

Homiletics Analysis: Psalms 86

Content & Intent

This Text — Content:

Psalms 86 is a personal lament and petition by David, titled explicitly as “A Prayer of David.” It is one of only a handful of Davidic psalms in Book III of the Psalter (Psalms 73–89), a collection otherwise dominated by Asaph and the Sons of Korah. The psalm moves through a sustained pattern of petition and praise, with David presenting his need before God, grounding each petition in a statement of God’s character or his own covenantal relationship with God, and returning repeatedly to doxological affirmation even in the midst of distress.

The psalm’s content can be traced in three movements: an opening section of urgent petition grounded in David’s neediness and devotion (vv. 1–7), a central doxological movement celebrating God’s incomparability and universal sovereignty (vv. 8–13), and a return to petition in the face of active, violent opposition from proud enemies (vv. 14–17). Throughout, David does not merely ask for things — he argues for them, marshaling reasons drawn from God’s character: God’s goodness and forgiveness (v. 5), God’s incomparability among the gods (v. 8), God’s greatness in works (v. 10), God’s steadfast love (*hesed*) and faithfulness (v. 15), and God’s identification of David as His servant (vv. 2, 4, 16). The petitions are numerous and specific: incline Your ear, preserve my soul, save Your servant, be gracious, gladden my soul, give ear, attend to my cry, call upon You in distress, teach me Your way, unite my heart to fear Your name, deliver me, show me a sign. The psalm is remarkable for its density of petition — more than a dozen distinct requests in seventeen verses — yet it never descends into mere complaint. Every petition is framed within a theology of who God is.

This Text — Intent:

God’s intent through this psalm is to teach His people how to pray when distress is real and enemies are dangerous — by anchoring every petition in the character of the God who is being addressed. The psalm is designed not only to be read but to be prayed. It models the discipline of *arguing toward God from His own character* rather than arguing away from distress toward despair. The reader is meant to be drawn into this posture — to recognize their own neediness (v. 1, “poor and needy”), to draw on the arsenal of God’s own attributes as the basis for bold petition, to pass through distress into doxology (vv. 8–13), and to return from doxology into renewed, confident petition (vv. 14–17). The intent is formative: God is shaping His people into those who know how to pray by showing them what prayer grounded in His character looks like. The psalm does not resolve the distress — it does not report that the enemies were scattered — but it ends with a petition for a

“sign of Your favor” and a statement of confidence that God’s comfort will shame the enemies. The transformation the passage is working toward is from distress-driven, self-focused petition to character-grounded, doxology-interrupted, enemy-defying prayer.

Subject Sentence: David teaches God’s people to petition by arguing from God’s own character.

Primary Claim: God is calling His people to bring every distress boldly to Him — not on the basis of their own worthiness or urgency, but on the basis of who He is: good, forgiving, incomparable, faithful, and full of steadfast love. The psalm is not merely a model to admire but a script to inhabit — shaping us into people who pray by knowing God.

Interpretive Evaluation

The Genre Question — Lament vs. Instruction: Some readers approach Psalm 86 primarily as a lament to be analyzed (what was David’s historical situation?) rather than as a prayer to be prayed. The historical approach is not wrong — the superscription grounds it in Davidic authorship, and identifying the life setting (likely a time of serious external threat from violent enemies, v. 14) illuminates the emotional register. But reducing the psalm to its historical occasion misses its canonical function: lament psalms are preserved precisely because they are *models for Israel’s ongoing prayer life*, not merely records of individual episodes. The Reformed reading, following Calvin’s *Commentary on the Psalms*, treats the psalm as simultaneously personal and exemplary — David’s prayer is authentic and specific to his situation, and also paradigmatic for every believer in analogous distress. The psalm is Israel’s (and the church’s) prayer as much as David’s.

