

Homiletics Analysis: 1 Samuel 20

Content & Intent

This Text — Content:

First Samuel 20 narrates the covenant-sealed friendship between David and Jonathan at a critical turning point in David's flight from Saul. The chapter opens with David fleeing to Jonathan after narrowly escaping Saul's murderous rage (19:9–10), pressing Jonathan with the raw question: "What have I done? What is my guilt? What is my sin before your father, that he seeks my life?" (v. 1). Jonathan initially resists the conclusion that his father means to kill David, but David's argument — that Saul conceals his plans from Jonathan precisely because of their friendship — begins to shift Jonathan's understanding. The two men devise a test using the New Moon feast: David will be absent from the king's table, and Jonathan will read Saul's reaction as the definitive signal of his true intentions. Before the plan is executed, however, the chapter pauses at its theological center (vv. 12–17) for the solemn renewal and deepening of the covenant between them — a covenant now explicitly extended to Jonathan's descendants and grounded not in sentiment but in the LORD's purposes. The test is executed, Saul's murderous rage toward David is revealed beyond all doubt (vv. 24–34), and Jonathan signals David by the agreed arrow code in a scene of extraordinary pathos (vv. 35–42). The chapter ends with the two men weeping together, embracing, and parting — David into exile, Jonathan back into the court of a murderous king — with the covenant spoken aloud one final time: "Go in peace, because we have sworn both of us in the name of the LORD, saying, 'The LORD shall be between me and you, and between my offspring and your offspring, forever'" (v. 42).

This Text — Intent:

God is accomplishing several things simultaneously through this chapter. He is demonstrating that His purposes for David cannot be thwarted even when human power structures are fully aligned against him — Saul's murderous will is not the final word. He is displaying the LORD's covenant faithfulness as the ground and model of human covenant loyalty — the David-Jonathan covenant is not merely a moving friendship story but a theological statement that God's electing purposes generate faithful covenant keeping among His people. He is also confronting the reader with the cost of covenant loyalty: Jonathan loses his inheritance (the throne), his proximity to David, and eventually his life, as a consequence of standing on the side of God's anointed against his own father. The intent of this passage is to ground the reader's confidence in God's sovereign protection of His anointed one, to display covenant loyalty as the appropriate response to God's electing purposes, and to call the reader to a costly allegiance that mirrors Jonathan's — loyal to the LORD's anointed above every other claim, including the claim of family, power, and self-preservation.

Subject Sentence: God’s covenant with David holds even when every human institution conspires against him.

Primary Claim: God is demonstrating through David’s preservation and Jonathan’s covenant loyalty that His electing purposes cannot be overthrown by human power — and He is calling His people to the costly, covenant-shaped allegiance that Jonathan models.

Interpretive Evaluation

The nature of the David-Jonathan friendship: Some readings of this chapter, particularly in contemporary culture, have proposed a romantic or erotic dimension to the David-Jonathan relationship, citing the language of love (vv. 17, 41) and the covenant bond. This reading must be clearly *refuted*. The Hebrew term *ahav* (“love”) and its cognates function throughout the ancient Near East and the Old Testament in covenantal and political contexts — it is the standard vocabulary of treaty obligation and vassal loyalty, not romantic attachment. The language of covenant in this chapter is precisely treaty language: oaths sworn before the LORD, obligations to descendants, the formal structure of mutual protection. The LXX, the Targum, and the entire interpretive tradition of Second Temple Judaism and the church through the patristic and Reformation periods read this as covenant brotherhood. The reading of romantic love imports assumptions the text actively resists and, more critically, destroys the passage’s actual theological point — that Jonathan’s loyalty to David is an instance of covenantal fidelity modeled on the LORD’s own faithfulness to His anointed.

