

Psalms 61:1

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

Hear my cry, O God; attend unto my prayer.

Analysis

Hear my cry, O God; attend unto my prayer. This opening verse establishes the psalm as urgent appeal to God for hearing and attention. "Hear my cry" (shim'ah Elohim rinati, רִנָּתִי אלֹהִים שִׁמְעָה uses the imperative form—direct command to God: "Hear! Listen! Pay attention!" This isn't hesitant request but urgent, forceful appeal. Shama means to hear with attention, to listen with intent to respond, to hear and act upon what is heard.

"My cry" (rinati, רִנָּתִי) comes from rinnah, which can mean joyful cry, shout of triumph, or cry for help—the context determining meaning. Here it clearly means cry for help, urgent appeal in distress. The same word appears in Psalm 17:1: "Hear the right, O LORD, attend unto my cry." David's cry isn't casual prayer but desperate appeal from genuine need.

"Attend unto my prayer" (haqshivah tefillati, תִּפְלַתִּי קְשִׁיבָה intensifies the opening appeal. Qashav means to prick up the ears, to pay close attention, to listen attentively—like an animal alerting to sound. The imperative form makes this another direct command: "Pay attention! Listen closely!" Tefillah is the standard Hebrew word for prayer, petition, intercession before God.

The double appeal ("hear" and "attend") emphasizes urgency and intensity. David isn't merely going through religious motions or offering perfunctory prayer. He desperately needs God's attention and intervention. The repetition reflects Hebrew poetic parallelism—expressing the same idea twice in slightly different words for emphasis and completeness.

Addressing God as "O God" (Elohim, אלֹהִים) uses the general term for deity, emphasizing God's power, sovereignty, and transcendence. This is the Creator God of Genesis 1, the almighty sovereign who can certainly hear and answer prayer. The address establishes the relationship undergirding the appeal—the sovereign God possesses power to intervene on behalf of the one who calls upon Him.

Historical Context

Psalm 61's superscription attributes it to David but doesn't specify historical circumstances. The reference to being 'at the end of the earth' (v.2) and praying for the king's life (v.6-7) suggests either David himself praying during exile from Jerusalem (perhaps during Absalom's rebellion) or later Davidic king during crisis. Either way, the psalm emerges from context of genuine distress requiring urgent divine intervention.

The imperative form of prayer—directly commanding God to hear—may sound irreverent to modern ears but reflects ancient Near Eastern prayer conventions and biblical precedent. Throughout the Psalms, worshipers address God with direct imperatives: 'Hear me' (Psalm 4:1), 'Have mercy' (Psalm 51:1), 'Deliver me' (Psalm 59:1), 'Help me' (Psalm 109:26). This reflects covenant relationship where believers can approach God with confidence, knowing He invites bold prayer.

Ancient Near Eastern prayer texts show similar patterns—direct address to deity with urgent imperatives. However, pagan prayers often sought to manipulate gods through magical formulas, flattery, or offerings. Biblical prayer differs fundamentally—approaching the covenant God who has invited His people to call upon Him, who promises to hear, who delights in answering His children's prayers. Imperatives in biblical prayer reflect confidence in God's promises and character, not magical manipulation.

Jesus taught disciples to pray with similar directness: 'Give us this day our daily bread' (Matthew 6:11). The Lord's Prayer contains multiple imperatives directed to God: 'hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done... give us... forgive us... lead us not... deliver us.' This models confident, direct communication with heavenly Father based on relationship, not hesitant, distant, fearful approach

based on works or merit.

The psalm's opening establishes the tone for what follows—urgent appeal from genuine distress, confident approach based on covenant relationship, expectation that God hears and responds to His servants' prayers. This becomes foundational for the church's prayer life: believers approach God's throne with 'boldness' (Hebrews 4:16), confident that 'if we ask any thing according to his will, he heareth us' (1 John 5:14).

Related Passages

Hebrews 11:1 — Definition of faith

James 2:17 — Faith and works

Study Questions

1. What is the difference between casual prayer and urgent crying out to God, and when is it appropriate to pray with the intensity David models here?
2. How does using imperative forms in prayer ('Hear! Attend!') reflect confidence in covenant relationship rather than presumption or disrespect?
3. Why does David use two different words for calling out to God ('cry' and 'prayer'), and how do these together express the full range of communication with God?
4. What circumstances in your life currently call for urgent, forceful appeal to God rather than routine, casual prayer?
5. How does addressing God as 'Elohim' (almighty, sovereign Creator) at the beginning of a desperate prayer establish confidence that He can answer?

Interlinear Text

תִּפְלָתִי:	בְּקַשׁ	יְבָה	רִבְתָּה	וְאַל	לְהִים	שְׁמֻעַת	הָ
Hear H8085	O God H430	my cry H7440	attend H7181		unto my prayer H8605		

Additional Cross-References

Philippians 4:6 (Prayer): Be careful for nothing; but in every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God.

Psalms 4:1 (Prayer): Hear me when I call, O God of my righteousness: thou hast enlarged me when I was in distress; have mercy upon me, and hear my prayer.

Psalms 86:6 (Prayer): Give ear, O LORD, unto my prayer; and attend to the voice of my supplications.

Psalms 130:2 (Parallel theme): Lord, hear my voice: let thine ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications.

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