

# Dancing in the “Dissonance”

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## Introduction

### The Text

<sup>1</sup> And Saul approved of his execution. And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. <sup>2</sup> Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him. <sup>3</sup> But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.

<sup>4</sup> Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word. <sup>5</sup> Philip went down to the city of Samaria and proclaimed to them the Christ. <sup>6</sup> And the crowds with one accord paid attention to what was being said by Philip, when they heard him and saw the signs that he did. <sup>7</sup> For unclean spirits, crying out with a loud voice, came out of many who had them, and many who were paralyzed or lame were healed. <sup>8</sup> So there was much joy in that city. (Acts 8:1–8)

### Clashing Notes?

- A. I imagine we all know what dissonance is, in a musical sense, don't we? Even still, I thought I'd illustrate it for you with the keyboard here. So you can really hear it.
1. First thing, though, here are some notes that are harmonious with one another, and they form a chord of sorts—they go well together, they sound pleasing to the ear . . .
  2. But, now, dissonance is the sort of thing you get when your little kid starts pounding on your piano at home with all ten fingers. It sounds something like this . . .
    - a. It's about that time in the house when Daddy cries out from his office: “Kids, I'm trying to work in here. No more, please, have mercy!”
      - i. You hear that and it makes you want to cover your ears. It doesn't sound like it goes. It doesn't sound like it works. It doesn't sound like music.
- B. Well, I'll tell you, when I first read these eight verses in [Acts 8](#), that's what I heard, that's what it sounded like to me. Dissonance. Did you notice it?
1. You've got those notes ringing out there in [vv. 4-8](#), and it's a sound of triumph and joy.
  2. But it doesn't play well at all with the notes that came just before in [vv. 1-3](#), where it's the sound of sorrow and death, and people are getting beat up and stuff.
- C. There seems, at first at least, to be a dissonance here. And it makes you wonder:
1. Is God like that little kid at the piano just pounding his hands away at the keys making an awful racket in the world?
  2. Or is he making music, is he writing a song, is he playing something we can even learn to dance to, however confusing it may be sometimes?

- a. Sometimes it takes a little while to learn how to dance to a certain style of music, doesn't it? Especially for someone like me. I can kind of do the bob-my-head thing, but you start trying to get hands and feet involved and that's when it all comes unraveled.
  - i. So is this something we can dance to? Is this music?
  - ii. Or is this just a terrible noise?
- D. And this is so important for us to make sense of because, you know, this isn't just something we see in the text, this is often what our life feels like, doesn't it?
  - 1. There are times where we feel like God is really with us, and he's good, and he's blessing.
  - 2. And then there are times where it just feels like he's gone—or if he is here, maybe he's actually against us.
    - a. There's a dissonance.
- E. So I just want to use this sermon to try to show us why and how we can dance even to that which sometimes seems like dissonance to us. So here's what we're going to do . . .
  - 1. First I'm just going to make sure we hear the dissonance in this text.
  - 2. And then I want to show you where the music is, where the harmony is, how God is actually a better composer than we could ever know—he plays with scales and notes our natural ears are unaccustomed to, and we can learn to dance to this.
    - a. So (1) Hearing the Dissonance; and (2) Learning to Dance. Let's go!

## (1) Hearing the Dissonance

- A. As I said, the text really breaks into two sections . . .
  - 1. In the first, vv. 1-3, everything seems to be going horribly.
  - 2. But, then, in the second, vv. 4-8, it's quite the opposite, it seems like things couldn't be going better.
    - a. So I just want to play these two sets of notes, if you will, and make you sit a little bit in the dissonance, and then we'll try to make sense of it.
- B. There are five layers to this dissonance, it seems to me. I'll bring them out for you one at a time . . .

### Layer #1: Social Dissonance

#### First Section (vv. 1-3)

- A. In the first section, we see that the Christians here are socially rejected, even opposed, in vehement and violent fashion.

