

Cherishing the Breath of Life: 2. Honourable Justice - in a World at War with God

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[0 : 00] Good, well let's turn to our Bible reading now, which is in Deuteronomy chapter 20, the whole of chapter 20. As you know, Willie has been preaching through this great book of Deuteronomy for some weeks now, and this is our passage for today. You'll see that it's headed, Laws Concerning Warfare.

You'll find us on page 162 in the Hardback Bible, page 162. So the Lord is speaking here, and Moses is to pass on these instructions to the people of Israel.

So Deuteronomy chapter 20. 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 is with you, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt.

And when you draw near to the battle, the priest shall come forward and speak to the people, 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, for the Lord your God is he who goes with you to fight for you against your enemies, to give you the victory.

[1 : 18] Literally, the meaning is he is with you to save you. Then 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. And 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.

And 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. And the officers shall speak further to the people and say, Is there any man who is fearful and faint-hearted?

Let him go back to his house, lest he make the heart of his fellows melt like his own. And when the officers are finished speaking to the people, Then commanders shall be appointed at the head of the people.

When you draw near to a city to fight against it, offer terms of peace to it. And if it responds to you peaceably and it opens to you, Then all the people who are found in it shall do forced labor for you and shall serve you.

[2 : 31] But if it makes no peace with you, 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.

But the women and the little ones, the livestock and everything else in the city, All its spoil you shall take as plunder for yourselves. And you shall enjoy the spoil of your enemies, which the Lord your God has given you.

Thus you shall do to all the cities that are very far from you, Which are not cities of the nations here. But in the cities of these peoples that the Lord your God is giving you for an inheritance, You shall save alive nothing that breathes, but you shall devote them to complete destruction.

The Hittites and the Amorites, the Canaanites and the Perizzites, The Hivites and the Jebusites, as the Lord your God has commanded. That they may not teach you to do according to all their abominable practices That they have done for their gods.

And so you sin against the Lord your God. When you besiege a city for a long time, making war against it in order to take it, You shall not destroy its trees by wielding an axe against them.

[3 : 41] You may eat from them, but you shall not cut them down. Are the trees in the field human, that they should be besieged by you? Only the trees that you know are not trees for food you may destroy and cut down, That you may build siege works against the city that makes war with you until it falls.

Amen. This is the word of the Lord and may it be a blessing to us this morning. Do turn, if you would, with me to Deuteronomy chapter 20, page 162 in the Blue Church Bibles.

Now these chapters, as we said last week, are all about the great concern for life. And our God is the God of life.

And his kingdom is the realm of life, of true life. Life that is lived in his presence and in his joy. And his kingdom is all about the reversal of death.

The reversal of the separation from life. That is the consequence of human rebellion against him. The biggest manifestation of that, the most obvious thing for us, is of our physical death, which separates us from our earthly life, separates us from all other human beings who are made in the image of God.

[5 : 06] And of course, that itself is but a shadow of the everlasting reality of the separation from the life of God for all eternity. That is the consequence of our sin.

So God hates death because of that. But the paradox, you see, is that God is at war with death, seeking to reverse the curse of death upon man, while the world is at war against him.

The world is fighting against the advance of God's kingdom of life, which is the only hope for reversal of death in this world, has been from the very beginning. Because, as the Bible tells us, the devil who wields the power of death over man and his sin has blinded the eyes of human beings, blinded us to the reality, holding them in slavery as enemies of God, instead of being seekers of God.

And so, you see, for God's kingdom people, for those of us who have had their eyes open to his life, who have embraced his life, we find that that life now involves us also in a life of warfare.

We face many battles for the kingdom as it advances against the forces of sin and of evil and of death in this world. And that is so in every age for God's people.

[6 : 27] And that's why we have this chapter in front of us today. We won't understand this chapter properly or indeed at all, unless we see that it's not really a manual for military operations, but rather like all the other chapters that surround it, it gives us guiding principles for life as God's kingdom people, and for how kingdom people are to cherish and preserve that life that is so precious to God, even in times when battles and real warfare are to the fore.

As I've said, although at that time in Canaan, it was real physical warfare, it wasn't even then just ordinary war. This was essential kingdom warfare, which is the same warfare that God's people are involved in in every age.

