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Modern Myths About Satan and Spiritual Warfare

By David Servant

MYTH #5:

“We can pull down demonic strongholds in the atmosphere through spiritual warfare.”

There is, according to Scripture, no doubt that Satan rules over a hierarchy of evil spirits who inhabit the earth’s atmosphere and who assist him in ruling the kingdom of darkness. That those evil spirits are “territorial,” ruling over certain geographical areas, is a concept that is also contained in the Bible (see Dan. 10:13, 20-21; Mark 5:9-10). That Christians have the authority to cast demons out of other people and the responsibility to resist the devil is scriptural (see Mark 16:17; Jas. 4:7; 1 Pet. 5:8-9). But can Christians pull down evil spirits over cities? The answer is that they can’t, and to attempt to do so is a waste of their time.

Before we expose the error of this particular myth, it would be helpful for us once again to consider another common-sense rule of sound Bible interpretation. Let’s begin by looking at an example of some Christians in the Bible who misinterpreted, because of an assumption, a statement Jesus once made. Our example is found in John’s gospel, and occurred after Jesus’ resurrection. Upon learning from Jesus about future persecution he would suffer, Peter questioned the Lord about his fellow disciple, John:

Peter therefore seeing him [John] said to Jesus, “Lord, and what about this man?” Jesus said to him, “If I want him to remain until I come, what is that to you? You follow Me!” This saying therefore went out among the brethren that that disciple would not die; yet Jesus did not say to him that he would not die, but only, “If I want him to remain until I come, what is that to you?” (John 21:23-21).

Here is a classic example of some Christians who misinterpreted Jesus’ words because they read into His statement more than He intended. Jesus never said that John would not die; He only said that if He wanted John to be alive at His return, it was His own business, and none of Peter’s!

I’m sure you can see how it would have been tempting to read into Jesus’ words and assume that John would not die. But we must be careful that we don’t make a similar error when we interpret *any* of God’s Word. We must be cautious in making any assumption that cannot be clearly proven from what the Bible says, or else we could find ourselves believing something that is not true.

This kind of misinterpretation is often made, however, by many Christians. Just because we can cast demons out of people, we should not assume that we can pull down evil spirits over cities. There are numerous examples of casting demons out of people in the gospels and the book of Acts, but can you think of even one example in the gospels or the book of Acts where someone pulled down an evil spirit that was ruling over a city or geographical area? You can't because there are no such examples. Can you think of one instruction anywhere in the epistles about our responsibility to pull down evil spirits from the atmosphere? No, because there are none. For this reason, we have no biblical basis to believe that we can or should be waging "spiritual warfare" against evil spirits in the atmosphere.

Extrabiblical or Unbiblical?

Errors of assumption are often justified by the argument, "I may not be able to prove what I am doing is correct according to the Bible, but you can't prove that it is incorrect either." Claiming that there is vast difference between what is *unbiblical* and what is *extrabiblical*, they justify their practice, classifying it as not necessarily supported by Scripture, yet not refuted by Scripture either.

This is a weak argument indeed. If God wants us to know something or do something, He makes it quite clear in Scripture. Why would anyone want to practice a kind of spiritual warfare for which there is no instruction or example in the Bible? Why not rather practice that which is clearly revealed as God's will in Scripture, such as casting demons out of people, preaching the gospel, making disciples, and praying scripturally?

Moreover, as we study Scripture closely, that which may be classed by some as extrabiblical is often exposed as being very unbiblical. Such is the case with the concept of pulling down territorial spirits.

Pushing Parables Too Far

Reading more meaning into the Bible than God intended is an error Christians often make when they read scripture passages containing metaphorical language. The Bible is full of comparisons, because they help us understand spiritual concepts. When Jesus said, "the kingdom of heaven is like," He took something His listeners did understand to explain something they did not understand. Metaphors are extremely helpful in aiding the learning process.

We must not forget, however, that every comparison is imperfect, because the two things compared are not usually identical in every respect. A metaphor is defined as a comparison of things *basically unlike* but having *some* striking similarities. For this reason, we must be cautious that we do not force a meaning upon a metaphor that God never intended. For example, Jesus once said:

"The kingdom of heaven *is like* a dragnet cast into the sea, and gathering fish of every kind; and when it was filled, they drew it up on the beach; and they sat down, and gathered the good fish into containers, but the bad they threw away (Matt. 13:47-48, emphasis added).

What did Jesus mean in this comparison? Like most of His parables, He wanted to convey one point. In this case, He wanted us to know that not everyone will automatically get into the kingdom of heaven, but that there will be a separation into two categories, good and bad. But that is where the similarities between His story of the gathered fish and the kingdom of heaven end.

