

## Covenant Promises

Deuteronomy 20:1-20

It's been six months since we last studied Deuteronomy. It was March 8, the last Sunday that we worshipped altogether with two services before the COVID-19 shutdown. It seems like ages ago, another world, another life. When we went to just the one service, I decided to continue the afternoon sermon series from 1 John and put Deuteronomy on hold. We finished 1 John the last time I preached before my vacation, and today, this evening, we will begin a new sermon series in a second worship service at 5 pm. It is the session's expectation that we will return to our normal schedule of an afternoon worship with a fellowship lunch just as soon as possible. But in the meantime, let me encourage you to come again as we worship this evening.

This morning we return to Deuteronomy. Literally, according to that title, it is the second law. The people of God, the nation of Israel are about to enter the promised land. God has delivered them out of the house of bondage, out of the land of Egypt. He has promised them their own land, their own nation, and after the generation spent in the wilderness as a matter of discipline for their sin and rebellion, God is about to fulfill that great promise.

Let me remind you of a couple things as we jump back into this book. To put it simply, the history of the nation of Israel is the history of salvation. The work of God in delivering Israel out of Egypt and giving them the promised land is an illustration, a type, a picture of the work of God in our salvation. So we, the church, are represented by the nation of Israel. Thus this is not simply a history of some ancient country, but it is the work of God in salvation embodied and embedded in the history of the Old Covenant nation of Israel. Here is that connection made clear,

Heb. 11:8 "By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go

out to the place which he would receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. 9 By faith he dwelt in the land of promise as in a foreign country, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise; 10 for he waited for the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God."

For us, the meaning of the promised land of Canaan in the Old Covenant is that which we will inherit as the promise of,

Rev. 21:1 "Now I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away. Also there was no more sea. 2 Then I, John, saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. 3 And I heard a loud voice from heaven saying, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God."

This is the inheritance that is ours, as it is prefigured in Deuteronomy,

1 Peter 1:3 "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His abundant mercy has begotten us again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, 4 to an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, 5 who are kept by the power of God through faith for salvation ready to be revealed in the last time."

So that perspective governs our understanding and our application of the book of Deuteronomy, including our text this morning. This isn't just a history of warfare nor a description of the conduct of that warfare which would raise all sorts of objectionable questions if it were interpreted as such for today. Instead, from a broader perspective, we are learning in this

chapter about the relationship between God and his covenant people. So that's where we start this morning. The relationship between God and his covenant people. Thus our first point is the matter of courage.

## **I. COURAGE FOR GOD'S PEOPLE.**

Again, let me emphasize, I'm stressing the idea of the relationship between God and his covenant people that transcends, or goes beyond, mere old testament history. The outward and external situation is different today, but the internal reality of our relationship with God is unchanged. This isn't just a moralistic application of some historical example, but rather a real, albeit spiritual, illustration of just how it is that our God encourages us today as his people, just as he did in the day of Moses in Deuteronomy 20. In that context, the first focus is upon courage.

### **A. The call for courage in the face of danger.**

Clearly the people of Israel were about to confront danger. They were about to enter into warfare, in order to take possession of the land which God had promised them. A land already inhabited. The nations of that land had armies.

v.1-3

We've certainly seen this encouragement before in Deuteronomy.

Deut. 7:17 "If you should say in your heart, 'These nations are greater than I; how can I dispossess them?'— 18 you shall not be afraid of them, but you shall remember well what the Lord your God did to Pharaoh and to all Egypt: 19 the great trials which your eyes saw, the signs and the wonders, the mighty hand and the outstretched arm, by which the Lord your God brought you out. So shall the Lord your God do to all the peoples of whom you are afraid."

So remember what the Lord did to Pharaoh and to all Egypt. That is such a common, repeated theme in the Bible. Remember what the Lord has done. Remember his work of redemption. Remember what he has accomplished on your behalf. Thus the encouragement, the comfort, when you see your enemy, "do not be afraid of them," verse 1. And verse 3, "Do not let your heart faint, do not be afraid, and do not tremble or be terrified because of them."

