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Modern Myths About Satan and Spiritual Warfare

By David Servant

MYTH #1:

“In eternity past, God and Satan engaged in a great battle. Today, the cosmic struggle still rages between them.”

This particular myth contradicts one of the most well-established, fundamental truths about God that is revealed in Scripture—the truth that He is all-powerful, or *omnipotent*, to use the theological term. From cover to cover the Bible affirms God’s omnipotence.

On page one we learn that God created everything. He spoke the universe into existence. How much power did that require? Whatever amount was necessary, God had it!

Has God’s power diminished since then, *now that He has grown so much older*? No, Jesus told us that *all things* are possible with God (see Matt. 19:26). Jeremiah affirmed that there is *nothing* too difficult for Him (see Jer. 32:17). No person or force can stop Him from fulfilling His plans (see 2 Chron. 20:6; Job 41:10; 42:2). Through Jeremiah God asks, “For who is like Me....And who then...can stand against Me?” (Jer. 50:44). The answer is *no one*, not even Satan.

Speaking through the prophet Isaiah, the Holy Spirit said, “Do you not know? Have you not heard? The Everlasting God, the Lord, the creator of the ends of the earth does not become weary or tired” (Is. 40:28). Paul wrote that God is able to do “exceeding abundantly beyond all that we ask or think” (Eph 3:20).

If God is truly all-powerful as the above-mentioned scriptures affirm, then to say that God and Satan were or are in a battle is to imply that He is *not* all-powerful. If God lost even a single round, was slightly overcome by Satan even to a small degree, or had to struggle against him for even a short time, then He is not all-powerful as He declares Himself to be.

Christ’s Commentary on Satan’s Power

Jesus once said something concerning Satan’s fall from heaven that will help us understand how much power Satan has in comparison to our omnipotent God:

And the seventy returned with joy, saying, “Lord, even the demons are subject to us in Your name.” And He said to them, “I was watching Satan fall from heaven like lightning” (Luke 10:17-18).

When Jesus sent out seventy of His disciples to preach and heal, they returned exuberantly to report that even the demons were subject to them in His name. They should not have been so surprised, however. Jesus informed them that in His preincarnate state, He had witnessed a very revealing demonstration of the Father's supreme power over Satan: When the all-powerful God decreed Satan's expulsion from heaven, *Satan could not resist*. Jesus chose the metaphor, *like lightning*, to emphasize the speed with which Satan fell. He fell, not *like molasses*, but *like lightning*. He didn't fall like a leaf from a tree or a rock from a cliff. Oh no. Satan was in heaven one second, and in the next—BOOM!—he was gone!

If God can so quickly and easily expel Satan himself, it should have been no surprise that His commissioned servants could also quickly and easily expel demons.

Previously, those disciples possessed great respect for the horrible power that demons exercised over their victims, but now they had witnessed a far greater power, causing their joyful amazement. How some of us need this same revelation. Too many Christians have a great respect for the power of the devil and have not yet grasped that God's power is far, far, *far* greater. God is the Creator, and Satan is only a creation.

Satan is no match for God. There is no comparison between God's power and Satan's power. Satan cannot even struggle against God's great power, as Jesus so aptly put it.

The War That Never Was

As strange as it may seem to some of our ears, we need to understand that *God and Satan are not, have never been, and never will be in a battle*. Yes, they do have differing agendas, and perhaps it could be cautiously said that they are in opposition. But when two parties are in opposition to one another, and one is immensely more powerful than the other, their conflicts are not considered battles. Could an earthworm fight with an elephant? An earthworm might make a very feeble attempt to oppose an elephant, but their contention could hardly be described as a fight.

Satan, like that earthworm, made a feeble attempt to oppose One who was immensely more powerful. His opposition was quickly dealt with, and he was expelled from heaven "like lightning." There was no battle—there was only an expulsion.

If God is all-powerful, then Satan doesn't have a ghost of a chance at slightly hindering God from doing what He wants to do. And if God does permit Satan to do something, ultimately it is only to accomplish His own divine will. This truth will become abundantly clear as we continue to examine the Scriptures in later chapters.

