

Homiletics Analysis: 2 Kings 23

Content & Intent

This Text — Content

Second Kings 23 is the climactic chapter of Josiah's reform movement, the most sweeping act of covenant renewal in Israel's recorded history. The chapter opens with a public covenant ceremony in which Josiah reads the Book of the Law before all Judah and leads the nation in a solemn pledge of obedience (vv. 1–3). What follows is an exhaustive, systematic dismantling of every form of syncretistic and outright pagan worship that had accumulated in Judah, Israel, and the surrounding regions over generations (vv. 4–20). Josiah desecrates high places, removes Asherah poles, tears down shrines for Molech and the gods of the nations, defiles the sites where child sacrifice was practiced in the Valley of Ben-Hinnom (Topheth), removes the horses and chariots dedicated to the sun, and smashes the altars Manasseh had installed in the temple courts. He even travels north into former Israelite territory — Bethel and the cities of Samaria — to destroy the high places Jeroboam had erected and that had precipitated the northern kingdom's destruction (vv. 15–20). The chapter then records the most magnificent Passover celebration since the days of the judges (vv. 21–23). After cataloguing the removal of occult practices — mediums, spiritists, household gods, idols — the narrator delivers a summary verdict: *“Neither before nor after Josiah was there a king like him who turned to the LORD as he did — with all his heart and with all his soul and with all his strength, in accordance with all the Law of Moses”* (v. 25). Yet the chapter closes in devastating theological irony: despite all of this, the LORD's fierce anger does not turn away (vv. 26–27). Josiah dies in battle at Megiddo against Pharaoh Necho (vv. 28–30), and the chapter ends with his successors rapidly undoing everything he accomplished (vv. 31–37). Two kings in quick succession — Jehoahaz and Jehoiakim — both do evil in the eyes of the LORD, and Judah is already returning to the trajectory that will end in exile.

This Text — Intent

God is seeking to do two things simultaneously through this passage, and the power of the chapter lies in holding them together without resolving the tension cheaply. First, He is displaying — through Josiah — what wholehearted covenant fidelity looks like in practice: it is not sentimental, not merely private, not selective. It is systematic, comprehensive, costly, and public. Second, and far more sobering, He is demonstrating that even the most extraordinary human obedience cannot undo the consequences of accumulated covenant faithlessness — and therefore cannot save. Josiah is the best possible human king, and it is not enough. The intent is not to discourage but to redirect: no human reformer, however zealous, can accomplish what only God's own decisive redemptive act can. The passage functions as a theological indictment of every program of human reformation offered as a

substitute for divine redemption, and as a preparation of the reader to look beyond Josiah to a greater King whose obedience will finally accomplish what Josiah's could not.

Subject Sentence: Josiah's comprehensive reform is the pinnacle of human covenant obedience — and proves insufficient to avert divine judgment.

Primary Claim: God demonstrates through Josiah that even the most complete and wholehearted human reformation cannot undo entrenched covenant rebellion or satisfy the demands of divine justice — and in doing so, He prepares His people to look for a greater Deliverer than any human king can be.

Interpretive Evaluation

The nature of Josiah's reform: genuine or merely external? Some interpreters, noting the rapid collapse of Josiah's reforms immediately after his death, have argued that the reform was superficial — a top-down political movement without genuine spiritual transformation in the people. This reading has a surface plausibility (vv. 26–27 seem to confirm that the people's hearts did not change) but misreads the narrator's intent. The text does not say the reform was insincere or external; it explicitly says Josiah was unparalleled in wholehearted devotion (v. 25). The problem the text identifies is not that Josiah's obedience was deficient but that individual human obedience, however extraordinary, cannot serve as a substitute atonement for a nation's accumulated guilt. The reform's rapid collapse after his death is not evidence of its shallowness but of its dependence on one man — which is precisely the narrator's theological point. **Verdict:** Josiah's reform was genuine and extraordinary. The failure was structural, not moral — no single human king, however faithful, can accomplish national redemption.

