

Worship through Suffering

Isaiah 29:13

Well today, I wanted to dive into the idea of worship despite suffering, but before we get to that, we get to experience a little musical education. Ludwig van Beethoven is perhaps the most famous musical composer of all time, and even if you have never listened to classical music in your entire life, it is still very likely that you have heard at least bits and pieces of Beethoven's work. For example, here is a piece of his 5th symphony that is extremely common. And here is a piece of his 9th symphony, his final work that has been considered the most popular piece of music of all time. This piece of music is sometimes referred to as Ode to Joy, which is the poem that Beethoven set his music to. He wrote this for orchestra, but he also wrote for a choir to be included in the symphony, in which they sang the words to the poem Ode to Joy. We will get to the words of the poem a little while later, but first we need a little background from Beethoven's personal life for this all to make sense.

Around the time period when Beethoven was born, a young man who can only be described as a child prodigy was taking Europe by storm. He was writing music, composing symphonies, and performing music and leaving people stunned at all of his performances. His name was Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. Now, Beethoven's father was a man named Johann van Beethoven, and he saw how much success Mozart was having, so he decided that he wanted his son to be the exact same way. He wanted young Beethoven to become the next Mozart. He began pushing his son into practicing music for hours upon hours of the day, and he would stand over Beethoven just waiting for him to make a mistake and when the time came that Beethoven would make a mistake his father would be very abusive toward him. Many say that he would slap the young child on his ears, which lent itself to Beethoven's hearing loss later in life. But this isn't all that made Beethoven's life difficult. His father was also an alcoholic, and he would frequently return home after a night of drinking and abuse Beethoven even further. Now the question becomes, how did Beethoven overcome all of this? Well the answer lies in another piece of Beethoven's music, called Moonlight Sonata. It is very difficult to describe the piece, so I will play for you just a few measures to show you what the general tone of this song is. The inspiration for this piece came from those times when Beethoven's father would come home drunk, because young Beethoven would wait for his father to pass out, and he would sneak out to the shores of a small lake near his house in Germany. He was inspired to write this by looking at the reflection of the moon on that lake. That was his escape from everything.

Now we are going to fast forward to Beethoven's 9th symphony. When Beethoven wrote this piece, which was the final piece of his life, he had completely lost his hearing. The story goes that when he would play the piano, he would lay his head directly onto the instrument and pound the keys just to try and hear the notes being played. On top of that, he could picture these melodies in his head, and he would walk the streets singing them out loud, but many people saw him and thought that he had gone crazy. What good is a composer who can't hear? They said his career was over, but Beethoven kept going, and he eventually unveiled the great 9th symphony, the fourth movement of which was set to a

poem: Friedrich Schiller's *Ode to Joy*. I am going to read to you a few excerpts from the words of that poem. The original poem was written in German, so the direct translations will not directly fit with the melody, but it is important for us to know the words as they were understood.

"O friends, no more of these sounds!

Let us sing more cheerful songs,

More songs full of joy!"

That excerpt is from the beginning of the poem, and now the last couple lines of the song, because they really underscore Beethoven's apparent outlook while writing this piece.

"Brothers, above the starry canopy

There must dwell a loving father."

Remember how people thought his career was over? Well during the premier of his symphony, Beethoven insisted that he be the one to conduct it. Obviously he couldn't hear, so he conducted the way that he heard the music as he wrote it, and his conducting didn't make any sense with the music. It just looked like he was moving his arms randomly, with no connection to what was being played. Come to the end of the piece, and after that fourth movement, the *Ode to Joy* movement, the symphony was met with thunderous applause. But as the audience was clapping, Beethoven still stood with his back to the audience, facing the orchestra. People knew his hearing was getting worse, but they didn't know how bad it had gotten. Eventually one of the soloists physically turned Beethoven around so that he could see the audience applauding his piece. Upon seeing this, people in the audience began to weep. They literally wept because they realized that his hearing was completely gone. And as a result of that they realized that this would be his final work.