The Moralistic Misreading — David as Prayer Hero: A common homiletical misreading treats Psalm 86 primarily as a portrait of admirable prayer practice: “Look at how David prays — he grounds his petitions in God’s character; we should do that too.” While this is not wrong as far as it goes, it falls into the Clowney anti-moralism trap — it reduces the psalm to instruction about what we should *do* rather than grounding the instruction in what God *is*. The Reformed reading insists that the psalm’s basis for confident prayer is not David’s spiritual technique but God’s *hesed* (steadfast covenant love, vv. 5, 13, 15) and God’s *incomparability* (vv. 8–10). We can pray this way because God is this kind of God — not because David modeled exemplary devotion. The motivation is theology, not spiritual discipline.

The Prosperity Gospel Misreading — Petition as Entitlement: Some traditions (particularly certain strands of charismatic and word-of-faith teaching) read the confident, argumentative petitions of Psalm 86 as evidence that bold, expectant prayer commands God’s response. The phrase “in the day of my trouble I call upon you, for you answer me” (v.

7) is sometimes read as a formula for guaranteed results. This misreads the confidence of the psalm. David's confidence is not entitlement — it is covenant-grounded trust. The arguments David makes are not demands but appeals: “for I am devoted to you” (v. 2), “for to you do I cry all the day” (v. 3), “for you, O Lord, are good and forgiving” (v. 5). The “for” (*kî*) structure throughout the psalm signals grounds for appeal, not mechanisms for compulsion. David's confidence rests in God's character, not in his own faith as a force that secures results. Reformed theology's insistence on God's sovereign freedom is precisely what makes confident petition *restful* rather than anxious.

The Syncretism Question — “No gods like You” (v. 8): Verse 8 (“There is none like you among the gods, O Lord”) raises the question of whether the psalm assumes the existence of other gods (henotheism) or is making a rhetorical comparative claim within strict monotheism. The Reformed reading aligns with the mainstream of Old Testament scholarship: the “gods” (*elohim*) referred to here are the divine council, supernatural beings, or the gods of the nations — none of which have genuine divine attributes comparable to YHWH. Psalm 86:8 does not concede their existence as genuine deities; it asserts YHWH's absolute incomparability. This is the standard comparative acknowledgment form found throughout the Psalter (cf. Ps. 89:6–8; Exod. 15:11). There is no genuine theological tension with monotheism here; the verse is a full-throated assertion of YHWH's unique supremacy.

Verdict: The primary Reformed reading treats Psalm 86 as a paradigmatic prayer grounded in God's covenant character, functioning as both authentic lament and didactic model for God's people. The petition's confidence is covenant-confidence in a faithful God, not spiritual technique, entitlement, or hedged henotheism. Applications should draw people into the prayer itself, not merely into admiration of it.

Key Canonical Support

- **Exodus 34:6–7** — The great self-disclosure of YHWH as “merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness” is almost certainly the theological source text for Psalm 86:15. David's prayer is saturated in the Sinai revelation; he prays *God's own self-description back to Him*. This is the deepest root of the psalm's petitionary confidence.
- **Hebrews 4:14–16** — “Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.” The New Testament grounds bold petition in Christ's high priestly mediation — the fulfillment and perfection of the access Psalm 86 reaches for. The “poor and needy” petitioner now approaches through One who “has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.”
- **Romans 8:26–27** — The Spirit's intercessory work on behalf of the believer in distress, making intercession “with groanings too deep for words,” answers the Psalm 86 situation from the other direction: not only can we approach God boldly

with our petitions, but the Spirit is active in shaping and carrying those very prayers. The psalm's confidence is anchored in this Trinitarian intercession.

- **Matthew 6:9–13 (The Lord's Prayer)** — Jesus' model prayer shares Psalm 86's structure: address to God, appeal to His character and purposes ("hallowed be Your name"), petition for immediate needs ("give us this day"), and a concluding doxology. Jesus teaches prayer the same way Psalm 86 teaches prayer — not as technique but as address to a known and characterful God. The psalm is part of the Old Testament curriculum out of which the Lord's Prayer emerges.
- **James 5:16–18** — "The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working." James's confidence in effectual prayer is grounded in the same covenantal relationship that Psalm 86 assumes — the righteous are those in covenant with God, whose prayers carry weight not because of their own spiritual achievement but because of who hears them. Elijah's prayer is the illustration; David's prayer is the model; the same God answers both.

