

The Christian Fight (Part One)

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The previous article, covering Christianity's requirement to seek God, explained that, once baptized, the Christian has a serious and continuous fight on his hands against the world, the flesh, and the Devil. Each of these opponents represents a formidable obstacle to true spiritual growth and overcoming. If personified, they would be strong and crafty enemies determined to bar us from the Kingdom of God by either derailing or stopping entirely any growth in our relationship with God.

The most formidable and ever-present obstacle hindering progress toward the Kingdom of God is the flesh—human nature—that remains following baptism. It is the major component of the cross we must bear while following Christ (Matthew 16:24; Luke 9:23). In Romans 8:7, Paul plainly states, "The carnal mind is enmity against God, for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be." It is always with us, yet we must fight it to overcome its constant drag on progress toward conforming to the image of Jesus Christ.

Paul describes in vivid terms the attitude in which we must fight it. He tells us that the flesh must be "crucified" and "put to death." Our attitude is to be like that of a soldier under orders to take no prisoners.

Did not God order the Israelites to do similarly when invading the Promised Land? They were to rid it completely of its original inhabitants, a command that they, of course, did not obey. Just as God predicted, as the Israelites became comfortable living among the land's original inhabitants, they became attracted to their gods and practices, snares that drew them into sin.

We will examine Israel's responsibility to God as the people left Mount Sinai after agreeing to the Old Covenant and subsequent happenings as they proceeded through the wilderness. Their patterns and examples support the idea that God's way of life under the New Covenant involves the struggles of which Paul wrote.

Examples, Good and Bad

Israel's example under the Old Covenant contains vivid and sober instruction for us, yet we must begin in the New Testament with Romans 15:3-4:

For even Christ did not please Himself; but as it is written, 'The reproaches of those who reproached You fell on Me.' For whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope.

Israel's experiences in the wilderness are primary examples for our learning.

Jesus says, "I always do those things that please Him" (John 8:29). He did not please Himself by serving Himself but by serving His Father and others. Certainly, Israel did not do this, yet this is what a Christian soldier must do. A soldier in an army faithfully serves to "please him who enlisted him" in the cause (II Timothy 2:4).

Paul often drew on Old Testament examples:

Now these things became our examples, to the intent that we should not lust after evil things as they also lusted. . . . Now all these things happened to them as examples, and they were written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the ages have come. (I Corinthians 10:6, 11)

The Old Testament contains many patterns, examples, and types that instruct us about how human nature acts and reacts, as well as how God acts and reacts. In the New Testament, however, Jesus Christ's example is above all. He was completely innocent, yet He suffered in His fight more than any of us ever will. Strangely, spiritual innocence like Christ's only intensifies persecution, which is one theater of the Christian's warfare. However, we must expect it, for as we grow, the tests of faithfulness become more difficult. Suffering is part of a soldier's lot (II Timothy 2:3), and for a Christian soldier, it occurs mainly because of the sacrifices involved in obeying God.

We know that, as a whole, the Israelites did not have God's Spirit, thus they were denied the enablement that we possess to achieve what God requires. But the Old Testament history God has preserved provides us with clear instruction on human nature's proclivities, so we should be better prepared for what it throws at us.

Paul charges Timothy and thus us, "Fight the good fight of faith, lay hold on eternal life, to which you were also called and have confessed the good confession in the presence of many witnesses" (I Timothy 6:12). "Fight the good fight of faith" and "lay hold on eternal life" are strong admonitions. We must seize our opportunity while it is near.

We must do likewise in following God's instruction on the Christian fight and begin by avoiding Israel's sad example.

God says in Exodus 23:20-23:

Behold, I send an Angel before you to keep you in the way and to bring you into the place which I have prepared. Beware of Him and obey His voice; do not provoke Him, for He will not pardon your transgressions; for My name is in Him. But if you indeed obey His voice and do all that I speak, then I will be an enemy to your enemies and an adversary to your adversaries. For My Angel will go before you and bring you in to the Amorites and the Hittites and the Perizzites and the Canaanites and the Hivites and the Jebusites; and I will cut them off.

These are the original instructions given to the Israelites as they prepared to leave Mount Sinai. They begin with a promise of guidance, a warning to obey, and an assurance that He will cut off their enemies in the land.

