

Homiletics Analysis: Psalms 35

Content & Intent

This Text — Content

Psalms 35 is a lament-imprecation psalm in which David cries out to the LORD for deliverance from enemies who have turned against him without cause. The psalm moves through three distinct cycles of petition, complaint, and vow of praise (vv. 1–10; vv. 11–18; vv. 19–28), each following a similar pattern: description of the enemies' malice, appeal to God for intervention, and anticipatory praise for the deliverance that will follow. The enemies are portrayed with accumulated specificity — they slander David in legal proceedings (v. 11), repay good with evil (v. 12), mock him in his suffering (vv. 15–16), and oppose him without provocation (v. 19). David does not simply ask for relief; he asks for the LORD Himself to take up arms as a warrior on his behalf (vv. 1–3), to pursue and rout his enemies as an angel of divine justice (vv. 4–6), and ultimately to vindicate him publicly before the assembly (vv. 27–28).

This Text — Intent

God is using this psalm to give His suffering people a vocabulary and a theology for crying out to Him when they face unjust opposition — to teach them that their cause is not merely a personal grievance but a matter of divine justice, and that the appropriate response to slander, betrayal, and malicious persecution is not private revenge or silent endurance but bold, faith-anchored appeal to the LORD as righteous Judge and divine Warrior. The intent is to move the reader from the despair and isolation that unjust suffering produces toward confident, expectant prayer — specifically by showing that the LORD's honor is engaged in the vindication of His servant.

Subject Sentence: David cries to God the warrior-judge for vindication against malicious, undeserved enemies.

Primary Claim: When the people of God face unjust opposition and undeserved hatred, the LORD calls them not to silence or self-vindication but to urgent, specific, faith-filled prayer — because their cause is His cause, and His justice will have the final word.

Interpretive Evaluation

The imprecatory dimension: The most contested feature of Psalm 35 is its imprecatory content — the explicit prayers for the enemies' ruin, shame, and destruction (vv. 4–8, 26). Several hermeneutical traditions handle this in ways that must be evaluated.

A common evangelical instinct is to domesticate the imprecatory psalms by either spiritualizing the enemies (they become abstract forces of evil rather than real people) or by treating the imprecations as sub-Christian sentiment that has been superseded by the New Testament ethic of love for enemies. Both moves must be *refuted*. The enemies in Psalm 35 are concretely personal — they are slanderers in a legal assembly, people who repaid David's kindness with hostility. The text resists abstraction. And while the New Testament does transform some dimensions of response to enemies (Matthew 5:44), it does not eliminate imprecatory prayer — Paul quotes Psalm 35:19 in John 15:25 to describe the world's hatred of Christ, and the Revelation martyrs cry out with imprecatory urgency (Revelation 6:9–10). The imprecatory psalms are not pre-Christian embarrassments; they are part of the inspired vocabulary of prayer.

A Lutheran reading tends to emphasize the psalms primarily as expressions of the human condition before God, drawing out the Law's function of exposing need. This is *acknowledged* as a genuine insight — the psalm does expose the human condition of unjust suffering and helplessness — but it must be *qualified*: Psalm 35 is not primarily about exposing the supplicant's need; it is about summoning the LORD's justice. The movement is from petition to expected praise, which is a distinctly faith-forward posture, not merely a lament.

A Christological-typological reading, rooted in Clowney and the Reformed tradition, observes that New Testament authors explicitly connect this psalm to Christ — John 15:25 cites Psalm 35:19, and the pattern of the righteous sufferer surrounded by malicious enemies finds its ultimate embodiment in Jesus at His trial and crucifixion. This reading is not imposed from outside the text but is *textually warranted*: David's experience as the LORD's anointed servant who suffers unjustly without cause functions typologically, pointing forward to the greater Anointed One. The imprecations, then, are not merely David's private prayers but carry eschatological freight — they anticipate the final judgment against all who oppose the LORD and His Messiah. This reading is affirmed as controlling for the Reformed exposition.

A Wesleyan application emphasis tends to move quickly to the believer's subjective response — “how do we pray in suffering?” This is not wrong but stops short of the text's full claim, which is not just about prayer form but about the *theological ground* on which David prays: the LORD's identity as warrior and righteous judge. Application that focuses only on prayer mechanics without grounding in divine character produces therapeutic spirituality rather than faith.

The “David as innocent” problem: Some readers stumble on the psalm's insistence that the enemies oppose David “without cause” (vv. 7, 19). This seems to assume a level of

personal righteousness that is at odds with David's documented failures elsewhere. The Reformed reading does not require the psalmist to be sinlessly innocent — it requires only that the specific charges and hostility described in this psalm are unjust and undeserved in this particular situation. The language of innocence here is forensic and relational, not absolute moral perfection. This distinction must be clear in exposition; failing to make it leads either to false piety (pretending we are guiltless) or to false humility (refusing to call unjust opposition what it is).