The theological problem of verses 26–27: Does obedience accomplish nothing? A significant interpretive challenge is the relationship between vv. 25 and 26. Verse 25 says no king was like Josiah; verse 26 says the LORD's anger still did not turn away because of Manasseh's provocations. Some interpreters read this as suggesting that obedience is ultimately futile — a conclusion Arminian and some Lutheran readings resist by stressing that the nation as a whole had not repented. The Reformed reading is more precise: the text does not say obedience is futile — it says Josiah's obedience earned him a personal promise (he would not see the coming disaster, 22:20) even while national judgment remained fixed. This distinction between personal fidelity and national-covenantal consequences is crucial. Josiah is not punished for Manasseh's sin; he is spared from witnessing the consequences. But he cannot reverse them by his own merits. The text is teaching the limits of human mediation, not the futility of obedience. **Verdict:** Reformed reading holds: Josiah's obedience received its own covenant reward (personal blessing

and protection), but it could not serve as vicarious atonement for national covenant-breaking. The passage anticipates a Mediator whose obedience accomplishes what Josiah's could not.

Dispensational reading: Is this passage primarily about Israel's national covenant?

Dispensational interpreters sometimes treat this passage as having limited applicability to the church, since it concerns Israel's Mosaic covenant obligations and national consequences. This reading **qualifies** a genuine insight — the passage is indeed deeply embedded in Mosaic covenant categories, and the specific forms of the reform (high places, Asherah poles, child sacrifice) are Israel-specific — but **overreaches** in concluding that the passage's theological logic does not translate. The principles governing this chapter — that human reformation is insufficient, that covenant faithfulness is comprehensive rather than selective, and that judgment deferred is not judgment averted — are canonical-theological truths, not merely Israelite-national specifics. The New Covenant does not abolish the applicability of these principles; it fulfills them in Christ. The Reformed reading affirms the passage's covenantal particularity while insisting that its theological logic is canonical and directly illuminating for the church.

Christological reading: Is Josiah a type of Christ? Some redemptive-historical preaching has treated Josiah straightforwardly as a Christ-type — his reform as a picture of Christ's purifying work. This is a legitimate instinct that requires careful calibration. The *contrast* between Josiah and Christ is as theologically significant as the *parallel*. Josiah reforms but cannot redeem; he purges externally but cannot change hearts; he dies at Megiddo and his work collapses. Christ accomplishes what Josiah pointed toward and could not complete. The typology is best understood as **contrastive-fulfillment**: Josiah is the best the old covenant could produce, and his insufficiency is the negative space that the New Covenant Mediator fills. To preach Josiah simply as a positive Christ-type without the contrast is to miss the chapter's sharpest theological edge. **Verdict:** Josiah is a type of Christ by contrast and partial anticipation, not by direct positive correspondence. His extraordinary obedience is real; its limits are equally real and equally instructive.

Key Canonical Support

- **Deuteronomy 17:14–20** — The law of the king: the king is to read and obey the Torah all his days. Josiah's reform is the closest any king comes to fulfilling this standard; the passage provides the criteria by which his obedience is measured and validated.
- **2 Kings 21:10–15** — The LORD's decree against Judah because of Manasseh: establishes why Josiah's obedience, though unparalleled, cannot reverse the divine sentence. The judgment is not arbitrary; it is a response to specific, named covenant violations. This is the theological anchor for vv. 26–27.

- **Jeremiah 3:10** — God’s indictment that Judah’s return to Him under Josiah was not wholehearted but only in pretense. Jeremiah, who prophesied during Josiah’s reign, provides the ground-level witness that the population as a whole did not genuinely turn with Josiah, even as Josiah himself did. This corroborates the narrator’s distinction between Josiah’s personal fidelity and national-covenantal failure.
- **Hebrews 7:23–28** — The high priest who lives forever and whose sacrifice is once-for-all. The contrast with Josiah is structurally precise: every human priest and king dies and is succeeded by another (vv. 28–37 in 2 Kings 23 demonstrate exactly this collapse). Christ, by contrast, holds His priesthood permanently and His obedience accomplishes what no succession of human kings could.
- **Romans 8:3–4** — “What the law was powerless to do because it was weakened by the flesh, God did by sending His own Son.” Josiah’s reform is the law’s most faithful executor, and it still cannot achieve what God’s own Son accomplishes. The passage provides the New Testament theological category for understanding 2 Kings 23’s central irony.