Thus we are called to courage. As we read in,

Josh. 1:5 "No man shall be able to stand before you all the days of your life; as I was with Moses, so I will be with you. I will not leave you nor forsake you. 6 Be strong and of good courage, for to this people you shall divide as an inheritance the land which I swore to their fathers to give them. 7 Only be strong and very courageous, that you may observe to do according to all the law which Moses My servant commanded you; do not turn from it to the right hand or to the left, that you may prosper wherever you go. 8 This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate in it day and night, that you may observe to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success. 9 Have I not commanded you? Be strong and of good courage; do not be afraid, nor be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go."

That's not a promise of military victory today. That's not a promise of earthly or worldly power or success. But rather a promise related to the spiritual battles of our lives. And we are told so plainly about those battles in the New Testament.

Eph. 6:10 "Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might. 11 Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. 12 For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities,

against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places. 13 Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand.”

That’s how this passage in Deuteronomy 20 comes across in our lives today, as Christians. Our battle is not against flesh and blood, but it is a battle nonetheless. With a real enemy, nonetheless. And we feel that battle every day. A spiritual battle, against the temptation of despair in this crazy world so filled with hypocrisy. There is the temptation to be angry, to be exasperated. The temptation to be unchaste, unclean, immoral. So “be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might.” With good reason. With good grounds. And that is what is so plain in these verses.

### **B. The ground of courage in face of danger.**

Go back to,  
v.1

I read it a moment ago in,  
Josh. 1:5 “No man shall be able to stand before you all the days of your life; as I was with Moses, so I will be with you. I will not leave you nor forsake you.”

Isaiah 41:10 “Fear not, for I am with you; Be not dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, Yes, I will help you, I will uphold you with My righteous right hand.”

Similarly,

Psalms 27:1 “The Lord is my light and my salvation; Whom shall I fear? The Lord is the strength of my life; Of whom shall I be afraid?”

This is such a familiar, repeated refrain. It is God’s promise, “I will not leave you nor forsake you.” And that very promise is explicitly repeated in the New Testament.

Heb. 13:5 “Let your conduct be without covetousness; be content with such things as you have. For He Himself has said, “I will never leave you nor forsake you.” 6 So we may boldly say: “The Lord is my helper; I will not fear. What can man do to me?”

That’s our encouragement today, as well. In different ways, everyone of you needs that encouragement. And in the spiritual realities of our own lives, the words of the 23rd Psalm remain true.

Psalms 23:4 “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; For You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me. 5 You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You anoint my head with oil; My cup runs over. 6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me All the days of my life; And I will dwell in the house of the Lord Forever.”

Well let’s move on in Deuteronomy 20.  
v.5-9

What do we do with those verses? I believe that the emphasis is upon,

## **II. COMPASSION FOR GOD’S PEOPLE.**

Even in the Old Testament context of the warfare necessary for the nation of Israel to take possession of their promised land, there is this emphasis upon compassion. Compassion for those who are freed from the responsibilities of that warfare. Several examples are given.

### **A. Examples of compassion.**

First, the man who has just built his house. They haven't had the chance to live in their new house, so they are granted an exception from military service. I don't think the emphasis is some sort of formal dedication ceremony, just the reality that they haven't had the chance to enjoy the peacefulness of normal, ordinary life. To those who just built their house, God says, "God enjoy the opportunity to live in it." Just a matter of compassion!

v.5

Then the man who has planted a vineyard but hadn't yet put it to good use.

v.6

Again, the idea is simply what we might label as human kindness. God is kind, considerate, compassionate, in these exemptions to military service. Then the third example, the newlywed.

v.7

The Bible is so practical. God's relationship with his people is so personable. So considerate. That principle of a newlywed is made even clearer in,

Deut. 24:5 "When a man has taken a new wife, he shall not go out to war or be charged with any business; he shall be free at home one year, and bring happiness to his wife whom he has taken."