Key Canonical Support

- **John 15:25** — Jesus explicitly applies Psalm 35:19 (“they hated me without cause”) to Himself, establishing the typological connection between David's experience and the greater righteous sufferer; this is the primary New Testament anchor for the psalm.
- **Romans 12:19 / Deuteronomy 32:35** — “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord” — grounds the imprecatory prayer theologically: David does not take vengeance himself but hands the cause to the LORD, which is precisely what Psalm 35 enacts.
- **Revelation 6:9–10** — The martyrs under the altar cry “How long, O Lord... do you not judge and avenge our blood?” — showing that imprecatory prayer is not eliminated in the New Covenant but rather awaits eschatological fulfillment; the vocabulary of Psalm 35 carries forward.
- **2 Timothy 4:14–18** — Paul facing unjust opposition from Alexander the coppersmith commits the cause to the LORD (“The Lord will repay him”) while trusting God for deliverance — a New Covenant embodiment of the Psalm 35 posture, without private retaliation.
- **Hebrews 4:15 / Isaiah 53:9** — The Suffering Servant who “had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth” fulfills the typological pattern of the innocent sufferer; what David approximates as the LORD's anointed, Christ completes perfectly.

Aim: To show that God-honoring response to unjust opposition is bold, specific, faith-grounded prayer that appeals to the LORD's character as righteous judge — not silence, not self-vindication, and not despair.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1–3	David calls the LORD to arm Himself as warrior and take up his defense — “Contend, O LORD, with those who contend with me; fight against those who fight against me.”	Military imagery: shield, buckler, spear, javelin. The LORD is invoked as divine warrior (cf. Exodus 15).
4–6	First imprecation: let the enemies be put to shame, turned back, driven away; may the angel of the LORD pursue them as chaff before the wind.	Angel of the LORD as instrument of divine justice; the imagery echoes the Exodus plagues and Psalm 18.
7–8	Grounds of the petition: they hid a net for David “without cause” and dug a pit for his soul; may destruction come upon them unawares.	“Without cause” (רֵחַק) — key word, cited in John 15:25. The enemies’ guilt is established before the Judge.
9–10	Anticipatory praise: “My soul will rejoice in the LORD, exulting in His salvation... who delivers the weak from those too strong for him.”	The praise is proleptic — offered before deliverance comes. This is the faith-posture the psalm models.
11–12	Second movement begins: malicious witnesses rise up, charging David with things he does not know; they repay good with evil.	Legal setting — “malicious witnesses” (עֵדִי רָשָׁעִים); the accusation is judicial, not merely personal.
13–14	David’s former conduct toward them: he mourned for them when they were sick, fasted, prayed for them as for a brother or mother.	The contrast between David’s loyal love and their betrayal establishes the depth of injustice.
15–16	Their response when he stumbled: they gathered in glee, mocked, gnashed their teeth at him.	“Impious mockers” (רֵחַק לְעֵגִי) — deliberate, organized malice, not mere indifference.
17	Appeal renewed: “How long, O Lord, will you look on?”	The “how long” question is the classic lament form

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	Rescue me from their destruction, my precious life from the lions.”	(cf. Psalm 13); it is not unbelief but urgent faith.
18	Vow of praise: “I will thank you in the great congregation; among the mighty throng I will praise you.”	Public, communal praise — the vindication will be visible, not merely private.
19–21	Third movement: do not let the enemies rejoice over David; those who hate without cause wink maliciously and devise deceitful words.	“Without cause” reappears — reinforcing the unjust character of the opposition.
22–24	Appeal to the LORD who has seen all of this: “You have seen, O LORD; be not silent... Wake up and rouse yourself for my vindication, my God and my Lord.”	God as witness and judge — “be not silent” assumes He is present; the appeal is to His character as righteous judge.
25–26	Imprecation: do not let them say “we have swallowed him up”; let them be put to shame and dishonor who magnify themselves against David.	The enemies’ triumphalism would be a public statement against the LORD’s faithfulness.
27–28	Closing vow: let those who delight in his vindication shout for joy and praise; “then my tongue shall tell of your righteousness and of your praise all the day long.”	The righteous community’s joy in vindication glorifies God; David’s praise will be continuous and public.