- B. So it begins there in v. 1: “And Saul approved of his [Stephen’s] execution. And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem . . . .”
1. We’re reminded here that all of this gets started because of Stephen, who stood for Jesus and paid for it at cost of his life.
  2. And Saul—who we’ll later know as Paul, a Pharisee of Pharisees, the guy who seems in some way to be overseeing the whole affair—approves of the stoning of Stephen and, having tasted a little blood, it would seem, he’s ready to go after more. He thinks he’s serving God by getting rid of these heretics.
    - a. So “a great persecution” arose. These Jewish Christians in Jerusalem here are hated by their own people, rejected, opposed, even hunted . . .
- C. In v. 3 we read: “But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.”
1. The Greek word for “ravage” here, it’s the same used in Ps. 80:13 of the LXX to describe what boars do to the forest: “[t]he boar from the forest ravages it . . . .”
    - a. We actually have wild boar around here, as some of you may know—there’s a whole herd of them you can usually see quite easily at Joseph D. Grant County Park on the east side. And, when you get out and hike, you can see what they do to the hillside there as they’re foraging for food . . . they just destroy it, with their ripping and tearing and all of this. They “ravage” it in search for a meal.
    - b. And that’s the picture we get of Saul here, as he’s moving from house to house, like a hungry boar tearing up the hills. He’s “ravaging the church.”
- D. Here’s how Paul himself will later sum up his activity at this point, Acts 26:9-11: “<sup>9</sup> I myself was convinced that I ought to do many things in opposing the name of Jesus of Nazareth. <sup>10</sup> And I did so in Jerusalem. I not only locked up many of the saints in prison after receiving authority from the chief priests, but when they were put to death I cast my vote against them. <sup>11</sup> And I punished them often in all the synagogues and tried to make them blaspheme, and in raging fury against them I persecuted them even to foreign cities.”
1. In Gal. 1:13, he puts it like this: “I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it.”
- E. So, socially, these Christians are outcasts. They’re no longer wanted. They no longer belong.

## Second Section (vv. 4-8)

- A. But then, of course, you keep reading on into that second section and everything seems the complete opposite.
1. Here Christians have favor with folks. There’s this social acceptance and even admiration, appreciation.

- B. So we read in v. 6: “And the crowds with one accord paid attention to what was being said by Philip . . .”
1. They’re not looking to push him out.
  2. They want to hear. They’re crowding around. Here now it seems the Christians have some sort of social capital. They’re not the dregs of society, but are becoming something like the cream of it.
- C. So there’s a dissonance between these two sets of notes, if you will. And maybe you resonate with one or the other right now.
1. As you come to Jesus, sometimes you find you’re given favor and you get community and you enjoy a deep sense of belonging and all this.
  2. But other times, you come to Jesus and things just get harder socially. People turn on you—family, old friends, coworkers . . . now they’re against you.
    - a. What are we to make of this?

## Layer #2: Missional Dissonance

- A. By “missional” here I’m referring to the ministries of these Christians—in one scene it’s going horrible, it would seem; in the other scene it’s going great . . .

### First Section (vv. 1-3)

- A. So in the first section, where once folks were standing boldly for the gospel, and seeing great things happen, because of this persecution, now, it would seem, at first glance at least, they’re just running scared.
1. It’s not a good look, right? We’re not playing offense anymore. It’s defense. It’s not even really defense, is it? It’s retreat. That’s at least how it feels. That’s how it looks. That’s how it sounds. That’s the note you hear.
    - a. They were storming hell’s gates just a few pages ago.
    - b. Now they’re on the run. Their mission, it looks like an utter failure.

### Second Section (vv. 4-8)

- A. But then, in the next set of verses, it’s a completely different story, isn’t it? There’s victory. There’s triumph.
1. Huge swaths of people are coming to faith in Jesus.
  2. The disciples aren’t being driven out, demons are—and they’re shrieking as they go. Did you notice that? “[U]nclean spirits, crying out with a loud voice, came out of many who had them . . .” (v. 7). The devil is running for his life.
    - a. This is a successful ministry. This is the kind of ministry I want to have.