Certainly Jesus was not trying to teach us that the kingdom of heaven will consist of fish! Or that the good fish in heaven will be put into containers! Or, if you are smart enough to realize that the fish in the story represent people, Jesus does not want us to

think that those people are going to be caught in a big dragnet or that their judgment before God will take place on a beach! Moreover, Jesus was not trying to teach us, as “good fish,” that our good works earns our salvation. Any of these conclusions would be reading more into His parable than He intended.

Yet how often this is done by some who try to read meaning into every minor detail of Jesus’ more lengthy and detailed parables. They end up confused, because they fail to realize that in every comparison, at some point, similarities turn to dissimilarities.

Because Scripture so often contains metaphorical language, we must be careful that we don’t fall into that trap, as unfortunately, many who teach about spiritual warfare have done. Satan is a master at twisting Scripture (see Matt. 4:5-7). He loves it when we misinterpret what God says.

“Pulling Down Strongholds”

The Bible does sometimes use military terminology when describing the Christian’s responsibility. Yet, in those cases, we must ask ourselves if we are “pushing the parables too far,” by reading more into metaphorical language than was meant. For example, a classic text that is often misinterpreted is 2 Corinthians 10:3-6:

For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses. We are destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God, and we are taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ, and we are ready to punish all disobedience, whenever your obedience is complete (2 Cor. 10:3-6).

The *King James Version*, rather than saying “we are destroying speculations,” says we are “pulling down strongholds.” From this one metaphorical phrase, practically an entire theology has been built to defend the idea of doing “spiritual warfare” in order to “pull down the strongholds” consisting of evil spirits in the atmosphere. But as the *New American Standard Version* clearly conveys, Paul is speaking, not of evil spirits in the atmosphere, but of strongholds of false beliefs that exist in people’s minds. *Speculations* are what Paul was destroying, not wicked spirits in high places.

This becomes even clearer as we read contextually. Paul said, “We are destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against *the knowledge of God*, and we are taking every *thought* captive to the obedience of Christ” (emphasis added). The battle of which Paul symbolically writes is a battle against thoughts, or ideas that are contrary to the true knowledge of God.

Using military metaphors, Paul explains that we are in a battle, a battle for the minds of people who have believed the lies of Satan. Our primary weapon in this battle is the truth, which is why we’ve been commanded to go into the entire world and preach the gospel, invading enemy territory with a message that can set captives free. The fortresses we are destroying have been built with building blocks of lies, joined by the mortar of deception.

If you will take the time to read all of the tenth chapter of Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians, you will see that he makes no mention there of wicked spiritual powers, even though we know (and he knew) that wicked spirits are involved in spreading lies. Therefore, in this particular passage, evil spirits were not the “strongholds” of which He was thinking when he wrote. To say that Paul’s words in 2 Corinthians 10:3-6 prove that we can and should practice pulling down evil spirits in the atmosphere is an obvious misrepresentation of what Paul actually meant.

If Paul did mean that we should pull down evil spirits in the atmosphere, we would have to wonder why he himself never practiced what he preached, as there is no mention of him ever doing it in the history of his ministry as recorded in the book of Acts.

The Whole Armor of God

Another passage in Paul's writings that is often misinterpreted is found in his Ephesian letter:

Finally, be strong in the Lord, and in the strength of His might. Put on the full armor of God, that you may be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places. Therefore, take up the full armor of God, that you may be able to resist in the evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. Stand firm therefore, having girded your loins with truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and having shod your feet with the preparation of the gospel of peace; in addition to all, taking up the shield of faith with which you will be able to extinguish all the flaming missiles of the evil one. And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God (Eph. 6:10-17).

May I initially point out that although this passage is definitely about the Christian's struggle with the devil and evil spirits, there is no mention of pulling down evil spirits over cities. As we study the passage closely, it becomes clear that Paul is primarily writing about each individual's responsibility to resist Satan's schemes *in his personal life* by applying the truth of God's Word.

Notice also the evident metaphorical language of the entire passage. Paul obviously was not speaking of a literal, material armor that Christians should put on their bodies. Rather, the armor of which he speaks is figurative. Those pieces of armor represent the various scriptural truths that Christians should use for protection against the devil and evil spirits. By knowing, believing, and acting upon God's Word, Christians are, figuratively speaking, clothed in God's protective armor.

