

“The Battle is the Lord’s”
Deuteronomy 20:1-9
September 7, 2025
Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service
Pastor Nicoletti

The Reading of the Word

As we enter the fall season, we return this morning to our series in Deuteronomy ... and as we do, it might be helpful to review our morning sermon annual calendar here at Faith.

For the last few years, in our morning sermons, we’ve followed a rotating system through different portions of Scripture during different seasons of the year. We still work through whole books of the Bible, but at the end of each season, we pause the series in the book we’ve been in during that portion of the year, and then, the next year, when we’re back at the beginning of that season, we pick up in that book right where we left off. From September to Christmas, we’ve been in the Old Testament – and the last few years we’ve been working through the Book of Deuteronomy. From January to around Easter we’ve been in a gospel – currently the Gospel of Mark. And from Easter to the end of the summer, we’ve been in a letter from the New Testament – most recently Philippians.

And so, as we enter September, we’re pausing our series in Philippians (we’ll return to it next spring), and we return now, right where we left off at the end of last year, in the Book of Deuteronomy.

As Deuteronomy begins, God has already rescued his people from Egypt – a military superpower of their day. By his power and might he has freed his people, and re-established his relationship with them, so that they will be his people and he will be their God. Then, after providing for them in the wilderness for a generation, God has now brought his people to the edge of the land that he has promised them.

And so, in the Book of Deuteronomy Moses and Israel are standing on the verge of the Promised Land. And before Moses leaves them, and Israel enters in, Moses is instructing the people, one last time, in how they should live their lives as God’s people.

Now, within Deuteronomy, as we come to chapter 20, we come to a series of passages on how Israel was to approach warfare and battle.

And so, with that in mind, let’s turn to our text now: Deuteronomy 20:1-19.

Please do listen carefully, for this is God’s word for us this morning.

Moses said to the people:

^{20:1} “When you go out to war against your enemies, and see horses and chariots and an army larger than your own, you shall not be afraid of them, for the LORD your God [Yahweh your God] is with you, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt. ² And when you draw near to the battle, the priest shall come forward and speak to the people ³ and shall say to them, ‘Hear, O Israel, today you are drawing near for battle against your enemies: let not your heart faint. Do not fear or

panic or be in dread of them, ⁴for Yahweh your God is he who goes with you to fight for you against your enemies, to give you the victory.’ ⁵Then the officers shall speak to the people, saying, ‘Is there any man who has built a new house and has not dedicated it? Let him go back to his house, lest he die in the battle and another man dedicate it. ⁶And is there any man who has planted a vineyard and has not enjoyed its fruit? Let him go back to his house, lest he die in the battle and another man enjoy its fruit. ⁷And is there any man who has betrothed a wife and has not taken her? Let him go back to his house, lest he die in the battle and another man take her.’ ⁸And the officers shall speak further to the people, and say, ‘Is there any man who is fearful and fainthearted? Let him go back to his house, lest he make the heart of his fellows melt like his own.’ ⁹And when the officers have finished speaking to the people, then commanders shall be appointed at the head of the people.”

This is the word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.)

“All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever.” [1 Peter 1:24-25]

Let’s pray ...

Prayer of Illumination

Lord, our soul clings to the dust,
and we ask you to give us life according to your word!
Teach us your ways,
help us understand your precepts,
make us to meditate on your works.
Help us to cling to your testimonies,
and enlarge our hearts,
that we may run in your ways.
In Jesus’s name. Amen.
[Based on Psalm 119:25-32]

Introduction

There are a couple things going on in our text, and so we’ll actually spend two Sundays on it. In the first half, Moses focuses on where Israel’s confidence should be as they go into battle. Then, in verses 5-7 Moses exempts some men from battle based on, what might be to us, some unexpected reasons.

Next week we’re going to look more closely at the reasons God excludes some men from battle rather than others in verses 5-7.

But this morning our focus will be on what Moses has to say about where Israel’s confidence should be as they prepare to go into battle.

And as we look at that theme in this text, what we see is that: Though we are prone to fear when our enemies are stronger than we are, the most important battles we face are not won by our strength, but by the Lord's strength, and he is with us.