Although, of course, it will take very different forms in the different ages of the history of God's saving purpose. That's why a chapter like this is so very relevant for us today, because the same principles that are enunciated here will hold true for every single battle in the church's life and for Christian people all through the ages, including in our own age.

Now, weapons, of course, are very different. The New Testament is plain about that. The weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, says Paul. We are not waging war in the flesh today. We're very clear about that.

No, our weapon, he says, is the gospel, which is indeed very powerful to demolish all strongholds of opposition against God, to take captive the thoughts of enemy hearts, to bring them to obedience to Christ.

[8 : 07] But it's not that our battles, therefore, are merely internal things within us. No, Paul is very clear, isn't he? He speaks about very real external battles for the gospel.

He fought wild beasts in Ephesus. That's pretty physical. But, of course, later he writes to the Ephesians, doesn't he, and talks about those battles, but says to them that behind every one of these earthly battles is the great heavenly battle.

The struggle that is the battle in the heavenly realms with the cosmic forces which are over this present age of darkness. That is, every battle that God's people face today on this earth is related to the great battle which is being waged and which is being won through the triumph of our Lord Jesus Christ on all the spiritual forces and all the opposition to his kingdom.

So we need to know how we are to live with the constant realities of that kingdom warfare that will be a feature of our lives. But we also need to remember that such warfare is not an end in itself.

Just as Moses reminds Israel, we need to see that they are but a means to an end. For Israel, that end was possession, it was enjoyment of God's land of life, his land of joy, his land of rest.

[9 : 29] God called them to enjoy his life in his land. And so even necessary God-ordained wars must not eclipse that life, must not squeeze the joy of God's life out of his people and out of his land.

And that's why chapter 20 is here, to insist that there must be honorable justice that fosters life, that cherishes life, even in times of war.

See, love for God and love for our neighbor, cherishing the breath of life as given us by God to enjoy, that mustn't be lost, even though there will be grim realities of warfare that will be featuring in the life of God's people in every age.

So I want us to keep that key principle in mind and its clear message for us as we learn from the detail that this chapter gives us. And it's this, that life for God's people will involve battles for his kingdom right to the end.

That's what Jesus says. But that isn't all of life. And kingdom life and kingdom joy mustn't be eclipsed by kingdom warfare.

[10 : 43] Well, what does that look like in practical reality? Well, I think four things, four key principles are outlined for us in this chapter. First of all, in verses 1 to 4, we're reminded that we must live, especially when facing kingdom battles, we must live with confidence in our weapons and in our true champion.

I don't know about you, but every time I read the news or I read the commentators in our society today, it feels like the forces that are arrayed against the church of Jesus Christ are very strong, are very vast, and very menacing.

We've lived through the relentless assaults of atheistic scientism, people like Richard Dawkins, attacking Christian belief with all the weapons of biology and genetics and so on, and his great war against the God delusion.

How ironic it is, though, that now he seems to be under attack in our post-truth and post-biology world because he has dared to offend some of the new deities in today's West.

The so-called tolerance that in fact wants to silence any free speech and any intolerance of disagreement. You might have read that his talk in California University, I think it was, was cancelled last week because he'd been accused of hate speech, of Islamophobia, because as he has criticized Christianity so much, he dared to criticize Islam.

[12 : 06] And he himself said, I've never been deplatformed anywhere because I've criticized Christianity so much, and yet now I am by criticizing Islam. But you see, you can't be Islamophobic and survive the Western Christian tolerance police today, or homophobic, or transgender phobic.

And today as Christians, we face increasing pressure if we dare to even express personal opinions that just a few years ago would have been considered normal by any sane person. And of course, the sharp point of attack today is in these gender wars.

So much so that again, this week our education secretary has said that she's wanting to make it as easy as ABC to change from being a man to a woman, or from being a woman to a man. And she's been lauded on all the airwaves and treated as a great hero.

Well, at the same time, one of her fellow conservatives came on the radio and said she personally disagreed with that view, was shouted down as a bigot and told Jolt to resign her position. How ironic it is that Professor Dawkins' famous selfish gene, the DNA that is supposed to rule all things and remove the need for God, has now been told, no, sorry DNA, you can't be so selfish as to dare to say that your chromosomes actually decide who is male and who is female.

We're not having that. We know better. Who's fighting against science now? It's not the church, is it? How ironic. Well, whether it's scientism or whether it's genderism or Islamism or whatever ism may be around today, the horses and the chariots that seem to be arrayed against the church of Jesus Christ are vast and very powerful.

