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Modern Myths About Satan and Spiritual Warfare

By David Servant

MYTH #6:

“Spiritual warfare against territorial spirits opens the door for effective evangelism.”

The driving motivation for many Christians who are heavily involved in doing spiritual warfare against territorial spirits is their desire to see God’s kingdom expanded. For this they are to be commended. Every Christian should desire to see more people escape from Satan’s grasp and an eternity in hell.

It is important, however, that we use God’s methods to build God’s kingdom. God knows what works and what is a waste of time. He has told us exactly what our responsibilities are in regard to the expansion of His kingdom. To think we can do something not found in Scripture that will multiply the effectiveness of our evangelism, something that Jesus, Peter, or Paul never practiced in their ministries, is foolish.

Why do so many Christians think that spiritual warfare can open the door to effective evangelism? Their line of reasoning usually sounds something like this: “Satan has blinded the minds of unsaved people. We must therefore do spiritual warfare against Satan to stop him from blinding them. Once the blinders are removed, more people will believe the gospel.” Is this true?

There is certainly no doubt that Satan has blinded the minds of unsaved people. Paul wrote:

And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, in whose case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving, that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God (2 Cor. 4:3-4).

The question is, *Did Paul give this piece of information to the Corinthian Christians with the intent of motivating them to do spiritual warfare and pull down territorial spirits?*

The answer is *No* for several obvious reasons.

First, because Paul did not go on to say, “Therefore Corinthians, because Satan has blinded the minds of unbelievers, I want you to do spiritual warfare and pull down territorial spirits so those blinders will be removed.” Rather, the very next thing he mentioned was his preaching of Christ, which is the way that spiritual blindness *is* removed.

Second, in *none* of his letters did Paul instruct any believers to be involved in pulling down strongholds over their cities that evangelistic results might increase.

Third, we know from reading all of Paul's letters that he did not believe Satan's blinding was the *primary* reason why unbelievers remained unbelieving. Satan's blinding is a contributing factor, but not the main or only factor. *The primary factor that keeps people unsaved is the hardness of their hearts.* This is obvious for the simple reason that Satan is not able to keep everyone blinded. Some people, when they hear the truth, believe it, and thus reject any lies they formerly believed. It is not so much Satan's blinding that causes their unbelief, as it is their unbelief that allows Satan's blinding.

Callous Hearts

In his letter to the Ephesians, the apostle Paul explained precisely why non-Christians remain in unbelief:

This I say therefore, and affirm together with the Lord, that you walk no longer just as the Gentiles also walk, in the futility of their mind, being *darkened in their understanding* [perhaps a reference to Satan's blinding], excluded from the life of God, because of the ignorance that is in them, *because of the hardness of their heart*; and they, having become *callous*, have given themselves over to sensuality, for the practice of every kind of impurity with greediness (Eph. 4:17-19, emphasis added).

Paul said that the unsaved are excluded from the life of God because of "the ignorance that is in them." But why are they ignorant? Why has their "understanding been darkened"? The answer is, "because of the hardness of their hearts." They have become "callous." That is the root and primary reason why people remain unsaved.¹ They bear the blame themselves. Satan only supplies the lies they want to believe.

Jesus' parable of the sower and the soils illustrates this concept perfectly:

"The sower went out to sow his seed; and as he sowed, some fell beside the road; and it was trampled under foot, and the birds of the air ate it up....Now the parable is this: the seed is the word of God. And those beside the road are those who have heard; then the devil comes and takes away the word from their heart, so that they may not believe and be saved" (Luke 8:5, 11-12).

Notice that the seed, which represents the gospel, fell beside the road and was trampled. It couldn't penetrate the hard soil where people frequently walked. Thus it was easy for birds, which represent the devil, to steal the seeds.

The point of the entire parable is to compare the condition of people's hearts (and their receptivity to God's Word) with various types of soil. Jesus was explaining why some people believe and why others do not: It all depends upon them.

How does Satan figure into the picture? He is only able to steal the Word from those with hardened hearts. The birds in the parable were only a secondary cause as to why the seeds did not germinate. The primary problem was with the soil; in fact, it was the soil's hardness that made it possible for the birds to get the seeds.