- B. But, again, you hear the dissonance, don't you? And maybe one or the other resonates more with where you're at right now.
1. Maybe you feel like God is blessing what you're doing and everything you touch is turning to gold. I've had those seasons. Wish I could stay there.
  2. Or maybe you feel like nothing's going right. There's no fruit no matter how hard you work the soil. It's just thorns and thistles. And you question whether God is really working through you at all. I've had those seasons as well.
    - a. What are we to make of this?

### Layer #3: Physical Dissonance

#### First Section (vv. 1-3)

- A. We already alluded to it, but in the first scene, people are dying. That's what v. 2 is all about. They're burying their dead: "[Devout men buried Stephen . . .](#)" Good, solid saints, six feet under.

#### Second Section (vv. 4-8)

- A. But then, in the second section, again, it's the reverse. People aren't being put to death and buried. Did you notice? They're being restored, they're being healed: "[\[M\]any who were paralyzed or lame were healed](#)" (v. 7).
1. That's what we would expect from a truly Christian ministry. That's what we want. The power of the Holy Spirit poured out upon a people, vindicating and illustrating the truth of the gospel, that Jesus is alive, and he's here to save!
- B. But Stephen (along with what will soon be many other disciples) . . . he just dies. There's no healing. There's no intervention. There's just a funeral.
- C. Again, you hear the dissonance, don't you? And maybe in your life right now you resonate with one side or the other.
1. Maybe physically things are going well, God's keeping you fit and healthy. Wow, what a blessing!
  2. But maybe, instead, your body's breaking down, no matter how hard you pray or work at it. Or maybe there's a loved one in your life that's recently passed, and you wonder: Where was God? Why would he let this happen? If he truly has the power to heal, why doesn't he?
    - a. What are we to make of this?

### Layer #4: Emotional Dissonance

- A. All of this leads, of course, to the emotional dissonance that we would expect . . .

#### First Section (vv. 1-3)

- A. So, in the first set of verses, there's sorrow and an apparent shadow cast over their hearts.

1. We see this in v. 2 again: “Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him.”
- B. But, of course, emotionally, you also imagine the anxiety and the fear that you would be tempted to feel, as you’re being run out of the city—leaving your home and livelihood behind, wondering if you’re going to be the next victim. I’d be an emotional wreck.

### Second Section (vv. 4-8)

- A. But, once more, the opposite comes in the next set of verses. So down in v. 8 we read: “So there was much joy in that city.”
1. The back and forth of all this is staggering. Which is it? Are we lamenting or are we rejoicing?
- B. You hear the dissonance. And, again, maybe one side or the other resonates with you and where you’ve been lately.

### Layer #5: Spiritual Dissonance

- A. But the last thing I thought about with all this was the spiritual dissonance that I would imagine there might be for the people in these two scenes.
1. The latter section, I imagine they feel pretty good, like God is on their side, and they’re close to him.
  2. But that first section, wow, that would be tough. I would think the temptation would be to imagine God is against you, right?
- B. I told my Home Group the other night: I’m so fickle, I can sometimes question God’s goodness to me over something as silly as getting a string of red lights on my commute.
1. I get one, okay. I get some greens, God’s still with me.
  2. But if I get red after red after red, do you want to know what I’m thinking: “God, do you even love me? You know I’m always running a little late. Are you trying to punish me? Do you even care?”
  3. How much more, then, would you be tempted to question God’s goodness towards you and love for you here in this?
    - a. You’re not just being held up on the road.
    - b. You’re being tied up and dragged off to jail, and you may even be killed.
- C. So let’s not be too quick to gloss over this. This would be a real challenge—not just socially, missionally, physically, and emotionally, but spiritually as well . . .
1. “God, where are you? How could you let such a thing happen? I thought you were all-powerful? I thought you were all-good? Maybe I was wrong.”