Let's examine this passage in Ephesians verse by verse, while asking ourselves, *What was Paul really trying to convey to us?*

The Source of Our Spiritual Strength

First, we are told to "be strong in the Lord, and in the strength of His might" (Eph. 6:10). The emphasis is on the fact that we should *not* derive our strength from ourselves but God. This is further brought out in Paul's next statement: "Put on the full armor of God" (Eph. 6:11a). This is God's armor, not ours. Paul is not saying that God Himself wears armor, but that we need the armor that God has supplied for us.

Why do we need this armor that God has supplied? The answer is, "that you may be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil" (Eph. 6:11b). That is the reason. This armor is primarily for *defensive*, not offensive use. It is not so we can go out and pull down evil spirits over cities; it is so we can *stand firm against* Satan's schemes.

We learn that the devil has evil plans to attack us, and unless we are wearing the armor that God supplies, we are vulnerable. Notice also that it is *our* responsibility to put on the armor, not God's.

Let's continue:

For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places (Eph. 6:12).

Here it becomes crystal clear that Paul is not talking about a physical, material battle, but a spiritual one. We are struggling against the schemes of various ranks of evil spirits whom Paul lists. Most Bible students assume that Paul listed those evil spirits as they are ranked from bottom to top, “rulers” being the lowest class and “spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places” being the highest class.

How can we struggle against spiritual beings? That question can be answered by asking, *How can spiritual beings attack us?* They attack us primarily with temptations, thoughts, suggestions, and ideas that contradict God’s Word and will. Therefore, our defense is knowing, believing, and obeying God’s Word.

“Therefore, take up the full armor of God, that you may be able to resist in the evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm” (Eph. 6:13).

Notice, once again, that Paul’s purpose is to equip us to *stand* against Satan’s attacks. His purpose is not to equip us to go out and attack Satan and pull down evil spirits from the atmosphere. Three times in this passage Paul tells us to *stand firm*. Our position is one of defense, not offense.

This is not to say that we never take an offensive stand, but that this passage is primarily speaking of maintaining a strong defense. When we proclaim the gospel, for example, we are definitely “invading enemy territory” in an offensive measure.

Also, notice that it is our responsibility to take up the armor and to stand firm. *God will not do it for us.*

Truth—Our Primary Defense

Stand firm therefore, having girded your loins with truth...(Eph. 6:14a).

Here is what keeps our armor in place—the truth. What is the truth? Jesus said to His Father, “Thy word is truth” (John 17:17). We cannot successfully stand firm against Satan unless we know the truth with which we can counter his lies. Jesus beautifully demonstrated this during His temptation in the wilderness as He responded to Satan’s every suggestion with, “It is written...”

Paul continued:

“...and having put on the breastplate of righteousness...(Eph. 6:14b).

As Christians, we should be familiar with two kinds of righteousness. First, we have been given, as a gift, the righteousness of Christ (see 2 Cor. 5:21). His righteous standing has been imputed to those who believe in Jesus, who bore their sins on the cross. That righteous standing has delivered us from Satan’s dominion.

Second, we should be living righteously, obeying Jesus’ commands, and that is probably what Paul had in mind regarding the breastplate of righteousness. By obedience to Christ, we give no place to the devil (see Eph. 4:26-27).

Firm Footing in Gospel Shoes

“...and having shod your feet with the preparation of the gospel of peace...”
(Eph. 6:15)

Knowing, believing and acting upon the truth of *the gospel* gives us firm footing to stand against Satan’s attacks. The shoes that Roman soldiers wore had spikes on the bottom that gave them a firm grip on the battlefield. When we know that Jesus has died for our sins and been raised from the dead for our justification, Satan’s lies are unable to knock us off our feet.

Paul specifically refers here to “the gospel of peace.” We now have “peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom. 5:1). We are no longer enemies with God.

“...in addition to all, taking up the shield of faith with which you will be able to extinguish all the flaming missiles of the evil one (Eph. 6:16).

Notice again Paul’s emphasis here on our defensive posture. He is not talking about our pulling down demons over cities. He is talking about our using faith in God’s Word to resist the devil’s lies. When we believe and act upon what God has said, it is like having a shield that protects us from Satan’s lies, represented figuratively as the “flaming missiles of the evil one.”

Our Spiritual Sword—God’s Word

“And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God” (Eph. 6:17).

Salvation, as the Bible describes it, includes our deliverance from Satan’s captivity. God has “delivered us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son” (Col. 1:13). Knowing this is like having a helmet that guards our minds from believing Satan’s lie that we are still under his dominion. Satan is no longer our master—Jesus is.