The same thing is true with the gospel. The real problem is with the hardened hearts of free moral agents. When people reject the gospel, they make a choice to remain blinded. They would prefer to believe lies rather than the truth. As Jesus put it, "The light is come

¹ Paul's description of unbelievers in Romans 1:18-32 also supports this same concept.

into the world, and *men loved the darkness* rather than the light; for their deeds were evil” (John 3:19, emphasis added).

The Bible does not lead us to believe that people are sincere, good-hearted folks, who would surely believe the gospel if Satan would only stop blinding them. On the contrary, the Bible paints a very dim picture of human character, and God will hold every individual responsible for his sinful choices. Sitting on His throne of judgment, God will not accept anyone’s excuse that “the devil made me do it.”

How Satan Blinds People’s Minds

Exactly how does Satan blind people’s minds? Does he possess some mystical spiritual power that he pours like a potion into people’s heads to dull their understanding? Does a demon dig its talons into their brains, effectively short-circuiting their rational thinking processes? No, Satan blinds people’s minds *by supplying them with lies to believe*.

Obviously, if people really believed the truth that Jesus is the Son of God who died for their sins, if they really believed that they will one day have to stand before Him to give an account of their lives, then they would repent and become His followers. But they don’t believe those things. They do, however, believe *something*. They may believe that there is no God, or that there is no life after death. They may believe in reincarnation, or that God would never send anyone to hell. They may think that their good works will get them into heaven. But whatever they believe, if it is not the gospel, it can be summed up in one word: *lies*. They don’t believe the truth, and thus Satan keeps them blinded through lies. If, however, they humble themselves and believe the truth, Satan will be able to blind them no longer.

The Lies of Darkness

Satan’s kingdom is referred to in Scripture as the “kingdom of *darkness*.” Darkness, of course, represents the absence of truth, the absence of light. When you are in darkness, you navigate by your imagination, and usually end up stubbing your toe on a bedpost. That is how it is in Satan’s kingdom of darkness. Those who are in it are navigating their lives by their imaginations, and their imaginations have been filled with Satan’s lies. They are in spiritual darkness.

Satan’s kingdom is best defined then, not as a geographical kingdom with clearly defined borders, but as a kingdom of belief—belief, that is, in lies. The kingdom of darkness is located in the same place as the kingdom of light. Those who believe the truth live right among those who believe lies.² Our primary job is to proclaim the truth to people who already believe lies. When someone believes the truth, Satan loses another one of his subjects because he is no longer able to deceive him.

Thus we set unsaved people free from Satan, not by “binding” evil spirits over them but by proclaiming the truth. Jesus said, “You shall know the truth, and *the truth shall make you free*” (John 8:32, emphasis added). Spiritual blindness is removed by truth.

Within that same passage of Scripture in John’s gospel, Jesus said to an unsaved audience:

“You are of your father the devil, and you want to do the desires of your father. He was a murderer from the beginning, and *does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. Whenever he speaks a lie, he speaks*

² It is true, of course, that in various geographical areas, there are greater or lesser percentages of people in either kingdom.

from his own nature; for he is a liar, and the father of lies. But because I speak the truth, you do not believe Me (John 8:44-45, emphasis added).

Notice the contrast Jesus made between Himself and the devil. He spoke the truth; Satan is the ultimate liar.

Notice also that even though Jesus told His listeners that they were of their father the devil, and even though He exposed Satan as a liar, He still placed responsibility on them to believe the truth He spoke. It was not the devil's fault that they were blinded—it was their own fault. Jesus held them responsible. Satan assists people who “love darkness” to stay in the darkness by supplying them with lies to believe. But Satan can't fool anyone who will believe the truth.

All this being so, the primary way we can push back the kingdom of darkness is by spreading the light—the truth of God's Word. That is why Jesus did *not* tell us, “Go into all the world and bind the devil,” but rather, “Go into all the world and preach the gospel.” Jesus told Paul that the purpose of his preaching would be to open people's “eyes *so that they may turn* from darkness to light and from the dominion of Satan to God” (Acts 26:18, emphasis added). This makes it clear that people escape Satan's dominion when they are exposed to the truth of the gospel and then make a decision to turn from darkness to light, that is, believe the truth rather than a lie. The only strongholds we are “pulling down” are strongholds of lies built in people's minds.

This is God's Plan

Don't forget that God is the one who cast Satan out of heaven to the earth. He could have put Satan anywhere in the universe or incarcerated him forever. But He didn't. Why? Because God wanted to use Satan to accomplish His ultimate goal—the goal one day to have a big family of free moral agents who would love Him, having chosen to serve Him.