Obviously, God permitted Satan to make a choice regarding obedience or disobedience, which is what we call *free will*. But the only reason Satan possessed the authority to make a choice was because God gave him that authority.

The Future Binding of Satan

God's supreme authority over Satan was not only demonstrated in eternity past, but will also be demonstrated in the future. We read in Revelation that *one solitary angel* will bind Satan and incarcerate him for a thousand years:

And I saw an angel coming down from heaven, having the key of the abyss and a great chain in his hand. And he laid hold of the dragon, the serpent of old, who is the devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years, and threw him into the abyss, and shut it and sealed it over him, so that he should not deceive the nations any longer, until the thousand years were completed; after these things he must be released for a short time (Rev. 20:1-3).

This future incident could not be considered a battle between God and Satan any more than Satan's original expulsion from heaven could be considered a battle between God and Satan. This unnamed angel will simply lay hold of Satan and put him out of operation for a thousand years. There is no mention of any skirmish.

Notice also that Satan will not have the power to break out of his prison and will only be released when it suits God's purposes (see Rev. 20:7-9).

God could easily bind Satan right now if He desired. To say that He could not is to say that He is not more powerful than Satan.

Then why doesn't God put a stop to Satan right now? Simply because it doesn't suit His purposes at this time. There are reasons why God permits Satan to function upon the earth, reasons which we will explore in later chapters.¹

What About the Future "War in Heaven"?

If it is true that God and Satan are not, have never been, and never will be in a battle, then why do we read in the book of Revelation of a future war in heaven that involves Satan? That's a good question, and one that can be easily answered. Let's first read about that future heavenly war in Revelation 12:7-9:

And there was war in heaven, Michael and his angels waging war with the dragon. And the dragon and his angels waged war, and they were not strong enough, and there was no longer a place found for them in heaven. And the great dragon was thrown down, the serpent of old who is called the devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world; he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him (Rev. 12:7-9).

If you will read the verses which immediately precede and follow those quoted above, you will see that this incident of which John wrote is not a description of Satan's *original* expulsion from heaven, when he "fell like lightning." Rather, it is a description of a *future* expulsion.² Other scriptures indicate that Satan, even since his original expulsion, may still have some limited access to God's heaven (see Job 1:6; 2:1; Zech. 3:1-2, Luke 22:31; Rev. 12:10).

Notice that this war will be between *Michael and his angels* and *Satan and his angels*. God Himself is not mentioned as being involved in the battle. If He were, the conflict could hardly be described as a war, because God, being all-powerful, could easily squelch any opposition in a flash of time as He has already proven.

Angels, including Michael, are not all-powerful, and thus their conflict with Satan and his angels can be described as a war because there will be some actual conflict for a portion of time. Still, they, being more powerful, will overcome Satan and his hordes.

Why would God not become personally involved in this particular battle, leaving it to His angels? I have no idea. Certainly God, being all-knowing, knew that His angels could win the war, and so perhaps He figured there was no need for Him to be involved

¹ Some claim that God *cannot* stop Satan right now because Satan usurped Adam's authority and now possesses Adam's former right to rule the earth, a right that God cannot revoke. This is a myth about Satan we will examine in the third chapter.

² For example, 12:10 reads, "And I heard a loud voice in heaven, saying, 'Now the salvation, and the power, and the kingdom of our God and the authority of His Christ have come, *for the accuser of our brethren has been thrown down, who accuses them before our God day and night*'" (emphasis added). When Satan was originally expelled from heaven, there were no brethren to accuse.

personally. And I suppose that if God did everything Himself, the angels would have nothing to do!

I have no doubt that God could have easily and quickly annihilated the wicked Canaanites in the days of Joshua, but He chose to give the Israelites the task. What God could have done effortlessly in seconds He required them to do, expending great efforts over a period of months. Perhaps this was more pleasing to God as it required faith on the part of the Israelites. Perhaps that is the reason He will not be personally involved in that future war in heaven. The Bible, however, does not tell us.