Jonathan’s culpability and moral agency: Some readers, particularly those in the Wesleyan tradition with its emphasis on moral accountability, have read Jonathan’s protection of David as ethically complex — is Jonathan wrongly deceiving his father? This is worth *acknowledging* as a genuine textual tension. Jonathan does not deceive Saul gratuitously, but he does conceal David’s whereabouts and fabricate a partial cover story (v. 6). The Reformed reading does not sanitize this tension but situates it within a larger moral framework: when human authority places itself against God’s anointed and God’s purposes, covenant loyalty to the LORD’s anointed takes precedence. Jonathan is not acting out of private sentiment but in conscious alignment with the LORD’s purposes (v. 14–15 make clear he understands the theological stakes). The passage does not present Jonathan’s deception as ideal but as the moral cost of living in a broken situation where authority structures have themselves become corrupt. The text’s own evaluation is implied in its narrative sympathy — Jonathan acts rightly, even at personal cost.

Typological/Christological reading: Some Reformed and redemptive-historical readers, following the Clowney trajectory, identify Jonathan as a type of Christ — the true heir who

voluntarily surrenders his inheritance for the sake of God's anointed. This reading is worth *qualifying* carefully. There are genuine typological resonances: Jonathan gives up the throne that is rightfully his (as a human succession claim), enters into covenant on behalf of his descendants, and ultimately dies with his father rather than with David. However, the typological direction is more properly David-toward-Christ (the anointed king, pursued, vindicated, ultimately reigning) than Jonathan-toward-Christ. The wiser reading locates Jonathan as a model of covenant faithfulness among God's people who gather around the LORD's anointed — closer to the posture of the disciples than to the Savior himself. Pressing the Jonathan-as-Christ typology too hard risks obscuring the chapter's primary claim about God's protection of His anointed David.

Saul as representative of corrupt human power: Dispensational readings sometimes treat Saul primarily in prophetic-typological terms (Israel rejecting her king). The text itself warrants *acknowledging* that Saul functions narratively as the representative of human institutional power turned against God's purposes — a pattern that recurs throughout redemptive history. However, the chapter is not primarily a typological allegory but a historical narrative with its own theological claims. The primary application should be drawn from the narrative's own movement before reaching for typological extensions.

Key Canonical Support

- **Genesis 15:1–21** — The LORD's covenant with Abram sealed by divine oath alone establishes the pattern: God's electing purposes are sealed not by human performance but by His own sworn faithfulness. The David-Jonathan covenant in 1 Samuel 20 echoes this structure — the covenant is sworn in the LORD's name and extends to descendants, just as God's covenant with Abram reaches beyond Abraham himself.
- **2 Samuel 9:1–13** — David's covenant faithfulness to Jonathan's household through Mephibosheth is the direct fulfillment of the covenant sworn in 1 Samuel 20:15–17. This canonical pair demonstrates that the covenant sworn in chapter 20 is not sentiment but binding obligation — and that David, as God's anointed, himself becomes the agent of covenant faithfulness toward the weak and vulnerable.
- **Psalms 37:12–15, 32–33** — “The wicked plots against the righteous and gnashes his teeth at him, but the Lord laughs at the wicked, for he sees that his day is coming.” The Psalm articulates the theological confidence underlying 1 Samuel 20's narrative: Saul's murderous purposes against David are not the final word because the LORD is the defender of His anointed. The righteous man may be handed over temporarily, but the LORD will not abandon him.
- **John 15:13–15** — “Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.” Jesus' definition of the greatest covenant love resonates with Jonathan's posture throughout 1 Samuel 20 — Jonathan stakes his inheritance, his

safety, and ultimately his life on his covenant with David. This New Testament text does not make Jonathan a Christ-figure but shows that the love Jonathan displays is precisely the kind Jesus names as the highest form of human covenant keeping.

- **Romans 8:31–39** — “If God is for us, who can be against us?” The theological confidence of 1 Samuel 20 — that Saul’s murderous power cannot ultimately prevail against God’s anointed — finds its fullest New Testament articulation here. David is the historical type of the One against whom every human and spiritual power is ultimately impotent because God has declared Him His Son.