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	1–10	First Cycle: The Divine Warrior Invoked — petition, imprecation, and anticipatory praise

Division	Verses	Label
2	11–18	Second Cycle: The Betrayal Described — the depth of injustice and renewed appeal
3	19–28	Third Cycle: The Judge Addressed — appeal to God’s witness, final imprecation, and closing vow of praise

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: David cries to God the warrior-judge for vindication against malicious, undeserved enemies.

Primary Claim: When the people of God face unjust opposition and undeserved hatred, the LORD calls them not to silence or self-vindication but to urgent, specific, faith-filled prayer — because their cause is His cause, and His justice will have the final word.

Applications (Five)

1. Reframe your suffering as a case before a righteous Judge, not merely a private pain.

(*Mind/belief*) David does not merely vent his feelings in Psalm 35 — he makes a legal case before the LORD. He names the specifics: what the enemies did, why it is unjust, what he had done for them, and what he is asking for. When you face unjust opposition, the gospel does not call you to pretend the injustice is not real or to suppress your awareness that wrong has been done. It calls you to bring the case to the One who sees perfectly, judges rightly, and whose honor is engaged in the vindication of His people. Stop processing unjust suffering only in horizontal terms — as a wound, an offense, a relational problem. Bring it vertically, as a petition before the throne of the righteous Judge.

2. Learn to pray the full vocabulary of the Psalms — including the hard prayers.

(*Mind/belief*) Many believers have been taught, implicitly or explicitly, that imprecatory prayer is sub-Christian, that godly people do not pray for God’s judgment to fall on their enemies. Psalm 35 — and the New Testament’s own use of it — directly contradicts this. Jesus cites this psalm to describe the world’s hatred of Himself. The Revelation martyrs cry out for divine justice. Paul commits his enemy to the LORD’s repayment. The imprecatory psalms are not an embarrassing remnant of an earlier dispensation — they are part of the inspired vocabulary of prayer that God has given His people precisely because human injustice is real, and the desire for justice is not wicked but God-given. Recover these prayers. Pray them as appeals to divine justice, not private revenge — but pray them.

3. Let the anticipatory praise in this psalm reshape how you wait on God.

(Affections/worship) David does not wait for deliverance to praise God — he praises God *in anticipation* of deliverance he has not yet seen (vv. 9–10, 18, 27–28). This is not performance or pretense; it is faith operating at its highest register. The theology underneath the anticipatory praise is this: the LORD’s character as deliverer is not contingent on the current circumstances. He is already the One “who delivers the weak from those too strong for him” (v. 10). When you are in the middle of unjust suffering and the deliverance has not yet come, ask whether your soul is capable of this psalm’s posture — praising God for who He is even before you see what He will do. If it is not, that is not a moral failure; it is a spiritual hunger the psalm itself is meant to feed.

4. Measure your response to enemies against David’s recorded conduct toward his.

(Affections/worship) Verses 13–14 are among the most convicting in the psalm: when these same people were sick, David mourned, fasted, and prayed for them as if they were his own family. His lament is not the cry of someone who has treated his enemies with contempt — it is the cry of someone who has loved his enemies genuinely and been betrayed anyway. Before claiming the posture of Psalm 35, the honest question is whether you have first lived the posture of verses 13–14. Have you actually prayed for the person who has wronged you? Fasted for them? Grieved their affliction even while they were your enemy? The psalm models that love-before-justice sequence, and the justice-cry is only fully honest when it arises from that prior love.

5. Stop taking private revenge on those who wrong you — hand the case to God and leave it there. *(Will/behavior)* The entire structure of Psalm 35 enacts what Romans 12:19 commands: “leave it to the wrath of God.” David does not plot against his enemies, does not gather his own witnesses, does not scheme to undo them through social or political means. He prays. He makes his case to God and asks God to act. In practical terms, this means identifying the specific situations where you are currently managing your own case against someone who has wronged you — the quiet undermining, the strategic distancing, the careful reputation management designed to disadvantage them — and replacing that self-management with the prayer-posture of this psalm. Not passive silence. Not pretend forgiveness that suppresses the grievance. But active, specific, God-directed petition that surrenders the outcome to the only Judge whose verdict will actually matter.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Psalm 35 teaches that the LORD is not a distant observer of human injustice but a personally engaged divine Warrior and righteous Judge whose honor is bound up with the cause of His suffering servants. The military imagery of verses 1–3 is not metaphor decorating an abstract concept — it depicts a God who fights, who contends, who takes up arms on behalf of the weak. This grounds the entire theology of imprecatory prayer: the prayers are not vindictive because they are handed to a Judge who sees perfectly and acts justly. The psalm also teaches that unjust suffering — suffering that