Verses 24-26 provide specific instruction regarding the most important of all sins—idolatry—and includes four clear promises as enticement to obedience:

You shall not bow down to their gods, nor serve them, nor do according to their works; but you shall utterly overthrow them and completely break down their sacred pillars. So

you shall serve the Lord your God, and He will bless your bread and your water. And I will take sickness away from the midst of you. No one shall suffer miscarriage or be barren in your land; I will fulfill the number of your days.

Verses 27-31 continue the promises:

I will send My fear before you, I will cause confusion among all the people to whom you come, and will make all your enemies turn their backs to you. I will send hornets before you, which shall drive out the Hivite, the Canaanite, and the Hittite from before you. I will not drive them out from before you in one year, lest the land become desolate and the beasts of the field become too numerous for you. Little by little I will drive them out from before you, until you have increased, and you inherit the land. And I will set your bounds from the Red Sea to the Sea of the Philistines, and from the desert to the River. For I will deliver the inhabitants of the land into your hand, and you shall drive them out before you.

These outstanding promises tell them how He will work to enable them to take over the land. He shows that progress will be incremental for practical reasons, that is, lest they get into a circumstance greater than they can handle. After giving them a general picture of how large their inheritance will be, He finishes with a second warning against idolatry (verses 32-33).

Without a Fight?

After reading this, some carelessly assume that, if Israel had just obeyed God, they would have taken over the Promised Land without having to confront the people already there. This is most assuredly untrue. The blessings and cursings establish a biblical principle for God's people:

If you walk in My statutes and keep My commandments, and perform them, then I will give you rain in its season, the land shall yield its produce, and the trees of the field shall yield their fruit. . . . But if you do not obey Me, and do not observe all these commandments, and if you despise My statutes, or if your soul abhors My judgments, so that you do not perform all My commandments, but break My covenant, I will also do this to you. . . . (Leviticus 26:3-4, 14-16)

In a similar way, the promises of Exodus 23 are conditional. The bestowal of blessings depends upon obedience to the covenant. In covenantal matters like this with God, a Christian must expect reciprocity.

Notice this principle spoken by the prophet Azariah in II Chronicles 15:2: "The Lord is with you while you are with Him. If you seek Him, He will be found by you; but if you forsake Him, He will forsake you." Will God bless rebellion by His people? Absolutely not! He answers rebellion by removing His protection.

Consider: Does God make growth and overcoming easy for us, even though He promises salvation? Are there no battles to fight while overcoming? If God completely smoothed the way for us, what would we have to overcome? If He smoothed our way, how would He test our loyalty? Would we be prepared for His Kingdom? Of course, He does not make it easy for us. Each of our paths is designed and tempered to test us on the level of our natural abilities and gifts (I Corinthians 10:13). Therefore, each Christian's way will be difficult; each will have to fight many battles at his or her level.

If God completely smoothed the way, it would create a Sunday-walk-in-the-park scenario, eliminating the possibility of God's law being written in our hearts. When other biblical information is added to God's promise in Exodus 23, we see that what He guarantees is that He will drive out the people of the land, making it far *easier* for the Israelites than if He were not involved at all. God is comparing situations with and without His intervention.

In the analogy, the people of the land are symbolic of human nature, which cannot be made subject to God and His law, according to Romans 8:7. Like human nature, the people of the land could not be driven out without God's help. We can conclude that Israel would have been totally unable to accomplish even what they did had not God been with them.

How can we know that Exodus 23 is not an outright promise that Israel would not have to go to war at some point in the conquest of the land? Seeing several scriptures together will make this clear. First, notice Deuteronomy 8:1-3:

Every commandment which I command you today you must be careful to observe, that you may live and multiply, and go in and possess the land of which the Lord swore to your fathers. And you shall remember that the Lord your God led you all the way these forty years in the wilderness, to humble you and test you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not. So He humbled you, allowed you to hunger, and fed you with manna which you did not know nor did your fathers know, that He might make you know that man shall not live by bread alone; but man lives by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the Lord.

Clearly, God tests us to see where we stand, revealing to us at the same time where our weaknesses lie. Our standing must be revealed to both God and us because His work in us is a cooperative effort with us. Tests are not normally easy; tests are often clarifying experiences, exposing our strengths and weaknesses. They are designed to reveal spiritual and moral progress or lack thereof, and in so doing should motivate growth in areas of weakness and produce confidence in areas of strength.