Aim: To build in the reader a confident, costly covenant allegiance — trusting God’s sovereign protection of His anointed above every threatening circumstance, and modeling Jonathan’s willingness to stand with God’s purposes even at the price of personal loss.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1	David flees to Jonathan; presses him with three urgent questions: What sin? What guilt? What have I done that your father seeks my life?	The threefold question is not rhetorical — David is genuinely seeking to understand whether he has sinned, and pressing Jonathan to take a position
2	Jonathan protests: you shall not die; my father does nothing without telling me; this thing is hidden from my father	Jonathan’s initial resistance is not naïveté but loyalty — he cannot yet believe his father would hide this from him
3	David presses back: your father knows that you favor me; but truly, there is but a step between me and death	“A step between me and death” — one of Scripture’s most haunting understated lines; David perceives the situation clearly
4	Jonathan: “Whatever you say, I will do for you”	Jonathan’s unconditional commitment precedes the plan — it is a posture before it is a strategy
5–8	David proposes the test: absent from the New Moon feast for three days;	<i>Hesed</i> (covenant lovingkindness) is explicitly invoked — v. 8; the test is

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	Jonathan to observe Saul's reaction; if Saul is angry, David is certain of Saul's murderous intent; if there is no anger, David is safe; David appeals to their covenant: "deal kindly with your servant, for you have brought your servant into a covenant of the LORD with you"	framed within their covenant relationship; David appeals not to friendship but to sworn obligation
9	Jonathan: "Far be it from you! If I knew that my father had determined that evil should come to you, would I not tell you?"	Jonathan reaffirms his commitment; still cannot believe his father means to kill David
10	David asks the logistical question: who will bring me word?	Practical planning within covenant relationship — faithfulness is concrete, not merely theoretical
11–12	They go to the field; Jonathan invokes the LORD as witness: "The LORD, the God of Israel, be witness!"	Movement to the field creates privacy for the covenant renewal; the LORD is named as the real party to this covenant
13	Jonathan vows: if Saul means evil toward David, Jonathan will tell him and send him away in peace; "may the LORD be with you, as he has been with my father"	Jonathan's blessing is remarkable — he pronounces the LORD's presence on David, the very presence that had departed from Saul; implicit acknowledgment of God's electing shift
14–15	Jonathan asks for covenant kindness (<i>hesed</i>) for himself and his descendants; "do not cut off your steadfast love from my house forever, when the LORD cuts off every one of the enemies of David from the face of the	"When the LORD cuts off" — Jonathan speaks with prophetic confidence about David's ultimate victory; this verse presupposes the Davidic promise and functions as a direct setup for 2 Samuel 9 and the

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
16–17	earth” Jonathan makes a covenant with the house of David; “May the LORD take vengeance on David’s enemies”; Jonathan makes David swear by his love for him	Mephibosheth narrative The covenant is expanded beyond the two men to “the house of David” — a covenant with the dynasty, not merely the individual; v. 17 emphasizes that Jonathan’s love for David was as his own soul
18–23	The practical plan: David hides three days; Jonathan will test Saul at the New Moon feast; signal system via arrows; “the LORD is between you and me forever”	The signal system (vv. 20–22) is the practical mechanism; the LORD as the true third party in their covenant (v. 23) is the theological frame that brackets the entire arrangement
24–26	New Moon feast; David absent; Saul says nothing the first day, assumes David is ceremonially unclean	Saul’s initial silence and charitable interpretation — even Saul gives David the benefit of the doubt on day one
27–29	Second day; Saul asks Jonathan where David is; Jonathan gives the agreed cover story (David went to Bethlehem for family sacrifice at Jesse’s request)	Jonathan’s cover story is technically partial — David did request this, but it is a fabrication designed to protect him; the narrative does not editorialize
30–31	Saul erupts in rage at Jonathan: “You son of a perverse, rebellious woman!”; accuses Jonathan of choosing David to his own shame; insists David must die or Jonathan’s kingdom is not established	Saul’s outburst reveals everything: he knows Jonathan has sided with David; his argument is dynastically self-interested (v. 31 — “for as long as the son of Jesse lives, you shall not be established, nor your kingdom”)
32–33	Jonathan asks why David should die and what he has done; Saul hurls his spear at Jonathan	Jonathan takes David’s side openly before his father; Saul’s attempted murder of Jonathan mirrors his

