups of people who could be exempted from military duty. The first three groups pertained to those who had begun certain personal activities, and the last group referred to those who displayed great fear. These four groups of people were to be instructed by the officers, the ones who were responsible to prepare the troops for battle.

Moses commanded that before an upcoming battle, *the officers also shall speak to the people* (v. 5). These officers (Heb. “shōṭēr”), who were subordinate military officials, were to inspect the troops and were to ask the following questions:

Who is the man that has built a new house and has not dedicated it? This referred to a man who built a new home and was required to live in it for a certain period to claim the right of ownership. Otherwise, another man might claim it and occupy it. The person who was in this situation was to *depart and return to his house, otherwise he might die in the battle and another man would dedicate it*. This was the first category of people exempt from fighting in battle. This command seems to anticipate a time later in the conquest of the Promised Land, since no one would have the opportunity to build *a new house* until a substantial part of the land was conquered and occupied.

The next question that the *officers* would ask concerned a second group of people. They were to ask *who is the man that has planted a vineyard and has not begun to use its fruit?* Whereas the first group concerned those who had a new house, this group included men who had a new vineyard and had not yet enjoyed its fruit. As with the first group, the officers would tell the men in this group to *depart and return to his house, otherwise he might die in the battle and another man would begin to use its fruit*. Thus, any man who had planted a vineyard was to return home to enjoy its fruits. Otherwise, someone else might come, enjoy the fruits of the vineyard, and claim ownership of it.

The *officers* would then address *the man that is engaged to a woman and has not married her* (v. 7). This third group involved men who had a new bride or fiancée. As with the previous two groups, newly married or engaged men were to *depart and return to his house, otherwise he might die in the battle and another man would marry her*. Someone who paid the bride price was supposed to marry his wife and take her home with him. Otherwise, he might die in battle and somebody else might marry that woman. [Deuteronomy 24:5](#) provides that when a man takes a new bride he must remain at home with his new wife for one year prior to engaging in war, in order to “bring happiness” to her.

The last group of people who were exempt from military service were those who were *afraid and fainthearted* (v. 8). The word translates two Hebrew words (“rak halēbāb”) that literally mean “soft [or tender] of heart.” Again, the *officers* were to tell the person to *depart and return to his house, so that he might not make his brothers’ hearts melt like his heart*. This rule sought to prevent one man’s paralyzing fear from spreading to the other men around

him. So, the frightened soldier was not to contaminate the others and thus cause them to lose the battle. Instead, he was to simply not participate in the war, since he would be a danger to himself and his fellow Israelites. Every soldier was to walk by faith as they put their trust in the great warrior, Yahweh. This last provision means that Israel was to have a volunteer army.

The last task was to take place *when the officers have finished speaking to the people* (v. 9). Here, they were to *appoint commanders of armies at the head of the people*. The word for *commanders* (Heb. “śar”) can also be translated “prince.” It is a generic term that refers to anyone in a position of authority over others. These *commanders* would serve as “leaders of thousands and of hundreds, of fifties and of tens” ([Deuteronomy 1:15](#)). Thus God’s army would be organized down to groups as small as ten. Using this math, it appears that each leader might have between five to ten men reporting to him.

The LORD wanted only the best soldiers to fight the battles. These would be men who were not distracted by some situation in life or paralyzed by fear. The LORD would not necessarily need a large army to fight because He was on their side and would fight for them.

Biblical Text:

When you go out to battle against your enemies and see horses and chariots *and* people more numerous than you, do not be afraid of them; for the Lord your God, who brought you up from the land of Egypt, is with you. ²When you are approaching the battle, the priest shall come near and speak to the people. ³He shall say to them, ‘Hear, O Israel, you are approaching the battle against your enemies today. Do not be fainthearted. Do not be afraid, or panic, or tremble before them, ⁴for the Lord your God is the one who goes with you, to fight for you against your enemies, to save you.’ ⁵The officers also shall speak to the people, saying, ‘Who is the man that has built a new house and has not dedicated it? Let him depart and return to his house, otherwise he might die in the battle and another man would dedicate it. ⁶Who is the man that has planted a vineyard and has not begun to use its fruit? Let him depart and return to his house, otherwise he might die in the battle and another man would begin to use its fruit. ⁷And who is the man that is engaged to a woman and has not married her? Let him depart and return to his house, otherwise he might die in the battle and another man would marry her.’ ⁸Then the officers shall speak further to the people and say, ‘Who is the man that is afraid and fainthearted? Let him

depart and return to his house, so that he might not make his brothers' hearts melt like his heart.'⁹ When the officers have finished speaking to the people, they shall appoint commanders of armies at the head of the people.