Aim: To lead readers into the discipline of character-grounded petition — learning to bring their specific distresses to God by arguing from His own revealed character rather than from their own urgency or worthiness.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1	David petitions: "Incline your ear, O LORD, and answer me" — basis: "I am poor and needy"	Opening petition; neediness as the ground, not achievement
2	"Preserve my soul, for I am godly (<i>hāsîd</i>)"; "Save your servant, who trusts in you"	David claims covenantal status — "your servant," "who trusts in you"
3	"Be gracious to me, O Lord, for to you do I cry all the day"	Persistence in prayer cited as basis for petition
4	"Gladden the soul of your servant, for to you, O Lord, do I lift up my soul"	Wholehearted orientation to God — soul-lift
5	"For you, O Lord, are good and forgiving, abounding in steadfast love to all who call upon you"	Theological pivot: God's character grounds the petition

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
6–7	“Give ear, O LORD, to my prayer; listen to my plea for grace. In the day of my trouble I call upon you, for you answer me”	Summary of the section: petition and confidence together
8	“There is none like you among the gods, O Lord, nor are there any works like yours”	Incomparability assertion — the doxological turn begins
9	“All the nations you have made shall come and worship before you, O Lord, and shall glorify your name”	Universal eschatological vision — all nations, not just Israel
10	“For you are great and do wondrous things; you alone are God”	Strict monotheism: “you <i>alone</i> are God”
11	“Teach me your way, O LORD, that I may walk in your truth; unite my heart to fear your name”	Return to petition — now for wisdom, fidelity, undivided heart
12	“I give thanks to you, O Lord my God, with my whole heart, and I will glorify your name forever”	Vow of praise — the doxological movement crests
13	“For great is your steadfast love (<i>hesed</i>) toward me; you have delivered my soul from the depths of Sheol”	Past deliverance as the ground of present confidence — <i>hesed</i> again
14	“O God, insolent men have risen up against me; a band of ruthless men seeks my life”	The crisis named: proud, ruthless enemies threatening death
15	“But you, O Lord, are a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness”	Direct echo of Exodus 34:6 — the great Sinai self-disclosure
16	“Turn to me and be gracious to me; give your strength to your servant, and save the	Renewed petition grounded in servanthood identity

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
17	son of your maidservant” “Show me a sign of your favor, that those who hate me may see and be put to shame, because you, LORD, have helped and comforted me”	Final petition: a visible sign; enemies shamed by God’s favor

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	1–7	Petition Grounded in Neediness and Devotion
2	8–10	Doxology: God’s Incomparability and Universal Sovereignty
3	11–13	Petition for Wisdom; Vow of Praise; Past Deliverance Recalled
4	14–17	The Crisis Named; Renewed Petition; Confident Conclusion

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: David teaches God’s people to petition by arguing from God’s own character.

Primary Claim: God is calling His people to bring every distress boldly to Him — not on the basis of their own worthiness or urgency, but on the basis of who He is: good, forgiving, incomparable, faithful, and full of steadfast love. The psalm is not merely a model to admire but a script to inhabit — shaping us into people who pray by knowing God.

Applications (Five)

1. When you do not know how to begin praying, begin with God’s character, not your condition. (*Mind/Belief*)

David’s pattern throughout Psalm 86 is not to lead with the crisis but to lead with or immediately anchor to who God is. He names the crisis — “I am poor and needy” (v. 1),

“insolent men have risen up against me” (v. 14) — but every petition is tethered to a “for You, O Lord, are...” statement. Many believers stall in prayer because they begin with their circumstances and spiral into anxiety or numbness. The psalm reorients the mind: the starting point is not “here is my problem” but “here is my God.” Begin by speaking who God is before you list what you need. Your prayer will be transformed not by greater spiritual discipline but by a clearer theology.

2. Learn God’s self-descriptions in Scripture and pray them back to Him. (*Mind/Belief*)

Verse 15 — “you, O Lord, are a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness” — is almost verbatim from Exodus 34:6. David did not compose this; he borrowed it from Scripture and returned it to God as prayer. This is a transferable discipline: the attributes of God revealed in Scripture are not merely things to believe about God — they are arguments to bring to God. The believer who knows that God is “slow to anger” has a petition available in every moment of relational failure and guilt. The believer who knows that God “abounds in steadfast love” has a petition available in every moment of feeling forgotten. Memorize God’s self-descriptions. You are arming yourself for prayer.

