

# Psalm 43: A Cry of Distress

by Art Katz

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*The psalmist's distress is not about his own situation, but about God's seeming failure to be God, and it leads him to a deeper awareness of God and a deeper trust in His goodness and sovereignty.*

**Scripture:** Psalm 43:1

**Topics:** "Joy in Suffering", "Distress and Faith"

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## Description

Art Katz explores Psalm 43, emphasizing the psalmist's deep distress and his struggle to reconcile his experiences with his understanding of God's character. The psalmist's cry for vindication reflects a profound intimacy with God, where his anguish stems not from personal suffering but from a perceived absence of God's action. Katz highlights that true faith is not merely waiting for relief but finding joy in God Himself, even amidst trials. The sermon encourages believers to embrace distress as a means to deepen their relationship with God, ultimately leading to a greater understanding of His nature and presence. The call to praise God in the midst of suffering is presented as a powerful act of faith and a declaration of hope.

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## Transcript

Vindicate me, O God, and plead my case against an ungodly nation; O deliver me from the deceitful and unjust man! For Thou art the God of my strength; Why has Thou rejected me? Why do I go mourning because of the oppression of the enemy? O send out Thy light and Thy truth, let them lead me; Let them bring me to the holy hill, And to Thy dwelling places. Then I will go to the altar of God, To God my exceeding joy; And upon the lyre I shall praise Thee, O God, my God. Why are you in despair, O my soul?

And why are you disturbed within me? Hope in God, for I shall again praise Him, The help of my countenance, and my God. (New American Standard Version) Though short, this psalm contains many of the classic elements that are to be found in the whole psalmist hymnody. It is a psalm of lament issuing out of distress, but a kind of psalm that invariably ends with a note of acclamation of God in praise, in recognition, and in celebration. Anyone who is a serious believer knows that there are times of distresses, laments, and sorrows, and there are times of, "Why, God...?"

It is almost as if the psalmist cannot reconcile what he is experiencing with what he knows of the character of God. The source of distress that issues from the heart of the psalmist is not out of the distress for his own flesh, or his life, or his own situation. I am not saying that those are invalid forms of distress, but the deepest distress of the psalmist in saying, "Why, God?" is his distress that God is seemingly failing to be God in the way he would have expected; almost as if God is not acting as the God in whom the psalmist

has come to believe.

There is a painful disjuncture in what the psalmist has been inducted to know of God through His own intense personal relationship, and yet there is an apparent failure in that knowledge: "How come You are silent? How come You are quiet?" Sometimes the psalmist goes so far as to provoke God and say, "Arise and wake up! Are you sleeping?" It almost sounds like terrible arrogance to address God like that, but I personally do not believe that God is offended. The psalmist has a relationship of such an intimacy that his cry is understood by God, and yet there must be reasons why the Lord withholds Himself and allows the distress to compound by stretching the man out to the point of breaking.

In this psalm there is no evidence that God is heard, or that He comes and saves the psalmist out of his distress. However, something happens in the psalmist's awareness and consciousness that is indeed God's very answer; something that can only come to him through the cry out of his own heart. He is thinking about the faithfulness of God in the past. He recognizes that God is allowing the distress, and though God is not acting now, He will in time act. Therefore, he can rejoice now for what he knows will come later.

His faith has deepened and accumulated from the consistency and faithfulness of God in times past. Distress, in all its forms, has always been the lot of God's people in the earth; nor can we expect any let up. Our understanding of God needs constantly to be "rattled" and challenged. It will seem that He will fail to come through when we think that He ought. From God's point of view, He sees our distresses as opportunities for instruction, growth and preparation. The distress is relative to the psalmist's knowledge and intimacy with God.

If he was just a rank-and-file evangelical or charismatic Christian, who lives by the correct principles of the faith in a more or less self-sufficient way, then he would never experience this form of distress. The distress is uniquely his because of the truth of his relationship with God. It is of a character and kind that frequently arouses the powers of darkness to unbelievable hatred and ferocity against him; something which they do not dispense to the casual Christian because the casual Christian does not constitute a threat.