Aim: To demonstrate that Josiah’s extraordinary yet finally insufficient obedience exposes the structural limits of human reformation and points the reader to Christ as the only Mediator whose obedience accomplishes complete and lasting redemption.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1–3	Josiah assembles all Judah and the priests at the temple; reads the Book of the Covenant publicly; leads the people in a solemn covenant pledge	Public, comprehensive covenant renewal — the reform’s theological foundation
4–7	Hilkiah and the priests remove all Asherah poles, vessels for Baal, and host of heaven from the temple; Josiah removes male shrine prostitutes; burns Asherah poles at Kidron	The temple is the first and primary site of purification
8–9	High places throughout Judah defiled; priests from high places brought to	Distinguishes between the defilement of sites and the treatment of their personnel

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
10	Jerusalem but not permitted to serve at the altar Topheth in the Valley of Ben-Hinnom defiled — the site of child sacrifice to Molech	One of the most heinous practices; this site has an eschatological shadow in later prophetic literature (Gehenna)
11–12	Horses dedicated to the sun removed; chariots burned; altars Ahaz and Manasseh built on the temple roof smashed	Even royal innovations by Josiah's own ancestors are removed without exception
13–14	High places east of Jerusalem — built by Solomon for Ashtoreth, Chemosh, and Milcom — defiled; sacred stones smashed, Asherah poles replaced with human bones	Solomon's apostasy finally addressed after three centuries
15–18	The altar at Bethel — built by Jeroboam — broken down, burned, and defiled with human bones; the tomb of the man of God from 1 Kings 13 is preserved	Remarkable fulfillment of the 1 Kings 13 prophecy (v. 17–18); the unnamed prophet's bones preserved
19–20	Josiah extends the reform north into Samaria; destroys high places, kills their priests on the altars, returns to Jerusalem	The reform crosses the former border of the northern kingdom
21–23	Josiah commands the Passover; narrator states it has not been observed like this since the judges	Covenant renewal culminates in covenant celebration; the Passover is the apex of the reform
24	Josiah removes mediums, spiritists, household gods, idols, and all detestable things from Judah and Jerusalem	Comprehensive purging of occult practices
25	Narrator's climactic verdict: no king before or after	The Shema standard (Deut. 6:5) applied to a king —

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	turned to the LORD like Josiah — with all his heart, soul, and strength, per the Law of Moses	uniquely fulfilled here
26–27	Despite all this, the LORD does not turn away His fierce anger against Judah because of Manasseh’s provocations; the LORD still declares He will remove Judah from His sight	The theological pivot — the reform’s limits made explicit
28–30	Josiah killed at Megiddo fighting Pharaoh Necho; returned dead to Jerusalem; mourned; succeeded by Jehoahaz	The reform’s human leader dies; the institutional embodiment of the reform ends
31–33	Jehoahaz reigns three months; does evil; deposed by Pharaoh Necho; taken to Egypt	The collapse begins immediately after Josiah
34–37	Jehoiakim installed by Pharaoh; taxes the land; does evil; described in terms echoing Josiah’s predecessors	The return to pre-reform conditions is complete within the same chapter

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	1–3	The Covenant Renewed: Josiah Reads, the People Pledge
2	4–20	The Kingdom Purged: Comprehensive Removal of Every False Worship
3	21–24	The Passover Restored and the Purging Completed
4	25–27	The Verdict and Its Limit: Unrivaled Obedience, Unmoved Judgment

Division	Verses	Label
5	28–37	The Reform Outlived: Josiah’s Death and the Rapid Return to Apostasy

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: Josiah’s comprehensive reform is the pinnacle of human covenant obedience — and proves insufficient to avert divine judgment.

Primary Claim: God demonstrates through Josiah that even the most complete and wholehearted human reformation cannot undo entrenched covenant rebellion or satisfy the demands of divine justice — and in doing so, He prepares His people to look for a greater Deliverer than any human king can be.

Applications (Five)

1. Examine whether your obedience is comprehensive or selective. (*Mind/Belief*)

Josiah’s reform is striking not merely for its intensity but for its comprehensiveness — he does not exempt Solomonic high places from his predecessors’ era, does not stop at Judah’s borders, does not allow sentimental attachment to any corrupted practice. The reader must ask not only “Am I obeying?” but “Where am I negotiating exemptions?” Selective obedience — maintaining one cherished idolatrous pattern while reforming others — is the structural failure the chapter warns against. The person who reforms their finances but not their relationships, their public behavior but not their private thought-life, their religious practices but not their vocational ethics, is practicing the partial obedience the chapter implicitly indicts. Josiah’s model calls for the same audit of every sector of the life.