Doesn't that make good sense? One of the most frustrating things that I observe in the exercise of governmental authority today is this ability to judge cases individually. To show mercy and compassion where it is well deserved. The cry of our day is to treat everyone the same way, and in that sense there is no compassion at all. God provides for the opportunity to exercise that compassion, and in the Old Covenant context, he embeds

those provisions for compassion right into the law itself.

There is one more example listed, perhaps a bit more difficult to understand in terms of compassion.

v.8-9

I'm willing to see this in terms of compassion as well, that those who are more faint-hearted are granted a release from military duty. They were not to be bullied into battle or mocked for their fearfulness. They weren't to be court-martialed, but just sent home. There is, of course, in addition to compassion, the reality that such fearful men would not make very good soldiers. "What man is there who is fearful and fainthearted? Let him go and return to his house, lest the heart of his brethren faint like his heart."

So compassion is the order of the day. Even in the context of warfare, military combat, there is a graciousness extended to those who have need. Such is the nature of our covenant God.

Thirdly, then, are the,

### **III. COVENANT PROMISES FOR GOD'S PEOPLE.**

This chapter isn't really about courage or compassion for God's people, but it is a chapter about the nature of God himself. The nature of God's covenant faithfulness. And strikingly, noticeably, the first promise is,

#### **A. The promise of peace.**

In the context of warfare and military conquest, we read this, v.10

Peace, shalom. That is nothing less than the promise of the gospel. It's still in the Old Covenant, and the nation of Israel is still destined to possess the land as God had promised, but still,

at least in seed form, here is peace. The peace that would be promised fully to all the nations under the gospel.

Eph. 2:11 “Therefore remember that you, once Gentiles in the flesh—who are called Uncircumcision by what is called the Circumcision made in the flesh by hands— 12 that at that time you were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. 13 But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. 14 For He Himself is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation, 15 having abolished in His flesh the enmity, that is, the law of commandments contained in ordinances, so as to create in Himself one new man from the two, thus making peace, 16 and that He might reconcile them both to God in one body through the cross, thereby putting to death the enmity. 17 And He came and preached peace to you who were afar off and to those who were near. 18 For through Him we both have access by one Spirit to the Father.”

Peace means reconciliation. It means the absence of war, of conflict. And in terms of the gospel, it is the central message that defines our relationship with God. And what is true in describing the relationship of God with nations in the Old Covenant now describes our relationship as believers in the New Covenant.

Rom. 5:1 “Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

So even in the Old Covenant, even in the context of the military conquest of Israel over the nations of Canaan, there is the invitation of the gospel of peace. The Old Covenant context remains clear, the nations would become vassals, or subjects to Israel, rather than free and independent countries. But don't read these words thinking about the definition of slavery as existed in

our country in centuries past.

v.11

That would a privileged position, perhaps comparable to US territories today, such as the U.S. Virgin Islands or Puerto Rico. The nations who accepted the invitation of peace would be preserved, united together with Israel as the people of God. The invitation to the nations was always present in the Bible, an invitation made so crystal clear with the incarnation of Jesus. And that invitation remains the duty and obligation of the church according to Jesus' own words,

Mat. 28:18. “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. 19 Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” Amen.”

There is a second promise here for God's people, the obvious one.

### **B. The promise of the inheritance.**

The land. That promise goes all the way back to Abraham, to whom God had said,

Gen. 12:1 “Now the Lord had said to Abram: “Get out of your country, From your family And from your father's house, To a land that I will show you. 2 I will make you a great nation; I will bless you And make your name great; And you shall be a blessing. 3 I will bless those who bless you, And I will curse him who curses you; And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”...7 Then the Lord appeared to Abram and said, “To your descendants I will give this land.”

And so we read about the fulfillment of that promise in our

text,

v.12-15

Please note in that the graciousness with which God protects even those nations which are conquered. Only the fighting men are killed. Only the warriors who pose a threat to Israel are killed. The rest are allowed to live, and I don't think you have to imagine the worst possible construct of the words "spoil" and "plunder."