Let me say that again: Though we are prone to fear when our enemies are stronger than we are, the most important battles we face are not won by our strength, but by the Lord's strength, and he is with us.

Let's break that down together.

We Are Prone to Fear When Our Enemies Are Stronger Than We Are

First, we see that Moses is addressing the reality that we are prone to fear when our enemies are stronger than we are.

That's what we see in verse one. Moses here is addressing situations when Israel will be tempted to be fearful.

And while Moses is going to tell the people not to be afraid ... at the very same time he is clear that the thing they are afraid of is very real.

In other words, Moses doesn't say that when Israel is fearful here it's because they've exaggerated the threat that's before them, because Israel's enemies really were stronger than they were.

Moses says, in verse one, "When you go out to war against your enemies, and see horses and chariots and an army larger than your own."

Horses and chariots were powerful weapons of war – representing strength and technology on the battlefield. Israel's enemies would have them. But Israel at this time did not. In terms of weaponry and military equipment, Israel would be outgunned.

And if that alone were not enough, they'd also be outnumbered – the enemy's army, Moses says, would be larger than their own.

And in that moment, Moses says – they would be prone to fear, and to panic, and to dread, as we read in verse three.

We can sometimes have fears and anxieties that are not rooted in the reality of our earthly situation, but that come instead from our own minds. And when that's the case – when our fears and anxieties are in our head – then often what's needed is for us to see our earthly situation more clearly.

But that's not the kind of situation Moses is addressing here. When discussing the kind of enemies Israel will face, Moses doesn't say to the people: "Take a good look at them: They're not really so tough. They're not really so big. They're not really so strong." He doesn't minimize the threat or downplay the power of the hostile forces. Far from that, he tells the people matter-of-factly: you will face enemies, and they will be bigger, and stronger, and better equipped you are. That will really be the situation. And in that moment ... you will be prone to fear.

Moses is addressing moments when we are prone to fear because our enemies really are stronger than we are.

Our Most Important Battles Are Not Won by Our Strength

And as he addresses those situations, the first thing he reminds them is that our most important battles are not won by our own strength.

Though we are prone to fear when our enemies are stronger than we are, the most important battles we face are not won by our strength.

And that's one thing that we, in our particular cultural setting, have a tendency to forget.

You can see it in how we talk to one another when someone is facing a real challenge or hardship.

When we are trying to encourage someone else ... when someone we care about is facing a difficult or even a hostile situation, so often our response is to say something to inflate and puff up their perception of their own strength to overcome the challenge.

"You can do it." "I believe in you." "You got this."

Now look ... there's a place for "you got this" when someone truly has underestimated their own skills or strength or abilities.

But when someone really is outgunned and outmatched ... when someone can't really win the battle in front of them with their own strength ... in those moments ... "You got this" is not helpful. If you say it, and they're smart enough know you're wrong, they'll just be discouraged ... and if they're dumb enough to believe you, they'll be delusional and overconfident.

I think it bothers us, as go-get-'em, high-self-esteem, achievement-oriented, self-sufficient Americans to acknowledge that sometimes we are truly outmatched.

Every part of us wants to push back against that idea – to insist that we really have what it takes to overcome any problem, or any challenge, or any enemy that we might face.

But Moses doesn't make that mistake.

Notice what Moses doesn't say here. He doesn't say "They're bigger ... but we're smarter." He doesn't say "They're better equipped ... but we're more crafty." He doesn't say "They've got horses, but you guys are so tough, you don't even need horses." He doesn't say "I believe in you." He doesn't say "You got this."

He doesn't tell them that their strength will get them the victory. In fact, in verse four he says the opposite.

And to drive that point home, Moses tells them in verses 5-8 specific ways to reduce their own strength, proving even more clearly that whatever wins the battle, it won't be their strength.

Moses doesn't urge them to put their confidence in their own strength. Far from that, he makes It clear that their victory will not come by their own strength.

Though we are prone to fear when our enemies are stronger than we are, Moses reminds us here that the most important battles we face are not won by our strength.