[13 : 51] And very often we feel very feeble, don't we? We feel a very tiny minority. If that is, we calculate things in merely human terms. In human terms, the odds must surely be stacked very, very heavily against the survival of the Christian church today.

Isn't that so? But of course, the odds are not merely human, are they? Look at verse 1. You shall not be afraid, says Moses, for the Lord your God is with you.

And here's the one great circumstance that changes all other apparent circumstances. He brought you out of Egypt, says Moses, with all their horses and chariots and Egypt was the superpower of that day.

And so he can defend you against any powers that you might face ever, ever again. That's the point. It was the Lord, it was his powerful word, that was the real chariot and horsemen of Israel.

It's the phrase that Elisha used. Remember, when Elijah was taken up to heaven, the chariots and horsemen of Israel were departing, as he thought, because God's man and who spoke God's word, that was the bulwark of power and authority against every enemy in Israel.

[15 : 07] That's why Psalm 20 says, some trust in chariots and horsemen, but we trust in the name of the Lord, our God. Because we know that the visible powers of this world are utterly outnumbered by the invisible powers of the power of God.

Remember that other Elisha story when Elisha's servant is so terrified at the huge armies of Assyria all surrounding the house until the prophet prays, Lord, open his eyes. And he looks again out of the window and this time he sees not only the horsemen of Assyria but all surrounding them and above them and everywhere the vast hordes of the armies of heaven, the Lord of hosts.

And that's the message here, isn't it? And we must live, especially when we are facing daunting battles against worldly powers, we must live with confidence in our true weapons and in our true champion.

And of course to do that, that means that the most important leadership in God's forces must be not, as here the pronouncements of generals, but the preaching of the gospel. Look at verses 2 to 4.

There's no military sense in that, is there? No common sense in the lead being taken by the priests. The priests, what can they do? But the priests, remember, are the teachers of the true word of God.

[16 : 30] Because it's only the word of God that can truly remind his people of where their true strength and where their true confidence is. In the Lord, he says, who has gone with you to fight for you against your enemies.

Literally, as Edward said, to save you. Our God is a God who is with us to save. Does that sound familiar? He is Emmanuel with us to save.

And with that knowledge, you see, everything is different. Without it, verse 3, it's right. Our hearts would faint. We would panic. But you see, with this glorious gospel truth, we need not fear.

We can be confident. We can be bold in the face of the greatest attack. And that's why the New Testament, you see, tells us that we need exactly the same thing as the people here.

We need the same constant briefing and rebriefing for battle from the truth of the gospel. From our great God, Emmanuel, to remind us that he is with us to save us from our sins.

[17 : 32] That he is with us even to the end of the age, says Jesus. Because every week we go out to war, don't we? For Christ and his kingdom. Every Monday morning, tomorrow morning, you'll go out to work and you can feel faint.

You can feel daunted, very fearful. How much we need this reassurance week by week, day by day, proclaimed from the word of God to remind us where lies our true confidence and our true weapons.

That's why the New Testament tells us we mustn't give up meeting together day by day and week by week as Christians to receive that strengthening. That was why Paul wrote to the Ephesians and urged them to constantly rearm themselves with the armor that comes from the knowledge of the gospel.

That alone is what will extinguish the fiery darts of the evil one. That's what will equip you for the battles that you face as you take again the word of God, the gospel of Christ, wielded with prayer, knowing that therein is the power for his kingdom to advance.

Knowing that therein is the way that we shall bring every thought captive to Christ. There is the victory that overcomes the world, says the Apostle John, in our faith, our faith in the great God who is our champion and who is with us to save.

[19 : 00] And that faith is nurtured in us only as, just like Israel of old, we will hear repeatedly of his greatness and of his nearness to give us victory for his kingdom and for his people.

So we need to keep hearing that again and again from God's word so that we will live, especially when we face real kingdom battles, and we will, so that we will live with full confidence in our true weapons and in our true champion.

So that's the first thing. But second, verses 5 to 10, I think, tell us that we must live even when fighting kingdom battles, we must live with compassion and also realism.

In chapter 28, one of the curses listed for disobedience to God and rebellion against God is this, you shall betroth the wife but another man will ravish her.