arrives “without cause,” from those whom you have treated with loyalty and love — is not an anomaly in the covenant life but a recurring pattern anticipated by God’s own Word. The repeated phrase “without cause” does not appear to explain the suffering but to name it accurately before the One who can address it. Finally, the three cycles of petition and anticipatory praise teach that faith is not the absence of lament but the framework within which lament is offered — confident that God will act, specific about what is asked, and already worshipful in advance of the answer.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: Psalm 35 displays a distinctly Reformed understanding of divine sovereignty in suffering — the sufferer does not manage his own vindication but entrusts it entirely to the LORD, whose sovereign justice is not in doubt even when His timing is unknown. The typological connection to Christ, established by John 15:25, gives this psalm its ultimate theological weight: the pattern of the anointed servant who suffers unjust hatred “without cause” reaches its fullest expression in Jesus at His trial and crucifixion, where the enemies’ malice and the servant’s appeal to the Father come to their climactic convergence. This means Psalm 35 is not merely a historical record of David’s suffering or a prayer resource for individual Christians in difficulty — it is a window into the passion of Christ, and the believer who prays it does so as one united to the One who prayed it perfectly. The imprecatory dimension carries eschatological force in this framework: the prayers for the enemies’ ruin are ultimately prayers for the final judgment that Christ’s resurrection has guaranteed, and the anticipated praise of verses 9–10 and 27–28 is the praise of those who already know how the story ends.

Main Takeaway

You are not alone in your unjust suffering, and you are not the one responsible for fixing it. The LORD has seen everything — the slander, the betrayal, the malice, the repayment of your kindness with cruelty — and He has not been silent as a matter of indifference but is holding it all for the day of His reckoning. Your assignment is not to manage the verdict; it is to bring the case to the Judge, leave it there, and — by faith in the character of the One who fights for His people — begin to praise Him for what He will do before you see it.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Sanitizing the imprecations into abstraction.** The most common homiletical failure with Psalm 35 is to spiritualize the enemies into abstract forces (sin, Satan, disease, circumstances) in order to avoid the discomfort of praying against real people. This is exegetically unjustified — the enemies are concretely personal

throughout the psalm — and pastorally dishonest, because it removes the psalm's most difficult and most needed pastoral provision: a vocabulary for praying about real people who have genuinely wronged you. Preach the enemies as real, and let the psalm do its intended work.

- **Preaching the imprecations without the prior love of verses 13–14.** Equally dangerous is preaching the imprecatory content without grounding it in the context of David's prior loyal love toward these same people. If the sermon moves directly from "you have enemies" to "pray these prayers," it licenses self-righteous vindictiveness rather than the godly justice-cry of the psalm. The sequence matters: David fasted for them, mourned for them, prayed for them as family — *then* cries out for divine justice when they respond with betrayal. The exposition must hold both together.
- **Dismissing imprecatory prayer as sub-Christian.** The opposite error — common in more progressive evangelical settings — is to treat the imprecatory psalms as pre-New Covenant sentiments that Jesus has superseded and that mature believers should not pray. This must be corrected with the New Testament data: Jesus cites Psalm 35:19; the Revelation martyrs pray imprecatorily; Paul commits his enemies to the LORD's repayment. Imprecatory prayer is not eliminated in the New Covenant — it is eschatologically anchored.
- **Missing the Christological depth.** A psalm-35 sermon that never arrives at Christ has stopped short of the psalm's own canonical trajectory. John 15:25 is explicit: Jesus applies the "without cause" language to Himself. The exposition should show how David's experience as the LORD's anointed servant typologically anticipates the passion of Christ — not as a forced allegory but as the New Testament's own interpretive warrant. This also transforms the preacher's relationship to the imprecations: they are not merely personal prayers but eschatological prayers, grounded in Christ's resurrection and the certainty of final judgment.
- **Treating the anticipatory praise as emotional technique rather than theological conviction.** When the sermon reaches the proleptic praise of verses 9–10 and 18, the temptation is to present it as a psychological strategy — "praise your way through adversity." This reduces a theological posture to a coping mechanism. The anticipatory praise in Psalm 35 is grounded in the LORD's character as the One "who delivers the weak from those too strong for him" — it is faith in a person and His known character, not a spiritual technique. Preach the theology that grounds the praise, not just the praise as a practice.
- **Preaching the psalm without naming the forensic setting.** Psalm 35 is not generically about enemies — it has a specifically legal dimension (malicious witnesses in a court, false charges, public slander). Expositions that flatten this into generic "conflict with people" miss the psalm's particular pastoral provision for

those facing unjust accusation, false testimony, and public reputation destruction
— a provision that is urgently needed and rarely addressed in preaching.

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