Additionally, we are to take “the sword of the Spirit” which, as Paul explains, is figurative for the Word of God. As I already mentioned, Jesus was the perfect example of a spiritual warrior who skillfully wielded His spiritual sword. During His temptation in the wilderness He responded to Satan each time by quoting directly from God’s Word. So too, if we are to defeat the devil in spiritual combat, we must know and believe what God has said, lest we fall for his lies.

Also notice that Jesus used “the sword of the Spirit” *defensively*. Some like to point out, to those of us who maintain that the armor of which Paul wrote is primarily defensive, that a sword is definitely an offensive weapon. Thus, with a very weak argument, they try to justify their theory that this passage in Ephesians 6:10-12 is applicable to our supposed responsibility to offensively “pull down strongholds” of evil spirits in the heavenly places.

Obviously, from reading Paul’s own reason why Christians should put on God’s armor (that they may “stand firm against the schemes of the devil”), we know that he is speaking primarily of a defensive use of the armor. Additionally, although a sword can be thought of as an offensive weapon, it can also be thought of as defensive, as it blocks and protects from the thrusts of the opponent’s sword.

Moreover, we must be careful that we don’t strain the entire metaphor, as we attempt to wrench from the various pieces of armor significance that really doesn’t exist. When we begin to argue about the defensive and offensive nature of a sword, we are very likely “pushing the parable too far” as we carve into pieces a simple metaphor that was never meant to be so dissected.

Most importantly, notice that every piece of the armor which Paul described relates somehow to the truth of the Word of God. Knowing, believing, and acting upon God’s Word are the ways we overcome Satan’s schemes against us.

Didn’t Jesus Instruct Us to “Bind the Strong Man”?

Three times in the Gospels we find Jesus making mention of “binding the strong man.” In none of those three cases, however, did He tell His followers that “binding the strong man” was something they should practice. Let’s examine exactly what Jesus did say, and let’s read what He said contextually:

And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem were saying, “He is possessed by Beelzebul,” and “He casts out the demons by the ruler of the demons.” And He called them to Himself and began speaking to them in parables, “How can Satan cast out Satan? And if a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand. And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but he is finished! *But no one can enter the strong man's house and plunder his property unless he first binds the strong man, and then he will plunder his house.* Truly I say to you, all sins shall be forgiven the sons of men, and whatever blasphemies they utter; but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin”—because they were saying, “He has an unclean spirit” (Mark 3:23-30, emphasis added).

Notice that Jesus was not teaching His followers to bind any strong men. Rather, He was responding to the criticism of the Jerusalem scribes with unassailable logic and a clear metaphor.

They accused Him of casting out demons by using demonic power. He responded by saying that Satan would be insane to work against himself. No one can intelligently argue with that.

If it wasn't Satan's power that Jesus used to cast out demons, then whose power was He using? It had to be a power stronger than Satan's. It had to be God's power, the power of the Holy Spirit. Thus Jesus spoke metaphorically of Satan, comparing him to a strong man guarding his possessions. The only one able to take the strong man's possessions would be someone even stronger, namely, Himself. This was the true explanation as to how He cast out demons.

Satan is the “strong man,” and Jesus is the one who overpowered him to plunder his house. Isn't that exactly what Jesus did through His sacrificial death? He broke Satan's power over all those who would believe in Jesus. His casting out of demons was a foreshadowing of an even greater deliverance that He would accomplish for Satan's captives.

Jesus concluded by warning those scribes of the great danger they were in by attributing to Satan the work of the Holy Spirit.

This passage that mentions the strong man, as well as the similar ones found in Matthew and Luke, cannot be used to justify our “binding strong men” over cities. Additionally, when we examine the rest of the New Testament, we do not find any examples of anyone “binding strong men” over cities, or any instruction for anyone to do so. We can thus safely conclude that it is unscriptural for any Christian to attempt to bind and render powerless some supposed “strong man-evil spirit” over a city or geographic area.

What About “Binding on Earth and in Heaven”?

Only twice in the gospels do we find Jesus' words, “Whatever you shall bind on earth shall be [or ‘have been’] bound in heaven, and whatever you shall loose on earth shall be [or ‘have been’] loosed in heaven.” Both instances are recorded in Matthew's gospel.

Was Jesus teaching us that we can and should “bind” demonic spirits in the atmosphere?

First, let's consider His words, *binding* and *loosing*. Jesus' use of those words is *obviously* metaphorical, as He certainly did not mean that His followers would be taking physical ropes or cords and literally binding anything or literally loosing anything that was bound with physical ropes or cords. Jesus must have used the words *binding* and *loosing* figuratively. What did He mean?