You shall build a house but you shall not dwell in it. You shall plant a vineyard but you shall not enjoy its fruit. Exactly the things mentioned here in these verses but the opposite.

[20 : 07] And so surely the point of these verses is very clear that to be one of God's people and to be serving in God's army is not to be seen as a curse. Serving God and even fighting kingdom battles is a duty for God's people but it's not a duty that is to destroy all the delight out of our lives.

I was speaking to a minister this week who was really feeling himself up against it and I was reminding of these verses. Your ministry is not to de-joy your life. Verses 5 to 7 here are full of compassion, aren't they?

And all this is to pertain even when battle service is needed among God's people. Objects of our labor are to be enjoyed whether they're domestic like the house you're building or whether it's professional like the vineyard you've planted.

And service to the Lord, to the God of Israel, service to God and country and not to obliterate the ordinary things in the enjoyment of life because life is what God's land is for.

Warfare is in order that the life of God's land might be known. It's not that the land is to be possessed in order that warfare can be known. Warfare is to enable life not life to enable warfare.

[21 : 26] That's important, isn't it? And God's people need to remember that just as much today. Even when we are in the midst of real kingdom battles which often we are.

There must be compassion. There must be enjoyment in life because the very life that God has given us is not to be utterly emasculated, not to be eclipsed by the demands of battle. And of course for that to be so there must be real faith and real trust in the message of the first four verses.

That it is the Lord who is our real champion. That the promise of victory does really depend on Him and not just solely on us. That's something that's sometimes very difficult for us to remember.

I think especially for those in full-time ministry, especially for senior pastors, you can start to think the whole gospel and the whole kingdom will collapse if we are not running ourselves ragged into the ground for the sake of the gospel.

That's just a failure of faith in God, isn't it? As well as a very dangerous overtrust in ourself and our own abilities. But here's the truth. God can win His battles without our lives having to be utterly destroyed, utterly dejoyed, utterly deprived of all the blessings of our earthly life.

[22 : 43] We need to remember that. We need to remember that as a church too. That's one reason why it is so important for us to prioritize our regular church prayer meetings because that is what reminds us, isn't it?

That it's God who does the work ultimately, not us. And if we forget that, we will deprive ourselves of a great deal of peace and a great deal of joy in our Christian lives.

So there must be compassion even in these battles that have to be fought. But there must also be realism. Notice in verses 5 to 7, three times we are reminded that even in the Lord's army there will be casualties lest He die.

Three times. Just because the Lord will have the victory does not mean that every single Israelite will be unscathed in their earthly battles. That's why alongside this emphasis on compassion lies an understanding of the commitment that is involved in being part of the Lord's kingdom advance.

The Lord Jesus promised His presence and His power to His church right till the end of the age. When He promised that there would be the triumph of His gospel to the very ends of the earth, at the same time, He did also warn us that there would be many who would suffer.

[24 : 01] and some even to the death. And this passage also reminds us that there are casualties in the army of the Lord. And that it is often those who are in the front line who will often suffer most severely, especially when the battle is very hard, when it's very long.

It's one of the one of the most painful things I've seen personally in recent years myself is the toll on the health of many, both physically and mentally, who have had to fight strongly for the battles of the Lord, who have had to go through things that we've had to go through, leaving their denominations and so on for the sake of faithfulness to Christ.

There have been many casualties and great suffering. And so we've got to be realistic, too. Casualties do happen. And so also is cowardice a feature in the battle for the kingdom.

That's surely what verse 8 here is about, the mourning against. And there must be realism. Lest the faint-heartedness of some will sap the morale of others. That's what he's saying here.

You see, God can win his battles no matter how small his army might be. That's the message of the story of Gideon, remember, when so many were sent away. So it's far better to have a smaller, committed, courageous band than one that might be larger, but actually is hampered and weakened by the fearful, by the complainer, by the person who undermines the morale of everybody else.

[25 : 25] That is why, sadly, some of the greatest advances in the life of a church is when there is one or two blessed disjunctions, when one or two people like that actually leave the church.

And the sad truth often is it's only when somebody like that is gone that it becomes clear after a while what an enormous drain on morale they actually were to everybody else. It's very sad, but it's true. So this section surely must have something very important to tell us in the church today in so many ways as we think about how we are to live as God's people in Christ even when we face tough battles.

