

Homiletics Analysis: 2 Samuel 20

Content & Intent

This Text — Content:

Second Samuel 20 narrates the aftermath of Absalom's rebellion and the swift suppression of a second insurrection led by Sheba son of Bichri, a Benjaminite. The chapter opens with Sheba's opportunistic cry — "We have no portion in David" — exploiting the festering tribal rivalry between Israel and Judah that erupted even as David was being restored. Joab murders Amasa, David's newly appointed general, with the same cold treachery he used against Abner (2 Samuel 3), consolidating his own military position. The pursuit of Sheba culminates not through Joab's force but through the wisdom of an unnamed woman of Abel Beth-maacah, who negotiates with Joab and delivers Sheba's head over the wall, preserving her city. The chapter closes with a brief list of David's officials — a governmental snapshot of the restored kingdom.

This Text — Intent:

God is using this chapter to demonstrate what a kingdom looks like when it is being held together by human calculation, treachery, and violence rather than by covenantal faithfulness. The intent is not merely to record political turbulence but to press the reader toward a sober reckoning: the fragility of David's restored throne, the ongoing cost of David's moral failures, and — through the unnamed wise woman — the quiet, unexpected ways wisdom and peace operate within a world of power. The text confronts the reader with the persistent disorder that follows unrepented structural sin and invites a deeper longing for a king whose kingdom will not be so maintained.

Subject Sentence: A kingdom rebuilt on treachery and tribal rivalry reveals how deeply David's failures have fractured Israel.

Primary Claim: God is showing through Sheba's revolt, Joab's murders, and the unnamed woman's wisdom that human power without covenant faithfulness cannot hold a kingdom together — and that the wounds opened by David's sin reach far beyond David himself.

Interpretive Evaluation

The primary interpretive divergence on 2 Samuel 20 concerns how to read the chapter theologically: Is it essentially a political history with moral lessons extracted from specific characters (particularly the wise woman), or is it a unified theological statement about the consequences of covenant failure and the persistent disorder it produces?

Moralistic/character-study readings — common in popular evangelical exposition — tend to isolate the wise woman of Abel Beth-maacah as the chapter's hero and draw applications about courage, negotiation, or wisdom in conflict. This reading is not wrong in what it sees but is incomplete. It treats a secondary character as the chapter's organizing center rather than recognizing her as a foil that exposes the surrounding chaos. The woman's wisdom is remarkable precisely *because* it stands in such sharp contrast to the treachery of Joab, the opportunism of Sheba, and the instability of David's court. To preach her in isolation is to extract a positive model from a chapter whose dominant tone is one of ruin — and to miss what the chapter is actually claiming.

Dispensational readings that emphasize the Israel/Judah tribal conflict as prefiguring a future national Israel may import prophetic categories the text does not itself develop. The tribal rift here is presented as a *consequence* of David's failures, not as a structural feature of prophetic eschatology. This reading should be **qualified** — the Israel/Judah tension is real and historically significant, but the chapter is not making a prophetic point about national Israel; it is making a covenantal point about the wages of sin within the covenant community.

Reformed and redemptive-historical readings correctly identify Joab's recurring treachery, the tribal fragmentation, and the grim efficiency with which the rebellion is suppressed as part of the extended narrative consequence of 2 Samuel 11-12 — the sword that would not depart from David's house (2 Samuel 12:10). This reading is preferred: it integrates the chapter into the broader Davidic narrative, accounts for the cumulative darkness of 2 Samuel 13-20, and frames the material in terms of covenant faithfulness rather than bare political history. The wise woman then functions within this reading not as an isolated hero but as a testimony that wisdom and peace are available even within a disordered kingdom — a canonical pointer toward something greater.

Key Canonical Support

- **2 Samuel 12:10-12** — Nathan's oracle that "the sword shall never depart from your house" and that adversaries would rise "from within your own household" provides the direct covenantal framework for everything in chapters 13-20, including Sheba's revolt and Joab's violence.
- **2 Samuel 3:26-27** — Joab's murder of Abner establishes the pattern repeated in his killing of Amasa (20:9-10): Joab's treachery is not an isolated event but a character

settled in violence, underscoring how deeply compromised the instruments of David's power are.

