

Homiletics Analysis: Job 35

Content & Intent

This Text — Content

Job 35 is Elihu's third speech, the middle movement of his extended address (chapters 32–37). In this chapter Elihu confronts what he regards as a specific error in Job's reasoning: the claim that righteousness or wickedness makes no practical difference to God, and the related complaint that God has not answered Job's cries. Elihu opens by quoting Job's position — "What advantage have I? How am I better off than if I had sinned?" (v. 3) — and proceeds to dismantle it on two grounds. First (vv. 5–8), he argues that God, being transcendent and infinite, is neither diminished by human sin nor enriched by human righteousness. God's nature does not fluctuate with human behavior. Second (vv. 9–13), he argues that the oppressed who cry out but are not answered have cried without God — not to God — because their cries are driven by pain and self-interest, not by genuine seeking of God as Maker and Redeemer. They ask for relief but do not ask *for God*. Finally (vv. 14–16), Elihu applies this directly to Job: Job's case is before God, Job must wait, and his multiplying of words without knowledge only deepens his error. Job's complaint that God does not answer is, in Elihu's analysis, self-refuting — Job has not truly brought his case to God in trust; he has brought it to God in demand.

This Text — Intent

God's intent through this passage — even as mediated through an imperfect human speaker whose theology is partially correct and partially overreaching — is to press the reader toward honest self-examination regarding the *quality* of their crying out to God. Is prayer driven by genuine seeking of God, or by desire for relief? Is complaint before God offered in trust, or in demand? The chapter functions as a mirror: those who feel their prayers go unanswered are invited to ask whether they have actually been praying *to God* or merely using religious vocabulary to demand outcomes. Simultaneously, the passage preserves God's transcendence against any transactional theology that assumes human virtue obligates divine response. The intent is not to crush the suffering reader but to redirect them — from cries that orbit the self, toward genuine orientation toward God as Maker, Deliverer, and Teacher (vv. 10–11).

Subject Sentence

Subject Sentence: Elihu presses Job: Is your complaint reaching God, or merely reaching the air?

Primary Claim

Primary Claim: God calls His people to examine whether their prayers and complaints are genuinely directed to Him in trust-seeking, or are merely self-oriented cries for relief — and He will not be moved by the latter, however loud, however long.

Interpretive Evaluation

The Status of Elihu's Speeches

The most significant interpretive issue in Job 35 is how to evaluate Elihu as a theological source. At the book's conclusion (42:7), God rebukes Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar for not speaking "what is right" about Him, as Job has. Elihu is conspicuously absent from this verdict — neither rebuked nor commended. This has generated three readings:

Reading 1 — Elihu is wholly reliable: Some commentators (Franz Delitzsch, Bruce Waltke) argue that Elihu's absence from the divine verdict indicates divine approval; his speeches anticipate and prepare for God's own speeches from the whirlwind and are substantively correct.

Reading 2 — Elihu is wholly unreliable: Some read Elihu's bombast, his self-introduction, and his failure to be addressed by God as signs that he represents a fourth form of the same error as the friends — human theological self-confidence in the face of divine mystery.

Reading 3 — Elihu is partially correct and partially overreaching (the Reformed and best-supported reading): Elihu grasps genuinely important truths — God's transcendence (vv. 5–8), the distinction between crying in pain and crying to God (vv. 9–13), the need for patient waiting before God (v. 14) — but he applies them to Job with an overconfidence that the book ultimately critiques. He does not know what the reader knows (the prologue). His analysis of *why* Job's cries seem unanswered is technically insightful but misapplied to a man whom God has called blameless. The Reformed reading acknowledges what is true in Elihu's theology while resisting the wholesale vindication of his application to Job specifically.

Verdict: Treat Elihu's theological claims on their own merits, passage by passage, distinguishing between the truth of the principle and the validity of its application. In Job 35, the distinction between pain-driven crying and God-seeking prayer (vv. 9–13) is genuinely illuminating and scripturally grounded, even if Elihu draws too tight a conclusion about Job's guilt from it. The transcendence argument (vv. 5–8) is sound. The rebuke of Job's multiplied words without knowledge (v. 16) is partially warranted but overstated.