For the answer, we should look at His use of the words *binding* and *loosing* within the context of whatever He was speaking of at the time. Was He talking on the subject of evil spirits? If so, we could conclude that His words about binding have application to the binding of evil spirits.

Let's examine the first passage where Jesus mentioned binding and loosing:

He [Jesus] said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" And Simon Peter answered and said, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God." And Jesus answered and said to him, "Blessed are you, Simon Barjona, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but My Father who is in heaven. And I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades shall not overpower it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and *whatever you shall bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven, and whatever you shall loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven.* (Matt. 16:15-19, emphasis added).

No doubt the reason this passage has been interpreted in so many ways is that it contains at least five metaphorical expressions: (1) "flesh and blood," (2) "rock," (3) "gates of Hades," (4) "keys of the kingdom of heaven," and (5) "binding/loosing." All of these expressions are figurative, speaking of something else.

Hades' Gates

Regardless of the precise meaning of the metaphors, you can see that, in this passage, Jesus did not mention evil spirits. The closest He came was His mention of the "gates of Hades," which are, of course, symbolic, as there is no way that the literal gates of Hades could do anything to hinder the church.

What do the "gates of Hades" represent? Perhaps they are symbolic of Satan's power, and Jesus meant that Satan's power would not stop His church from being built. The Bible, however, really doesn't associate Satan's power with Hades (or hell) as we often do. Satan is not presently living in Hades or ruling in hell as He often is portrayed in cartoons. The Scripture teaches that his domain is primarily the realm of the earth. Satan will *one day* be cast into the lake of fire, but it won't be so that he can rule there, but so that he can be tormented there day and night (see Rev. 20:10). Shortly after Satan is cast into the lake of fire, Hades itself will be cast there as well (see Rev. 20:14). So, again, the "gates of Hades" are not a likely symbolism for Satan's power or authority.

More likely, what Jesus meant by His statement is that the church He would build would save people from the eternal fate of being imprisoned behind Hades' gates. Those terrible gates, which forever hold captive people who died without Christ, will have fewer to constrain because of Christ's saving work on the cross and because of His church being built.

Notice that Jesus actually makes reference to two sets of gates: the gates of Hades, and the gates to heaven, implied by His giving Peter the "keys to heaven." This contrast further supports that idea that Jesus' statement about Hades' gates is representative of the church's role in saving people from going to Hades. Keep in mind that it was not Satan who constructed gates into Hades, it was God.

Nevertheless, even if Jesus did mean that "all the power of Satan would not stop His church," we cannot jump to the conclusion that His comments about binding and loosing are instructions as to what we should be doing with evil spirits over cities, for the simple reason that we can find no examples in the gospels or Acts of anyone binding evil spirits over cities, nor can we find any instructions in the epistles for doing such a thing. However we interpret Christ's words about binding and loosing, our interpretation must be supported *contextually within the rest of the New Testament*. In light of the absence of any scriptural example, it is amazing how often we say such things as, "I bind the devil in

Jesus name,” or “I loose the angels over that person,” or I loose God’s mercy in that situation” and so on. You don’t find anyone saying such things anywhere in the New Testament. The emphasis in Acts and the epistles is not on speaking to the devil or binding and loosing evil spirits, but on preaching the gospel and praying to God. For example, when Paul was being continually buffeted by a messenger (literally, “angel”) of Satan, he didn’t try to “bind” it. He prayed to God about it (see 2 Cor. 12:7-10).

The Keys to Heaven

Let’s look further at the immediate context of Jesus’ words about binding and loosing. Note that directly before He mentioned binding and loosing, Jesus said that He would give Peter the “keys to the kingdom of heaven.” Peter was never given any literal keys to heaven’s gates, and so Jesus’ words must be taken as metaphorical. What do “keys” represent? Keys represent *the means of access to something that is locked*. One who has the keys has means that others do not have to open certain doors.

As we consider Peter’s ministry as reported in the book of Acts, what is it that we find him doing that could be considered comparable to opening doors that are locked to others?

Primarily, we find him proclaiming the gospel, the gospel which opens heaven’s doors for all who will believe (and the gospel which shuts the gates of Hades). In that sense, all of us who are Christ’s followers possess the “keys to the kingdom of heaven,” as we all can and should share the good news that can open the door of heaven to anyone. *The keys to the kingdom of heaven can only be the gospel of Jesus Christ*. It wasn’t until after Jesus was resurrected that Peter understood that Jesus had died for the sins of the world on the cross, and only then did he have a gospel to proclaim that could open heaven’s doors.