If God wanted a family of children who would love Him, then two things were required. First, He had to create people with free wills, because the foundation of love is free will. Robots can't love.

Second, He had to test them in an environment where they would be faced with a choice to obey or disobey, to love or hate Him. Free moral agents *must* be tested. And if there is going to be a test of loyalty, there must exist a temptation to disloyalty. Thus, we begin to understand why God placed Satan on the earth. Satan would serve as the alternate choice for humanity's allegiance. He would be permitted (with certain limitations) to influence anyone who was receptive to his lies. Everyone would be faced with the choice: *Will I believe God or Satan? Will I serve God or Satan?* Whether people realize it or not, they have all made a decision already. Our job is to encourage people who have made the wrong decision to repent and believe the gospel, making the right decision.

Is this not what happened in the Garden of Eden? God placed the tree of the knowledge of good and evil there and then forbade Adam and Eve to eat from it. If God didn't want them to eat from it, why did He place it there? That answer is that it served as a test.

We also note that Satan was permitted by God to tempt Eve. Again, if loyalty is to be tested, there must exist the temptation to be disloyal. Satan lied to Eve and she believed him, and so, at the same time, she decided *not* to believe what God had said. The result? The first free moral agents revealed the disloyalty that was in their hearts.

In a similar manner, every free moral agent is tested throughout his or her lifetime. God has revealed Himself through His creation, and so everyone can see that there is an awesome God who exists (see Rom. 1:19-20). God has given every one of us a conscience, and in our hearts, we know right from wrong (see Rom. 2:14-16). Satan and

his evil spirits are permitted, in a limited manner, to lie to and tempt people. The result is that every free moral agent is tested.

The sad truth of the matter is that every free moral agent has rebelled, and has “exchanged the truth of God for a lie” (Rom. 1:25). We can thank God, however, that He has provided a ransom for our sins and a way to be born into His family. Jesus’ sacrificial death is the only and all-sufficient answer to our problem.

Satan’s Deception, Now and Later

So we understand at least one reason why the devil and his rebel army are permitted to work on this planet: for the purpose of deceiving those who love darkness.

This truth is further validated when we consider that, according to the book of Revelation, Satan will one day be bound by an angel and incarcerated for a thousand years. The reason for his incarceration? “That he should not deceive the nations any longer” (Rev. 20:3). During that Millennium, Jesus will personally rule the world from Jerusalem.

But after those thousand years, Satan will be released for a short period of time. The result? He “will come out to deceive the nations which are in the four corners of the earth” (Rev. 20:8).

Now, if God didn’t want Satan to deceive people at that time, then why would He release him? Especially in light of the fact that God originally incarcerated him “that he should not deceive the nations any longer”?

God, of course, would prefer that Satan never deceive anyone. But He knows that the only people whom Satan can deceive are those who don’t believe what He Himself has said. Satan can only deceive those who reject the truth, and that is why God permits him to operate now, and why He will permit Satan to operate then. As Satan deceives people, the condition of people’s hearts is made apparent, and then God can sort the “wheat from the tares” (see Matt. 13:24-30).

This is exactly what will happen at the end of the Millennium when Satan is released. He will deceive all those who love darkness, and they will then gather their armies around Jerusalem in an attempt to overthrow Christ’s rule. God will know exactly who loves Him and who hates Him, and thus He will immediately send “fire from heaven” that will “devour them” (Rev. 20:10). Satan will serve God’s purposes then just as he does now. For this reason among others, it is foolish to think that we can “pull down territorial spirits.” God allows them to operate for His own reasons.

Biblical Evangelism

The plain fact is that neither Jesus nor any of the New Testament apostles practiced the kind of spiritual warfare that some are claiming is the missing key to effective evangelism today. We never find Jesus, Peter, John, Stephen, Philip, or Paul “pulling down strongholds” or “binding the strong men” over the cities in which they preached. Rather, we find that they followed the Holy Spirit in regard to where He wanted them to preach; we find them proclaiming the simple gospel, calling people to repentance and faith in Christ; and we find them enjoying marvelous results. And in those cases where they preached to unreceptive people who rejected the gospel, we don’t find them “doing spiritual warfare so that Satan wouldn’t be able to continue blinding their minds.” Rather, we find them “shaking the dust off their feet” as Jesus commanded, and going to the next city (Matt. 10:14; Acts 13:5).

