

When You Go Off to War

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Preacher: Paul Barker

[0 : 0 0] Our God, we pray that your word will take deep root in our lives and bear much fruit for your glory. For Jesus' sake we pray. Amen.

Well, this is an awful passage. This is a passage that surely must make our hearts cringe when we read it. We've just heard, But as for the towns of these peoples that the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance, you must not let anything that breathes remain alive.

You shall annihilate them. It's hardly anybody's favourite verse of the Bible. It's hardly a verse that we teach our children to memorise. Not even the Pauline Hansons of this world would agree, surely, with words like that.

It's certainly not politically correct. It does not promote tolerance or freedom of speech or worship or life. It hardly promotes the values which we recognise to be the values of the New Testament.

Love and peace and joy and so on. Indeed, it's quite a dangerous passage. This passage about killing these nations. It would be easy to use this passage to justify war.

[1 : 1 6] To justify killing. It would be easy to use this passage to justify the Crusades of the Middle Ages. When Christendom rose up to recapture Jerusalem and the Promised Land from the Arabs and Turks and infidels.

It would be easy to use a passage like this to justify ethnic cleansing. The genocide of people groups and tribes and nations.

Whether in Bosnia or Rwanda. It would be easy to use a passage like this to justify Israel's invasion of Jordan in 1968. And so on.

We are, in many respects, on dangerous ground when we read a passage like this. Can ethnic cleansing really be commanded by God?

Approved by Him? Maybe it's easier to just rip this page out and throw it away. To ignore it. To say that it's just the Old Testament and it's not the New.

[2 : 2 0] That three and a half thousand years has shown that this passage is now irrelevant to us. And yet it's in our Bibles. The Bibles of Christian faith.

So what do we do with it? What's God's word to us from this passage? The first paragraph is about encouragement.

When you go out to war against your enemies and see horses and chariots, 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 from the land of Egypt.

Before you engage in battle, the priest shall come forward and speak to the troops and shall say to them, Hear, O Israel, today you are drawing near to do battle against your enemies. Do not lose heart or be afraid or panic or be in dread of them.

For it is the Lord your God who goes with you to fight for you against your enemies to give you victory. When we encourage each other, we often use fairly empty words.

[3 : 26] Cheer up, tomorrow will be better. Have faith, things will work out. It'll be okay. Don't worry. Things will get better or you'll get better.

But very often we don't know what things are going to turn out like. And very often they get worse, not better. Somebody who's ill gets worse or dies. Somebody without a job remains without a job.

Somebody who's sitting an exam fails the exam. Or whatever it is, we don't know that things will get better. And yet so often we use words of encouragement that in the end are fairly vacuous.

But these words of encouragement of Moses to Israel to have no fear, to trust in God, to not be afraid.

These are not words that are just vain and empty words of encouragement. But these are words of encouragement based on the promises of God. For faith is not just hoping vainly that things are going to get better.

[4 : 29] That's not what Christian faith is about at all. Christian faith is trusting in the promises of God. And therefore real encouragement comes when we encourage one another based on the promises of God.

And that's what's happening here. Israel is being encouraged before it goes into the promised land. And the encouragement is based on what God has promised. For 600 years before these words were spoken by Moses, God promised to Abraham and to his descendants a land, a particular land.

The land that Israel is about to go in and enter. And it's on the grounds of that promise that Moses can say to the people, be encouraged. Don't be afraid. God is with you.

He'll fight for you. He's going before you. With him on your side, there will be victory. Not idle words of encouragement, but words of encouragement based on the promises of God. Therefore, in order to exercise an encouragement of one another, we need to know what God promises.

Because if we promise something or encourage people on something that God has not promised and it doesn't come out, then where are we left? For so often I find Christian people who've given up on God because he hasn't delivered the goods.

[5 : 39] Their health has not improved. Their marriage has failed. They haven't got a job. They've lost their house or their children or their parents or something else. But very often these are people who are expecting something from God that God has not promised.

They've misunderstood the promises of God. Perhaps they've been falsely encouraged. Or they've misunderstood what Christian faith is about. So often those sorts of people who misunderstand or don't know the promises of God, in the end lose faith.

In the end, give up on God. Get angry with him. Cynical. Doubt his existence or doubt his power. What we must remember is that we ought to know what God has promised.

Because God is faithful to that promise. And that's why Moses can encourage the people so strongly. Because he knows what God has promised. And he knows that God is keeping that promise.

And because God has promised this land to Israel, God is going to keep that promise. So when Israel goes across the Jordan River to conquer the land, Moses can assure the people with absolute confidence that God will keep his promise.

[6 : 48] And therefore they will be victorious in the conquering of the land. So let's be careful how we encourage each other. Let us be careful to know the promises of God. Let us be careful not to expect things from God that he's not promised.