And Now, Binding and Loosing

Finally, after promising to give Peter the keys to the kingdom of heaven, Jesus made His statement about binding and loosing, His fifth metaphorical expression in the passage under consideration.

Within the context of the statements we have already examined, what did Jesus mean? How does Peter’s binding and loosing have application to Jesus building His church, to the saving of people from Hades, and to proclaiming the gospel?

I can think of only two possibilities as to what the expression, *binding and loosing* represents, one being a more strict interpretation and the other being less strict.

First the more strict: Perhaps Jesus meant that if Peter didn’t use the keys to the kingdom by proclaiming the gospel, people would remain bound by Satan. But, if Peter did proclaim the gospel, people would be loosed from Satan’s grasp.

Jesus wanted to impress upon Peter (and us) that we have been given a great responsibility. No one can be saved unless *we* preach the gospel (see Rom. 10:14). *We* hold the keys to the kingdom of heaven. It is our responsibility to spread the gospel—the *only* message that can open heaven’s doors (and close Hades’ gates). God won’t open (or shut) those doors without us. *We have the keys*.

In keeping with this same theme, Jesus said to Peter that whatever *he* would bind would be bound in heaven, and whatever *he* would loose would be loosed in heaven. The responsibility of binding and loosing falls upon us, not upon God in heaven. Heaven will back us up, but we are God’s *only* messengers of a gospel that can set people free.

This interpretation of Jesus’ words fits well with the context of the rest of Scripture. We don’t find anyone binding demons over cities or over anything else in the book of Acts, but we do find Christ’s followers taking very seriously their responsibility to proclaim a gospel that sets people free from Satan.

If we don't share the gospel, leaving people bound by Satan, God will leave them bound. If, however, we do share the gospel, a gospel that, if believed, looses people from sin and Satan, God in heaven will loose them.

But if that is what Jesus meant, why didn't He just say it that way? I don't know! But the fact is, Jesus often used powerful figures of speech to provoke us to think and to make His points unforgettable. In order to convey to us how much we should love God, He once told us to hate our fathers, mothers, and children (see Luke 14:26).

A Similar Statement

In a declaration that is similar to His statement about binding and loosing, we once find Jesus saying to His disciples, "If you forgive the sins of any, their sins have been forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they have been retained" (John 20:23).

Obviously, Jesus did not mean that His disciples had the authority to forgive or not forgive anyone's sins. Only God has that authority, and we don't find the apostles forgiving or retaining anyone's sins in the book of Acts.

We do find them, however, proclaiming a message that offers people the forgiveness of their sins. We have the God-given right to tell anyone who believes the gospel that his sins are forgiven. And we have the God-given right to tell anyone who rejects the gospel that his sins are not forgiven.

That must be what Jesus meant, but *notice how He said it*. We are not forgiving people of their sins, but are proclaiming a message that can bring them God's forgiveness. We are not binding or loosing anyone, but we are proclaiming a message that will either loose people from sin and Satan or leave them bound.

A Less Strict Interpretation

The other, less strict interpretation finds less significance in the metaphorical words, *binding* and *loosing*. Perhaps all that Jesus meant was, "I'm authorizing you as heaven's representative. Fulfill your responsibility on earth, and heaven will back you up."

If an employer said to his salesman, "Whatever you do in Omaha will be done in the home office," how would that salesman interpret his boss's words? He would take them to mean that he was authorized to represent his company in Omaha. Perhaps all that Jesus meant was that we who are His on earth are authorized to represent Him who is in heaven.

This less strict interpretation of Jesus' words harmonizes well with His second use of the same expression, found two chapters after the first passage in Matthew's gospel:

"And if your brother sins, go and reprove him in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother. But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed. And if he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax-gatherer. Truly I say to you, *whatever you shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven*. Again I say to you, that if two of you agree on earth about anything that they may ask, it shall be done for them by My Father who is in heaven. For where two or three have gathered together in My name, there I am in their midst" (Matt. 18:15-20, emphasis added).

In this second passage that mentions binding and loosing, there is absolutely *nothing* within the text that would lead us to believe that Jesus was speaking of binding evil spirits. Here Christ spoke of binding and loosing directly after speaking on the subject of church discipline.

This would seem to indicate that in reference to binding and loosing in this passage, Jesus meant something like, “I’m giving *you* responsibility to determine who should be in the church and who should not. It is your job. As you fulfill your responsibilities, heaven will back you up.”

In a broader application, Jesus was saying, “You are authorized on earth as heaven’s representatives. You have responsibilities, and as you fulfill your responsibilities on earth, heaven will always support you.”