2. Refuse the illusion that moral reformation can substitute for redemption.

(*Mind/Belief*) The chapter’s central theological claim is that the best possible program of human moral reform — unprecedented in scope and sincerity — cannot accomplish redemption. This speaks directly to a deep and recurring human temptation: the belief that if we simply try harder, reform more completely, or accumulate sufficient moral momentum, we can resolve our condition before God. Josiah tried harder than anyone. His trying was not enough — not because it was insincere, but because the problem of human guilt requires atonement, not improvement. Every person who is trusting their moral reformation as their standing before God must hear this: even Josiah’s obedience was insufficient. The only obedience that accomplishes redemption is Christ’s.

3. Grieve what accumulated unfaithfulness costs — in a life, a family, a church, a culture. (*Affections/Worship*)

Verses 26–27 carry enormous affective weight that is easily passed over. Josiah’s extraordinary efforts cannot reverse the damage accumulated over

Manasseh's fifty-five years of covenant destruction. There is an irreversibility to entrenched unfaithfulness that should produce sober grief, not merely analytical acknowledgment. This applies at every level: the family that has spent a generation training children away from faith, the church that has drifted from doctrinal integrity for decades, the person whose patterns of sin have calcified into character. Josiah weeps (22:19); his grief is part of his faithfulness. The appropriate response to entrenched covenant failure — in oneself, in one's community — is not optimism or despair but the grief that comes from taking God's holiness and the weight of sin seriously.

4. Do not let the good work of reform become a source of pride or a claim against God.

(Affections/Worship) Josiah's reform is the high point of Judah's covenant history, and it is immediately followed by the announcement that it changes nothing about the coming judgment. This should permanently dismantle any posture of spiritual self-congratulation. The person who has made genuine, costly, visible progress in covenant faithfulness — in their own life, in their church, in their community — is tempted to leverage that progress as a claim: "Surely God will honor this." Josiah's story dismantles that claim not by denying the value of the reform but by denying that any human obedience generates a merit-claim against God sufficient to reverse divine judgment. Progress in holiness is right, necessary, and genuinely valued by God — but it never becomes currency to spend before His throne. Only Christ's obedience has that standing.

5. Act with Josiah's thoroughness in removing false worship from your own life —

beginning now, not eventually. *(Will/Behavior)* Josiah does not phase out false worship gradually or negotiate a transition plan. He removes it systematically and immediately. The application is direct: where the Spirit has convicted you of a specific pattern of idolatry — a functional savior, a habitual practice that belongs to a previous loyalty, a relationship or possession that has taken God's place — the appropriate response is Josiah's kind of action: immediate, thorough, and without exemptions. Deferred obedience is not obedience. The chapter does not show Josiah scheduling the removal of the Asherah poles for the next fiscal year. He acted on what the Word revealed. The reader who has heard the Word and knows what needs to be removed bears exactly the same call.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Second Kings 23 teaches with unusual sharpness that the demands of divine justice exceed the capacity of human obedience to satisfy them — not because human obedience is worthless, but because accumulated covenant guilt requires more than improved behavior; it requires atonement. The passage also teaches that God is not indifferent to obedience: Josiah receives a specific personal promise (22:20) and is described in superlative terms (v. 25). But God's justice is not a ledger system in which sufficient good behavior cancels prior accumulated debt. The theological weight of vv. 26–27 falls precisely on this point: God's fierce anger is not irrational or arbitrary — it is a response to specific, named covenant violations under Manasseh — and it cannot be

negotiated away by subsequent human effort, however extraordinary. This passage also teaches that God keeps His word: the prophecy spoken against Bethel's altar three centuries earlier (1 Kgs. 13:2) is fulfilled precisely in v. 16, underscoring that divine speech is never merely rhetorical and that history moves under His governance, not under the governance of human political and religious power.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: This passage is a profound display of the Reformed principle that grace alone, not human effort, accomplishes redemption — demonstrated here negatively, through the failure of the best possible human obedience to accomplish what only God's redemptive act can. The total depravity of the human condition is not simply a statement about individual moral capacity; it operates at the corporate-covenantal level as well. Manasseh's sin cannot be undone by Josiah's obedience because the human problem is not merely behavioral but covenantal — a broken relationship that only a Covenant Mediator, not a covenant reformer, can restore. Reformed soteriology insists that justification is by faith alone, not by works — and 2 Kings 23 is the Old Testament's most powerful enacted demonstration of why that must be so: if anyone's works could have been sufficient, Josiah's would have been, and they were not. The passage functions within the redemptive-historical narrative as the moment at which the limits of the Davidic-Mosaic covenant administration are most starkly exposed, preparing the reader for the prophetic announcements of a New Covenant (Jer. 31:31–34) and, ultimately, for the obedience of the Son of David whose active righteousness accomplishes what Josiah could only approximate.