It is only this kind of a psalmist who is really the enemy of the powers of darkness. The enemy wants to break the man down, to break him away from his exalted relationship with God, the very thing that antagonizes the powers of darkness. They cannot stand this worshipful respect and knowledge of God as God. The distress, therefore, is relative to the relationship, and if we are void of distress, then we might well ponder what our spiritual condition really is, and why it is that the enemy leaves us more or less alone.

Why then does God allow the distress? We are brought into a deeper awareness of God that would not have been ours except by distress. In other words, God turns distress to the good by deepening the spiritual life of the believer. Evidently, if it could come in some other way it would, because we know that God is not malicious. This depth of understanding, "O God, my God," is not some little cheap nickname. It is a heart cry of such a statement of the knowledge of God, that the very knowledge of God is his exceeding joy.

He has come to that place where very God Himself is the joy of the believer, even in his distress, and nothing but distress would have brought him there. I am suggesting a kind of union with God uncommon in the church. Are we willing for the cost of this kind of union? How dear to us is a relationship with God? Do we understand that the depth of our relationship with God will be determined in this life for all eternity? Our

proximity to the throne of heaven will be relative to the degree of intimacy and knowledge of God obtained in this life, and may well be the reward of this life.

If we were satisfied with only a casual knowledge of God, we are not to think that we will be able to stand in the light of His glory eternally. But if we are walking in the light as He is in the light, and are willing for the chastisements and dealings of God, as well as the distresses that bring us to the greater intimate union, then that will be the thing that determines our eternal relationship. It might well be that that is the whole purpose for our earthly tenure. God has a role for those who seek an intimate knowledge of Him that has to do with being part of His millennial government and eternal rule.

To rule and reign with Him is not some bureaucratic office of shuffling papers. It is rather the dispensing of the wisdom and knowledge of God from the heavenly places into the earth for which we will need glorified bodies, but only in proportion as we have actually come to know Him and His way. This life is a preparation for the hereafter. That is why we see so many references in the psalms to praising Him forever. The distress gives the psalmist the opportunity to cry out and for God to answer that cry; but the answer is never immediate.

The mindset of the world is to always want an answer now. It wants to be alleviated from the pain of the distress of not knowing. But what if God prolongs the answer until the moment of His own choosing? Is He still our God? What if He does not give the answer until the person himself breaks through into a deepened existential knowledge of God? What if this knowledge is in fact His answer? In other words, the answer is not God coming to remove the distress; the answer is a breakthrough into the knowledge of God; that no matter what the distress, He is yet our exceeding joy.

When we come to that, then that is the answer, and it is a better answer than the alleviation of our distress. The praise that comes forth at the end is not because the distress has been removed, but a praise that issues even in the midst of the distress. Praise of this kind is the ultimate statement of the truth of one's faith. True faith not hoping that God is going to come and deliver; it is the knowledge of God, as God. And if God delays His answer, then He has purposes for that delay that He need not divulge, nor do we require that information.

Our confidence is in God as God. And if we can rejoice in our distress, the powers of the air are required to flee; they have no weapon with which to magnify our distress. In other words, we have stripped them. It is their final defeat. They have no other thing they can employ against us because we are rejoicing in the very affliction that they have brought. This is the call and the triumph of the church. It is what Paul speaks of in Ephesians 3:10: "that God has created all things in order that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made manifest to the principalities and powers of the air."

This praise of God is that wisdom, because He is yet God, even in His seeming absence. The psalmist is crying out, "Vindicate me, O God." Have you ever needed to be vindicated? Your name is mud, you are misunderstood, and everyone believes they are right in their estimation of you; your enemies have seized upon something so as to put you down, but you are crying out for a vindication from God. Ironically, those "enemies" are more often than not found from within the church itself rather than from the outside world.

The deepest distress is caused by those who have not this quality of intimacy with God. Though the psalmist does not tell us what his distress is, there is enough in this psalm to indicate the depth and truth of it, and enough to compel the cry. The joy of the Lord cannot be fabricated. Happiness is something different, and can be humanly contrived. It occurs when something good takes place for our benefit: we

win the lottery, etc. But joy is an ultimate statement of being, and we might well ask ourselves whether our failure to ever come to joy has meant that we have not really come to true personhood, to the reality of what we can be in God.

