



CHRISTADELPHIAN ISOLATION LEAGUE

EXHORTATION

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SECTION LEADER:

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Readings: Deuteronomy 20, Ecclesiastes 12, Acts 11, 12

If God is For Us

God has always been a God of love. The book of Deuteronomy clearly shows this. In many ways the law of God is also challenging. While we see the care of God, it also demands faith of a surprisingly high level. Today's chapter in **Deuteronomy 20** is a good example of this. On first reading we might be tempted to dismiss it as not applying to us, as we are a small group of believers who do not make war against others. In fact, it seems to be in contradiction to the Lord Jesus' command to love our enemies. We find, however, that even though the letter of the law doesn't apply to us, there are useful lessons looking at the spirit of the law.

The chapter begins with a request not to be afraid when faced with enemies greater than ourselves. That's a lot easier said than done. If you know that you are hopelessly outnumbered it is difficult not to fear. In the same verse God gives a reason why we should have confidence: "*for the LORD your God is with you*" (**Deuteronomy 20:1** ESV). The encouragement is repeated in **verse 4**; fear not: "*...for the LORD your God is he who goes with you to fight for you against your enemies, to give you the victory.*" The real question is, can we believe this when it is put to the test? This is where faith comes in and why this law is challenging.

From a human point of view the next verses are confusing because it appears that they give people a list of excuses not to fight in the battle. Sorry, I've just built a house, the vineyard has just been planted, I've just got married... (**vs5-7**). The next verse (**v8**) is even more surprising. What army would actively encourage the fearful to go home?! Usually, when soldiers turn from the fight, we call it desertion, which is punished severely (often with death), but here the ones who are afraid are sent home and no questions asked. This is remarkable because you can only do that if you are absolutely certain that you are still going to win and you don't actually need every man, because God is with you. That is a level of faith we often fail to reach.

How can we develop such a faith in God, that we are willing to put our lives in his hand to this extent? The answer lies in experience. If we consider carefully, most of us will be able to think of times in our lives when God was at work. When God gave this law through Moses, the Israelites had already had an experience when they were faced with an enemy far stronger than they were. When Israel came out of Egypt they were pursued by the Egyptian army (**Exodus 14**). Suddenly they found themselves stuck with the Egyptians behind them and the Red Sea in front and nowhere to go and they were greatly afraid (**v10**). Moses' response is worth thinking about: "*Fear not, stand firm, and see the salvation of the LORD, which he will work for you today... The LORD will fight for you.*" (**Exodus 14:13, 14**). And He did. As we well know, God provided a wholly unexpected solution. Moses lifted up his staff and the waters parted to let the Israelites through, but when the Egyptians followed the waters rushed back and Israel's enemies were defeated.

There is no enemy too big, no problem too great that God does not have a solution to it, even if we can't see it. But can we develop a faith which stands firm, knowing that God will fight and provide salvation for us? Let us use our own experience as well as God's word to strengthen our faith. The scriptures are full of examples of such faith in adversity. The most famous is perhaps David and Goliath. David should have been terrified, but he had full faith in the ability of God to help him. David draws on his own experience to strengthen his faith (**1 Samuel 17:32-37**), because God has helped him in the past (**v37**): "*The LORD who delivered me from the paw of the lion and from the*

paw of the bear will deliver me from the hand of this Philistine". Notice how he says that God, not his own strength, was the reason for his success: *"This day the LORD will deliver you into my hand... the LORD saves not with sword and spear. For the battle is the LORD's, and he will give you into our hand."* (**1 Samuel 17:46, 47**). Can we see the parallels to **Deuteronomy 20:4** and **Exodus 14:14**? God will fight for us!

Yet, there may be a problem here. On the one hand we are thrilled to see the faith displayed here, but on the other hand, we might feel inadequate because we are often not like David. It is worth remembering that the fearful are not condemned in God's law. It should much rather give us confidence that even though we may fall short, God will step in to help us out.

I'd like to share another example with you where, at least at first, there was great fear. It's the story of king Jehoshaphat of Judah in **2 Chronicles 20** where he is faced with a mighty invading army. **Verse 1** introduces the invaders and **verse 2** describes them as: *"a great multitude."* The king's first reaction is fear (**v3**) and in **v12** he says: *"we are powerless against this great horde that is coming against us. We do not know what to do..."* He feels he has no chance, so what does he do? In the face of fear, he turns to God (**v3** again)! Then he encourages all of Judah to follow his example in **verses 3, 4**. From **verse 6** down to **verse 12** he now prays a beautiful prayer acknowledging the Almighty's power and reminding God of His own promises. Finally, Jehoshaphat admits that he has no answer, but he knows that God has, **v12**: *"...We do not know what to do, but our eyes are on you."* God's answer comes through a Levite in the assembly and it is remarkable: *"Do not be afraid and do not be dismayed at this great horde, for the battle is not yours but God's."* (**v15**). We have heard this before in **1 Samuel 17:47**! He repeats the assurance in **verse 17**, and again it sounds familiar: *"You will not need to fight in this battle. Stand firm, hold your position, and see the salvation of the LORD on your behalf."* Twice in **verses 15-17** God says he will deal with the problem, but he also says twice that they must go down to face their enemies. There is an important lesson here. God will help us if we ask him, but we must face our trials, we cannot hide or run away (think of Jonah).

Who then are our enemies? There may be people in our lives who really mean us harm and God will help us to deal with them if we ask Him. But at the same time, we need to seek to love them as the Lord has commanded us and seek their welfare (**Luke 6:27,28; Romans 12:14-21**). Often our worst enemies are our own sins, our weaknesses, our thoughtlessness, when we are lukewarm (see **Revelation 3:16**). Our battle is in our minds!

The apostle Paul talks about this struggle in his letters. In **1 Timothy 6:12** we are told to: *"fight the good fight of faith."* In **Colossians 3:2** he says: *"set your minds on things that are above"* and to: *"put to death therefore what is earthly in you"* (**v5**). In **2 Corinthians 10:3** he says we don't wage a 'normal' war, but we: *"destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ"* (**v5**). In **Ephesians 6** the soldier of Christ is described, whose armour is so different from that of an ordinary soldier. Paul says that we have a battle to fight, but God will still help us in our struggles if we are willing to put our trust in Him and face our 'enemies' head-on.

The beauty of this is that in some way the victory is already won. Where we have failed and continue to fail, the Lord Jesus Christ has not! He fought sin and temptation all his life, never giving in and has won the victory, which we can share in and we remember that now in Bread and Wine. Just like his Heavenly Father, he cared for his own and he still cares for us.

"If God is for us, who can be against us? ... Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?... in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life... nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." (**Romans 8:31, 35, 37-39**).