Main Takeaway

Josiah did everything right — more comprehensively and wholeheartedly than any king before or after him — and it was not enough. Not because his obedience was deficient, but because human obedience, however extraordinary, cannot undo entrenched guilt, cannot serve as atonement, and cannot accomplish what only God Himself in the flesh could. If you are trusting your moral improvement, your religious sincerity, or your spiritual track record as your standing before God, Josiah has something to say to you: he did more than you, and it could not save. Stop trying to be Josiah. Look for the King Josiah was pointing toward — the One whose obedience was perfect and whose death accomplished what Josiah's entire reign could only foreshadow.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls:

- **Preaching Josiah as a moral exemplar without engaging the theological irony of vv. 26–27.** This is the most common mishandling of the chapter. The temptation is to use vv. 1–25 to preach a sermon on wholehearted obedience — comprehensive, courageous, uncompromising — and treat vv. 26–27 as an awkward footnote. This inverts the chapter’s structure. The narrative is building toward vv. 26–27 as its theological destination, not its postscript. A sermon that does not grapple with why Josiah’s unparalleled obedience was insufficient has not preached 2 Kings 23 — it has preached a moralistic abstraction using 2 Kings 23 as its illustration.
- **Reducing the chapter to an application about personal spiritual housecleaning.** The reform narrative does carry genuine applicational force for the individual believer — idols must be named and removed, occult involvement must be renounced, false worship must be dismantled. But if this is the primary sermonic load the chapter carries, the preacher has missed the canonical function of the passage. The chapter is not primarily about spiritual disciplines; it is a redemptive-historical turning point that demonstrates the insufficiency of the old covenant administration and its human mediators. The personal applications are real but secondary; the christological-covenantal claim is primary.
- **Treating Josiah’s death at Megiddo as merely biographical.** Josiah’s death is not incidental. He dies — the best king Israel ever had — at the hands of a foreign power, without a successor capable of continuing his work. This is theologically load-bearing: no human king, however faithful, can permanently secure what the covenant requires. The reform dies with Josiah in the same chapter. A preacher who treats vv. 28–30 as mere historical narrative has missed the structural theological argument: the dependence of the entire reform on one mortal man is itself the indictment of a covenant structure that requires a king who does not die.
- **Treating Josiah as a straightforward Christ-type without the contrasting element.** Redemptive-historical preaching that draws a straight line from Josiah’s reform to Christ’s purifying work misses what the passage is most powerfully doing. The typology is contrastive: Josiah does what no other king did, and it is still not enough — which means what was needed was not a better version of Josiah but something categorically different. The contrast between Josiah’s temporary, externally-driven reform and Christ’s permanent, heart-transforming redemption is the preaching point. Josiah points to Christ by displaying the inadequacy of every human substitute, not by foreshadowing Christ’s method.
- **Ignoring the rapid succession narrative (vv. 31–37) as outside the sermon’s scope.** The chapter does not end at v. 30. The rapid return to apostasy under Jehoahaz and Jehoiakim is part of the passage’s argument, not an appendix. These verses confirm that the reform was structurally dependent on Josiah’s personal fidelity and could not be institutionally sustained. A sermon that ends at the Passover celebration or at Josiah’s death without accounting for the immediate collapse of the reform leaves the congregation with a false impression — that

faithful leadership produces durable cultural transformation. The text says otherwise, and the preacher must say so.

- **Underplaying the 1 Kings 13 fulfillment in vv. 16–18.** The detail about the man of God's tomb is not narrative decoration. The narrator flags it specifically (v. 17: "What is that tombstone I see?") and identifies it as fulfillment of the unnamed prophet's word from three centuries earlier. This is the narrator making a point about the reliability of divine speech and the long arc of divine governance. A preacher who moves quickly through the reform catalogue without pausing here misses an opportunity to ground the congregation's confidence in God's word — including the promises not yet fulfilled in their own time.