Our Most Important Battles Are Won by the Lord's Strength, and He Is With Us

So ... Moses won't minimize the strength of Israel's enemies ... he also won't puff up or overstate the strength of Israel itself ... so where then is Israel to find hope? Where are we to find hope when our enemies are stronger than we are?

Moses answers clearly. He tells them that their hope for victory lies in the fact that the Lord is with them, and he will win the battle.

Moses says it in verse one: "you shall not be afraid of them, for Yahweh your God is with you." He says it again in verses three and four: "Do not fear or panic or be in dread of them, for Yahweh your God is he who goes with you." God is with his people.

And God is not there as a mere spectator. As Moses says in verse four, the Lord goes with you, he says, "to fight against your enemies, to give you the victory."

Israel was called on to act. They were called on to take up their arms, to enter the battlefield, to fight their enemies. But it would be the Lord – it would be Yahweh – it would be his strength and his power that would give them the victory.

You might think of it like this.

Imagine a nine-year-old boy challenges his five-year-old little brother to a tug of war. And the nine-year-old, he's taller than his little brother. He's stronger than his little brother. And he decides ... as older siblings sometimes do ... to rub that in with his little brother – to give the younger brother a little reminder of the older brother's superior physical strength ... and to get a little laugh out of it at his little brother's expense along the way.

So, he gets out their small, kiddie wading pool, and fills it with water. He gets a thick rope from the garage, and he lays it out flat in the backyard, with the wading pool right in the middle. And he challenges his little brother to a tug of war. The rope is long, but they won't grab it at the very end, they'll each just grab it a few feet from the kiddie pool. And then they'll each pull, he explains, until one of them has fallen into the pool.

But before they start, their father comes outside to watch. After talking to them both, their father stands a few feet behind the five-year old right before they begin.

And the boys start pulling. And right off the bat the five-year-old is yanked a couple feet forward, closer to the kiddie pool, and the nine-year-old lets out a shout of glee. Just a few more seconds, he figures, and he should have his little brother falling into that pool.

But then, just as the five-year-old approaches the edge of the pool, the rope stops moving. The five-year-old doesn't seem to go any closer. The older brothers were surprised. He pulls harder and harder, but the rope and the five-year-old don't budge.

But it's not because the five-year-old has gotten a burst of strength. You see, right before the tug-of-war, the father took the five-year-old aside and told him that he was going to help him win. And so, the five-year-old went out with confidence.

And while the five-year-old's confidence – his faith – was important ... that wasn't the source of the sudden strength at his end of the rope. The source of the strength came from the fact that when the father took up his position behind the five-year-old, he also, very quietly, slipped his foot into the loop at the end of the rope ... which was on the ground, behind the five-year-old. And so, after giving just a couple feet, the rope pulled tight against the father's ankle, halting the nine-year-old's progress, and preventing the five-year-old's quick defeat.

But the nine-year-old hadn't noticed.

At first the two boys struggled on, without the rope budging.

Until the father, quietly, takes a step back with the leg that has the rope looped around it.

And suddenly, with that step, the five-year-old gains a foot of distance from the little kiddie pool, and his older, bigger, stronger, nine-year-old brother is pulled one step closer to the water. And then it happened again. And again.

Until finally, with a look of shock on his face, the nine-year-old tumbles into the kiddie pool, soaked with water, and utterly baffled by what has happened. And at the same time, the smaller five-year-old turns around, looks at his father ... and bursts into joyous laughter over "their" victory.

The nine-year-old was bigger than the five-year-old – no question. But both were comically puny compared with their big, strong father. It was the father's strength that won the victory. The five-year-old just needed to trust his father and enter the battle.

And that's what Moses is calling Israel to here.

Of course, they're dealing with a real, deadly military battle, not a backyard tug-of-war. But even so, it will only be by their Father's strength that they will win.

And the same is true for us. As we face our enemies and opponents in this life, as they pull us towards apparent defeat, our Father tells us that he is with us. He tells us that we will not hold the rope alone ... but he will have a hold on it as well. And however, things may look at the start, or the middle, of the battle ... by the end, it will be clear that he was fighting for us ... and he will give us the victory.