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
		attempted murder of David — the covenant men share the same enemy
34	Jonathan rises from the table in fierce anger; grieves for David; eats nothing the second day of the feast	Jonathan's grief is both personal and principled — he grieves not only for David but because he is now undeniably certain of his father's evil toward him
35–39	Jonathan goes to the field; sends the lad ahead; shoots the arrows beyond him; calls out the prearranged signal words	The arrow code is executed as planned; the lad is an unwitting instrument — he understands nothing; Jonathan and David alone hold the meaning
40	Jonathan sends the lad back to the city	David cannot emerge while any other person is present — the secrecy of their parting is total
41	David rises from beside the stone heap; falls on his face three times; the two men weep together; David weeps the more	The prostration (three times) is covenantal obeisance — David honors Jonathan formally; the weeping is not sentimentality but the grief of two men who understand what this parting costs
42	Jonathan sends David away in peace: "Go in peace, because we have sworn both of us in the name of the LORD, saying, 'The LORD shall be between me and you, and between my offspring and your offspring, forever.'"	The covenant is spoken aloud in full — this is its final formal articulation; the basis of the farewell is not feeling but sworn oath; "forever" — the covenant outlasts both men, as 2 Samuel 9 demonstrates

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	1–10	The Crisis Confronted: David

Division	Verses	Label
		Presses Jonathan to See What Is True
2	11–23	The Covenant Renewed: Jonathan and David Swear Before the LORD
3	24–34	The Test Executed: Saul’s Murderous Intent Confirmed Beyond Doubt
4	35–42	The Parting: Covenant Sealed in Grief, Spoken in Full, and Kept Forever

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: God’s covenant with David holds even when every human institution conspires against him.

Primary Claim: God is demonstrating through David’s preservation and Jonathan’s covenant loyalty that His electing purposes cannot be overthrown by human power — and He is calling His people to the costly, covenant-shaped allegiance that Jonathan models.

Applications (Five)

1. God’s purposes for His anointed cannot be strangled by human opposition — receive this as settled confidence, not hopeful wishing. (*Mind/Belief*) Saul is the king of Israel, David’s father-in-law, and the most powerful human force in the land — and none of it is sufficient to prevent what God has ordained. David’s “step between me and death” (v. 3) is true on the human level and irrelevant on the divine level simultaneously. The reader who faces institutional opposition, relational hostility, or circumstances that appear to have foreclosed God’s purposes for them is being called by this text to a specific cognitive reorientation: the powers arrayed against you are not the final government of your situation. God’s electing purposes are not contingent on favorable human conditions. Receive this not as a general encouragement but as a specific, irreversible fact about how the universe is actually governed.

2. Covenant loyalty is grounded in the LORD’s name, not in mutual feeling — and that grounding is what makes it durable. (*Mind/Belief*) The David-Jonathan covenant is marked throughout by the invocation of the LORD’s name as the true party, the true witness, and the true guarantor (vv. 12, 23, 42). When David appeals to Jonathan, he appeals not to their friendship but to their sworn covenant before God (v. 8 — *hesed*). When Jonathan sends David away, he does not say “our love will sustain us” — he says

“we have sworn in the name of the LORD.” Every human covenant — marriage, friendship, church membership, promise-keeping — that is grounded in feeling alone will not survive the conditions of 1 Samuel 20: prolonged separation, the hostility of family and institutions, and the grief of unanswered loss. But covenant loyalty grounded in the LORD’s own character, sworn in His name, outlasts everything — including death, as the Mephibosheth narrative in 2 Samuel 9 demonstrates. Examine whether the covenants you have made — to spouse, to church, to God — are grounded in feeling or in sworn oath.

