

Faith Pulpit

David's Musical Therapy, I Samuel 16:14–23, Part 1

A hot topic brewing in Baptist churches today is the subject of music. Although music is not on the theological level of Christology, the practical considerations of a leader's music philosophy affect the local church on every level; for that reason this topic is on the front burner for many people. These articles will discuss a premier text dealing with the power of music. Part one will discuss the problem of evil, the identity of the evil spirit, and the solution for Saul's affliction. Part two will discuss the two-fold cure for Saul's affliction.

In 1 Samuel 16:13, Samuel had just anointed David king of Israel, and the Bible says, "The Spirit of the Lord came upon David from that day." Subsequently, the Spirit of God departed from Saul, and "the Lord sent a distressing spirit upon Saul to trouble him." The word translated "trouble" in verses 14 and 15 is Ba`ath, which means "to fall upon, startle, terrify, or overwhelm."¹ The word reveals that Saul quickly had a change in his attitude, thinking, and perspective. This same word is used to describe Job's reaction to the death of his children, physical agony, and financial ruin in Job 3:5; 9:34. Saul's attitude and countenance changed so drastically that his servants foresaw imminent trouble. Their concern was valid, since kings would often vent any displeasure on their servants! Notice how the servants attempted to solve this possibly dangerous situation: they turned to the art of music. This decision reveals the axiomatic belief of ancient civilizations that music had remarkable power to heal the human psyche.²

The Problem of Evil

The problem of evil is a major question in both theology and philosophy. People of great intellect have wrestled with the problem of how a good God could allow evil. Only God's Word has an answer to this dilemma, and an entire article would need to be written to even partially address it. We do know from other passages, however, that God is not the author of sin (Psalm 5:4; 1 Pet. 1:15, 16; 1 John 1:5,

6). Lewis Sperry Chafer sheds light on the moral problem when he writes, “God is Himself holy and in no sense is He directly or indirectly the instigator of angelic sin.”³

God’s purpose in afflicting Saul was probably to bring about a change of attitude so that Saul would repent. God at times does allow evil to flourish in order to accomplish His sovereign plan and purpose. A relevant example is found in Revelation 17:17 where the Bible says that God will “put it into their hearts to fulfill His purpose, to be of one mind, and to give their kingdom to the beast, until the words of God are fulfilled.” This verse refers to the Tribulation period when leaders of the world legion turn against the ecumenical world religion and destroy her with fire. God puts this desire to destroy the false religious network into the hearts of the ten world leaders who are under the control of the antichrist.

We must insert God’s sovereignty into this type of possible interpretive problem, to ensure a conclusion that is in harmony with Scripture. God’s thoughts, ways, and purposes are so far beyond our finite cognitive ability that we must ultimately exercise biblical faith and trust that He knows best how to accomplish His plan. Romans 11:33–34 reminds us: “Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out! ‘For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has become His counselor?’”

The Identity of the “Evil Spirit”

What was this “evil spirit” (KJV) in verse 14? Many commentators believe God sent a demon to possess Saul periodically; a more practical interpretation exists however. More likely, God sent an angel to influence Saul to feel terribly depressed and anxious. The “evil” probably refers to the effect the angel produced rather than its moral essence.

Several considerations support the latter viewpoint.

First, the word used for “Spirit of the Lord” is the same Hebrew word used later in verse 14 as an “evil spirit.” Both are *Ruwach*, which is the basic word for “spirit, wind, breath.” In 1 Kings 22:19–23 this same word for “spirit” is used to refer to a good angel from the host of heaven who volunteers to persuade Ahab to go up to Ramoth Gilead by becoming a “lying spirit” in the mouth of Israel’s prophets. The 1 Kings passage also states that several angels presented their plans before the Lord; yet, He chose this angel’s idea to lure Ahab. The point here is that the Bible does set a precedent in showing us that God has used good angels in other circumstances to produce a negative effect upon man.

Second, the 1 Kings passage is not the only passage that reveals the negative influence of angels upon men’s thoughts, words, and attitudes. In Judges 9:23 the Lord sent an “evil spirit” between Abimelech and the men of Shechem. The two Hebrew words in this text are identical to the ones used in 1 Samuel

16:14,15.