We can now add I Corinthians 10:11-13 to our understanding:

Now all these things happened to them as examples, and they were written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the ages have come. Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall. No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it.

An admonition is an instructive warning. It is not a "chewing-out" but a sobering, thought-provoking prod. Overall, Paul is encouraging us that God is carefully monitoring the tests we experience so that we do not get in over our heads. The sanctification process requires our cooperation with God, and He does not want to lose us through extreme discouragement.

Though He manages the operations of His creative process, His work definitely does not eliminate our involvement. Knowing that God carefully monitors each of us helps us to understand why the Bible cautions us to be careful in how we evaluate each other. God knows, but we certainly do not know all the factors working in other Christians' tests.

In Exodus 23:22-31, God makes six promises and gives one command to the Israelites regarding their conquest of the Promised Land:

1. I will be an enemy to your enemies and an adversary to your adversaries.
2. I will cut them off.
3. I will send My fear before you, I will cause confusion among all the people to whom you come, and will make all your enemies turn their backs to you.
4. I will send hornets before you.
5. Little by little I will drive them out from before you.
6. I will deliver the inhabitants of the land into your hand.

His one command, in verse 31, is, "*You shall drive them out before you.*"

Consider what these seven statements reveal. The entire context suggests confrontation between God and the people of the land. However, the command, "You shall drive them out before you," should give us pause. There is more to this than a first glance might indicate. The easy assumption that God would remove every impediment upon Israel's entrance into the Promised Land proves false; that is not how it worked out in history. In addition, the Israelites knew for a certainty that they would have to face the people of the land in multiple confrontations.

In addition, they had already experienced a strong indicator of God's will for them regarding warfare when He permitted the Amalekites to attack the rear of Israel's column (see Exodus 17:8-13). That clash was only the first of an intense spate of battles in which the outcome hung in the balance on occasion. They knew that further warfare was a strong possibility.

Exodus 23:32 adds another factor that strongly hints that God would not simply drive the inhabitants from Canaan: "You shall make no covenant with them, nor with their gods." If He were going to drive the Canaanites completely out of the land before the Israelites, why would He need to make this warning? There would have been no people to make a covenant with!

Exodus 34:11-12, 15 repeats this command even more forcefully:

Observe what I command you this day. Behold, I am driving out from before you the Amorite and the Canaanite and the Hittite and the Perizzite and the Hivite and the Jebusite. Take heed to yourself, lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land where you are going, lest it be a snare in your midst. . . . [L]est you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land, and they play the harlot with their gods and make sacrifice to their gods, and one of them invites you and you eat of his sacrifice.

If we take Exodus 23 and 34 at face value, the Israelites would have no opportunity to make a covenant with the people of the land because they would never encounter them to be tempted to make a covenant with them.

If the Israelites came into the land and began tearing down altars, would the people of the land have just stood around and let their revered high places be destroyed without resistance? No way! We can compare this to the confrontations many of us faced when we came to believe God, causing us to stop observing Christmas, Easter, Halloween, and Sunday worship and to begin keeping the Sabbath and God's holy days instead. Did our families, friends, and employers give us no resistance to these changes, which severely disturbed these relationships? Did they not defend their lifelong practices?

Because they would have close contact with the land's inhabitants, the Israelites had a choice to make: They could either compromise with the inhabitants regarding their cultures or follow God's commands. The latter choice entailed doing things like destroying altars, which would produce intense confrontations—warfare. The evidence indicates that the Israelites expected that they would have to go to war.

Confrontation and Fear at the Border

Numbers 13:26-33 sets the stage for Israel's initial, aborted entrance into the land. This episode occurs two years after Israel left Egypt and less than one year after they began their pilgrimage from Mount Sinai.

Now [the spies] departed and came back to Moses and Aaron and all the congregation of the children of Israel in the Wilderness of Paran, at Kadesh; they brought back word to them and to all the congregation, and showed them the fruit of the land. Then they told him, and said: "We went to the land where you sent us. It truly flows with milk and honey, and this is its fruit. Nevertheless the people who dwell in the land are strong; the cities are fortified and very large; moreover we saw the descendants of Anak there. The Amalekites dwell in the land of the South; the Hittites, the Jebusites, and the Amorites dwell in the mountains; and the Canaanites dwell by the sea and along the banks of the Jordan."