Are we living in a shallow way and never coming into the fruition and fulfillment that God intended? "O deliver me from the deceitful and unjust man" is really another kind of suggestion of where our oppression is coming from. The deceitful are those who appear to be one thing and, in fact, are another. "For Thou art the God of my strength; Why has Thou rejected me? Why do I go mourning because of the oppression of the enemy?" Great questions! In other words, the psalmist is saying, "I am stupefied.

Everything that I thought I understood about You is not being upheld. Why have You allowed this to go on so long? Why am I the victim of this oppression? Why have You not answered before?" This is a real depth of a cry to God, "Why have You failed to be God as I understand you to be? I am not as concerned about my own relief from this; my deepest distress stems from Your seeming failure to be God. I do not want to see Your name blasphemed. I do not want to have to bear the taunt of men who cry, "Where is your God?"

I cannot bear to hear that You would be disparaged or negated as God. Show Yourself, then." This is a cry that is not on a subjective, petty level: "Why haven't You come to help me?" The real question is, "Why haven't You come to honor and vindicate Yourself as God? That is what I do not understand." When the psalm ends, the word why is again brought up in verse 5: "Why are you in despair, O my soul? And why are you disturbed within me?" This is Hebrew parallelism in poetry, where something is struck at the beginning and comes out again at the end.

There is a beautiful harmony, but the two kinds of "why's" are absolutely different. The first why is, "Why, God, have You failed to be God?" The second why is not directed toward God but toward the soul of the psalmist himself, where the psalmist is talking to his own soul, "Why are you disquieted within me? Why continue to be mournful and melancholy and self-pitying and sorrowing when God is God, and He will vindicate?" "Why has Thou rejected me?" Those are not just some arbitrary choice of words; this is the same as Jesus' own cry, "My God, my God, Why hast Thou forsaken me?"

In other words, "You are totally absent! I feel like I have been cast off. There is no seeming evidence that We are in any kind of relationship. This is extremely painful for My being, to feel Myself as being rejected by You. It is one thing to be rejected of men; they are deceitful, but it is worse yet to feel that You have rejected Me. Why have You cast Me off? I thought we were in a relationship together. What about the times of communion in the early morning hours, and all of the experiences that We have had?

In my time of greatest need, why are You so absolutely absent?" This is what Jesus cried out from the Cross, prophetically spoke in Psalm 2: "My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?" This issue of forsakenness, then, or the feeling of being forsaken by God, is something that we need to take into our deepest consideration. Maybe it is a final and ultimate test of faith, and that despite the feeling of forsakenness, will we yet believe that God is with us, not according to the feeling, but according to His word and His promise, "I will never leave you, nor forsake you"?

Why does the psalmist use the expression, "Why have You rejected me?" Is it just a play on words? Is it a kind of poetry, or is he really experiencing God as abandonment? And, if that is true, why is it true? Remember that the psalmist is someone dear to God's own heart, and yet God allows him to experience the forsakenness of God. The world would not call that love, but by the standard of the Kingdom of God it

is very love itself. Not only is it love, I would say it is ultimate love, because it seeks after the maturity of a son.

And a son is one who can persevere in the absence of the felt presence of God. Where others would collapse and sag, he remains steadfast and faithful because of the word of God and of His promise. That is a true son, and God is bringing "many sons to glory." If He does not have huge amounts of sons, it is because not many are willing to join Him in this kind of union whereby one experiences the forsakeness of God. A true son is willing to be accused of being disinterested or unsympathetic toward others.

A son knows when not to interfere with the dealing of God in the souls of others. This ought to be at the heart of pasturing a flock. Those who want to bring comfort when it is not comfort that is needed may prevent people from passing through this dealing of God to sift and refine our soul and to bring us through onto the other side. There is too much interference by man because we are more humanly motivated than we ought, and because the person who seeks to comfort does not himself understand and know.