Think about everything that Beethoven went through all the way back to his early childhood. The abusive home life, being forced to practice piano for hours upon hours. Picture him lying down on the banks of the lake near his house, watching the moon sparkle on the water. Picture him realizing while in the midst of his composing career that his hearing was beginning to fail him. Picture his head resting on the piano while his hands pounded the keys in a desperate attempt to hear SOMETHING. Picture him being mocked on the street for singing at the top of his lungs. Now picture the crowd after the premier of that 9th symphony. Beethoven lived a life that was ripe with suffering. For most composers in that situation, their final piece would be very dark. In fact, Mozart, who Beethoven's father strongly desired for him to be like, entitled his final piece *Requiem*. We will listen to a little bit of it here. Do you get how dark this piece is? Mozart wrote this while he was on his death bed at 35 years old. *Requiem* was indicative of his outlook. In the same way, *Ode to Joy*, and the 9th symphony in general are indicative of Beethoven's outlook as a whole. What's the difference in their lives? One composer's final piece includes the Lord, and the other does not. Mozart was a Roman Catholic, but he doesn't make that apparent near the end of his life. The darkness of an early end overcame him. Contrast that with Beethoven. Beethoven was not necessarily a practicing Christian, but through letters and personal

documents it can be inferred that at the very least Beethoven did believe in a higher power, and through his use of Schiller's poem, we can infer that the higher power he believed in was the same father that we are here today to worship. That belief is reflected in his work. On one hand you have the Schillerian message of peace and brotherhood and joy. And on the other hand you a message of angst and sadness that is reflected in the music.

One thing that is very important to note about suffering is that it is always meaningful. Every single thing that we go through in life is bringing us toward a particular end in God's plan for our lives.

Romans 8:28-"And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."

No pain that we go through is meaningless. God is always doing something with our trials. A lot of times it comes down to God calling us back to him.

Let's take a close look at what Beethoven does here. He goes through trial after trial in his life, yet he comes out of it and does what? He points to God. Look back at the lyrics I shared with you. Why can we sing songs of joy? Because there must dwell a loving father. **When we go through a trial, whether it is big or small, our first reaction should ALWAYS be to thank the one who brought us through it.** Looking back through my life, the things that I have been successful doing are not the things that I have done on my own. Even the fact that I am right here speaking today has not been achieved on my own. Ever since the first time I spoke, all the way back in May of 2016, I get nervous. Usually beginning during our praise hymns, my hands begin to get sweaty. I get nervous ticks. When I sit, my leg shakes, and when I stand, I tend to rock a little bit. My point is, God is the one giving me the strength to do this because I do not have the strength within me.

Last week, I helped with the women's retreat, and I was seriously impressed. Not only did Pam do an amazing job planning it, but every single one of the women who spoke to the group provided awesome insight when it comes to walking the Christian walk. Now, I am a little partial, because my mom just so happened to be one of the presenters, but here we had a group of women, just ordinary women from the community, doing extraordinary things through Christ and for Christ.

We may encounter things in life that make us wonder whether or not we will be able to make it through. Maybe we are sinking in debt. Maybe we are struggling with depression. Maybe we lost our job. Maybe our family is breaking apart. Whatever it is that we are going through, we can be absolutely certain that God will bring us through it.

The Christian life is not an easy one. A study was released in January of this year, stating that Christians were the most persecuted group of people in the world in 2016. In that year, 90,000 Christians were killed on the basis of their beliefs. That is 1 person murdered every 6 minutes. Here in the United States we are sheltered by freedom of religion, and that is something that I will always be thankful to God for, but around the world, people are losing their lives based solely on the fact that they believe in Jesus Christ as their savior. Most of these murders were performed at the hands of Islamic extremist groups such as ISIS, but others were killed by their own governments, in countries such as

North Korea. On top of this, the study concluded that as many as 600 MILLION Christians were prevented from practicing their faith in 2016. They weren't allowed to do what we are doing at this very moment. I don't know about you guys but when I first read those statistics, my heart just dropped. The bible verse that came to mind upon hearing this was what Jesus said in John 16:33.

John 16:33- "I have told you these things so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."

We have brothers and sisters in Christ who are living through struggles that no human being should ever have to go through. People live in fear for their own lives, or their family's lives, and they can still praise the Lord. To me that definitively proves that God gives us strength to get through whatever life throws our way. If God can give strength to people who are looking death in face, then he can give strength to us in whatever we have to go through. God will not keep the hard times from coming, but He will without a doubt see us through to the end.