Then Caleb quieted the people before Moses, and said, "Let us go up at once, and take possession, for we are well able to overcome it." But the men who had gone up with him said, "We are not able to go up against the people, for they are stronger than we." And they gave the children of Israel a bad report of the land which they had spied out, saying, "The land through which we have gone as spies is a land that devours its inhabitants, and all the people whom we saw in it are men of great stature. There we saw the giants (the descendants of Anak came from the giants); and we were like grasshoppers in our own sight, and so we were in their sight."

The story continues in Numbers 14:4-9:

So they said to one another, "Let us select a leader and return to Egypt." Then Moses and Aaron fell on their faces before all the assembly of the congregation of the children of Israel. But Joshua the son of Nun and Caleb the son of Jephunneh, who were among those who had spied out the land, tore their clothes; and they spoke to all the congregation of the children of Israel, saying: "The land we passed through to spy out is an exceedingly good land. If the Lord delights in us, then He will bring us into this land

and give it to us, a land which flows with milk and honey. Only do not rebel against the Lord, nor fear the people of the land, for they are our bread; their protection has departed from them, and the Lord is with us. Do not fear them."

Notice the spies' timidity even at the beginning of their report, and they become increasingly fearful. If, because of God's promises in Exodus 23, they did not expect confrontation, why do they show so much trepidation? Even Joshua and Caleb expected confrontation. They most certainly did not understand that God's promises in Exodus 23 would be fulfilled without them having to lift so much as a finger to gain the land. They knew they would have to make war against the people of the land.

The underlying problem was that they did not trust that the warfare would be a cooperative effort. In effect, they believed that God could not do it. They did not trust that God would be with them, cooperating with them and fighting on their side against the common enemy, the people of the land. Joshua and Caleb knew there would be combat, but the difference was that they were confident that God would fight for Israel and against the Canaanites.

Numbers 33:51-53 adds a defining element:

Speak to the children of Israel, and say to them: "When you have crossed the Jordan into the land of Canaan, then you shall drive out all the inhabitants of the land from before you, destroy all their engraved stones, destroy all their molded images, and demolish all their high places; you shall dispossess the inhabitants of the land and dwell in it, for I have given you the land to possess."

Deuteronomy 7:1-2, written and delivered by Moses during the last month before Israel entered the Promised Land, confirms the earlier command:

When the Lord your God brings you into the land which you go to possess, and has cast out many nations before you, . . . seven nations greater and mightier than you, and when the Lord your God delivers them over to you, you shall conquer them and utterly destroy them. You shall make no covenant with them nor show mercy to them.

When we compare statements like these to Exodus 23 and Numbers 13-14, it becomes apparent that, from the very beginning, God intended the driving out of the people of the land to be a cooperative effort between Him and the Israelites. That Israel would have to fight is beyond question.

Sanctification Requires Reciprocity

Within our relationship with God, a measure of reciprocity always exists, even though our part is but a tiny percentage of the overall amount. It must be this way because love cannot be one-sided, or the relationship will not exist for very long. This is a major reason why Jesus says in John 14:15, "If you love Me, keep My commandments." Obedience is the way we reciprocate His love toward us.

Notice in Numbers 1:1-3, 20, 22 several interesting statements made as the Israelites began the longest part of their trek through the wilderness:

Now the Lord spoke to Moses in the Wilderness of Sinai, in the tabernacle of meeting, on the first day of the second month, in the second year after they had come out of the land of Egypt, saying: "Take a census of all the congregation of the children of Israel, by

their families, by their fathers' houses, according to the number of names, every male individually, from twenty years old and above—all who are able to go to war in Israel. You and Aaron shall number them by their armies. . . . Now the children of Reuben, Israel's oldest son, their genealogies by their families, by their fathers' house, according to the number of names, every male individually, from twenty years old and above, all who were able to go to war. . . . From the children of Simeon, . . . all who were able to go to war."

This phrase, "all who were able to go to war," appears 14 times in this one section! What is the significance of God commanding a census to be taken of all males twenty years old and above and able to go to war? Obviously, God wanted Israel to comprehend the size of its army. God was preparing the Israelites for the *certainty* of warfare with the people of the land.