We must exhibit compassion, but also the realism that is needed if there's going to be real commitment and indeed if there's going to be conquest for the church.

We need to make sure that our Christian service in the church isn't de-joying our lives of all the blessings of God and sucking the life out of us. Marriages matter.

That's what these verses say for one thing, isn't it? We should remember that. So do the natural labors of our hands, our homes, our jobs, our gardens. Even, says Moses, time to enjoy the fruit of the vine, whether for you that's schlur or chardonnay.

[26 : 44] See, some Christians are in danger, aren't they, of forgetting that God is the creator of this world in our lives as well as our Savior and that he's the God who redeems us for life.

The redemption is a means to an end and that end is joy and life in the Father's house. Isn't that what Jesus tells us? So yes, of course, the best is yet to come still and our mission as the church in these days is unquestionably to make disciples of all nations.

That is the mission of the church. But Jesus says we are to teach those disciples the way of the Lord in every way. And he is the Lord after all who said, I have come that they might have life in abundance, not misery and lack of joy and a shriveled life.

So it would be terrible, wouldn't it, if we showed the world a picture of kingdom life that was one of crushed life, joyless life, of a life that is devoid of the very fullness of life that Jesus tells us to proclaim.

But on the other hand, there must be realism. We do need also to recognize that if there is too much fearfulness, too much faint-heartedness about service in the kingdom, too little willingness to fight real battles, perhaps because of divided loyalties, perhaps because of too much indulgence indulgence in life, then likewise the battle will never be fought.

[28 : 15] The New Testament is equally clear on that too, isn't it? Paul says to Timothy in 2 Timothy 2, a real warning about those who are too engaged in the affairs of life that they can't fight the battle of the Lord.

James likewise talks of that double-mindedness of those who are too taken up with earthly desires. Jesus himself warns about putting yourself to the plow and then turning back, looking back, because you're too entangled with all these things of life.

So there needs to be realism, doesn't there? As well as that compassion and commitment to life. And I think that is especially so when the church is considering and thinking about setting people apart for full-time gospel service.

I think the church often has not heeded the warning here of verse 8 nearly enough, and it's led to many a car crash in ministry and in mission. Some people just do not have the temperament, even if they do have many of the gifts for full-time ministry and mission.

And it's far better in that case to say to that person, go back to your house, go back to your secular job, unless actually you do more harm than good by taking this route in life.

[29 : 27] Sometimes in ministry it's a man whose wife is not 100% with him. And that will inevitably mean that he cannot have the kind of ministry that he might otherwise have been able to have had he not been married to that person.

Sometimes it is somebody with just too many interests in life, too many things in their family and their work or whatever it might be that they simply cannot be undistracted. And they will inevitably be distracted and lead to fearfulness and faint-heartedness in their service.

Far better if that is the case to say to that person, go home now. Don't take up this post. We need compassion and we need realism amid the many kingdom battles that we will face in the church today.

And you see, we can be both compassionate, that is, not needing to destroy our lives and also realistic, not deluding ourselves about people because we know that the battle is not ultimately ours, but it is the Lord's and that it is he who fights and he who gives the victory.

The third thing in verses 10 to 18 is that I think we are told here we must live especially when fighting kingdom battles with both discernment and seriousness. The key thing here, I think, is the clear distinction that's made in verses 15 and 16 between the more distant cities and those of the Canaanite tribes in the land which the Lord has already said must be totally devoted to destruction.

[30 : 56] Remember, that's the phrase that speaks particularly of God's final judgment on the utter degradation of the Canaanites with their horrible culture, things like human sacrifice, killing babies and all those awful things.

They must be destroyed, says the Lord. And Israel there was specifically and uniquely God's instrument of judgment on earth to do that. But notice again verse 18 here and the realism there.

Even God's people, he says, were so prone to be infected by such evil that they needed protection against that temptation. That's another reason why these people had to be cast out.

And we need also to take that seriousness about sin as a warning today. If the church isn't clear in that regard, if it allows sin, if it turns a blind eye to sin, then it will surely end up doing great, great damage to the body of Christ.

That's why the New Testament so often picks up precisely this language of holy war about sin in the church. Put to death all that is earthly in you, says Paul repeatedly.

[32 : 07] And so God's people must live with real seriousness about sin always, in every age. But these verses also exhibit real discernment, real discrimination, don't they?