D. Certainly, there would be some in the church here crying out with David in [Ps. 13](#): “<sup>1</sup>How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?<sup>2</sup> How long must I take counsel in my soul and have sorrow in my heart all the day? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?<sup>3</sup> Consider and answer me, O LORD my God; light up my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death,<sup>4</sup> lest my enemy say, ‘I have prevailed over him,’ lest my foes rejoice because I am shaken” (vv. 1-4).

1. Have you ever prayed like that? Have you ever felt like you’re stuck in [Acts 8:1-3](#)? Is that where you’re at right now?
  - a. You see other Christians and they’re looking all close to God and everything’s going well. They come to church and they’re raising their hands when they sing and all this, with a big smile on their face.
  - b. But all you want to do is just crumple into the floor.
    - i. Because you feel beat up—not just by other people, or the circumstances of life—but by God. And you don’t get it.
    - ii. And you certainly don’t feel like dancing.
    - iii. It sounds like dissonance. “For goodness sake, God, stop slamming your fingers down on the keys. It’s horrendous. And I’m sick of it.”

E. So what do we do with this? This dissonance that we hear, that we see, that we feel . . . that’s right here in this text? How do we learn to dance to it? Is such a thing even reasonable? Is it even possible?

1. Well, obviously, I think it is. Now it’s about time I show you why and how . . .

## (2) Learning to Dance

A. If we’re going to learn to dance, even in the apparent dissonance of all this, we’ve got to be sure of at least two things so far as God and his dealings with us are concerned. And both of them can be observed here in our text . . .

### Observation #1: Complementarity

- A. I’d sum up this first observation with the word “Complementarity.”
1. By Complementarity I mean we need to see that both sides of this text, however contradictory they may seem to us at first, are actually together part of the normal Christian life. The hard stuff and the good stuff.
    - a. It’s all a part of the whole package of following Jesus—after all, he is the crucified and resurrected One.

B. I think we're prone to look at the first side of this text and assume God must be angry with the folks there. "Look at what happens to them. Everything's going wrong. It's so hard. There must be sin in the camp." Or something like this.

1. And then we look at the other side of it and think: "Ah these folks got it right. Look at all that's going good. God's blessing is upon them."

a. But rarely is it ever that simple. In fact, here's what we must see: It's the very same people on both sides of the text. Did you notice that?

i. It's not one group and then another.

ii. It's the same group moving from place to place.

(1) In one moment, there's suffering and hardship; in another moment there's blessing and breakthrough—but it's all a part of following Jesus and the normal Christian life.

C. And of course it is. This is what Jesus tells us to expect—both unimaginable blessing and gut-wrenching hardship.

1. Listen to what he says to his disciples in [Mark 10:29-30](#): "<sup>29</sup> Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel,<sup>30</sup> who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands [he's talking about the blessing that we'll receive as we come into the church family with God as our Father—how awesome it is now, but then, lest we misunderstand, he adds . . .], with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life."

a. Will following Jesus be awesome only later, in heaven, but life is a slog now? No! He says it's going to be awesome now, starting today. You come to know God, how could that be anything other than amazing?! And there will be times when he just opens up the floodgates for you and blessing flows. Have you had seasons in your life like that? I have. And you're just saying: "God you are being so good to me, thank you!"

b. But there are going to be other times where it's going to be hard. But you know what, as we'll see more clearly in a moment: He's still being good to me.

i. Both sides of this are a part of the normal Christian life. The blessing and the hardship.

2. This is what he means when he says to his disciples elsewhere: "[In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world](#)" ([John 16:33](#)).

a. Which is it, Jesus? Are we going to have tribulation because of you or are we going to overcome because of you? Answer: yes! It's both. You're going to have hardship, but you're going to triumph.



D. So that's the first thing to see . . .

1. Don't get all freaked out like God's abandoning you or breaking all his promises when stuff gets hard. He told you it would.
2. But he also told you he'd be with you in it and get you through it.
  - a. Just because he's working with notes and scales you're not familiar with, doesn't mean it's dissonance, it doesn't mean he's not still making sweet music and up to good. Because he is.