Notice the precise dating in verse 1: It was "the first day of the second month, in the second year" following their flight from Egypt. Exodus 19:1 tells us, "In the third month after the children of Israel had gone out of the land of Egypt, on the same day, they came to the Wilderness of Sinai." The giving of the law, then, occurred three months after they left Egypt. Exodus 40:17 adds another time marker: "And it came to pass in the first month of the second year, on the first day of the month, that the tabernacle was raised up."

Thus, after receiving the law and making the covenant, God gave instructions concerning the Tabernacle, and it was constructed. It was erected on Abib/Nisan 1, the first day of the first month, of the second year. At this point, the Israelites have now been out of Egypt just two weeks shy of a full year. Once the Tabernacle had been erected and was in operation, God gave to Moses all the instructions in the book of Leviticus, and the priesthood began to put the ceremonial practices into operation.

In Numbers 1:1, thirteen more months have passed, and Israel is still at Mount Sinai. However, their stay is soon to end. The events of Numbers 13 and 14 did not take place until near the end of this second year after leaving Egypt. Therefore, before the Israelites even began the serious part of their trek to take over the Promised Land, the initial preparation for their being forged into an army, a force intended to fight against the people of the land, had already taken place.

They fully understood that Exodus 23 was not an unconditional promise that God would fight all their wars for them. They knew they would not just walk into the land and take it over while hornets maddeningly buzzed around their enemies' heads!

Do Not Follow Their Examples

Hebrews 10:37-39 admonishes us:

"For yet a little while, and He who is coming will come and will not tarry. Now the just shall live by faith; but if anyone draws back, My soul has no pleasure in Him." But we are not of those who draw back to perdition, but of those who believe to the saving of the soul.

Israel feared the warfare that they knew would confront them when they stepped over the border—and they drew back. Their drawing back in fear was a serious sin, as Numbers 14:9 shows. Drawing back in fear or failing to enter the fray is on a par with rebellion because it is a rejection of God's Word, a despising of His promise.

Numbers 14:27-32 reveals a chief part of Israel's sin and its resulting evil fruit:

How long shall I bear with this evil congregation who complain against Me? I have heard the complaints which the children of Israel make against Me. Say to them, "As I live," says the Lord, "just as you have spoken in My hearing, so I will do to you: The carcasses of you who have complained against Me shall fall in this wilderness, all of you who were numbered, according to your entire number, from twenty years old and above. Except for Caleb the son of Jephunneh and Joshua the son of Nun, you shall by no means enter the land which I swore I would make you dwell in. But your little ones, who you said would be victims, I will bring in, and they shall know the land which you have despised. But as for you, your carcasses shall fall in this wilderness."

Deuteronomy 20:1-4 provides encouragement for all of us who, perceiving the spiritual parallel, recognize the responsibility God requires of those who have made the New Covenant with Him:

When you go out to battle against your enemies, and see horses and chariots and people more numerous than you, do not be afraid of them; for the Lord your God is with you, who brought you up from the land of Egypt. So it shall be, when you are on the verge of battle, that the priest shall approach and speak to the people. And he shall say to them, "Hear, O Israel: Today you are on the verge of battle with your enemies. Do not let your heart faint, do not be afraid, and do not tremble or be terrified because of them; for the Lord your God is He who goes with you, to fight for you against your enemies, to save you."

As further encouragement, Hebrews 13:5-6 helps us steel our resolve against our spiritual enemies:

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

Our warfare is different from what the Israelites faced, but its principles are similar. Obedience to God provokes persecution, confrontation, and resistance from others, even though offense is totally unintended on our parts. Far more seriously, it awakens demonic spirits to intensify their attempts to throw us off the track, and perhaps above that, it stirs our remaining carnality to continue its attempts to break our will to keep us from overcoming it.

It is helpful to remember that, as serious as Israel's responsibilities were, ours are many times greater because eternity is involved. If we are to succeed, the Christian fight is an element of God's way that we cannot avoid. In the New Testament, the word translated as "overcomer" can just as easily be translated as "conqueror," which more strongly suggests warfare. If we fail to join the fray because we fear the sacrifices that will be involved, we will not be prepared for God's Kingdom. We can take heart, however, because His promises of cooperation in the fight, just as He promised to Israel, still stand.