The Transactional Theology Problem (vv. 3–8)

Wesleyan and some Baptist readings emphasize human response as the basis for God's action, which can incline toward reading vv. 5–8 as merely establishing God's self-sufficiency to protect human freedom — God is not *compelled* by our virtue. The Reformed reading goes further: Elihu's point is not just that God is not *compelled* but that the entire transactional frame is wrong. Human righteousness does not create a claim on God's response. This should be *qualify* rather than *refute* — the Wesleyan reading is not wrong about human responsibility but does not press Elihu's transcendence argument to its full depth.

Charismatic/Pentecostal readings (vv. 9–13)

Some readings in experiential traditions struggle with vv. 9–13 because they can be read to undercut confident, expectant petition — if God does not answer, perhaps our prayer is deficient. This reading imports an anxiety Elihu does not intend. The text is not teaching a prayer-quality theology of answered prayer. It is diagnosing a specific category of outcry that has no orientation toward God at all. This is a *qualify* situation: the diagnostic insight is sound, but it cannot be weaponized into a general principle that unanswered prayer indicates deficient prayer quality.

Key Canonical Support

Key Canonical Support:

- **Psalm 22:1–5** — David's "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" demonstrates what genuine God-directed complaint looks like — raw, honest, but addressed to God in a history of trust; illuminates Elihu's distinction between pain-cries and God-seeking cries.
 - **James 4:2–3** — "You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions" — the New Testament's clearest parallel to Elihu's diagnosis in vv. 9–13; confirms that the quality and orientation of petition matters.
 - **Isaiah 40:27–31** — Israel complains that God does not see their cause; God's response grounds transcendence in covenant care rather than distance — a corrective to Elihu's transcendence argument that can slide toward cold impassibility.
 - **Psalm 10:1–14** — The psalmist cries over God's apparent hiddenness while remaining anchored in God's character; models the tension between honest complaint and genuine God-directedness that Elihu is probing.
 - **Luke 18:1–8** (The Persistent Widow) — Jesus grounds persistent petition in trust in a just God, not in the merit of the petitioner; both confirms and nuances Elihu: persistence in prayer is commended, but its ground is God's character, not human worthiness.
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Aim

Aim: To lead the reader to honest examination of whether their prayers — especially prayers born in suffering — are genuinely oriented toward God Himself, and to redirect any self-oriented complaint toward authentic, God-seeking trust.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
35:1–3	Elihu opens by quoting Job’s alleged claim: “What advantage is it to me? What profit do I have, more than if I had sinned?”	The quotation is Elihu’s paraphrase, likely of 9:22–24 and 34:9. Whether it perfectly represents Job is debated, but Elihu takes it as Job’s operative position.
35:4	Elihu announces he will answer Job and his companions regarding this claim.	“His companions” may refer to the friends, or to other humans who reason as Job does.
35:5–8	First argument — God’s transcendence: Look to the heavens, which are higher than you. Your righteousness or wickedness affects fellow humans, not God. God is beyond being harmed by your sin or benefited by your righteousness.	This is Elihu’s strongest and most theologically defensible point. The argument is not that God is indifferent but that the transactional frame is wrong — God operates from another order entirely.
35:9–10	Second argument begins — the nature of crying out: People cry out under oppression, but they do not ask “Where is God my Maker, who gives songs in the night?”	The phrase “songs in the night” is striking — it suggests that authentic orientation toward God finds cause for worship even in darkness, not merely relief from darkness.
35:11	God teaches humans more than the beasts and makes them wiser than the birds of the sky — yet they do not seek Him.	The contrast with animals implies ingratitude: humans have been given knowledge of God that creation does not give animals, yet they cry out as animals would — in

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35:12	Therefore God does not answer — because of the pride of evil men.	raw pain without reference to their Maker. “Pride” (<i>ge’eh</i>) here likely indicates self-reliance and self-orientation in the crying — not a moral charge of arrogance per se, but a diagnostic of misdirected petition.
35:13	God will not listen to an empty cry; the Almighty will not regard it.	“Empty” (<i>shāw’</i>) — the same word for vanity/emptiness. The cry is hollow because it has no content of genuine God-seeking.
35:14	Application to Job: How much less will God answer when you say you do not perceive Him, that your case is before Him, and you are waiting for Him?	Elihu acknowledges Job has said his case is before God — but reads Job’s posture as demand rather than trust.
35:15	And now, because God’s anger does not punish and He does not greatly heed transgression...	Elihu’s point is that Job has misread God’s patience (delay of punishment) as absence or injustice.
35:16	Therefore Job opens his mouth in empty talk; he multiplies words without knowledge.	“Empty talk” (<i>hebel</i>) — vanity. This is Elihu’s verdict: Job’s words have been voluminous but not genuinely oriented toward God as God. A sharp closing verdict.