E. And that comes out even more clearly with the second thing we observe here in this text . . .

## Observation #2: Chronology

A. I'd sum up this second observation with the word "Chronology." If we're really going to learn to dance in what seems like "dissonance" to us, we need to see, not just the Complementarity between the two parts of this text, but the Chronology of it.

1. By Chronology I mean to say that the first side of this text doesn't just properly stand alongside the second, it actually leads into the second. There's a sequence, an order, a progression here.

B. And this is so important. This is really what I've been gearing up this whole sermon to say . . .

1. We are supposed to gather from this story here not just that hard stuff and good stuff are both a part of the normal Christian life. We're supposed to see, I think, surprisingly, shockingly, that the hard stuff is actually what God often uses to get us to the good stuff.

## From the Great Persecution to the Great Commission

A. So we might look at the death of Stephen and the great persecution that arises and think it's just something rough the church has to grit her teeth and get through.

1. But that hard stuff is actually taking them somewhere. It's doing something good. God has a purpose and a plan for it. Do you see it in our text?

B. If you've been trekking along with us through the book of Acts, you'll, remember, perhaps, that all the way back in [Acts 1:8](#), Jesus speaks of the mission he has for his disciples. Here's what he says: "[\[Y\]ou will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.](#)"

1. Now, when we looked at this months ago I said it really is the thesis statement for the whole book—because this is what we'll watch transpire.
  - a. The gospel is going to advance through these various boundary lines—from Jerusalem to Judea, then Samaria, and to the ends of the earth (reaching even the Gentiles). That's what the whole book is about.

- C. But did you notice? We're now seven chapters in (253 verses have gone by) and where are all the disciples when we get to [Acts 8:1](#)?
1. They're still in Jerusalem. They haven't gone anywhere. Not one of these boundary lines has been traversed.
    - a. Now I'm not trying to imply this is necessarily wrong, I'm not saying the church was in sin at this point. They were faithfully preaching and getting things going there in Jerusalem, that is for sure.
    - b. But I do find it interesting that any movement beyond the capital city there hasn't seemed to have happened yet.
- D. And what does God do to get it going? He allows persecution to come. When it comes . . . they go.
1. And where do they go? Throughout Judea and Samaria.
  2. And what do they do as they go? They witness. They preach the word. They herald the good news of the gospel.
    - a. Look back at [Acts 8:4-5](#): “<sup>4</sup> Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word.<sup>5</sup> Philip went down to the city of Samaria and proclaimed to them the Christ.”
      - i. What an amazing thing! God turns the hardship for good. This is how they begin to fulfill the mission given to them at the first.
        - (1) The great persecution of [Acts 8:1](#) serves the great commission of [Acts 1:8](#)!
    - b. And it doesn't stop here with Judea or Samaria. Oh no. Later, in [Acts 11](#), Luke goes out of his way to connect this initial persecution to the advance of the gospel even beyond Judea and Samaria to the ends of the earth, to the Gentiles!
      - i. So he writes in [Acts 11:19-21](#): “<sup>19</sup> Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except Jews.<sup>20</sup> But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who on coming to Antioch spoke to the Hellenists also, preaching the Lord Jesus.<sup>21</sup> And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number who believed turned to the Lord.”
- E. So the gospel is advancing through all those boundary-lines now. But, again, how? What got this whole thing jumpstarted?
1. Opposition and persecution. Apparent failure. Death. Sorrow and lamentation. Hardship. That's the stuff God so often uses to bring about his good purposes for us in our lives.

## Trials and Taxicabs

- A. As I've said in here before: Trials and tribulations are God's taxicabs. They're one of the ways he picks us up and takes us where he wants us to go.