God hates sin, that is plain. But God is also the one who has a burning desire to save sinners. And verses 10 to 14 you see describe a very different attitude towards these more distant cities, these who are outside the land of promise.

To these, the advance of Israel, the advance of God's kingdom is to mean to them an offer of peace, a call to enter into a covenant of peace with Israel and with their God to come under the protection of the one true God.

So only if that offer is rejected, if they choose to fight on against God, only then are they to fight them and destroy them. And even then, verse 14, there's great restraint, there's great mercy.

Do you see? Women and children are not to be killed and raped and so on, they're to be spared. And only the property of the enemies is to be enjoyed as the spoils of war.

[33 : 09] These things are very worth noting because so often people say, oh, the Old Testament is full of rape and pillage, it's an open season on enemies and wanton destruction and so on.

Not so. This is about as different from the ethics of ISIS today as you could possibly be. Listen to what Christopher Wright says.

Without a Geneva Convention, Deuteronomy advocates humane exemptions from combat, requires prior negotiation, prefers non-violence, limits treatment of subject populations, allows for killing of male combatants only, demands humane and dignified treatment of female captives, that's chapter 21 as we'll see later, and insists on ecological restraint.

It's very important to remember that. It's just the facts of the conquest of Canaan. But even more important is that we remember again that this is not ordinary warfare, this is kingdom warfare.

And that is surely the lesson for us in terms of the same battles for the advance of the kingdom today. Our mission, you see, is to offer those far away a covenant of peace through the gospel of Christ.

[34 : 27] To offer peace, to offer protection under his lordship. That is what acceptance of the gospel means. Acceptance of God's protection, acceptance to belong and come under the protection of God's people.

But equally, of course, rejection does mean ultimately God's judgment. And in the end, persistent rejection, persistence defiance of God, refusal of God, persistent wickedness and living so as to be an abomination to God, that ultimately must mean that people put themselves in the same place as these Canaanite tribes under God's judgment.

judgment. There comes a time when the day of mercy is spent and when only judgment can remain. I mean, discernment, Jesus himself speaks plainly, doesn't he?

We're not to go on casting our pearls before swine, he says. There's a time, he says, to shake the dust of your feet as a testimony against those who have refused the gospel to the point of utter hardness.

His apostle John tells us that there is a sin that leads to death when people have hardened themselves repeatedly, persistently against God's offer of peace. That's why he says there comes a time when we're not any longer to pray for such a person because God has given them up to the desire of their own heart.

[35 : 58] They've said to God, we want nothing to do with you, nothing to do with you, go away. And ultimately, the Lord says, well, you shall have what you've desired. It's a chilling thing to read that, isn't it?

It's a very chilling thing to read in Hebrews chapter 6 or Hebrews chapter 10 where the apostle speaks about those who once professed the true faith, who were inside God's professing church, but who have steadfastly departed, steadfastly turned against everything that they once espoused.

And the apostle says, it is impossible to restore such a one to repentance. Why? Because they've crucified all over again the Son of God to their own harm.

Only judgment can await such a one, he says. And we need discernment. We need not naivety, not sentimentality about these things.

There are some, according to the Bible, for whom the offer of peace is withdrawn. I believe that pertains especially to those who have once been teachers and leaders in the church of God who have turned their backs, utterly abandoned the faith that they once believed and taught and now teach the opposite.

[37 : 08] There comes a time when those people, their every influence, their every legacy must be removed from the life of the church so that they don't teach others and lead others to go in that terrible path of apostasy which they themselves have trod.

So we must live especially when we're fighting real kingdom battles with discernment, with real seriousness. But fourthly, and again, just see how balanced God's word is.

Fourthly, we must live, even when we are fighting kingdom battles, we must live also with wisdom and with real humanity. Again, verses 19 and 20 bear very stark contrast to the common spoiling tactics that were so prevalent in the ancient world.

This was unique for its time, this ecological concern. ecological concern. Indeed, it's still very rare today when you think of the sort of scorched earth policies that are so often prosecuted in modern wars.

Now, there is an ecological concern here. There is a principal concern for vegetation, both wild and culture, because it's all part of God's creation. But remember, this is not just ordinary land.

[38 : 20] This is God's promised land, his land of blessing. And so the ecological concerns are principally tied up with preserving that spiritual inheritance of his kingdom.