It is amazing that anyone could claim that “pulling down strongholds” and “binding the strong men” is a prerequisite to successful evangelism when there are so many thousands of examples of great revivals in church history where such “spiritual warfare” was never practiced.

“But our techniques work!” someone will say. “Since we started doing this kind of spiritual warfare, more people have been getting saved than ever before.”

If that is true, I’ll tell you why. It is because there has been more scriptural prayer and evangelism done at the same time. Prayer and evangelism will bring a spiritual harvest, even if unscriptural things like “pulling down strongholds” over cities is done in conjunction.

What would you say if an evangelist told you, “Tonight, before I preached at the revival service, I privately did forty-one jumping jacks. And when I preached, sixteen people were saved! I’ve finally found the secret to effective evangelism! From now on, I’m going to make sure I do forty-one jumping jacks before I preach!”?

Surely you would say to that evangelist, “Your jumping jacks had nothing to do with those sixteen people being saved. The key to your success is that you preached the gospel, and there were sixteen people listening who were receptive.”

God honors His Word. If God gives a promise, and someone meets the conditions to that particular promise, God will keep His promise, even if that person is doing other things that are unscriptural.

God Always Keeps His Promises

For example, I recently attended one of the most deceitful evangelistic crusades I have ever attended in my twenty-five years of being a Christian. It seemed that the evangelist used every trick in the book to get money, from “God told me there are 100 people here who are each supposed to give a thousand dollars,” to “There is a special anointing right now for giving, and if you give generously right now, your act of faith will produce an extra-special return, and even some of your loved-ones will be saved.” The evangelist would blow on his crusade team to make them fall over “by the power of the Holy Spirit,” and it was about as convincing as studio wrestling on television. There was an incredible amount of showmanship, fakery, and hype, and I can’t remember once hearing about Jesus dying on the cross for our sins.

At the end of the service, the evangelist claimed to have the “word of knowledge” in operation. He then began calling out, supposedly by supernatural knowledge, general sicknesses and ailments that were afflicting people present in the large auditorium. It’s one thing when an evangelist points to a person in a crowd whom he doesn’t know and says, “The Lord shows me you have a tumor in your kidney, and another thing when he points to a crowd of ten thousand and says, “The Lord shows me there are people here today who have back trouble!” Such “words of knowledge” are not so convincingly supernatural. This particular evangelist then encouraged the crowd to receive their healings and come forward and testify of what God had done for them.

Amazingly enough, some people were genuinely healed. Why? Was it because the evangelist was so anointed by the Holy Spirit? No, it was because Jesus said, “All things for which you pray and ask, believe that you have received them, and they shall be granted you” (Mark 11:24). Sick people present in that crusade did what Jesus said to do, and Jesus did what He promised He would do. They believed and He healed them. Those who were healed didn’t need to come to the crusade to wait for the “man of God” to call out their sickness; they could have received their healing at home by just taking God at His Word. But in spite of all that dishonored the Holy Spirit at that particular crusade, God still kept his Word for people who met His conditions.

It is the same way with the present spiritual warfare practices. If you start passing out tracts and “binding the strong man” over your city, a certain percentage of people will be saved. And, if you just start passing out tracts without binding the strong man, the same percentage of people will be saved.

How to Pray Scripturally for a Spiritual Harvest

How should we pray for unsaved people? First, we should understand that there is no instruction in the New Testament that tells us to pray that God will save people, nor is there any record of any early Christians praying that way. The reason is because, from God's standpoint, He has done everything He needs to do in order for everyone in the world to be saved. He so much desires for them to be saved that He gave His Son to die on the cross.

But why isn't everyone saved yet? Because not everyone has believed the gospel. And why have they not believed? There are only two reasons: (1) Either they have never yet heard the gospel, or (2) they've heard the gospel and rejected it.

That is why the scriptural way to pray for the unsaved is to pray that they will have opportunities to hear the gospel. For example, Jesus told us "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore *beseech the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest*" (Luke 10:2, emphasis added). In order for people to hear the gospel and be saved, someone has to tell them the gospel. That is why we should pray for God to send people to them.

When the early church prayed regarding a spiritual harvest, they prayed, "Grant that Thy bond-servants may *speak Thy word with all confidence*, while Thou dost extend Thy hand to heal, and signs and wonders take place through the name of Thy holy servant Jesus" (Acts 4:29-30, emphasis added).