Third, the Lord's hardening of Pharaoh's heart in Exodus 7 is a similar situation where God influenced a king for His sovereign plan.

Fourth, the word translated "spirit" in 1 Samuel 16:14,15 is tied directly to Ra`a`, which can mean "evil, bad, distressing."⁴ The NKJV better translates this word as "distressing" indicating the function of the spirit. A modern example would be the statement, "He throws a wicked pitch!" which indicates the pitcher's professional control of a fastball. Of course, a pitch cannot contain any moral essence; the batter standing behind the plate, however, views the pitch as a bad thing since attempting to hit a 101 mph fastball that jumps 6 inches just as it reaches the plate is almost impossible. The opposing team however, views the pitch as a good thing because it helps them to accomplish the goal of winning. Obviously, Saul did not view the evil spirit as a positive force in his life because the context clearly states that Saul was physically and spiritually miserable; in the mind of God, however, the evil spirit was meant to bring about the fulfillment of His sovereign plan.

Fifth, this spirit cannot be a demon because in other Old Testament passages the Bible never uses Ruwach to speak of demons but utilizes different words (Exodus 32:17; Psalm 106:37; 2 Chronicles 11:15; and Leviticus 17:7). In the first two passages, the word used is shd, which refers to foreign deities. The latter two passages use the word sh'yr which literally means "hairy ones" and is a reference to goat-demons (satyrs) that many believed inhabited the wilderness.⁵

Sixth, the New Testament teaches that only the power of the name of the Lord Jesus Christ can remove demons from people (Mark 6:7; 16:17; Luke 10:17). Based on these considerations, it seems clear that the word evil is stressing the angel's function of distressing Saul rather than its moral character.⁶ Much of the problem exists with the translation of the Hebrew word in English as "evil." This translation automatically produces the concept of evil in the moral sense within our minds; however, the idea of "distressing" expresses the nuance of the original word more clearly.

The Solution for King Saul's Affliction

The servants immediately searched for a competent, skillful musician to help Saul. The word skillful indicates that David had a reputation for playing a stringed instrument well. David's instrument was a lyre, which is much smaller than a harp and can be played from a standing or sitting position.⁷ David's skill as a musician is expressed in 2 Sam. 23:1, where he is called "the sweet psalmist of Israel." The text uses the Hebrew word Nagan, which means, "To touch (strings), play a stringed instrument."⁸ The word byad', "with his hand," is lost in our English versions that simply conflate the Hebrew words into "play." In either case, the word is significant because it was the music itself emanating from David's harp which created the relief from the distressing spirit. This fact disproves the notion of many

Christians today, that only the lyrics matter. A historical, grammatical, and literal interpretation of verse 23 emphasizes the direct correlation between the playing of David's music and the relief experienced by Saul a testimony that David's music must have been very beautiful and pleasing to God.

Works Cited

1. F. Brown, S. Driver, and C. Briggs, The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon, reprint (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 2004), 129.
2. David Tame, The Secret Power of Music (Rochester, Vermont: Harper & Row Publishers, Inc., 1984), 30.
3. Lewis Sperry Chafer, Systematic Theology, Volume One, (Winona Lake, Indiana: BMH Books, 1988), 289.
4. Brown, Driver, Briggs, The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon, 949.
5. Benjamin Davidson, The Analytical Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon, (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc. 1993), 733.
6. Robin Routledge, "An Evil Spirit from the Lord—Demonic influence or divine instrument," Evangelical Quarterly 70 (Ja 1998): 4. This author agrees with my assessment when he states, "The designation 'evil' may describe, not its character, but its function: to bring harm as an instrument of divine judgment."
7. Ralph W. Klein, Word Biblical Commentary, 1 Samuel, Volume 10 (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1983), 166. The lyre usually had two arms rising up from the sound box. The strings, all of the same length, were attached to the crossbar at the top of the instrument. (For a picture of the Meggido lyre, dating to 1400 B.C., see BA Rev 6 [1980], 18 and cf. BA Rev 7 [1980], 14).
8. Brown, Driver, Briggs, The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon, 618.

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