

Psalms 120:1

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

In my distress I cried unto the LORD, and he heard me.

Analysis

This opening verse initiates the fifteen 'Songs of Ascents' (Psalms 120-134), likely sung by pilgrims traveling to Jerusalem for the three annual feasts. The psalmist's appeal 'In my distress I cried unto the LORD' demonstrates that prayer is the proper response to trouble, not self-reliance or despair. The Hebrew word 'tsarah' (distress) denotes narrow straits, confinement, or pressure - situations where human solutions prove inadequate. The phrase 'and he heard me' testifies to answered prayer, providing assurance that God responds to His people's cries. This verse establishes the theological foundation for the entire Ascents collection: worship begins not with our arrival at the temple but with our desperate dependence on God in daily life. The journey to God's presence starts with recognition of need.

Historical Context

The Songs of Ascents (Psalms 120-134) were likely compiled during or after the exile, when faithful Israelites would make pilgrimage to Jerusalem. The term 'ascents' refers both to the physical ascent up to Jerusalem (situated on Mount Zion) and the spiritual ascent of the soul toward God. Psalm 120 uniquely begins the collection with a note of distress and longing for peace, perhaps reflecting the experience of Jews living in diaspora among hostile neighbors. The psalm captures the experience of God's people living as strangers in a foreign land, anticipating their journey home to worship.

Related Passages

John 3:16 — God's love and salvation

Romans 10:9 — Confession and belief for salvation

Study Questions

1. What does it mean to cry to the LORD 'in distress,' and how does this differ from casual prayer?
2. How does the assurance 'he heard me' shape our confidence in bringing troubles before God?
3. In what ways does recognizing our neediness serve as the starting point for authentic worship?
4. How do the Songs of Ascents as a collection model the journey from distress to praise?
5. What parallels exist between the ancient pilgrims' journey to Jerusalem and the Christian's pilgrimage toward the heavenly city?

Interlinear Text

אֶל	! הָיָה	בְּצָרָה תָּהָא	לִי	קָרָאתִי אֵתִי	וַיִּשְׁמָעֵנִי
H413	unto the LORD	In my distress	H0	I cried	and he heard
	H3068	H6869		H7121	H6030

Additional Cross-References

Psalms 18:6 (References Lord): In my distress I called upon the LORD, and cried unto my God: he heard my voice out of his temple, and my cry came before him, even into his ears.

Jonah 2:2 (References Lord): And said, I cried by reason of mine affliction unto the LORD, and he heard me; out of the belly of hell cried I, and thou heardest my voice.

Psalms 118:5 (References Lord): I called upon the LORD in distress: the LORD answered me, and set me in a large place.

Psalms 50:15 (Parallel theme): And call upon me in the day of trouble: I will deliver thee, and thou shalt glorify me.

Hebrews 5:7 (Parallel theme): Who in the days of his flesh, when he had offered up prayers and supplications with strong crying and tears unto him that was able to save him from death, and was heard in that he feared;

Psalms 130:1 (References Lord): Out of the depths have I cried unto thee, O LORD.

Psalms 131:1 (References Lord): LORD, my heart is not haughty, nor mine eyes lofty: neither do I exercise myself in great matters, or in things too high for me.

Psalms 107:13 (References Lord): Then they cried unto the LORD in their trouble, and he saved them out of their distresses.

Psalms 125:1 (References Lord): They that trust in the LORD shall be as mount Zion, which cannot be removed, but abideth for ever.

Psalms 122:1 (References Lord): I was glad when they said unto me, Let us go into the house of the LORD.