

## An Evil Spirit and Saul

### Did God Send an Evil Spirit upon Saul?

The nature of God is such that He never would do anything that is out of harmony with His divine essence. Being infinite in all of His attributes (including goodness and compassion), He never would mistreat anyone, manifest partiality or injustice, or do something that may be legitimately indicted as wrong (Genesis 18:25). “He is the Rock, His work is perfect; for all His ways are justice, a God of truth and without injustice; righteous and upright is He” (Deuteronomy 32:4). That being the case, how does one explain the following: “But the Spirit of the Lord departed from Saul, and a distressing spirit from the Lord troubled him” (1 Samuel 16:14); “And it happened on the next day that the distressing spirit from God came upon Saul” (1 Samuel 18:10; cf. 19:9; Judges 9:23)? Did God supernaturally afflict Saul with a demonic spirit that, in turn, overruled Saul’s ability to be responsible for his own actions?

At least three clarifications are worthy of consideration. First, the Bible frequently refers to acts of deserved punishment that God has inflicted upon people throughout history. For example, He brought a global deluge against the Earth’s population (Genesis 6-9) due to rampant human wickedness and depravity (6:5). God did not act inappropriately in doing so, not only because the people deserved nothing less, but also because He repeatedly warned the people of impending disaster, and was longsuffering in giving them ample opportunity to repent (1 Peter 3:20; 2 Peter 2:5; 3:9). The Bible provides instance after instance where evil people received their “just desserts.” God is not to be blamed nor deemed unjust for levying deserved punishment for sin, even as honest, impartial judges in America today are not culpable when they mete out just penalties for criminal behavior. Retribution upon flagrant, ongoing, impenitent lawlessness is not only right and appropriate; it is absolutely indispensable and necessary (see [Miller, 2002](#)).

In this case, Saul was afflicted with “ an evil spirit ” as a punishment for his insistent defiance of God’s will. He had committed flagrant violation of God’s commands on two previous occasions (1 Samuel 13:13-14; 15:11,19). His persistence in this **lifelong** pattern of disobedient behavior certainly deserved direct punitive response from God (e.g., 31:4). As Keil and Delitzsch maintained: “This demon is called ‘an evil spirit (coming) from Jehovah,’ because Jehovah had sent it as a punishment” (1976, 2:170). John W. Haley added: “And he has a punitive purpose in granting this permission. He uses evil to

chastise evil” (1977, p. 142). Of course, the reader needs to be aware of the fact that the term for “evil” is a broad term that need not refer to spiritual wickedness. In fact, it often refers to physical harm or painful hardship (e.g., Genesis 19:19; 2 Samuel 17:14).

A second clarification regarding the sending of an evil spirit upon Saul is the question of, in what sense the spirit was “from the Lord.” To be honest and fair, the biblical interpreter must be willing to allow the peculiar linguistic features of ancient languages to be clarified and understood in accordance with the way those languages functioned. Specifically, ancient Hebrew (like most all other languages, then and now) was literally loaded with **figurative** language—i.e., figures of speech, Semitisms, colloquialisms, and idioms. It frequently was the case that “[a]ctive verbs were used by the Hebrews to express, not the doing of the thing, but the **permission** of the thing which the agent is said to do” (Bullinger, 1898, p. 823, emp. in orig.; cf. MacKnight, 1954, p. 29). Similarly, the figure of speech known as “metonymy of the subject” occurs “[w]here the action is put for the declaration concerning it: or where what is said *to be done* is put for what is declared, **or permitted**, or foretold as *to be done*: or where an action, said *to be done*, is put for *the giving occasion* for such action” (Bullinger, p. 570, italics in orig., emp. added). Hence, when the Bible says that the “distressing spirit” that troubled Saul was “from the Lord,” the writer was using an idiom to indicate that the Lord **allowed or permitted** the distressing spirit to come upon Saul. George Williams commented: “What God permits He is stated in the Bible to perform” (1960, p. 127).

In this second case, God did not directly send upon Saul an evil spirit; rather He **allowed** it to happen in view of Saul’s own propensity for stubborn disobedience. Gleason Archer commented on this point: “By these successive acts of rebellion against the will and law of God, King Saul left himself wide open to satanic influence—just as Judas Iscariot did after he had determined to betray the Lord Jesus” (1982, p. 179). One need not necessarily suppose that this demonic influence **overwhelmed** Saul’s free will. Satan can have power over us only insofar as we encourage or invite him to do so—“for what God fills not, the devil will” (Clarke, n.d., 2:259).

It is particularly interesting to note how the Bible links the frequent attempts at subversion by Satan with the redemptive scheme of God to provide atonement through the Christ. David, an ancestor of Christ, had to face Satan in the form of this “evil spirit” that sought to harm him through Saul, even as Jesus Himself had to face Satan’s attempts to subvert Him (Genesis 3:15; Matthew 4:1-11; cf. Matthew 2:16; Hebrews 2:14; Revelation 12:4). Williams went on to observe: “This explains why so many of those who were the ancestors of Christ were the objects of Satan’s peculiar cunning and hatred” (p. 153).

A third consideration regarding the “evil spirit” that came upon Saul is the fact that the term “spirit” (*ruach*) has a wide range of meanings: air (i.e., breath or wind); the vital principle of life or animating force; the rational mind where thinking and decision-making occurs; the Holy Spirit of God (Gesenius, 1847, pp. 760-761), and even **disposition of mind or attitude** (Harris, et al., 1980, 2:836). Likewise, the word translated “evil” (KJV), “distressing” (NKJV), or “injurious” (NIV margin) is a word (*ra‘a*) that can mean “bad,” “unhappy,” or “sad of heart or mind” (Gesenius, p. 772). It can refer to “a variety of negative attitudes common to wicked people, and be extended to include the consequences of that kind of lifestyle” (Harris, et al., 2:856). In view of these linguistic data, the “evil spirit” that came upon Saul may well have been his own bad attitude—his ugly disposition of mind—that he manifested over and over again. Here is a persistent problem with which so many people grapple—the need to get their attitude straight regarding God’s will for their lives, and the need to have an unselfish approach to life and the people around them. We can be “our own worst enemy.” Such certainly was the case with Saul—and he bore total responsibility for his own actions. He could not blame God or an external “evil spirit.” Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown summarize this point quite adequately: “His own gloomy reflections—the consciousness that he had not acted up to the character of an Israelitish king—the loss of his throne, and the extinction of his royal house, made him jealous, irritable, vindictive, and subject to fits of morbid melancholy” (n.d., p. 185). Indeed, all people ultimately **choose** to allow Satan to rule them by their capitulation to their own sinful inclinations, desires, and decisions (cf. Genesis 4:7; Luke 22:3; Acts 5:3). In view of these considerations, God and the Bible are exonerated from wrongdoing in the matter of Saul being the recipient of an evil spirit. When adequate evidence is gathered, the facts may be understood in such a way that God is shown to be righteous and free from unfair treatment of Saul. Like every other accountable human being who has ever lived, Saul made his own decisions, and reaped the consequences accordingly.

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