If they come well and good, it's an added blessing. And something for which we can give thanks to God. But if it's not something that God himself has promised, then there's no guarantee that it will come.

He hasn't promised us lives of good health, of good marriage, of work, employment, satisfaction, wealth, travel. He hasn't promised us a happy church or a nearly perfect church.

And yet so often people give up on God because their involvement in the church is a frustration to them. But God has not promised a church which is perfect or close to it. So we oughtn't to expect from God things that he hasn't promised.

If we get good things that he hasn't promised, well and good and let's give thanks. But let's be careful that we know exactly what God has promised and not expect too much. God promised a land.

[7 : 55] Moses is encouraging the people to trust God. Know that he is absolutely faithful to his promise. He always keeps his promises. So much so that Moses can go on to give instructions about people not being part of the army.

So in verse 5, for the person who's just built a house, has anyone built a new house but not dedicated it? He should go back to his house or he might die in the battle and another dedicate it.

So you can imagine a few people leave the army to go back to their newly built homes. Has anyone planted a vineyard but not yet enjoyed its fruit? It takes three to five years before the fruit of the vineyard will be enjoyed.

He should go back to his house or he might die in the battle and another be the first to enjoy its fruit. And then for Warwick, has anyone become engaged to a woman but not yet married her?

Well, he should go back to his house. So if we were the people of Israel about to cross the Jordan River, Warwick would be excused from fighting in the army. And one could imagine a number of people therefore leaving the army.

[9 : 00] Probably not huge numbers but some at least. The idea behind that is firstly that numbers don't matter with God. If God's on Israel's side, then they will be assured of their victory.

They don't need to have every single person highly skilled and competent to fight. For it's God on the side that counts. But the other thing is also that Israel ultimately is not fighting as a means to an end, not the end.

But the end is enjoying the blessings that God promises. And things like enjoying the fruit of your vineyard and your house and your marriage is part of the blessing of God in the Old Testament to his people.

And they are not to be deprived of that if they are to go and fight in the war. But then this point about God being the one that counts is really underlined in verse 8.

For if I applied verses 5, 6 and 7 to you here, Warwick and maybe a couple of others would leave on the grounds of just having planted a vineyard, built a house or got engaged.

[10 : 01] But what about verse 8? Who'd be left then? The officials shall continue to address the troops saying, Is anyone afraid or disheartened? He should go back to his house where he might cause the heart of his comrades to melt like his own.

Who'd be left? There's a great excuse there for everybody to go if they're afraid or disheartened. But you see what's being demanded here? That those who fight for Israel and therefore are in a sense fighting for God are those who trust in God's promises.

Those who are afraid or terrified, they're not exercising faith. And therefore are they excused so that it doesn't become contagious in the army. God wants people on his side who trust him and trust his promises and trust his faithfulness to keep his promises.

But remember that if God's on the side, it doesn't matter if there's nobody else. Victory is assured. Because God is Israel's one-man team. He's their Tony Lockett. When he's on their side, they win.

When he's not, they lose. God is in effect a one-man team. And it doesn't matter whether there's five or five hundred or five hundred thousand Israelites fighting. If God's on the side, they'll win.

[11 : 13] Just as later in Israel's history after they conquered the land under the leader Gideon. Remember he had a large army and then through various means, the army came down to just a handful. But they won.

They won't win. Because God was on their side. It also reminds us that in the last bit of the Bible, in the New Testament, the conquest over sin and death and evil is achieved by one person, God incarnate, Jesus on the cross.

It didn't need a whole army of hundreds of thousands of the people of God fighting to conquer sin, death and evil. But really only one person did it and could do it. Jesus Christ.

The passage goes on then to the bit that we probably cringe at the most. The destruction of other nations. Verses 10 to 15 deal with cities that are near, within the promised land.

And verses 16 to 18 deal with the cities, I've got it the wrong way around. Verses 10 to 15 deal with the cities far away, outside the promised land. Verses 16 to 18 deal with the cities that are near, within the boundaries.

[12 : 23] Of the promised land. And the way those two groups of cities are to be treated is different. For the cities that are far away, when you draw near to them, in verse 10, you offer them terms of peace.

This is not a mutual treaty as though they're going to be members of some alliance together on mutual terms. But notice what the verse goes on to say. Offer it terms of peace.

If it accepts your terms of peace and surrenders to you, then all the people in it shall serve you as forced labour. That's not a mutual treaty. It is Israel saying, we're in charge.

Give up and surrender to us and be our forced labour. You can imagine that not many cities would do that. But nonetheless, the terms of peace can be offered by Israel to the other nations.

If it doesn't submit to you, verse 12, peacefully, but makes war against you, then you shall besiege it. And when the Lord your God gives it into your hand, you shall put all its males to the sword. You may, however, take as your booty the women, the children, livestock and everything else in the town, all its spoil.