Just because there is going to be a war someday in heaven between Michael and his angels and Satan and his angels is no reason for us to think that God is not all-powerful—any more than Israel's battles in Canaan are reason for us to think that God is not all-powerful. Remember, God's angels are not all-powerful—God is.

Was Not Satan Defeated by Jesus on the Cross?

In regard to this first myth of God and Satan's reputed battles, I would like to conclude this chapter by considering the commonly-used statement: *Jesus defeated Satan on the cross*.

In years past, I had often stated that Jesus defeated Satan on the cross until I realized that what I was saying was not entirely biblical. Scripture never actually states that Jesus *defeated* Satan on the cross.

Am I, perhaps, splitting theological hairs? No, there is good reason to be so particular. When we say that Jesus *defeated* Satan, we make it sound as if Jesus and Satan were in a battle, which implies that God is not all-powerful and that Satan was not already under the complete authority of God. That is why I no longer say that Jesus *defeated* Satan on the Cross. There are more biblical ways of describing what happened to Satan when Jesus gave His life on Calvary.

Hebrews 2:14-15 tells us: "Since then the children [that's us, the children of God] share in flesh and blood [that is, we have physical bodies], He Himself [Jesus] likewise also partook of the same [a physical body], that through death *He might render powerless him who had the power of death*, that is, the devil; and might deliver those who through fear of death were subject to slavery all their lives" (emphasis added).

Note that Jesus, through His death, rendered Satan *powerless*. To what extent did He render Satan powerless? Obviously, Satan is not completely powerless, or else the apostle John would never have written that "the whole world lies in the *power* of the evil one" (1 John 5:19, emphasis added). Neither would James and Peter have told us to resist the devil, because if Satan had no power, there would be nothing for us to resist (see James 4:7; 1 Pet. 5:8-9). Nor would Paul have written, "And the God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet" (Rom. 16:20).

If you overheard me say to someone, "I'm powerless," you probably wouldn't conclude I meant that I was incapable of doing *anything*. You would assume that I meant I was powerless to change a certain situation, or that I had lost some jurisdiction over something I had previously controlled. If you had heard the context of my comment, you would probably know exactly what I meant. That is why it is so important to read verses of the Bible within their context, otherwise, we can wrongly interpret what God is trying to communicate to us.

We've already determined from other scriptures that Satan was not rendered totally powerless or inoperable by Jesus' death. Thus we need to know in what area or to what extent Satan was rendered powerless. Hebrews 2:14-15 tells us. It says that through His death, Jesus rendered "powerless him who had *the power of death*, that is, the devil; and might deliver those who through fear of death were subject to slavery all their lives" (emphasis added). Satan was rendered powerless in regard to "*the power of death*." What, exactly, does that mean?

This question is answered by looking at what other parts of the New Testament have to say about death.

Three Kinds of Death

Scripture makes reference to three kinds of death: *spiritual death*, *physical death*, and *the second death*.

The *second death* (or *eternal death*) is referred to in Revelation 2:22; 20:6,14; 21:8, and is described as the time when unbelievers will be thrown into the lake of fire.

Physical death occurs when a person's spirit departs from his body, and his body then ceases to function.

Scripture teaches that we are tripartite in nature: spirit, soul, and body (see 1 Thes. 5:23). Our *body* is our physical person, the flesh and bones and blood. Our *soul* is often considered to be our emotions, intellect and will. Our *spirit* is referred to in Scripture as "the inward man" (2 Cor. 4:16), or "the hidden man of the heart" (1 Pet. 3:4). In both cases, the spirit is called a "man." The spirit is a person who is made of spiritual material, rather than physical material, just like angels, for example. The spirit has been described by some as the "real you." Your spirit is eternal.

With this in mind we can better understand the third kind of death of which the Bible speaks—spiritual death.

Being *spiritually dead* describes the condition of a human spirit which has not been born again by the Holy Spirit. A spiritually dead person has a spirit that is alienated from God, a spirit that possesses a sinful nature, a spirit that is, to some degree, joined to Satan. Ephesians 2:1-3 paints for us a picture of the spiritually dead person:

And you were dead in your trespasses and sins, in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience. Among them we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest.