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	35:1–4	Elihu States the Charge: Job Claims Virtue Has No Advantage
2	35:5–8	First Rebuttal: God’s Transcendence Invalidates

Division	Verses	Label
3	35:9–13	the Transactional Frame Second Rebuttal: Unanswered Cries Are Often Misdirected — Pain-Driven, Not God-Seeking
4	35:14–16	Application to Job: His Complaint Multiplies Words Without True God- Orientation

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: Elihu presses Job: Is your complaint reaching God, or merely reaching the air?

Primary Claim: God calls His people to examine whether their prayers and complaints are genuinely directed *to Him* in trust-seeking, or are merely self-oriented cries for relief — and He will not be moved by the latter, however loud, however long.

Applications (Five)

1. Examine whether you are praying to God or merely *at* your circumstances.

(*Mind/Belief*) Elihu’s diagnosis in verses 9–13 is not primarily a moral charge but a directional one. Many prayers that use the name of God are functionally oriented toward outcomes, relief, or vindication — not toward God Himself as the one being sought. The test is not whether God’s name appears in the prayer but whether God Himself is what you are reaching for. When suffering, ask yourself: If God gave me exactly what I am asking for but was not Himself more present to me, would I be satisfied? If the honest answer is yes, the prayer is misdirected.

2. Release the transactional assumption that your faithfulness creates a claim on God’s response. (*Mind/Belief*) Elihu’s transcendence argument (vv. 5–8) cuts against one of the deepest instincts of religious consciousness: the assumption that doing right obligates God to do right by me. Your righteousness does not enrich God; your sin does not diminish Him. He does not respond to virtue as a creditor responding to payment. The gospel confirms this from the other direction — even the perfect righteousness of Christ was not a *transaction* that *obligated* the Father; it was the Father’s own provision. Stop bringing God a ledger. He does not operate from one.

3. Let the phrase “songs in the night” (v. 10) reshape what you are asking God for in suffering. (*Affections/Worship*) Elihu’s passing phrase is theologically rich: God gives

“songs in the night” — not removal of the night, but the capacity to worship within it. The authentic orientation toward God in suffering is not “get me out” but “be with me here, and make me capable of something I cannot manufacture on my own.” Those who have experienced genuine fellowship with God in affliction know this is not resignation — it is a deeper gift than relief. Ask God for that. Ask Him to be your song before you ask Him to be your solution.

4. When God seems silent, wait — and examine the posture of your waiting.

(Affections/Worship) Elihu tells Job that his case is before God (v. 14) and that the proper response is to wait. Waiting is not passive — it is an active posture of trust that the one you are waiting for is real, present, and good. But there are two kinds of waiting: waiting *in* God (Psalm 27:14 — hoping in His character), and waiting *for* God to perform (treating Him as a delayed service provider). The silence of God is one of the most painful experiences in Christian life. The discipline is to examine, during that silence, whether the waiting is oriented toward God’s presence or only toward His performance.