3. Let the doxological center of the psalm (vv. 8–10) reorder what you are most afraid of. (*Affections/Worship*)

The psalm passes through a remarkable movement at verses 8–10: in the middle of a crisis with violent enemies, David’s attention is captured by the vision of all nations coming to worship YHWH. This is not escapism — it is worship doing what worship is designed to do: reordering the believer’s sense of what is ultimate. The enemies of verse 14 are real and dangerous. The God of verse 10 — “you alone are God” — is realer and more ultimate. When fear of your circumstances is eating you, the corrective is not optimism about the circumstances but worship of the God who holds them. Psalm 86:8–10 is a prescription: stop, look at the incomparable God, let the vision of His universal sovereignty recalibrate your terror. Worship is not a detour from the crisis — it is the primary weapon against it.

4. Stop waiting until your heart is “together” before approaching God — ask Him to unite it. (*Affections/Worship*)

Verse 11 contains one of the most honest requests in all of Scripture: “unite my heart to fear your name.” David is not presenting a unified, fully-devoted heart as the precondition of prayer — he is presenting a divided, scattered heart as the subject of a petition. He asks God to do the unifying. Many believers live with the unspoken assumption that genuine prayer requires a certain quality of inner preparation — enough quiet, enough spiritual focus, enough sincerity. Psalm 86:11 dismantles this. The divided heart is not disqualification from prayer; it is the occasion for it. Come to God fragmented and ask Him to gather what is scattered. He is not waiting for you to arrive put-together.

5. In situations where enemies or adversaries have real power over you, address God rather than the enemy. (*Will/Behavior*)

David's response to the "band of ruthless men" seeking his life (v. 14) is not a strategy memo, a counter-move, or a lament about the injustice. It is a petition to God (vv. 16–17). He asks God to "show a sign of favor" that will shame those who hate him. This is a specific, behavioral discipline — prayer as the primary response to threat, rather than the secondary response after strategic options are exhausted. In the believer's life this takes concrete form: when a colleague, family member, institution, or situation has real power to harm you and you cannot resolve it by direct action, the psalm's instruction is to bring the specific situation, specific adversary, and specific need to God and ask for a visible sign of His favor. Not because prayer is passive, but because God's direct action on the situation is more decisive than any counter-strategy you can devise.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Psalm 86 is a concentrated display of the character of YHWH as the ground of prayer. The psalm insists — structurally, not merely rhetorically — that God's goodness, forgiveness, steadfast love, incomparability, and faithfulness are not background assumptions but the active basis for approaching Him in need. The explicit citation of the Sinai self-disclosure in verse 15 (Exodus 34:6) anchors the psalm in the covenant revelation that defines YHWH's character across the whole Old Testament: He is the God who chose to name Himself in terms of His gracious character toward His people. The psalm further asserts a universal scope (v. 9) that goes beyond Israel — "all the nations you have made shall come and worship" — grounding individual petition in an eschatological vision of God's universal reign. This passage thus teaches that prayer is not a therapeutic exercise or a spiritual discipline with intrinsic value; it is an act of theological confession, a declaration that God is who He says He is and that His character is sufficient for every need.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: Psalm 86 is a showcase text for Reformed theology's insistence that the basis of the believer's standing before God is God's own gracious character, not the believer's spiritual achievement or moral worthiness. David's repeated appeals — "for I am devoted to you," "for to you do I cry all the day" — might appear to ground his petitions in his own fidelity, but the deepest argument in the psalm is always theological: "for *you*, O Lord, are good and forgiving" (v. 5), "for *you* are great and do wondrous things" (v. 10), "for great is *your* steadfast love toward me" (v. 13). The basis is always what God is, not what David is. This is the Reformed grammar of prayer — approaching God *coram Deo*, aware of one's own smallness and God's sovereign sufficiency. The psalm also displays the Reformed conviction that genuine prayer is inseparable from sound theology: you cannot pray Psalm 86 without knowing the God of Exodus 34, the incomparable God of the nations, the faithful deliverer from Sheol. For

Reformed preaching and teaching, this psalm is evidence that catechesis and devotion are not separate tracks — the believer who knows God most clearly is the believer who can pray most boldly. In the New Covenant, Jesus Christ has become the ultimate ground of this boldness, the One in whom all of God’s *hesed* and *emet* (steadfast love and faithfulness) are fully embodied and permanently secured for those who are “in Him.”

