**Deuteronomy 23:9-14**

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*Moses instructs the Israelites on how to remain pure in the battlefield because the Suzerain (Ruler) God is present with them to fight for them.*

Continuing the theme of personal purity, vv. 9-14 determine for Israel how to maintain purity in various military activities. These military operations were related to the conquest of the Promised Land. Moses told Israel that they were to remain pure in the military camp. He began with a summary statement (v. 9) and then used two illustrations to expand on it (vv. 10-11, and vv. 12-14).

Moses turned from maintaining purity in the religious assembly (vv. 1 – 8) to how to remain pure *when you go out as an army against your enemies* (v. 9). In a word, the Israelites were to *keep*themselves*from every evil thing.* The term *evil* (Heb. “ra’”) has a wide range of meanings. Generally, it describes something that was unacceptable to the LORD. It is used elsewhere in the book of Deuteronomy to refer to idolatry (Deuteronomy 13:12; 17:5) or a malicious witness (Deuteronomy 19:20). While it often refers to something morally wrong (wicked), in this context it merely refers to something ceremonially unclean (impure), anything that is defective (v. 10).

Verses 10 – 11 contain the first illustration of what it meant for Israelite soldiers to keep themselves *from every evil thing*. It involved a situation where*there is among you any man who is unclean because of a nocturnal emission*(v. 10). A *nocturnal emission* likely refers to an involuntary emission of semen during sleep (Leviticus 15:16-18). Under normal circumstances, this emission usually occurs during periods of sexual abstinence, as when a man is celibate or is away from his wife for quite some time. Though not immoral, it would cause the man to be ceremonially *unclean*. If this occurred, the man was required to *go outside the camp* and could not *reenter the camp* during this time of uncleanness.

But the state of uncleanness would not last long. Moses told them that *it shall be* *when evening approaches* (v. 11), the man needed to *bathe himself with water*, which would make him ceremonially clean again. Once this was done, *at sundown* he could *reenter the camp*.

Moses’s second illustration regarding the purity of the Israelite soldiers relates to another type of bodily emission. Here, it was concerned with the use of a special site as a latrine while in military duties. He commanded the Israelites to *have a place outside the camp and go out there* (v. 12). The phrase *go out there* is a euphemism for using the toilet, specifically defecation. The place for this must be outside of the encampment.

The reason for this was probably both spiritual and physical. Spiritually, the camp of the LORD was to be kept pure and unspoiled because He is holy. To allow excrement inside the camp was to allow impurity to exist in the presence of the pure and holy God who is in covenant with His people, whom He desires to be pure and holy. Locating the latrine outside of the camp would be another visible lesson that His people were to be pure and live in a pure manner. At the physical level, having a latrine close to where the soldiers ate and slept could be source of disease and infection, affecting their abilities to fight on the battlefield. As always, God’s commands teach His ways, which are the ways that will lead to our greatest benefit.

In this regard, Moses told the soldiers to *have a spade among your tools* (v. 13). The word *spade* (Heb. “yātēd”) refers to a piece of wood (usually with a pointed end) used for various purposes, such as a “peg” or “stake” used to secure tents like the tabernacle (Exodus 27:19), to hang articles on walls (Isa. 22:23), or a “paddle” to dig holes (such as latrines as in this verse). It was to be one of the pieces of equipment the Israelite soldiers would use in the field. Here, it was to be used *when you sit down outside* (a euphemism for using the latrine). With the *spade* they were to *dig with it and shall turn to cover up your excrement*.

The primary reason stated as to why these things were mandated was because *the Lord your God walks in the midst of your camp*(v. 14). His holy presence in the camp needed to be respected and honored by His people being clean in His sight. Of course, when God is honored, we always benefit. The washing of the body after a nocturnal emission (vv. 10-11) and the covering of the excrement (vv. 12-13) offered health benefits to the soldiers. In particular, covering the dung, and keeping the latrine outside the camp would minimize the spread of disease.

Moses then told the people that the presence of the LORD among His vassals (Israel) *was to deliver you and to defeat your enemies before you* (v. 14). And because their holy LORD was in their midst, Moses told them that *your camp must be holy*. Since the holy God was among His people, His holiness would not permit Him to dwell in the midst of sin and uncleanness.

In fact, *He* [God] *mus*t *not see anything indecent among you*. The word translated *anything indecent* (Heb. “’erwâ”) is literally “nakedness of a thing” and often refers to the genitals being exposed. It refers generally to anything that was offensive or shameful. Therefore, since God was with the Israelites in the camp, Moses commanded the Israelite soldiers to remain pure. This might be directed to prohibit the bringing of women into the camp as entertainment for the soldiers.

Finally, Moses warned that if the LORD witnessed this type of impurity, *He will turn away from you***.** For the LORD to turn away from them guaranteed their defeat in battle. Throughout its history, Israel’s victory was always based upon obedience to the will of their Suzerain God. When they obeyed God, they won because God was always the one who fought for them whenever they went to battle (Exodus 14:14; Deuteronomy 2:26-31). Conversely, when they disobeyed the will of God and acted presumptuously, they were defeated (Deuteronomy 1:41-46).

Once again, Moses made it clear that if the Israelite soldiers failed to obey God’s command to remain clean in the camp, they would suffer one of the most devastating consequences because God would *turn away from* them. That means, God would no longer fight for them and would allow Israel’s foes to triumph over them. When Israel obeyed God’s ways, they gained benefit, because His ways are for our best (as with keeping sanitary facilities outside the camp, and covering dung with dirt). But God added supernatural blessings as a bonus. This included fighting for Israel, and giving them victory. However, their victory depended upon walking in obedience with God and following His ways.

**Biblical Text:**

**9When you go out as an army against your enemies, you shall keep yourself from every evil thing. 10“If there is among you any man who is unclean because of a nocturnal emission, then he must go outside the camp; he may not reenter the camp. 11But it shall be when evening approaches, he shall bathe himself with water, and at sundown he may reenter the camp. 12“You shall also have a place outside the camp and go out there, 13and you shall have a spade among your tools, and it shall be when you sit down outside, you shall dig with it and shall turn to cover up your excrement. 14Since the Lord your God walks in the midst of your camp to deliver you and to defeat your enemies before you, therefore your camp must be holy; and He must not see anything indecent among you or He will turn away from you.**