

# The Resonance of Suffering



**M**usic is an important part of my life, and I love musical instruments. Walking into my home office you would see hanging on the walls two violins, two banjos, a mountain dulcimer, a mandolin, a bodhran (an Irish drum), and four guitars. The floor is home to a harp, a keyboard, and an accordion, but of all the instruments, my favorite is the violin.

A violin is a picture of beauty, elegance, and tranquility, but its greatest allure is in its resonance, the way it transforms the simple sound of a vibrating string into glorious tones that can move our hearts. Its simple grace seems to stand in stark contrast to my life that seems chaotic and frustrated by problems coming from every side. Shouldn't life be more like a violin? Shouldn't all of our lives create sweet music that brings peace and beauty?

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Life often teaches us lessons we neither wanted or expected. I could blame it on my wife, she started the whole process when she prayed a dangerous prayer. With six children and one income, the first 20 years of our marriage were marked by financial struggles. Finally, I had progressed in my career enough so that we didn't have to scrimp. We weren't rich, but we were quite comfortable. Then my wife prayed, "God, things are going really well. There must be more. This is kind of boring, and I don't want an ordinary life."

Our entire life started unraveling. Things started going badly at work, my dream job became a nightmare. I started praying, "God, I think you want me to leave and start my own business. But that would be crazy. I have a family to support and a huge mortgage. Lord, I will do it out of obedience to you, but only if it is your idea. You have to make it so clear that even I couldn't miss it, and you know I'm not very bright."

After eight months of praying that prayer, it was answered. My boss came to my office and told me to come to a meeting. I asked what it was about and she told me, "We just want your opinion on something." That was odd because she had made it very clear on several occasions that she did not want my opinion on anything.

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When I walked into the room, the only person there was from Human Resources, and he handed me an envelope of papers saying, “You have been terminated. There’s nothing to discuss, it’s final. You are not returning to your office. If you left your car keys we’ll send someone after them. I’ll walk you to your car and escort you off the property.” The company had always gone out of its way to treat people well, and this was completely out of character. I remember thinking, “God, this isn’t the answer I was expecting, but it certainly is clear.”

At that moment, I felt as if I’d been kicked in the stomach, but at the same time I knew in my heart this was God’s answer to my prayer. I reasoned that if it was God’s plan for my life it would work out well. I still believe that, but I had to learn that my idea of working out well was not the same as God’s. I thought it would mean business and financial success. Instead, I, along with my wife and children, lost nearly everything we had and became homeless. I was to learn that God didn’t care much about my business and financial success. He didn’t seem to care about my comfort. He was quite willing to make me very uncomfortable because his goal was bigger than I had dreamed. He wasn’t going to make me rich; he was going to change my heart.

One day during our downward spiral but before we lost our house, I was sitting in my home office praying, “God, I know

there is something I'm supposed to learn in all this. Please tell me what it is so I don't miss it. I want to get it the first time because I do not want to repeat this class." One of the things I felt God telling me was: "You can't comfort others beyond what you have suffered."

I had never thought of that before, but it made sense. I was volunteering at a local hospital as a music therapist at the time, and I realized I couldn't have done that a few years earlier. I couldn't have been at ease sitting beside someone on a morphine drip, knowing they were dying of cancer. I couldn't have laughed and joked with them, or even cried with them. I couldn't have comforted them because I would have been uncomfortable in their presence. Now, I could; my pain was different, but it was no less real. It was as if by earning the right to sit in their presence, I could relate to them because we had something in common, and that something was suffering. Later I read in the book of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians that God comforts us in our hardship so that we can comfort others in their affliction.

Affliction, comfort, and suffering form a cycle that resonates within our lives, and affliction is the trigger that starts the process. We don't like affliction and we try desperately to avoid it. While we want God's comfort and seek after it, we shun the very thing that brings it about. We seek the cure when we do not have the disease. God comforts us in our affliction because

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affliction creates the need for comfort, but we seek after the remedy without the malady. We desire comfort as a recreational drug.

Affliction isn't always bad. It has served at least two purposes in my life; it forces me into a community with others, and it drives me forward. Left to myself, I tend to be a lone ranger, and I'm guessing you may be the same. We take pride in needing no one, we want to be able to handle it ourselves. God uses affliction to press us together, to show us that we need Him. We need others, and others need us. With comfort comes complacency. I know that without affliction I am less likely to do the things I should do. Without that pressure moving me forward, I am content to sit. In truth, I'm more inclined to recline.

Is our affliction part of God's will for us? I struggle with this, but I do believe that God is in control, sovereign, and good. We seem to feel the need to protect God's reputation. We say things like, "God doesn't cause bad things to happen, he simply allows them as the result of our bad choices."

I have a couple of problems with that idea. First, if God is sovereign, as I believe he is, then he doesn't have to allow bad things to happen. If I saw someone getting ready to commit a murder, and I had the power to stop the crime, would I not be obligated to do so? If I could prevent it and did nothing, I would

be responsible for the murder. So, how can we say God allows things to happen but is not responsible for them, that argument seems logically invalid. On the other hand, there are a lot of things that I don't understand, and I admit I could be wrong.

The other problem is that I don't see it in scripture. The Bible doesn't tell me of a God who is in the corner wringing his hands saying, "Oh, no. I really wish they hadn't done that. Now bad things are going to happen." On the other hand, I do see scriptures that teach of an all-powerful God, never at a loss. Consider Lamentations 3:38. "Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that good and bad come?" Or look at Isaiah 45:7. "I form light and create darkness, I make well-being and create calamity, I am the Lord, who does all these things."