Main Takeaway

God is enough — and Psalm 86 exists to teach you how to know that when nothing in your circumstances confirms it. David’s prayer is not a record of spiritual technique; it is an argument from God’s own character that you are invited to make your own. Every attribute of God he names is a door into bold petition. Learn who God is. Pray who God is. The enemies may not scatter immediately, the distress may not resolve, but you will not be abandoned by the God who declared Himself “merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness” — and who, in Christ, has signed that declaration in blood.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Treating the psalm as a how-to guide for prayer technique rather than a theological formation of the pray-er.** The easiest homiletical move with Psalm 86 is to extract a list of “David’s prayer principles” (persistence, humility, grounding petitions in God’s character, etc.) and present them as a spiritual discipline to be adopted. This reduces the psalm to moralistic instruction — “pray like David prayed.” The passage’s intent is not to produce better prayer technique but to form people whose knowledge of God is deep enough to make their prayers bold. The discipline flows from the theology; the theology must be the sermon’s center.
- **Glossing over the enemy crisis in verses 14–17 as background color.** The threat David faces is not incidental to the psalm — it is the circumstance that generates the entire prayer. Verses 14–17 name real, violent, proud adversaries seeking his life. A preacher who rushes past this to get to the theology leaves the congregation without the application most likely to fit their own crises. Dwell in the specific, dangerous situation David is in, then show how the theology of the preceding verses actually holds under that specific pressure.
- **Misreading David’s appeals to his own devotion (vv. 2, 4) as meritorious grounds for petition.** The phrases “for I am godly” (v. 2) and “for to you, O Lord, do I lift up my soul” (v. 4) can be read as self-commendation — “God should answer me because of my spiritual record.” This imports a merit framework foreign to the psalm. In context, David is identifying himself as a covenant member, not claiming meritorious standing. The deepest ground of every petition is always God’s own

character. Make this distinction explicit, or a congregation accustomed to performance-based thinking will hear a psalm that confirms their worst instinct: pray harder and you will deserve more answers.

- **Skipping the doxological center (vv. 8–10) as a detour from the main argument.** Some expository approaches treat the incomparability hymn of verses 8–10 as a parenthesis — the real psalm is the petition sections on either side. But the doxological center is structurally and theologically essential: it is the ground of all the petitions. The petitions are as confident as they are *because* the God addressed is the incomparable, universal-sovereign God of verses 8–10. A sermon that moves quickly through the doxological center loses the weight that makes the confidence of the petition theologically intelligible.
- **Failing to connect verse 15 to Exodus 34:6, thus missing the psalm’s deepest root.** Verse 15 is not David composing an original theological statement — it is a near-verbatim citation of the Sinai self-disclosure of YHWH to Moses. This is the most important single piece of canonical background for the psalm. A congregation that does not know Exodus 34:6–7 will hear verse 15 as a nice description of God. A congregation that knows it will hear it as David praying God’s own covenant commitment back to Him — which is a fundamentally different and far more powerful thing. Make the connection explicit. The Exodus text is the theological engine under the psalm’s hood.
- **Ending the sermon without actually praying the psalm.** Psalm 86 is a prayer. A sermon that analyzes it without inviting the congregation to pray it has treated a prayer as a lecture subject. The most natural conclusion to exposition of this psalm is to lead the congregation in praying it — either through a version of the psalm itself, a pastoral prayer that follows its structure, or a moment of guided individual petition using the psalm’s theological categories. The psalm does not end with resolution; it ends with petition (“show me a sign”). The sermon should not be tidier than the text.