- **Proverbs 11:14; 24:6** — “In an abundance of counselors there is safety” / “by wise guidance you can wage your war.” The unnamed wise woman embodies the canonical principle that wisdom — not force — is the true security of a city, providing a canonical counterpoint to Joab's brutal efficiency.
- **Isaiah 9:6-7** — The promise of a Prince of Peace whose government will increase without end and who will uphold it with justice and righteousness stands as the canonical answer to what 2 Samuel 20 exposes: a kingdom upheld by treachery, fragmented by tribal rivalry, requiring a greater king whose rule is not so maintained.
- **Luke 1:32-33** — The angel's declaration that the Son of David will reign on David's throne forever and of His kingdom there will be no end is the New Testament fulfillment that 2 Samuel 20's brokenness strains toward — the king whose kingdom is not held together by Joab's sword.

Aim: To press readers to see in David's fractured, violence-maintained kingdom the insufficiency of merely human leadership and covenant-violating rule — and to awaken longing for the one King whose reign is not so sustained.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1	Sheba son of Bichri, a Benjaminite, sounds a trumpet and cries “We have no portion in David” — Israel follows Sheba; Judah stays with David	Sheba exploits the tribal rift exposed in 19:41-43; “son of Bichri” — Benjaminite = Saul's tribe; the wound is old
2	All Israel deserts David and follows Sheba; Judah holds from the Jordan to Jerusalem	The division is immediate and nearly total — the restoration of ch. 19 is already fracturing
3	David returns to Jerusalem; he puts his ten concubines (left to keep the house) in confinement — he provides for them but does not sleep with them again; they are	Fulfillment of 2 Sam. 12:11-12 / 16:22 — the consequences of David's sin are still being worked out in these women's lives

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	“widows of a living man”	
4-5	David commands Amasa to muster Judah in three days; Amasa is delayed beyond the appointed time	Amasa was Absalom’s general, now appointed by David (19:13) — his delay creates the opening for Joab
6	David commands Abishai to pursue Sheba lest he fortify himself in walled cities; “he will do us more harm than Absalom”	David bypasses Joab for Abishai (not Joab) — Joab is still out of official favor after killing Absalom (18:14)
7	Joab’s men, the Cherethites and Pelethites, and the mighty men go out from Jerusalem under Abishai	Joab goes with the army — not as commander but he will assert command through violence
8	Amasa meets Joab’s forces at the great stone in Gibeon; Joab’s sword falls from its sheath — or he draws it deceptively	The detail of the falling/drawn sword is ominous; it prefigures the murder; Gibeon is loaded with covenant significance
9-10a	Joab greets Amasa with “Is it well with you, my brother?” and takes his beard to kiss him; with his other hand he stabs Amasa in the belly; Amasa dies	Direct parallel to the murder of Abner (3:27) — same treacherous kiss-greeting method; Joab speaks “shalom” and delivers death
10b	Joab and Abishai continue the pursuit of Sheba	Joab simply reclaims command through murder — no accountability, no pause
11-12	One of Joab’s men stands by Amasa’s body and calls the troops to follow Joab; the body is moved from the road to a field and covered when it becomes a problem for troop movement	The callousness of the scene — a man’s body managed as a logistical inconvenience — captures the chapter’s moral tone
13	Once the body is moved, all the men follow Joab	Joab’s authority is restored the moment the evidence is concealed — a picture of power maintained by silence

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
14-15	Joab pursues Sheba through all the tribes of Israel; Sheba gathers supporters from Bichri's clan; Joab's forces besiege Abel Beth-maacah and begin siege works against the wall	The whole northern countryside is involved; the siege engine images destruction coming on an entire city for one man
16	A wise woman calls out to Joab from the city	The text identifies her only as "a wise woman" — her wisdom is her identity in this narrative
17	Joab draws near; the woman asks if he is Joab; he confirms; she says "Listen to the words of your servant" — he says he is listening	The exchange is formal and deliberate — she commands the conversation
18-19	She invokes the proverb: "They used to say, 'Let them inquire at Abel'"; she identifies her city as a "mother in Israel," peaceful and faithful; she protests that Joab is destroying "an inheritance of the LORD"	The woman appeals to covenant language — "mother in Israel," "inheritance of the LORD"; she reframes the political crisis as a covenant violation
20-21	Joab denies wanting to destroy or swallow up; he only wants Sheba, who has lifted his hand against King David; deliver him and Joab will withdraw	Joab is negotiating — the wise woman's framing has shifted the dynamic
21b-22	The woman says she will throw his head over the wall; she speaks wisely to all the people; they cut off Sheba's head and throw it to Joab; Joab blows the trumpet and the siege ends; every man returns home	The woman delivers — her wisdom saves the city; note: "she spoke wisely to all the people" — unnamed, unrecorded, but the most effective actor in the chapter
23-26	List of David's officials: Joab over the army, Benaiah over the Cherethites and	The administrative list closes the chapter — kingdom "restored," order