They were asking either for (1) opportunities to proclaim the gospel boldly or (2) boldness to proclaim the gospel during the opportunities they knew they would have. They also expected God to confirm the gospel with healings, signs and wonders. Those are scriptural prayers, and notice the objective was to give people the opportunity to hear the gospel. God answered their prayer: "And when they had prayed, the place where they had gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and began to speak the word of God with boldness" (Acts 4:31).

How did Paul think Christians should pray in regard to producing a spiritual harvest? Did he instruct them to ask God to save more people? No, let's read what he said:

Finally, brethren, *pray for us that the word of the Lord may spread rapidly and be glorified*, just as it did also with you (2 Thes. 3:1, emphasis added).

Pray on my behalf, *that utterance may be given to me in the opening of my mouth, to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel*, for which I am an ambassador in chains; *that in proclaiming it I may speak boldly*, as I ought to speak (Eph. 6:19-20, emphasis added).

Whether or not people are saved now depends more upon them than it does upon God, and so our prayers should be for people to hear the gospel and for God to help us proclaim it. God will answer our prayers, but that still doesn't guarantee that anyone will be saved, because God gives people the right to make their own choices. Their salvation depends upon their response to the gospel.

Can We Not "Claim" People's Salvation?

In regard to this same subject of praying for the unsaved, is it not true that we can, by faith, claim certain people's salvation? Some Christians seem to think so, but there is no indication in the Bible that this is true. In fact, if it were true, then the entire biblical principle of free moral agency is negated.

How often I have heard people quote from Acts 16:31, claiming Paul's words there as a promise that all their relatives will be saved: "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you shall be saved, you and your household."

But it is important that we read this sentence of Scripture contextually. Was Paul saying that if we believe, all of our household will be saved? No he was not. Paul was responding to a Philippian jailer who asked what he must do to be saved (see Acts 16:30). It is quite obvious that Paul meant that if the jailer believed, he would be saved, and if his household believed, they would also be saved. That is why we read in the very next verse that Paul “spoke the word of the Lord to him *together with all who were in his house*” (Acts 16:32, emphasis added). Paul spoke the gospel to everyone in the jailer’s household because they each needed to believe individually in order to be saved. Jesus said, “God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish... (John 3:16). He did not say, “Whoever’s relative believes, he will not perish.” Everyone must believe for himself.

As we continue reading the narrative in Acts 16, we find that the jailer’s entire household did believe, and so Paul immediately baptized all of them in water:

And he [the jailer] took them that very hour of the night and washed their wounds, and immediately he was baptized, he *and all his household*. And he brought them into his house and set food before them, and rejoiced greatly, having believed in God *with his whole household* (Acts 16:33-34, emphasis added).

If we could simply claim, by faith, that our relatives would be saved, guaranteeing their salvation, why then did Paul write to the Corinthian Christians who had unsaved spouses, telling them, “For how do you know, O wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, O husband, whether you will save your wife?” (1 Cor. 7:16). The answer is that they don’t know, which indicates that they can’t simply “claim” the salvation of their spouses.

If we can claim the salvation of our household, why did Jesus say that because of His coming, “a man’s enemies will be the members of his household” (Matt. 10:36)? And why did He say,

“Do you suppose that I came to grant peace on earth? I tell you, no, but rather division; for from now on five members in one household will be divided, three against two, and two against three. They will be divided, father against son, and son against father; mother against daughter, and daughter against mother; mother-in-law against daughter-in-law, and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law” (Luke 12:51-53)?

Even though it is obvious from examining Scripture that we can’t claim, “by faith,” the salvation of our relatives (or anyone else), we can and should pray that God will send people across their paths to share gospel with them. And we should pray that God will give *us* opportunities and help *us* to share His truth with those who don’t know Him.

Myth #6: “Spiritual warfare against territorial spirits opens the door for effective evangelism.”

The truth is that there are no scriptures that instruct us to engage in battles with territorial spirits, nor are there any examples of any Christians doing so. God permits Satan and his hierarchy of evil spirits to rule the world of darkness in order to fulfill His divine purposes, and no amount of screaming at them by us will remove them. To try to “do spiritual warfare” against territorial spirits is a waste of time, and the idea that it will make any difference in evangelistic endeavors is unscriptural.