1. And believe it or not, though the ride itself may be dreadfully uncomfortable, the destination is always good.
    - a. All the stuff that comes in the second half of this text—the favor, the success, the miracles and healing, the joy—it comes on the backend of all the hard stuff. He uses the hard to get us to the good. That’s how it works.
- B. I imagine this is how many of you got saved in the first place. God used hard stuff to bring you to himself.
1. That’s what he did with me.
    - a. I was always interested in spiritual things and Jesus and all this, but I don’t think I would have ever made any real decision to follow. I never felt desperate enough. Life was pretty good. I could handle it on my own. I would research and learn about Jesus, but I never felt like I needed to actually call on his name, or surrender my life to him, or receive him as my Savior, and Lord, and Treasure. No.
    - b. The thing that finally tipped me in that direction is God put my face in the dirt. He kicked the props out from under me and I fell on him. He broke me down so he could build me up. He shattered my idols so I would come to Jesus.
      - i. And, while at the time, it was hard, now I’m so grateful he did so. Because he was taking me somewhere good.
  2. This is precisely what he’s going to do with Saul, as we’ll see.
    - a. He thinks he’s serving the Lord, that he’s on the right track.
    - b. Well, Jesus is going to knock him down, literally, so he can lift him up. He’s going to blind him so he can see. He gives us the hard to get us to the good.
  3. Maybe he’s doing that with you. Maybe that’s why you’re even in church this morning.
    - a. You thought, you could do life on your own. That’s what the devil wants you to think.
    - b. And then God in mercy is letting things get hard. And you’re wondering: Maybe I can’t do this on my own. Maybe I need help. Maybe I need Jesus.
- C. But, of course, it’s not just how he saves us. It’s also how he keeps us going in a good direction, fulfills his purpose for us, helps reach others with the gospel, and so forth.
1. This is what Paul is writing about in [2 Cor 4:17](#), when he says: “[T]his light momentary affliction is preparing for us [or ‘working for us’] an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison . . . .”
    - a. This affliction is working for me. It’s doing something good. It’s making me who I need to be. It’s taking me where I need to go.

2. Isn't that the story of Joseph?
  - a. What his brothers meant for evil, God was meaning for good. He's sold into slavery, brought down to Egypt.
  - b. But from there God uses him to intercede and provide for his people in miraculous ways and fulfill the dream he'd given to him earlier. But he couldn't have guessed that the way he'd get there would be by way of trial.
  
3. Isn't this the story of Jonah?
  - a. His trial is literally his taxicab. It's a whale that comes and swallows him up, because he's been running from God and his good purpose in his life. And it takes him down to the depths of the sea. You think: "I'm dying, it's over, God's killing me!"
  - b. But God is actually taking him right where he wants him to be and the whale spits him out on the shores of Nineveh, Jonah preaches, and the people there are reached for God.
  
4. And of course all these stories are just foreshadows of the story of Jesus, the gospel.
  - a. How does Jesus save us? How does he come to triumph over Satan, sin, and death? How does he receive "the name that is above every name" (Phil. 2:9)?
    - i. Not the way you'd think. It's through suffering and death. That's the means. That's the taxicab that gets him to the good and the glory.
  
- D. So I know you've got stuff in your life right now, and you just wish it was gone. It's hurting. It's hard. And you would do anything to get out of it.
  1. But can just encourage you: Don't be so quick to look for a way out. Don't try to get out of the cab when it's moving. That's a bad idea, right?
    - a. If you do that, you won't get there. You won't get to the favor and the fruit and the life and fullness of joy.
    - b. You just get road rash.
      - i. Trust him. He's taking you somewhere good even through the hard.
  
- E. Whatever it is for you, I think when we get this, the Complementarity and the Chronology that's here in our text—that, not only is hardship a part of the normal Christian life, it's actually one of the ways God gets us to the good—it doesn't sound so much like dissonance anymore.
  1. It's music. It's a different kind of music, for sure. As I've said, God composes using different keys and scales and notes than we're used to. And you might not get it at first. But it's music nonetheless. It's a gospel song.
    - a. And as the Spirit opens your heart and opens your ears, you know what you find? It's something you can learn to dance to!