We engage in the battle ... but at the end of the day, it will not be our strength that secures the victory. But the Lord is with us, and he will win the battle.

That's what we see here in our text.

Though we are prone to fear when our enemies are stronger than we are, the most important battles we face are not won by our strength, but by the Lord's strength, and he is with us.

And this biblical truth plays out in our lives in a number of ways.

Let's just briefly consider a few.

Implications for Our Eternal Life

First, and most importantly, this biblical truth plays out when it comes to our relationship with God, and our place in eternity.

In that way, the truth in our text this morning is at the very heart of the gospel itself.

The Bible says that every person who truly knows themselves ... who knows their own heart ... who knows their own mind ... knows that there are enemies within them: dark enemies ... powerful enemies ... numerous enemies ... well equipped enemies – they know there are enemies within them that they themselves cannot overcome ... and the presence and the power of those enemies within them, makes them unfit to stand in the presence of God – to be with him for eternity.

There is sin in us ... and selfishness in us ... ugly and self-centered desires ... cruel and hateful thoughts ... dark and twisted forces within us that make us unfit for the presence of a holy God for even a moment – let alone for an eternity. And we are powerless in ourselves to conquer these enemies.

Like Israel, on our own, we are outnumbered and outgunned against these enemies within.

And some of us try to downplay the threat. We tell ourselves that the powers of darkness within us are not that strong ... they're not that dominant ... they're not that numerous ... we tell ourselves that ... but we know, deep down that the darkness – what the Bible calls our sin – is powerful.

Others of us try to tell ourselves that though our sin may be strong, we are even stronger. And we can overcome it. We can do it. We can build up our own goodness, we can pile up our own good deeds, we can work hard and work smart and overcome the powers of darkness in our heart to make ourselves good enough, and right enough, and clean enough. We got this.

But again and again, we're reminded that we don't. We're not strong enough. We're not good enough. We're not clean enough. We may try. But our sin remains. We don't got this.

But God does.

God is stronger than the darkness inside us. God is stronger than our sin. And God can save us from our sin and guilt.

If you're not a Christian, and you call on the Lord, then he will be with you. And just as he did with Israel, once he is with you, he will go with you to fight against your enemies – first and

foremost against your sin and guilt, against everything that would keep you from the presence of God. And he will give you the victory.

That is what Jesus did in his death and resurrection: he drew close to us, he entered into battle with our sin and guilt, and he walked out of the tomb victorious. And now, when we trust in him, he shares that victory with us.

It's through that victory that we can be made right with God and spend eternity in his presence.

If you're not a Christian, then you need to know that.

And if you are a Christian already ... then you need to make sure that you don't forget that.

We see that in our text as well.

Right there in verse one, at the very beginning, God reminds them that he is the Lord – he is Yahweh, their God – he is the one who brought them up out of the land of Egypt.

God had saved them when they could not save themselves. God had defeated their enemies when they were helpless slaves. And if they forgot that ... then they would fail to move forward, and advance as they faced the new challenges that the Lord would put before them.

And the same is true for us. God has saved us when we could not save ourselves. God defeated our enemies – sin, and death, and the powers of darkness – when we were still slaves. He freed us, not by our power, but by his. And if we forget that ... then we too will not move forward in Christian life or in spiritual maturity.

When our enemies are stronger than we are, we need not fear, because the Lord is with us, and he will win the battle.

Most foundationally, that truth applies to our relationship with God, and our place in eternity.

Implications for Our Spiritual Life Now

But the application of that truth doesn't end there. Because it also applies to how we live our spiritual life now, in the present.

Because also in our ongoing spiritual life, when our enemies are stronger than we are, we need not fear, because the Lord is with us, and he will win the battle.

When it comes to our ongoing discipleship ... our spiritual growth, our sanctification, our growth in Christian maturity, our growth in wisdom – when it comes to these daily battles we face as we fight against our remaining sin, our remaining foolishness, or remaining immaturity – when it comes to these battles ... we sometimes act as if, though God saved us initially, after that, in the ongoing battles of the Christian life, we're on our own. That depends on our strength.

But that's not how our God cares for his people.