Paul said the Ephesian Christians were *dead* in their trespasses and sins. Obviously he was not referring to physical death because he was writing to physically alive people. Therefore, he must have been saying that they were *dead*, *spiritually speaking*.

What killed them, spiritually? It was their "trespasses and sins." Remember God told Adam that in the day he disobeyed, he would die (see Gen. 2:17). God was not speaking of physical death, but spiritual death, because Adam did not die physically on the day he ate the forbidden fruit. Rather, he died spiritually that day, and did not die physically until hundreds of years later.

Paul continued by saying that the Ephesians, as spiritually dead people, had walked in (or practiced) those trespasses and sins, following the "course of the world" (that is, doing what everyone else was doing) and following "the prince of the power of the air."

Who is "the prince of the power of the air"? He is Satan, who rules his dark domain as commander-in-chief over other evil spirits who inhabit the atmosphere. Those evil spirits are listed by various ranks in a later chapter of Ephesians (see Eph. 6:12).

Paul said that dark prince is a "spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience." The expression, "sons of disobedience," is just another description for all unbelievers which emphasizes that their nature is sinful. Paul later said that they "*were by nature children of wrath*" (Eph. 2:3, emphasis added). Additionally, he said that Satan was working *in* them.

The Devil for a Dad

Whether unsaved people realize it or not, they are following Satan and are his subjects in the kingdom of darkness. They have his evil, selfish nature residing in their spiritually dead spirits. Satan is actually their spiritual lord and father. That is why Jesus once said to some unsaved religious leaders: “You are of your father the devil, and you want to do the desires of your father” (John 8:44).

This is the bleak picture of the person who has not been born again! He is walking through life spiritually dead, full of Satan’s nature, heading for an inevitable physical death which he greatly fears; and, whether he realizes it or not, he will one day experience the worst death of all, eternal death, as he is cast into the lake of fire to suffer there forever.

It is extremely important that we understand that spiritual, physical, and eternal death are all manifestations of God’s wrath upon sinful humanity, and that Satan has a part in all of it. Satan has been permitted by God to rule over the kingdom of darkness and over all those who “love the darkness” (John 3:19). In effect, God said to Satan, “You may hold in captivity through your power those who are not submitted to Me.” Satan became a subordinate instrument of God’s wrath upon human rebels. Because all have sinned, all are under Satan’s power, filled with his nature in their spirits and held captive to do his will (see 2 Tim. 2:26).

The Ransom for Our Captivity

We can thank God, however, that He had mercy upon humanity, and because of His mercy, no one has to remain in that pitiful condition! Because Jesus’ substitutionary death satisfied the claims of divine justice, all those who believe in Christ can escape from spiritual death and Satan’s captivity because they are no longer under God’s wrath. When we put our faith in Jesus, the Holy Spirit comes into our spirits and eradicates Satan’s nature from it, causing our spirits to be born again (see John 3:1-16) and allowing us to become partakers of God’s divine nature (see 2 Pet. 1:4).

Now back to our original question. When the writer of Hebrews stated that Jesus, through His death, rendered “powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil,” he meant that the power of *spiritual* death, which Satan holds over every unsaved person, has been broken over all those who are “in Christ.” We are made spiritually alive because of Christ; He has paid the penalty for our sins.

Moreover, because we are no longer spiritually dead and under Satan’s dominion, we no longer have to fear *physical death*, since we know what awaits us—a glorious inheritance in heaven. Some of us may even *escape* physical death—if we are alive when Jesus returns (see 1 Cor. 15:51; 1 Thes. 4:13-18).

Finally, because of Jesus, we have been delivered from suffering the *second death*, being cast into the lake of fire.