And yet the brother who will withhold himself, and not come to alleviate your distress, will be misconstrued and seen as being indifferent and loveless. He has got to bear that reproach, and he will bear it for the brother's sake because he knows what the brother needs, which is not his human interference and shallow comforting. He knows to keep out of God's dealing and let the brother pass through while he holds him in his prayer. The psalmist cries out, "O, send out Thy light and Thy truth!"

The man is in such darkness, but his cry is very significant because it contains the apostolic word "send." He knows that if there is going to be any alleviation and answer, then there is only one place from which it can come, namely, from God Himself. It has got to come from the throne of heaven; it cannot be something that has its origin with men, however well-meaning men are; it must come from God. And he cries out to God who is the Source, "Send!" And what is he asking to be sent?

Light and truth. "Let them lead me; let them bring me to Your holy hill and to Your dwelling. Then I will go to the altar of God, to God my exceeding joy; and I will praise You with the harp, O God, my God." Nothing has changed externally. The distress remains; the reproach remains. Whoever is ungodly and deceitful and unjust is still oppressing and persecuting, but in the midst of that, the psalmist is able to find a place in the sanctuary of God, where God becomes his exceeding joy in the midst of his distress.

By sending light and truth, he finds his way to the dwelling place of God, to the altar of God, to the sanctuary of God, where God becomes his exceeding joy. What is light and truth? Whatever light and truth represent, it is the conjunction of those two things that is the key. It is something like bread and wine; it is not a true Communion unless both ingredients are there. It is when the two are enjoined that the reality and the power of that thing have their working. The psalmist knew enough to cry out to God for both light and truth.

Christ Himself is Light and Truth; He is the Light that has come into the world, and He is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. So the psalmist's cry is at the heart of the matter. How many of us desire that light, knowing that that light is fearful in what it will illumine? Do we welcome light? Light and truth are not just to bring me out of my distress, but to bring me into His courts, into His tabernacle, to His altar, and to the place of praise that I might discover Him as my exceeding great joy.

This is the thing that God is after, and He will go to any lengths to obtain it. "Then I will go to the altar of God, to God my exceeding joy; And upon the lyre I shall praise Thee, O God, my God." Note the holy

rapture with which the psalmist regards his Lord; God is not only his joy, but his exceeding joy. Not the Fountain of joy, the Giver of joy, or the Maintainer of joy, but that joy itself! We would be happy for the Giver of joy, or the Source of joy, or the Fountain of joy, but, no, David presses in and through to God as being very joy Himself.

He does not say, "You have shown me joy, or You have revealed joy, or made joy possible, but, "You have become joy. You are Yourself my exceeding joy!" And once you come to a place like that with God, what circumstance can ever make you to lose your hope? He has broken through into very God, not as a Source or a Supply, but the thing in Himself! He has found God, and he knows God, who has allowed him to suffer this intense distress, because only by it could he be brought to that place.

This is what it means to be Davidic, and there is an anointing reserved for such a son. This God whom they have come to discover in this depth is the One whom they will make known in that anointing. They have gone beyond the popular, but shallow counterfeit knowledge of God that fits Him into the worldly purposes of the church. The psalmist can now be sent because that is the message that the world needs to hear. But it can only be proclaimed in truth when we have come to this place of true reality in God.

Someone said, "What a man is in his privacy is the measure of what he will be publicly." What we see at large in the church are a lot of charlatans and shallow practitioners and glib and impressive men, but they are not in this Davidic place because they have not welcomed the distress that would bring them there. They are successes, and they would interpret distress as being somehow a statement of failure, and that if God abandons you, you must be in a bad and sinful place; when actually, the opposite is true.

To have God in this kind of possession is to come into the place of eternal bliss. It is to have found the Lord as joy. Then, from that place, he can rebuke his soul that wants to languish in self-pity, "Why are you in despair, O my soul?" This is what is implied in the psalmist speaking to himself. Self-pity is a discredit to God. It is contrary to faith; it is a statement that you do not believe that God is God. The issue is not how great the distress is, or when the solution will come, but who God is.