Binding and Loosing in Context

This interpretation fits well within the immediate context as well as the wider context of the rest of the New Testament.

In regard to the immediate context, we note that directly after His statement about binding and loosing, Jesus said: “Again I say to you, that if two of you agree *on earth* about anything that they may ask, it shall be done for them by My Father who is *in heaven*” (Matt. 18:19; italics).

There again is the theme of “what you do on earth will be supported in heaven.” We on earth are authorized and responsible to pray. When we do, heaven will respond. Jesus’ words, “*Again I say...*” seem to indicate He is expanding upon His prior statement about binding and loosing.

Jesus’ final statement in this passage, “For where two or three have gathered together in My name, there I am in their midst,” also supports the “heaven will back you up as you act” theme. First believers must gather; then Jesus will be in their midst.

The Church Has Responsibilities

The general idea conveyed in the passage is that the church has responsibility. The church has a responsibility to determine who should, and who should not be accepted as a member. It has the responsibility to pray. It has responsibility to gather together. The church should never have an attitude of “whatever will be, will be,” or think that God’s will is automatically done regardless of what we do. No, we have God-given responsibility. When we do what God has told us to do, He will support us.

As we consider the wider context of all the New Testament, we find this interpretation abundantly supported. We find the church fulfilling certain responsibilities and heaven backing her up. We find the Christians gathering, and then Jesus being in their midst by His Holy Spirit. We find them not accepting everything that happens as God’s will, agreeing in prayer together, and God answering their prayer. We find them disciplining those within the church, not waiting for God to do what He has told them to do. In fact, Paul once wrote concerning the discipline of a church member in Corinth,

I wrote you in my letter not to associate with immoral people; I did not at all mean with the immoral people of this world, or with the covetous and swindlers, or with idolaters; for then you would have to go out of the world. But actually, I wrote to you not to associate with any so-called brother if he should be an immoral person, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or a swindler—not even to eat with such a one. For what have I to do with judging outsiders? *Do you not judge those who are within the church? But those who are outside, God judges. Remove the wicked man from among yourselves* (1 Cor. 5:9-13, emphasis added).

Notice Paul indicated it was the church’s responsibility to excommunicate a false brother, not God’s.

As we consider both of the passages that mention binding and loosing, and if we assume that in both, the meaning of the binding and loosing expression is the same, then

it seems the best interpretation for what Jesus meant is the less strict one: “You are My ambassadors, My authorized representatives. Do your job, and heaven will support you.”

Even if you totally disagree with my interpretation of the passages in consideration, you are going to be hard pressed to present a sound, scriptural argument that Jesus was speaking about binding evil spirits over cities!¹

God’s Divine Plan Includes Satan

Satan and his angels are a rebel army, but not an army that is beyond God’s control. This rebel army was *created by God*, (although they were not rebellious when first created). Paul wrote:

For by Him [Christ] all things were created, both *in the heavens* and on earth, visible and *invisible*, whether *thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities*—all things have been created by Him and for Him (Col. 1:16, emphasis added).

Jesus created every angelic spirit of every rank, including Satan. Did He know that some would rebel? Of course He did. God is all-knowing. Then why did He create them? Because He would use those rebel spirits to help fulfill His plan. If He had no purpose for them, He would simply have incarcerated them, as we are told He has already done with some rebellious angels (see 2 Pet. 2:4) and as He will one day do with Satan (see Rev. 20:2).

My point is that God has reasons for allowing Satan and every evil spirit to operate upon the earth. If He didn’t, they would be completely out of commission. What are God’s reasons for allowing Satan to operate upon the earth? I don’t think anyone understands every reason, yet God has revealed some of the reasons in His Word.

First, God allows Satan to operate limitedly on the earth to fulfill His plan to test humans. Satan serves as the alternate choice for humanity’s allegiance. Whether they realize it or not, people are in subjection either to God or Satan. God permitted Satan to tempt Adam and Eve, two people who possessed God-given free wills, in order to test them. All those with free wills must be tested to reveal what is in their hearts, either obedience or disobedience.²

Second, God allows Satan to operate limitedly on the earth as an agent of His wrath upon evildoers. I have already proven this in a previous chapter by several specific cases in Scripture when God brought judgment upon deserving people through evil spirits. Just the fact that God has allowed Satan to rule over the unsaved people of the world is an indication of His wrath upon them. God judges groups of evil people by allowing wicked humans to rule over them, and also by allowing wicked spiritual beings to rule over them, making their lives all the more miserable.