3. Grieve honestly what covenant loyalty costs — Jonathan’s weeping is not weakness but the appropriate response to real loss. (*Affections/Worship*) Jonathan weeps in verse 41. He has lost his father’s approval, his inheritance trajectory, and now his closest companion. The narrator does not rush past this — David “wept the more.” There is a moralistic impulse in Christian piety to frame costly obedience as painless or to perform emotional invulnerability as evidence of spiritual maturity. The text will not support this. Jonathan’s grief is real, appropriate, and honored by the narrative. The reader who has paid a real price for covenant loyalty — who has lost relationships, position, or safety for standing with what God has ordained — is invited by this text not to suppress that grief but to bring it honestly into God’s presence, just as Jonathan weeps at a stone heap with the man God has chosen. Grief is not the opposite of faith. Jonathan is weeping *and* keeping covenant *simultaneously*.

4. Stand with God’s anointed against the claims of lesser loyalties, even when the cost is your inheritance. (*Will/Behavior*) Jonathan’s father is the king. Jonathan’s own dynastic claim runs through Saul. By protecting David, Jonathan is not only defying his father — he is surrendering his own claim to the throne. He does this consciously; verse 31 records Saul making the dynastic stakes explicit. Jonathan hears it and sides with David anyway. The reader of this text is confronted with a concrete behavioral demand: where lesser loyalties — family approval, institutional belonging, financial security, social position — press against loyalty to God’s anointed and God’s purposes, those lesser loyalties must yield. This is not a call to general rebelliousness or to the romanticization of marginality. It is a specific demand arising from this specific passage: when the clash is real, stand where Jonathan stood. Name one specific relationship, institution, or loyalty in your current situation where this demand is live.

5. Extend covenant faithfulness forward — make provision for those who will outlive your ability to protect them. (*Will/Behavior*) Jonathan does not merely ask David to protect him — he explicitly extends the covenant to his descendants (vv. 14–15): “do not cut off your steadfast love from my house forever.” Jonathan is thinking past his own lifespan, past the resolution of the present crisis, to the condition of those who will depend on the covenant long after both men are gone. This forward-reaching covenant faithfulness is what generates the Mephibosheth story in 2 Samuel 9 — a man who is crippled, forgotten, and powerless, suddenly brought to the king’s table because of a covenant sworn decades before he was born. The application is concrete: the covenants you make now — to God, to your children, to your church — generate obligations that extend beyond

your own tenure. Are you keeping covenant with your descendants? Are you building structures of faithfulness that will outlive you?

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: First Samuel 20 is a sustained demonstration that God's electing purposes are not hostage to human institutions, however powerful and however murderously opposed. Saul represents the fullest deployment of human institutional power — king, father, commanding authority — turned against God's anointed, and the chapter's entire narrative arc demonstrates his impotence to accomplish what he intends. Alongside this, the passage presents *hesed* (covenant lovingkindness) as simultaneously a divine attribute and a human calling — Jonathan's loyalty to David is not merely admirable human friendship but a participation in the kind of covenant faithfulness that characterizes the LORD Himself. The forward-reaching dimension of the covenant (vv. 14–15, 42) teaches that God's covenantal purposes are not exhausted within a single generation or relationship — they extend to “offspring forever,” establishing an architecture of faithfulness that transcends individual lives. The chapter thus teaches that God's sovereignty is not merely a theological category but a historically operative reality that protects His purposes against every human opposition, and that the human response to this sovereign faithfulness is a corresponding covenant loyalty modeled on the LORD's own *hesed*.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: This chapter is a historical and narrative display of the Davidic covenant's indestructibility — and as such it functions as a type of the new covenant's indestructibility in Christ. The Reformed tradition's insistence on the perseverance of the saints rests not on human resolve but on God's sovereign maintenance of His covenant with His anointed; 1 Samuel 20 is an early and concrete demonstration of that maintenance in the face of maximum human opposition. Jonathan's posture — consciously surrendering the throne he could claim, aligning himself with God's anointed at personal cost, and grounding that alignment in sworn covenant before the LORD rather than in sentiment — is a historical model of what it looks like to be gathered around the true Davidic King, Jesus Christ, in a posture of costly allegiance. The Reformed tradition's gospel-centered application of the Old Testament narrative avoids both moralism (Jonathan as a character to imitate through self-effort) and mere inspiration (Jonathan as an emotionally moving story) by pressing to the theological question: what does this text reveal about how God maintains His covenant purposes, and what does it demand of those who would live inside that covenant? The answer is that God's purposes are sovereign and therefore secure, and that the appropriate human response is a Jonathan-shaped *hesed* — costly, forward-reaching, grounded in the LORD's own name.

