

Question: How could something evil come from God? See 1 Samuel 16:14—“Now the Spirit of the Lord had left Saul, and an evil spirit sent from the Lord began to torment him.”

Answer: This text is troubling. God never tempts anyone (Jas 1:13). He gives only good gifts (Jas 1:17). Nothing evil can remain in His presence (Ps 5:4). So how could something evil come from God?

Is this a mistranslation? No. The Hebrew clearly says “an evil spirit from the LORD.” It’s the same word for “evil” used in Genesis 6:5, where every intent of the thoughts of man’s heart before the flood “was only evil continually.” It is the same word for “spirit” used earlier in this very verse. And it is the same phrase “from the Lord” used in Psalm 121:2, where God is the source of “help.”

Joseph Smith Jr., founder of the Mormon religion, found this verse troubling enough to “correct” it in his “Inspired Version” of the Bible: “an evil spirit which was not of the Lord troubled him.” But no ancient manuscript supports that change.

Critical scholars take a different route. They say the ancients did not understand natural causes, so they blamed everything on God. But that explanation contradicts what God says about Himself: “The One forming light and creating darkness, Causing well-being and creating calamity; I am the LORD who does all these” (Isa 45:7). “Calamity” there is the same Hebrew word translated “evil” in our text.

Was the spirit morally evil?

Maybe the spirit was not morally “evil.” Maybe it was just “destructive,” “disastrous,” or “devastating”—the Hebrew word can mean any of those. But that does not solve the problem. It is still a bad gift from God. It just pushes Him one step removed from the harm. And other texts still show God sending a spirit that is morally bad.

In 1 Kings 22, God puts a “lying spirit” in the mouths of Ahab’s prophets. But notice: this is punishment. These were already false prophets. Ahab had already rejected God’s guidance.

Saul is no different. He had already profaned his calling as king. The evil spirit was discipline, meant to bring him to repentance. That is a good, moral goal. As Proverbs 15:10 says, “Grievous [literally, “evil”] punishment is for him who forsakes the way; he who hates reproof will die.”

God’s discipline: to repent or reject

God invited Saul to walk the path of obedience. That path led to blessing, success, and long life. Instead, Saul exalted himself (1 Sam 15:12) and feared people more than God (15:24; see also ch. 13). He rejected the path of grace and chose disobedience. So, he reaped wrath, discipline, and judgment instead. Discipline accepted leads to repentance and restoration. Discipline rejected leads to death and destruction.

All things—good and evil—come from God. There is no other ultimate source. Good things come directly from His hand. Bad things come through Satan, but only as God permits (Job 1–2). Even then, they remain within God’s sovereign will. Nothing touches us outside God’s permission. We accept all things from His hand. We give Him glory in every situation (Job 1:21; 2:10; 2 Cor 12:7–10).

Nothing is the result of blind chance or Satan’s upper hand

This truth is hard. But it is also deeply comforting. Nothing that happens to us is chance. Satan never has the upper hand. God is in control.

When David faced discipline, he chose to fall into the hand of the Lord, “for His mercies are great” (2 Sam 24:14). Jesus said not even a sparrow dies apart from God’s will—and God loves us far more than sparrows (Matt 10:29–31).

In the end, the wicked will be judged. Everyone who has accepted God’s invitation will be saved (Matt 13:24–30, 37–43). Be comforted. None of God’s children will ever be lost (John 10:28–29; Rom 8:31–39).