Third, God allows Satan to operate limitedly on the earth to glorify Himself. “The Son of God appeared for this purpose, that He might destroy the works of the devil” (1 John 3:8). Every time God destroys one of Satan’s works, it glorifies His power and wisdom.

¹ One final question that could be asked about that particular interpretation is this: *If Jesus meant that we are to bind evil spirits, did He also mean that sometimes we should loose evil spirits?* If not, then what are we supposed to loose? Some might claim we should loose God’s power, or loose His angels, or loose His protection, and so on, as some Christians often attempt to do. But where in the New Testament can we find anyone doing such things?

² This concept is discussed much more thoroughly in my book, *God’s Tests*.

Presently, it is God's will that Satan and evil spirits operate upon the earth. This is not to say that God wants anyone to remain under Satan's dominion or be oppressed by evil spirits. He wants them all to be saved and be free. But as long as there are people who are in rebellion against Him, God will continue to use Satan and evil spirits to fulfill His plans. For this reason, it is foolish to think that we can bind territorial spirits from operating on the earth.

Jesus is the Head Over Principalities and Powers

As Christians, our scriptural responsibility to deal with Satan and evil spirits is two-fold: to resist them in our own lives (Jas. 4:7), and to cast them out of others who want to be delivered (Mark 16:17). Any Christian who has experience in casting demons out of other people knows that, as a general rule, unless the demonized person wants to be delivered, he will be unable to cast the demon out.³ God honors every person's free will, and if a person wants to yield to evil spirits, God won't stop him.

This is yet another reason why we can't pull down territorial spirits over geographic areas. Those evil spirits are there holding people in bondage because that is what those people have chosen. Through proclaiming the gospel to them, we offer them a choice. If they make the right choice, it will result in their freedom from Satan and evil spirits. But if they make the wrong choice, choosing not to repent, God will allow Satan to hold them captive.

Jesus is spoken of in Scripture as being "the head over all rule and authority" (Col. 2:10). Although the Greek words for *rule* (*arche*) and *authority* (*exousia*) are sometimes used in describing human political leaders, they are also used in the New Testament as titles for demonic spiritual rulers. The classic passage about the Christians struggle against rulers (*arche*) and powers (*exousia*) in Ephesians 6:12 is one example.

When we read contextually what Paul wrote about Jesus being the head over all rule and authority in Colossians 2:10, it seems clear that he is speaking of spiritual powers. For example, in the same passage just four verses later, Paul writes of Jesus, "When He had disarmed the *rulers* and *authorities*, He made a public display of them, having triumphed over them through Him" (Col. 2:15).

If Jesus is the head of the spiritual rulers and authorities, then He is sovereign over them. This is a wonderful revelation to Christians living in pagan, animistic cultures, who spent their former lives worshipping idols in fear of the evil spirits whom they knew ruled over them. To those of us living in "enlightened" cultures, where it is thought that evil spirits do not actually exist, the revelation of Christ's headship over spiritual rulers and authorities is not so exciting. But it should be, once we discover that we, just like those in more primitive societies, were living in captivity to evil spirits.

The Only Way of Escape

The only way to escape the captivity of evil spirits is to repent and believe the gospel. That is the escape God has provided. No one can bind the demonic forces over a city and set you free or set you partially free. Until a person repents and believes the gospel, He is abiding in God's wrath (see John 3:36), which includes being held by demonic powers.

That is why there are no measurable changes in the cities where the big spiritual warfare conferences and sessions have taken place, because nothing has happened that has really affected the demonic hierarchies that rule in those areas. Christians can scream

³ The exception to this rule would be in cases of people who are so controlled by demons that they have no way of communicating their desire for freedom. In those cases, special gifts of the Spirit would be necessary to bring deliverance, and gifts of the Spirit operate as the Spirit wills.

at principalities and powers all day and night; they can attempt to torment the devil by so-called “warring tongues”; they can say “I bind you evil spirits over this city” a million times; they can even do all these things up in airplanes and on the top floors of skyscrapers (as some actually do); and the only way the evil spirits will be affected is that they will get a good laugh at the foolish Christians.

This is a good place to conclude this chapter and prepare to launch into examining the next myth, the myth that we can open the door for effective evangelism by doing spiritual warfare against territorial spirits.

Myth #5: “We can pull down demonic strongholds in the atmosphere through spiritual warfare.”

No, we can't. God created them and allows them to remain there, and they will be there until it no longer suits His divine purposes. God could do away with all of them right now if He desired. There is no example of anyone pulling down any territorial spirits in the New Testament; neither are there any instructions found there for Christians to do so.