Main Takeaway

Saul has the throne, the army, and the murderous will — and none of it is enough to stop what God has ordained for David. That is not just an ancient historical detail; it is the governing reality of your situation right now. Stand with God's anointed. Keep your covenants. Grieve what it costs. Trust what God has sworn.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Reducing the passage to a friendship story.** The most common mishandling of 1 Samuel 20 is treating it as a passage primarily about human friendship — loyalty, encouragement, standing by a friend in crisis. While the friendship is real and should not be minimized, the passage is primarily a covenant-theological text about God's maintenance of His electing purposes and the *hesed* that covenant generates. Preaching this as “be a good friend like Jonathan” misses the theological engine entirely and produces exactly the moralism the framework exists to avoid. The application must flow from the covenant's grounding in the LORD's name, not from Jonathan's admirable character.
- **The romantic-reading distortion.** As noted in Interpretive Evaluation, contemporary culture has generated a reading of David and Jonathan as romantically involved. A preacher who ignores this entirely risks leaving confused listeners in the congregation; a preacher who responds to it by simply asserting “that's wrong” without demonstrating *why* risks appearing defensive rather than exegetically grounded. The better approach is to demonstrate positively what the covenant language and structure actually mean — treaty language, dynastic extension, *hesed* in its political-covenantal register — so that the romantic reading dissolves not because it is prohibited but because it is a category error. The text is about something far larger than romance.
- **Treating Jonathan as the hero without locating his heroism theologically.** Jonathan is genuinely admirable, and the narrative presents him sympathetically. But Jonathan's heroism is not self-generated virtue — it flows from his conscious alignment with God's electing purposes for David (v. 14–15 reveal that Jonathan understands the theological stakes). A sermon that celebrates Jonathan's courage and loyalty without grounding those qualities in his theological recognition of David's anointing has missed the passage's own logic. The question to press is: *why* does Jonathan act this way? The answer the text gives is theological, not temperamental.
- **Skipping the covenant extension to descendants (vv. 14–15) as a logistical detail.** These verses are not a logistical footnote — they are the passage's bridge to

2 Samuel 9 and the most explicit statement of the covenant's forward-reaching character. Without them, the chapter reads as a moving but self-contained episode. With them, it reads as a covenant establishing obligations that outlive both parties and are fulfilled decades later in the person of a crippled, forgotten man brought to the king's table. The canonical extension to Mephibosheth is load-bearing for the application.

- **Failing to press the cost of Jonathan's loyalty.** There is a preaching tendency to honor Jonathan's courage without dwelling on what it actually cost him. By the end of 1 Samuel 20, Jonathan has made himself an enemy of his own father (who has just tried to kill him), surrendered his inheritance trajectory, lost his closest companion to exile, and knows he may never see David again. A sermon that does not let the congregation feel the weight of this cost will generate admiration without challenge. The question "what has your covenant loyalty with God's anointed cost you?" must be pressed concretely, with Jonathan's specific losses on the table.
- **Disconnecting the Primary Claim from the NT and Christ.** First Samuel 20 generates its full canonical force only when it is read as part of the larger movement toward the true Davidic King. Without this canonical grounding, the passage becomes a moving historical episode about two remarkable men. With it, the passage becomes a demonstration of the pattern by which God maintains His covenant with His anointed against every human opposition — a pattern that reaches its terminus in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, the son of David, against whom death itself deployed its full power and failed. The preacher should not force this connection artificially at every point in the exposition, but it should be present and explicit in the closing movement of the sermon.