[13 : 25] You may enjoy the spoil of your enemies, which the Lord your God has given you. And verse 15 makes it clear that this is speaking not about any city, but about the cities that are beyond the boundaries of the promised land, that don't represent such a threat to Israel as the cities or nations that live within the boundaries of the promised land.

For those, in verses 16 to 18, the treatment is much harsher. No terms of peace are offered, just war. And when that war is won by Israel, it's not only the men who will be put to the sword, but everything that breathes.

Verse 16, but as for the towns of these peoples that the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance, that is the cities within the boundaries of the promised land, you must not let anything that breathes remain alive.

You shall annihilate them, all those nations that are listed, just as the Lord your God has commanded. And the reason for that is because the nations that live within the boundaries of the promised land will entice and tempt Israel to worship their gods rather than the God of the Old Testament and the Bible.

Verse 18, the reason for this is so that they may not teach you to do all the abhorrent things that they do for their gods and you thus sin against the Lord your God.

[14 : 46] Now what do we make of all this? What do we make of these commands about the nations far away and the nations near?

Why is there this distinction between the two? Why are the nations further away treated with relative leniency, but those who are living in the land treated with such uncompromising severity?

Whenever we read the Old Testament, we need to read it in the light of the New Testament. We need to see how the principles of the Old Testament are continued or adapted or changed or superseded or whatever is the case in the light of the New Testament.

And what we find here, I think, are two things that change and two things that are consistent in the light of the New Testament. What's changed for us as we apply this passage to us?

The first thing that's changed is the notion of land. The people of God in the Old Testament were promised a specific geographical land bounded by the Mediterranean Sea on the west, the Jordan River on the east, Lebanon and Mount Hermon in the north and the Negev Desert in the south.

[16 : 01] It's the land we know today as the modern state of Israel and the West Bank or the Palestinian Autonomous Authority. But there's no promise of a physical geographical land in the New Testament.

The land that's promised to the people of God of New Testament is a heavenly land, an eternal inheritance kept for us in heaven by God. Not the land of Israel and Jerusalem, not any other land, not England's green and pleasant land, but rather an eternal heavenly land, which is ours.

That's God's promise for the people of God who are Christians after Jesus Christ. And in the New Testament, the notions of warfare are applied to that promise of an eternal inheritance.

In the Old Testament, the warfare of Israel was in part to secure God's promise. It was Israel's way of claiming God's promise. But we're not offered a geographical land, we're offered an eternal inheritance in heaven.

So warfare for us is anything against anything that threatens the promise of heaven for us. That's what spiritual warfare is about in Ephesians 6 and 2 Corinthians and other places in the New Testament.

[17 : 12] It's not just some airy fairy idea, it's actually real warfare. But it's warfare against what threatens the promises of God and for us that's heaven, an eternal inheritance kept for us.

The other thing that's changed is the notion of nation. In the Old Testament, the people of God was a nation. Israel, later called the Jews.

But Christians are not a nation. Australia is not a Christian nation of the people of God. Never has been and never will be. The same for England. The same for the Holy Roman Empire.

Or any other nation that's ever existed after the time of Jesus Christ. For the only nation of God's people ever constituted was the nation of Israel in the Old Testament. And therefore there can be no holy war for any nation after Jesus Christ.

Justifiable war maybe, but not holy war. For God's people are part of every nation. And it's too simple or simplistic to say that God was on our side in the Second World War or in the Gulf War.

[18 : 23] For there are Christians on both sides. They're not holy wars. This may be justifiable, but not holy. We cannot apply a passage like this in the Old Testament to modern warfare.

It doesn't work. Because the people of God are no longer a nation. Haven't been and never will be until the return of Jesus Christ. It's too simplistic to say that if one side wins in modern warfare, then it shows God is on their side.

It doesn't work like that either. If Hitler had won the Second World War, it would not have been because God is on his side and not on the other side. And the fact that we won the Second World War does not necessarily mean that God was on our side rather than the other side.

Life isn't that simple. Life isn't that simple. And we can't use the pattern of Old Testament warfare to apply to modern warfare like that. But there are two principles that remain the same.

And this is where this passage bites for us. This is where it applies in our lives. This is where it hits us. The first is the issue of judgment.

[19 : 34] Because the nations that were defeated by Israel deserved their defeat. They're not innocent people sitting naively. But rather they're guilty of immorality and idolatry.

And Israel's defeat of them was the judgment of God upon their sins. Deuteronomy 9 makes that clear. Showing that Israel's defeat of these other nations was because of the wickedness of these nations.

It was God's judgment against their sin. We may say, well, what about mercy? It doesn't seem very fair to God for God to judge these nations. Why doesn't he exercise mercy?

Well, he has done. Because when the promise of land was made to Abraham 600 years before Moses, God said to Abraham, you're not going to get the land yet. You'll have to wait.