Just as he didn't save Israel from Egypt just to leave them on their own, to fight off the Canaanites on their own, so he does not save us from condemnation just to leave us to fight out the struggles of the Christian life all on our own.

God remains with us. And God continues to work.

C.S. Lewis puts it like this. He explains that when we follow Jesus, we don't just apply his teachings to our life on our own. No. Far from that, he writes, the Bible teaches us that "a real Person, Christ, here and now, in that very room where you are saying your prayers, is doing things to you. It is not a question of a good man who died two thousand years ago. It is a living Man, still as much a man as you, and still as much God as He was when He created the world, really coming and interfering with your very self; killing the old natural self in you and replacing it with the kind of self He has. At first, only for moments. Then for longer periods." [Lewis, 165]

In other words, as much as we are called to be active – as much as we are called to fight our sin – even so, our spiritual growth is not accomplished by our strength. But Jesus really is with us. He really is active. And he will grow us, he will mature us, as we battle with our sin and our folly.

And so, no matter how strong our sin may seem, as we go to battle with it, we need not fear. We need not panic. We need not despair. Instead, we can fight with confidence – not in our strength, but in the Lord's. Because he is with us. And he is working. And he will conquer our sin.

In our spiritual life now, when our enemies are stronger than we are, we need not fear, because the Lord is with us, and he will win the battle.

Implications for Our Life as the Church

Finally, this same biblical truth plays out also in our life together as the Church.

Far too often, when we look at the challenges we face as God's people ... whether those challenges are internal, and within the church (like: how we will raise our covenant children, or how we will disciple new believers, or how we will heal the divisions between God's people, or how we will guard against false teaching, or how we will combat coldness or hypocrisy) – whether those challenges are internal, within the church ... or whether those challenges are external, outside the church (like: how we will withstand a hostile, unbelieving culture, or how we will share the gospel with resistant and unbelieving loved ones, or how we will withstand the assaults and temptations to greed and lust and cruelty that are so prevalent all around us) – whether the challenges we consider are internal, or external ... far too often we speak and think and act as if it's all up to us, and our strength to combat them ... far too often we act as if God is just a spectator ... standing on the sideline ... watching to see how we'll do.

But that's not what our God is like. We serve a God who is with his people on the battlefield. We serve a God who fights for his people.

We worship a God who – whether we see it or not, whether it feels true or not – when the tug-of-war begins, he's already placed his foot in the loop in the rope behind us, anchoring it, and ensured our ultimate safety and our final victory.

There may be back and forth. There may be strain and suffering. But he will not let go. He will not allow us to be destroyed. He will neither leave us nor forsake us. The gates of hell will not prevail against his Church or his people.

Conclusion

Brothers and sisters, what are you fearful of? What is causing you to panic? What are you in dread over?

Our text this morning reminds us that in those very moments, God is with us. And he is stronger than any enemy who will stand against us.

And so ... when you face conflict and battle, when you go to war with the enemies of God and the enemies of your soul ... when you see that your enemies' numbers are larger than yours, and their power and strength is greater than yours ... do not be afraid.

Do not fear, or panic, or be in dread.

For the Lord your God is with you.

He goes with you, to fight for you against your enemies.

And he will give you the victory.

Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

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Millar, J. Gary. *Now Choose Life: Theology and Ethics in Deuteronomy*. Downers Grove, IL: Apollos, 1998.

Theopolis Podcast. "Episode 685: Wars and Just Wars (Deuteronomy 20)" November 15, 2023. <https://soundcloud.com/user-812874628/episode-685-wars-and-just-wars-deuteronomy-20>

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Note: In my preaching I often cite and draw from a range of sources, which includes material from Christians within my theological tradition, Christians outside my theological tradition (in keeping with our church's core value of "Reformed Catholicity"), and also (following the Apostle Paul's example in Acts 17) non-Christians who are well outside of Christian orthodoxy and orthopraxy. And so, when I cite an author or a source, that citation should not be understood or construed as me necessarily agreeing with, endorsing, or recommending to others anything else from that author or source, except for what I explicitly say I agree with, endorse, or recommend. When engaging with different materials and thinkers, all Christians must exercise wisdom and discernment to

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