5. Bring your honest complaint to God — but bring it to God, not past Him toward an audience. *(Will/Behavior)* The chapter does not forbid lament. The Psalms are full of raw, honest, anguished complaint that Scripture commends and preserves. What Elihu identifies is a complaint that has lost its address — a cry that goes upward but has no genuine orientation toward God as Maker, Deliverer, and Teacher. Practically: when you are suffering, write or speak your complaint out. Then ask, “Is this addressed to God — with His character, His promises, and His history with me in view — or is it addressed to the void?” Redirect it. Do not sanitize it. Just make sure it is going somewhere real.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Job 35 preserves two essential theological truths that are perennially under pressure. First, divine transcendence is not cold impassibility but the basis on which God’s goodness cannot be manipulated, diminished, or obligated by human behavior — God acts from His own character, not in response to human leverage. Second, there is a genuine distinction between religious outcry and genuine prayer: using God’s name while oriented entirely toward outcomes is not the same as seeking God Himself. These two truths together protect against two opposite errors: the therapeutic God who exists to service human need, and the transactional God who rewards virtue with blessing. The true God of Job 35 is beyond both — He is the Maker who gives songs in the night, the Teacher who instructs more than the beasts, the Deliverer who is sought, not just invoked.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: Job 35 speaks directly into the Reformed insistence that God’s sovereignty is not a threat to genuine prayer but its only foundation. The passage exposes the subtle self-sovereignty that underlies much religious petition — the assumption that our virtue, our persistence, or the quality of our need gives us standing before God. Reformed theology insists, with Elihu’s best point, that there is no such standing — only the standing provided by grace. The distinction between pain-driven crying and God-seeking prayer also connects to the Reformed understanding of regeneration: only those who have been genuinely turned toward God by the Spirit will find their deepest cry oriented toward God Himself rather than toward outcomes. The phrase “God my Maker, who gives songs in the night” (v. 10) is a window into what genuine faith looks like in the dark — not the absence of pain but the presence of orientation toward the One who alone can make praise possible within it.

Main Takeaway

Main Takeaway: Your prayers in suffering may be loud, long, and theologically worded — and still be going nowhere, because they are aimed at your relief rather than at God. Elihu’s sharpest point is not a rebuke but an invitation: turn around. Bring your honest, anguished complaint to the God who gives songs in the night — not to extract relief from Him, but to find *Him*, and to discover that He is sufficient even when the darkness does not lift.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls:

- **Treating Elihu as fully authoritative without qualification.** The most common error in preaching Job 35 is reading Elihu’s words as if they carry the same weight as God’s speeches in chapters 38–41. Elihu is neither rebuked nor commended; his theological principles are often sound, but his application to Job is overreaching. Preachers must distinguish between the truth of the principle (misdirected prayer is a real problem) and Elihu’s false certainty that this diagnosis explains Job’s specific situation. Presenting Elihu as a fourth wise counselor rather than a complex, partially-correct voice distorts the book’s overall theology.
- **Using vv. 9–13 to imply that unanswered prayer means deficient prayer.** This is a weaponization of Elihu’s diagnostic point that causes serious pastoral damage. Elihu is not teaching a general principle that God answers good prayer and ignores bad prayer. He is identifying a specific category of entirely self-oriented crying with no God-directedness at all. Applying this passage to a grieving parent whose child is

not healed, and suggesting the problem is the quality of their prayer, is not only bad exegesis — it is pastorally cruel and theologically false.

- **Skipping the transcendence argument (vv. 5–8) as abstract philosophy.** Verses 5–8 are often treated as padding before the more interesting vv. 9–13, but they carry the chapter’s theological foundation. Without the transcendence argument, the prayer-quality argument becomes a technique (pray better to get results), rather than a reorientation (God is beyond being leveraged; seek Him for who He is). The transcendence section must be preached, not skipped.
- **Moralizing the “songs in the night” phrase (v. 10) into a positive-thinking exhortation.** “God gives songs in the night” is sometimes preached as encouragement to maintain a positive attitude in hard times. This domesticates a theologically rich phrase. Elihu’s point is that the authentic orientation toward God as Maker produces a capacity for worship that transcends circumstances — this is a work of God in the soul, not a discipline of human attitude management. Preach it as gift, not as self-generated resolve.
- **Failing to distinguish lament from the misdirected crying Elihu critiques.** Job 35 is sometimes read as a rebuke of lament itself — as if honest, raw complaint before God is the problem Elihu is diagnosing. This misreads the passage entirely and contradicts the Psalms, Jeremiah’s confessions, and Lamentations. Elihu’s critique is of crying that is not addressed to God at all, not of honest God-directed complaint. The preacher must make this distinction explicit, especially given how many listeners have been told that lament is faithlessness.
- **Ignoring the book’s prologue when applying the chapter.** The reader knows what Elihu does not: that Job is suffering not because of sin or misdirected prayer, but because God has allowed a cosmic test for reasons Job cannot see. Any application of Job 35 that implies God’s silence in Job’s case is due to Job’s prayer posture is importing Elihu’s ignorance into the pulpit. Preach Elihu’s true principles; do not endorse his false application to Job’s specific case.