You'll have to wait because these are days of grace for these nations, in effect, is what was said. But what happened? These nations sinned away their days of grace. And God's judgment came upon them for their sin, immorality and idolatry.

[20 : 38] This is fair justice by God. It is not the punishment of innocence, but rather deserved judgment by a holy God. Maybe this jars with us still.

But the same principle applies in the New Testament. God has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he's appointed, Jesus Christ. Jesus, when he returns, will judge all people.

In a way similar to Israel exercising God's judgment, in the future Jesus exercises God's judgment. And he will judge us and all people. In the Old Testament, Israel is the agent of God's judgment.

The people of God are no longer the agent of God's judgment. Jesus has that right and him alone. And yes, the days that we live in now are also days of mercy.

God's extending the time before Jesus returns in order to give people opportunity to repent of their sins and turn to God. But one day that time will run out.

[21 : 42] One day Jesus will return. And one day he will judge us and all people who've ever lived. And then the times run out. Then mercy ends and justice begins. And so the destruction of the nations by Israel in the Old Testament ought to be a warning to us.

It ought to be a warning to us to make sure that we are right with God. That we've repented of our sins and exercised faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. And it ought also to be an encouragement to us.

That our friends, our colleagues, our families, our husbands, our wives, our parents, our children. That we use this time before Jesus returns to encourage them to come to the Lord Jesus Christ with faith and repentance.

Because one day he'll come and one day he'll judge. And the days of grace will come to an end. It's a somber warning. But it's true. For God in both Old and New Testaments is the judge of the world.

And though in the Old and the New he may judge in slightly different ways. Nonetheless he is judge. A holy judge of all peoples. And all of us, like those nations that were defeated, will be called before the judgment seat of Christ.

[22 : 50] Maybe we don't like the idea of God being a judge. But it's written on every page of the Bible. We cannot get it out of the Bible. That God is a holy judge.

Yes, a God of love and mercy and grace and forgiveness. But nonetheless a holy judge. And what would be lost if God were not a holy judge? If God were not going to judge our lives, then what we did didn't matter.

What I do doesn't matter if God's not going to judge me. I could do whatever I like and it wouldn't matter. What sort of God would that be? Not a God worth worshipping at all. A God whose mercy and grace is nonsense if he's not going to judge in holiness and with justice.

And if God is not a holy judge, then he's not moral. He doesn't have any standards worth following. And in the end, if he's not a holy judge, then Jesus died in vain.

And the cross was absolute folly. But of course it's not. Because God is holy. And as he judged the Amorites, the Hittites, the Hivites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites and so on, so one day will he judge us.

[24 : 04] The other theme that carries over for us from this passage and related to judgment is holiness.

This passage in Deuteronomy 20 recognizes the power of sin to contaminate. That if Israel were to tolerate the nations living in their own land, then they would be seduced by their sin, their idolatry and their immorality.

There's no suggestion that Israel is invulnerable to that. Just because they're the people of God doesn't make them safe from sin. And the same sort of warnings are held out in the New Testament as well.

That none of us is safe from sin. All of us are sinners and all of us are vulnerable to sin and temptation. So Jesus says if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off. Speaking of course metaphorically, otherwise we'd be dismembered bodies all over the place.

But metaphorically he's showing how serious sin is and how seriously we must take the quest for holiness. Paul wrote flee immorality, flee idolatry, flee sin.

[25 : 08] Don't court it. Don't be tempted by it. Don't think that you're safe and secure. If you're engaged with people, friends, colleagues, relationships that are seducing you to sinful behavior, whether in swearing or gambling or sexual immorality or whatever, stop it, stop the relationships, flee the immorality and flee the sin.

Because none of us is safe and secure from the temptations of sin in this world. Israel was to exercise their holiness in geographical separation from the world.

We're not. We're scattered amongst the nations. We live in all sorts of different nations as Christian people around this world. But nonetheless the demand for uncompromising holiness applies to us as well. Flee sin.

If your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off. Because the quest for holiness must drive us all. The demands of God are perfect and apply to each one of us.

We ought not play with fire for we will get burned. But be encouraged. Be encouraged because God has promised us an inheritance in heaven.

[26 : 13] Kept for us. Guarded for us. In fact we also are guarded so that one day we all will receive that inheritance in heaven. Because God is gracious and God is faithful to his promises.

And our quest for holiness, our striving to be perfect and blameless in the sight of God, we don't do on our own but we do in the strength of God. That's real warfare. That's real spiritual warfare.

Spiritual warfare is not an unreal thing. It's actually real, tangible and physical. Because in our lives as Christians we are to keep on exercising a fight. A fight to be pure and holy.

To resist the temptations of sin. So that when Jesus does return and we stand before his judgment seat, we'll be able to stand because of the grace and mercy of God, pure and holy in his sight.

Because God who promised is faithful.