And what is He in His very nature? Is He going to allow His people forever to remain in this trampled condition? Must He not act out of what He is in Himself as God and bring the relief in the moment of His own choosing and wisdom? Therefore, let us rejoice now in very hope that it must come, because God is God! And once we have that hope, then what is the distress? It loses its power to humiliate, to mortify us, and to bring us down. Hope is joyous anticipation; not when the thing takes place, but in advance of its taking place, in advance of its actuality.

We know it must become actual, because God is the Source of it. He will not forever leave us abandoned; there must be a time when He will act, and because we know that and what He is in Himself in His character, then we can rejoice now in confident expectation of that answer. As your hope is, or as your faith is, so be it unto you. One's hope is not just an idle category, it is a dynamic factor that brings the fulfillment of the thing hoped for. Faith is the thing hoped for.

Hope is therefore a profound factor. Hope is an ultimate spiritual quality and condition, and we have it in proportion to our knowledge of God. Once He has become our exceeding joy, to that measure, so is He also our hope. In contrast, optimism is more of a human, inflated kind of a thing that rises and falls. But hope is a divine quality. To hope in God is to be in God; it is to have God. To have hope is to have God. "Hope in God, for I shall again praise Him, the help of my confidence and my God."

The psalmist does not have to wait for the help to take place; God is already a present help in time of trouble, not because He has provided the answer, but because He is the answer. People say, "Jesus is the answer," in a shallow way and it has become a cheap slogan. The statement is true, but they do not know it as truth, and therefore it is a cliché. Jesus is indeed the hope and He is the answer. For that reason, I will praise Him now rather than wait for the fulfillment of what is hoped for.

And He is my God. This possession is so critical. Paul could say that it was his gospel. His appropriation of it was profoundly personal. And so must ours be of God. The whole of the psalm is given to that end, that through these words, out of the suffering of the psalmist, we ourselves might find that same encouragement. Synonyms for praise would be honor, glorify, magnify, extol, celebrate, and worship. The opposite would be blaming God and holding Him responsible. Do you know how many people have arguments with God?

They complain that He has failed them, disappointed them, and they go on to languish a whole lifetime in that terrible negativism about God. God inhabits the praises of His people, and where the Lord is, there is liberty. If we allow the praise of God, however, to become just a little charismatic or evangelical flurry, we have missed it. Praise is holy. God inhabits the praises of His people whose praise is as authentic as their knowledge of Him, the deeps of which are revealed not in the good times but in the bad.

In the times of distress and out of the cry comes the revelation of God and the responding praise, "I will praise Him, I will extol Him, I will honor Him, even before His answer comes for He Himself is the answer. He is my Hope and my exceeding joy." What shall the world do to me? While the psalmist is agonizing under the taunting of others, God bears that sorrow; it is an agony for Him to hear the accusations of the unbelieving. Both God and the psalmist are suffering a furnace of affliction as an ultimate form of love.

God knows the end from the beginning, and He knows our eternal destiny and what we are being fitted for by the things through which we must pass here on earth. Jesus learned obedience through the things which He suffered. There is a necessary suffering that precedes the glory, and God loves us enough not to spare us or hide us from it. The very thing from which we run is the very thing to which we have been purposed. God is bringing and perfecting many sons and daughters to glory.

Then we shall see as we are seen; then everything we anguished over here will be the very same thing by which we will give Him the glory. In the economy and wisdom of God, if you lose your life, you find it. He is after the real affirmation that comes when you command your soul: "I will praise You." When you come to that, in that moment, you have come to yourself. You have come to the realization of yourself in your personhood, in the truth of what you are in God as He intended you to become, who framed you in your mother's womb.

In the face of distress and darkness, it is an act of will that commands the deepest in you: "I will praise You." In that moment, God is God as He really is, and you are you as you really are. Those are praises that He can hear that will bless His soul because they are more than something to affect the atmosphere of our services. When you come to that place in God where He is joy, you have come to reality itself. God is the pivotal point of reality itself, and the church is falling short of that reality in the proportion that He has not yet become our exceeding, great joy.

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