Did Jesus *defeat* the devil on the cross? No, He did not, because there was no battle between Jesus and Satan. Jesus did, however, render Satan powerless in regard to Satan’s power over spiritual death, by which he holds unsaved people captive in sin. Satan still holds the power of spiritual death over unsaved people, but as far as those who are in Christ are concerned, Satan is powerless over them. This is why in Revelation 12:11, we read, “And they [the believers] overcame him [Satan] because of the blood of the Lamb.” *It was because Jesus shed His blood on the cross that we have overcome Satan.*

The Disarming of the Powers

This also helps us understand Paul’s statement about the “disarming of rulers and authorities” found in Colossians 2:13-15:

And when you were [spiritually] dead in your transgressions...He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions, having canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us and which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross. *When He had disarmed the rulers and authorities, He made a public display of them, having triumphed over them through Him* (emphasis added).

Paul uses obvious metaphorical language in this passage. In the first part, he compares our guilt to a “certificate of debt.” What we could not pay was paid for us by Christ, who took our sin-debt to the cross. There our account was paid in full.

In the second part, just as ancient kings stripped their defeated foes of their weapons and triumphantly paraded them through their city streets, so Christ’s death was a triumph over “rulers and authorities,” the lower ranks of demons who rule over rebellious humans, holding them captive.

Could we not say, based upon this passage, that Christ *defeated* Satan? Perhaps, but with some qualification. We must keep in mind that, in this passage, Paul was writing metaphorically. And every metaphor, whether written or spoken, has a point where the similarities turn to dissimilarities.

For example, if I say to my wife, “Your eyes are like pools,” I mean that her eyes are deep, dark, blue, and inviting. But I mean nothing more, because those are the only similarities between my wife’s eyes and pools of water. I do not mean that fish swim in her eyes, or that they freeze over in the winter, or that ducks might want to land on them. Every metaphor is like that. It reaches a point where, if pushed beyond the intended similarities, would darken understanding rather than enlighten it, as metaphors are supposed to do. (This very thing is often done by people trying to find some significance in every minor detail of Jesus’ parables, when Jesus was usually only trying to make one major point.)

In interpreting Paul’s metaphors in Colossians 2:13-15, we must be equally cautious. Obviously, there wasn’t an actual “certificate of debt” that had all our sins written on it that was nailed to the cross. That is, however, symbolic of what Jesus accomplished.

Similarly, the demons who ruled over unsaved humanity were not literally disarmed of their swords and shields and paraded publicly through the streets by Jesus. The language Paul uses is symbolic of what Jesus accomplished for us. We were held captive by those evil spirits. By dying for our sins, however, Jesus released us from our captivity. Jesus didn’t literally fight against those evil spirits and they were not at war with Him. They, by God’s righteous permission, held *us* in their power all of our lives. Their “armaments,” as it were, were pointed, not at Christ, but at us. Jesus, however, “disarmed” them. They can’t keep us captive any longer.

Let us not think that there was some age-long fight between Jesus and Satan’s evil spirits, and finally, Jesus won the battle on the cross. If we are going to say that Jesus defeated the devil, let us be certain we understand that He defeated the devil *for us*, and not for Himself. He didn’t need to overcome the devil for Himself.

In my front yard I once chased away a small dog who was terrifying my baby daughter. I might say I *defeated* that little dog, but I hope you understand that dog was never any threat to me, only to my daughter. It was the same with Jesus and Satan. Jesus chased away a dog from us that never bothered Him at all.

How did He chase away that Satan-dog? He did it by bearing the punishment for our sins, thus releasing us from our guilt before God, thus delivering us from God’s wrath, and thus the evil spirits whom God righteously permits to enslave human rebels no longer had any right to enslave us. Praise God for that!

Myth #1: “In eternity past, God and Satan engaged in a great battle. Today, the cosmic struggle still rages between them.”

No, we can thank God that in eternity past Satan was *expelled* from heaven *without a fight*. God will someday, through one powerful angel, bind Satan and render him inoperable for a thousand years. In the meantime, Satan’s power in holding people captive through spiritual death has been broken over all those who are in Christ. Satan is no longer our spiritual father and lord. God Himself is not, never has been, and never will be in a battle with Satan. *God is all-powerful*.

This leads us to an appropriate place to examine a second related myth.