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	Pelethites, Adoram over forced labor, Jehoshaphat as recorder, Sheva as secretary, Zadok and Abiathar as priests, Ira the Jairite as David's priest	resumed; but it is Joab's name that heads the list

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	1-2	Sheba's Revolt: The Kingdom Fractures Again
2	3	The Concubines: Ongoing Cost of David's Sin
3	4-13	Joab's Murder: Power Reclaimed Through Treachery
4	14-22	The Wise Woman: Wisdom Preserves What Force Would Destroy
5	23-26	The Official List: Kingdom Restored — With Joab at the Head

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: A kingdom rebuilt on treachery and tribal rivalry reveals how deeply David's failures have fractured Israel.

Primary Claim: God is showing through Sheba's revolt, Joab's murders, and the unnamed woman's wisdom that human power without covenant faithfulness cannot hold a kingdom together — and that the wounds opened by David's sin reach far beyond David himself.

Applications (Five)

1. (Mind/Belief) Recognize that unrepented sin does not stay contained — it metastasizes into the systems and relationships around it. David's adultery and murder did not cost only David; it cost Amasa his life, it cost ten women their futures, it cost an entire city a siege they did not deserve. The reader who imagines that private sin will remain private is making

an assumption this text systematically destroys. Ask: What decisions have I made in private that are now bearing public fruit I do not want to look at?

2. (Affections/Worship) Feel the grief of the ten concubines — “widows of a living man” — and let it produce not merely moral instruction but lament. These women were used as instruments of political humiliation, then managed as an administrative problem, then warehoused for the rest of their lives, never named, never heard from again. The text does not editorialize. It simply records. The weight of their situation is meant to be felt. Let it create in the reader a mourning for the collateral suffering that human sin produces — and a longing for a king who does not use people as tools.

3. (Will/Behavior) Where you hold structural power — in a family, an organization, a church — examine whether that power is maintained through Joab’s methods: selective loyalty, convenient silence about wrongdoing, violence (emotional, relational, institutional) that is quickly moved past once the immediate problem is solved. Joab reclaims command by murdering Amasa and then covering the body so the troops don’t notice. Name specifically one place where you have managed a situation rather than addressed it — and commit to addressing it rather than managing it.

4. (Mind/Belief) Notice that the most effective actor in this entire chapter is a woman whose name is never recorded. The named men — Sheba, Joab, Amasa, David — produce chaos, death, and fragmentation. The unnamed wise woman produces peace, preservation, and resolution. This is not a coincidence the text asks you to pass over. Wisdom operating through an unlikely, unrecorded vessel is a canonical pattern. Train yourself to look for wisdom in the places power overlooks — and to receive it when it comes.

5. (Affections/Worship) Let the closing official list — with Joab’s name at the top of a restored administration — produce a hunger for something this kingdom cannot provide. Order has been restored, but at what cost? By what means? By whose hand? The very instrument of disorder now heads the list. The reader is meant to feel the insufficiency of this outcome — not cynicism toward David, but a longing for the Son of David whose kingdom will be upheld not by the swords of men like Joab but by justice and righteousness forever (Isaiah 9:7). That hunger is not worldly dissatisfaction; it is a Spirit-wrought longing for the true King.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Second Samuel 20 teaches that the consequences of covenant unfaithfulness are not bounded by the moment of sin — they radiate outward through time, relationships, and institutions in ways the sinner neither controls nor can fully foresee. God’s word through Nathan (“the sword shall never depart from your house”) is not a curse arbitrarily imposed but the organic fruit of a kingdom whose head has broken covenant. The chapter also teaches that human governance — even the governance of a man after