You can see a measure of that same graciousness in verses 19-20 as well. Destruction was permitted only as necessary for the military victory and conquest.

v.19-20

A couple further thoughts are in order about the context of the Old Testament. The purpose here is not to prescribe for us the process of a holy war, it does not defend killing people in the name of religion. But in the unique context of the covenant promise of God to give his people the promised land, this conquest is essential. The people of God conquered the inhabitants of the land. It was the land which God has promised to them as his special people.

So, for our benefit and application now in the New Covenant, keep these things in mind. First, we the church are Israel. The United States isn't Israel; there is no justification for warfare in which we conquer lands today in the name of God. And the modern state of Israel is not given that right either. This was Old Testament Israel demonstrating by the events of their national history that the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God who created the world, would redeem a people for himself and bless them with a glorious inheritance.

Related to that, our inheritance is not of this world. Our

inheritance is in heaven, and so what this warfare represents for us is the our promised inheritance as Christians in heaven.

1 Peter 1:3 "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His abundant mercy has begotten us again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, 4 to an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, 5 who are kept by the power of God through faith for salvation ready to be revealed in the last time."

The third thought in this context of a transition from the Old Covenant to the New Covenant is what Paul says in,

2 Cor. 10:3 "For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh. 4 For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, 5 casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ, 6 and being ready to punish all disobedience when your obedience is fulfilled."

That's the warfare in which we are engaged.

Back in our text, notice that this invitation for peace is given to the nations far away, according to verse 15. There is another principle that applies to the cities of the actual land of Canaan, where the people of Israel will settle. Actually, it is another promise.

### **C. The promise of purity.**

The idea is that the people of God would be holy, they would be set apart from the nations. They would be God's holy nation. And thus, in order to demonstrate that holiness, that separation, in order to protect and to preserve that holiness as the people of God, the ungodly and immoral nations had to be destroyed.

“You shall utterly destroy them.” This wasn’t merely God’s judgment upon those nations for their wickedness. It was as much or more so a protection for God’s people, protection from the unholy and ungodly influence of those nations. That principle is applied to us in terms of our holiness as the New Covenant people of God. Specifically,

1 Cor. 5:6 “Your glorying is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? 7 Therefore purge out the old leaven, that you may be a new lump, since you truly are unleavened. For indeed Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us. 8 Therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.”

Paul continues with his application, the new covenant application of what we read in Deuteronomy 20.

1 Cor. 5:9 “I wrote to you in my epistle not to keep company with sexually immoral people. 10 Yet I certainly did not mean with the sexually immoral people of this world, or with the covetous, or extortioners, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. 11 But now I have written to you not to keep company with anyone named a brother, who is sexually immoral, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortioner—not even to eat with such a person. 12 For what have I to do with judging those also who are outside? Do you not judge those who are inside? 13 But those who are outside God judges. Therefore “put away from yourselves the evil person.”

Similarly,

2 Cor. 6:14 “Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness? 15

And what accord has Christ with Belial? Or what part has a believer with an unbeliever? 16 And what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For you are the temple of the living God. As God has said: “I will dwell in them And walk among them. I will be their God, And they shall be My people.” 17 Therefore “Come out from among them And be separate, says the Lord. Do not touch what is unclean, And I will receive you.” 18 “I will be a Father to you, And you shall be My sons and daughters, Says the Lord Almighty.”

The covenant promise of God, therefore, is that we shall be separate from those nations. We shall be holy. It is, therefore, the promise and the provision for our purity.

So don’t just read this history of an ancient nation and wonder what you should do about it. Rather, as you read of God’s promises to his people being fulfilled in the life and history of the nation of Israel,

v.3 “...Do not let your heart faint, do not be afraid, and do not tremble or be terrified because of [your enemies]; 4 for the Lord your God is He who goes with you, to fight for you against your enemies, to save you.”

And having received the great covenant promises of peace and of your eternal inheritance through faith in Jesus Christ, realize that God calls us to this same purity in our lives today as his New Covenant people. So, “Come out from among them And be separate, says the Lord.” And the very next words Paul writes to the Corinthians are these, with which I will end this morning.

2 Cor. 7:1 “Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God.”