And behind the concern for trees, of course, is a much more important concern for people. That's why he says in verse 19, you can't eat from these trees of your enemies. Only the trees you can't eat from can you use, if you have to, for prosecution of the battle, for building these siege works and so on.

And even then, not wantonly. You see, so there's a concern that even in the necessary battles for God's kingdom, things we must fight not to leave a legacy of unnecessary destruction which is going to blight the landscape and more importantly, the lives of God's people for a long time afterwards and indeed, the rest of humanity also.

I think that must also be an important thing for us to remember in the church today because sometimes Christians have been too fond of fighting, too fond of fighting battles and they lose sight of the fallout all around and the destruction to the cause because they've often fought wantonly and needlessly.

And sometimes the church's inheritance suffers for a very long time afterwards. Sometimes even battles that have been necessary to fight have been won but in such a way that having won the war the peace has been lost for a very long time afterwards.

[39 : 49] How much gain is there in winning a city if all you're left with is a conqueror, is a smoking ruin and the whole ground has been destroyed by chemical and biological weapons?

And we need wisdom, don't we, as the church? We need common humanity in the way that we do battle for the kingdom today. So as we strive to do as little damage to the church's inheritance in the long term as we possibly can.

Now that is a very hard thing to do and the heat of battle often makes wisdom like that very difficult to evoke. So we do well, don't we, if we think about these things before we charge over the top in a great gospel advance.

Some Christians have done great damage, I think, to the cause of Christ by the way that they've expressed their opposition to the homosexual rights lobby. placards and things saying God hates faggots and all of that.

That just tires the reputation of Christ's church everywhere, doesn't it? It does no good at all. Other Christians, other evangelicals have sometimes been so zealous to combat error that they don't seem to make any distinction between those who are out and out heretics and true enemies of the gospel and those who simply may be mistaken or wrong in certain matters but nevertheless are true believers and are really ultimately on the same side.

[41 : 19] But they just cut them down as though they were all the same kinds of tree as they take swipes at them on their blogs and on their Facebook grants and so on. I don't think that shows wisdom.

I don't think it shows common humanity. Nor do I think it fails to damage the environment for kingdom witness and for the advance of the gospel. So we must live with discernment and seriousness.

Yes, acceptance and rejection of the gospel of the kingdom is a matter of life and death. It is a matter of heaven and hell. But we must also live with wisdom and humanity.

Battles and wars are not an end in themselves and we mustn't by winning our battles at any cost or by any means. We mustn't destroy the very goal that we're seeking to win for Christ.

What's the good of that? And we can live even facing such battles for the kingdom all through our lives. We can live with real compassion and realism.

[42 : 24] Not allowing the life to be crushed out of us nor the joy out of our lives because we are liberated from the need for human superiority in our Christian warfare.

because we have the knowledge of God's absolute supremacy and because we can live there for fighting every battle that he brings us into with confidence that our weapons and our true champion are heavenly ones and God's ones.

Isn't it wonderful that we as Christians today we can look not only to the people of Israel of old but we can look to our Lord Jesus Christ as the captain of our salvation. as our example on how to fight with utterly honorable justice in a world that is at war with God and with his kingdom.

The Lord Jesus who walked in wisdom who walked in great humanity who fought his battle with sin with guilt with enmity to God with great discernment with great seriousness who dealt with everyone in his ranks with great realism but also with great compassion.

So as to win not only the war against evil but to win it well and to win an everlasting peace and the everlasting prosperity of all who will respond to his offer as peace who will surrender to his gracious rule.

[43 : 45] The apostle says let us consider him who endured from sinners such hostility to himself so that we may not grow weary or faint hearted in our struggle but run with endurance the race with its many battles that is set before us and with honorable justice with rightness even in a world that is still at war with God and with his kingdom and with his people and will be until the very end.

Let not your heart faint. Don't fear or panic or be in dread of them. for the Lord your God is he who goes with you to fight for you against your enemies and to save you.

Let's pray. O Lord we beseech thee to keep thy church and household continually in thy true faith that they who do lean only upon the hope of thy heavenly grace may evermore be defended by thy mighty power and therefore that we might know the liberty the joy and the life and all abundance that you have called us to even in the darkest time of war.

So help us to follow you our Lord Jesus Christ our great captain and to know through him his way of victory.

And we ask it in his name. Amen.