God's own heart — is deeply insufficient to maintain justice, protect the vulnerable, or secure peace. The best outcome available in this chapter is a negotiated decapitation and a silenced trumpet. This is not peace — it is the management of disorder. God permits this narrative precisely so its insufficiency is felt and its theological verdict registered: human kingship alone cannot do what the covenant promises require.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: Within Reformed theology, 2 Samuel 20 functions as part of the extended typological argument that David's kingship, for all its genuine covenantal significance, points beyond itself to the one king it cannot be. The chapter does not undermine the Davidic covenant — it shows why the Davidic covenant requires fulfillment in a greater Son of David whose rule is not maintained by Joab's treachery. Reformed hermeneutics, following Clowney and Ferguson, reads the accumulated failures of David's administration not as a disqualification of the covenant but as a deepening of its promissory logic: if this is the best David can do, then "great David's greater Son" must be something qualitatively different. The unnamed wise woman — preserving her city through wisdom and at cost to herself — functions within this canonical structure as a quiet, partial anticipation of the one who comes to seek and save, not to besiege and destroy. The gospel is not preached from this chapter by extracting it prematurely; it is preached by letting the chapter's darkness generate the longing that the New Testament answers.

Main Takeaway

Human kingdoms — even kingdoms God has covenanted to bless — cannot hold together when their foundations are cracked by covenant sin. David's kingdom is being "restored" in this chapter through murder, manipulation, and managed silence, with the chief murderer's name heading the official list at the end. This is the best human power can do. Which is precisely why God promised a different king — one whose kingdom would be upheld not by the sword of men like Joab, but by justice and righteousness, without end. Stop expecting David to give you what only his greater Son can provide.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Reducing the chapter to a character study of the wise woman.** The wise woman is remarkable and her wisdom is genuine — but she is a foil, not the frame. To preach her in isolation from the surrounding chaos of Joab's murder, Sheba's revolt, and the concubines' warehoused lives is to extract a positive model from a chapter whose dominant claim is one of structural, covenantal disorder. Preach her within the chapter's darkness, not as an escape from it.

- **Treating the chapter as a political history with detachable moral lessons.** “Don’t be like Sheba — be loyal.” “Don’t be like Joab — don’t use treachery to advance yourself.” These applications are not wrong but they are shallow. They flatten a theologically dense narrative into a conduct manual. The chapter is making a claim about the nature of covenant consequences and the insufficiency of human kingship — not merely providing behavioral models and anti-models.
- **Skipping the concubines.** Verse 3 is one of the most quietly devastating verses in the Davidic narrative — ten women living out the rest of their lives as functional widows because David sinned and Absalom instrumentalized them. The tendency to move quickly past this verse in order to get to the “action” of the chapter is a homiletical failure. The concubines are part of the theological claim: David’s sin has ongoing, embodied, irreversible costs to people who had no say in any of it.
- **Domesticating Joab’s murder of Amasa.** The parallel to the murder of Abner (2 Samuel 3) is not accidental — it signals that Joab is a settled character, not a man who has one bad moment. The “Is it well with you, my brother?” greeting followed by a sword to the belly is a precise repetition of his earlier method. A reader who notices only “Joab kills Amasa” and moves on has missed the canonical weight of the repetition: this is who Joab is; this is the kind of instrument David’s kingdom runs on; this is the problem.
- **Failing to connect the chapter to Nathan’s oracle.** Without 2 Samuel 12:10 as the explicit covenantal frame, chapter 20 reads as episodic political trouble. With it, every element of the chapter is legible as the continuing fruit of David’s sin — the sword that will not depart. Establish this frame early and let it govern the entire exposition.
- **Jumping to Christ too quickly.** The redemptive-historical pointer toward the Son of David is real and should be made — but only after the chapter’s own darkness has been fully inhabited. To rush to Isaiah 9:7 without allowing the reader to feel the weight of what 2 Samuel 20 actually shows is to make the gospel sound like an afterthought rather than the answer to a deeply felt need. Let the chapter do its work first. The longing it creates is the setup for the answer the gospel provides.