A beautiful statue started as a hunk of stone, but the artist chipped away the parts that did not belong. We are God's workmanship, but we are hard as stone and have many parts that need to be removed. Affliction is a chisel God uses to shape the ugly stone of my life into the beautiful image of his son. I don't like the feel of the chisel, but I want the beauty it brings.

The only way all of this makes any sense to me is that God's plan is so glorious that it incorporates the joy and the pain, resolving them to make the story even deeper, brighter, and more spectacular.

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When we face affliction the greatest comfort comes through relationships, other people walking with us through the pain and sorrow. It may be an advocate or a helper, but it's often simply one who has been through their own pain and can relate. Sometimes wise words are spoken, but often relief comes from a caring person who is willing to sit in silence. Sharing pain brings comfort, we need to know that we are not alone.

Early one rainy morning several years ago, I was one of the first on the scene of a serious auto accident involving at least three cars. Someone was already with the first car so I ran to the small pickup truck about 30 yards out in a muddy field. The doors wouldn't open but the passenger window was broken out, so I forced my upper body through to help the driver. He was fading in and out of consciousness, and I could see that, even though wearing a seatbelt, he had been thrown all around the cab. I had never felt so helpless, I knew he might be dying and there was nothing I could do to change that, but I decided that if that man was going to die, he was not going to die alone. I forced my upper body further into the cab and supported his head making sure he knew that I was there and help was coming. When the ambulance arrived, I helped them brace his back while they used their equipment to pry the door open and then helped move him out. There was nothing more I could do to help so I went on with my day. A week later, I got a phone call. A woman was saying

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something about an accident and a truck, but she was having trouble getting the words out and I had no idea what she was talking about. Finally, she got her composure and asked, “Are you the man who climbed into that truck with my husband?” Suddenly I understood and said, “Yes, ma’am.” She went on to say that she had almost given up finding out who I was, people had seen me at the accident, but no one had seen me leave. She said, “I had almost decided you must have been an angel — and I still think you are.” I could do nothing for that man other than stay with him, but that had brought comfort.

Resonance is a wonderful thing. Why do people sing in the shower? Because their voice reverberates off the hard walls and resonates within the small space, making the sound fuller and more vibrant. How does resonance work? It’s the reinforcement of sound by reflection. As waves bounce back and forth, they boost each other to create a fuller, richer sound.

It isn’t only the same frequency that resonates, the beauty of music is in large part due to sounds from different instruments or voices resonating with each other. Think of the strings in a piano. When you hit a key, a felt hammer strikes the corresponding string. That string vibrates, but it also vibrates other strings with complimentary frequencies.



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We speak of emotional resonance. Like the strings on the piano, we each have our own individual frequency, but our hearts can be touched and moved by others, allowing us to make a more glorious sound than any of us could create alone.

Now apply that concept to the cycle of affliction, comfort, and suffering. It starts with affliction, which brings comfort from God and teaches us to comfort others. As we learn to comfort others in their affliction we share in their suffering. As we suffer with others our pain increases and we are more afflicted. The three components of this cycle don't fit well in a diagram, it isn't quite that neat. It's pretty messy. However, messy isn't always bad. As I write this I am listening to Beethoven's 9th symphony. It's incredibly beautiful, but if you could see the sound waves bouncing around the concert hall, I'm guessing that would look pretty messy. As we allow God to work in our lives we become his instrument, responsive to his touch, and the result often looks messy to us, but it becomes the glorious beauty he has planned for us.

I started out talking about the violin, it's a better picture of life than you might have thought. To make a violin you cut thin strips of wood to and glue them together to form the ribs or the sides of the instrument. You shape the top and back out of blocks of wood, cutting and scraping until they are arched and their thickness in places is about 1/8 inch. Then you glue these thin

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pieces of wood together, but you don't use strong glue. If the wood is too thick or held together too tightly the instrument won't vibrate and resonate to create the beautiful sound characteristic of the violin. You attach the neck and the tailpiece, and then stretch the strings across the bridge, another thin, fragile piece of wood. Then you continue tightening the strings until they are near their breaking point. Are you getting the picture? The violin which we thought of as a picture of tranquility is actually a study in stress with virtually every piece thin, fragile, and under tension. You might think it would break or fall apart, but one of the violins hanging on my wall, Methuselah, is about 200 years old. In my years as a scoutmaster, I carried it strapped to the top of my backpack for several hundred miles, playing it on mountain tops and around campfires. I played it in the rain and snow. Yes, I maintain it, but the most important care is to keep it under stress and play it.

Playing a violin requires a bow, another piece of wood attached to a bundle of hair from a horse's tail, and also under stress. Do you know what the purpose of the bow is? The bow has only one reason for existing... to irritate the strings!

A violin that has no stress and no irritation will make no sound. When a violin whose strings are tightened is irritated by a bow, also under tension, there will be a sound. The sound it makes may be a horrific screeching, a truly appalling noise, or it may be

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one of the most beautiful sounds on earth, but there will be sound.

Isn't that an apt picture of life? You are stressed and someone else under tension rubs you the wrong way, they irritate your strings. The sounds produced can be the most horrid imaginable, or the most beautiful. It all depends on whether you are making your own sounds or surrendering to the hands of the master, bearing affliction, accepting comfort, and sharing in our combined suffering, in other words, resonating to his loving touch.