

# Homiletics Analysis: 1 Chronicles 20

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## Content & Intent

### This Text — Content

First Chronicles 20 is a compact military chapter consisting of three distinct but thematically unified episodes. The chapter opens with the account of Joab's capture of Rabbah, the Ammonite capital, while David remains in Jerusalem — a brief note that in Chronicles conspicuously omits the Bathsheba-Uriah narrative that occupies the same temporal space in 2 Samuel 11–12. The chapter then records three Philistine giant-slaying encounters: the killing of Lahmi (brother of Goliath) by Elhanan son of Jair at Gezer, the killing of a six-fingered, six-toed giant at Gath by Jonathan son of Shimea, and the killing of a giant at Gath by Sibbecai the Hushathite. In each case the victories are attributed to Israel's warriors acting under David's leadership, and in each case the fallen giant is explicitly identified as a descendant of the Rephaim.

The Chronicler writes with a specific purpose that shapes what he includes and, critically, what he omits. He is not writing military history for its own sake. He is writing a theological account of David's kingdom that serves the post-exilic community's need for a foundation for worship, covenant continuity, and hope. The selection and arrangement of these battles — brief, decisive, complete — presents a kingdom in which the LORD grants total military sufficiency to His anointed king and his warriors. The land's enemies fall. The giants are slain. The covenant people prevail.

### This Text — Intent

God's intent through this passage is to assure His people — both the original post-exilic recipients of Chronicles and every generation of readers — that the enemies of the covenant community are not too large to fall. The Rephaim (giants) are a loaded theological symbol in Israel's history: they appear at the edges of the Promised Land as the reason ten spies gave for refusing to enter Canaan (Numbers 13), and their defeat has echoed from Joshua forward as a sign of divine enablement. By accumulating three giant-slaying accounts in a single tight chapter, the Chronicler is making a doxological claim: under God's anointed king, no enemy — however formidable — stands. The intent is not merely informational; it is strengthening. God is calling His people to confident, unflinching participation in the life of the covenant community, trusting that He has already dealt with what they fear most.

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**Subject Sentence:** Under David's reign, the LORD's warriors systematically defeat every oversized enemy of His people.

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**Primary Claim:** God demonstrates through David’s warriors that no enemy — however physically overwhelming — can withstand the LORD’s anointed leadership, so that His people need never shrink in fear before the giants arrayed against them.

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## Interpretive Evaluation

### The Chronicler’s Omission of 2 Samuel 11–12

The most significant interpretive issue in 1 Chronicles 20 is not what the text says but what it does not say. Second Samuel 11 begins with almost identical language (“In the spring, at the time when kings go off to war”), but then narrates the Bathsheba-Uriah catastrophe — David’s adultery, murder by proxy, and Nathan’s confrontation. The Chronicler moves directly from Joab laying siege to Rabbah to Joab’s summons of David to receive the crown, with no mention of the intervening moral collapse.

Three readings compete here:

A **critical-historical** reading treats this omission as evidence of idealization or hagiography — the Chronicler is whitewashing David to serve a political or religious agenda. This reading must be evaluated and refuted at the level of the Chronicler’s stated purpose. The Chronicler is not writing a comprehensive biography; he is writing a theologically structured account for a specific community with specific needs. The New Testament authors themselves show no anxiety about selective emphasis (compare Matthew’s genealogy with Luke’s). Omission is not falsification. The Chronicler knows his readers know their Bibles. The omission is not concealment — it is compositional focus.

A **moralistic** reading observes the omission and concludes that the Chronicler is simply passing over David’s worst failures to keep the ideal intact. This reading partially holds but overreaches. The Chronicler does address David’s failures — notably the census in 1 Chronicles 21 — when those failures are structurally relevant to his theological argument. The omission of the Bathsheba narrative is not about protecting David’s reputation; it is about the Chronicler’s chosen frame for this section: military victory under divine enablement. The failure and the discipline are real; they simply fall outside the Chronicler’s focus here.

The **Reformed reading** preferred here treats the omission as a hermeneutical key to the Chronicler’s purpose. He is not chronicling moral biography; he is tracing the theological patterns that establish the Davidic covenant as the foundation for Israel’s worship, kingship, and hope. The chapter is organized around what God accomplishes through David’s house — including when the king himself remains in Jerusalem and his servants act in his name. The Primary Claim of the chapter survives the omission intact: the LORD grants total victory to His anointed king’s house over every enemy. That claim is not

undermined by David's moral failures recorded elsewhere; it is grounded in the LORD's sovereign faithfulness to His covenant, not David's personal perfection.

### The Rephaim Identification

The chapter identifies each slain giant as a descendant of *harapa* (הַרְפָּה) in Gath — translated variously as “the giant,” “Rapha,” or “the Rephaim.” Some dispensational and critical readers debate whether these should be read as a specific family lineage from Gath or as a broader mythological category (Rephaim as a Canaanite underworld concept). The Reformed and grammatical-historical reading follows the plain sense: these are literal descendants of a lineage of large warriors identified throughout the conquest narratives. Their theological function — as the kind of enemy that made ten spies despair — is the load-bearing element for the passage's claim, regardless of how one resolves the precise genealogical question.

**No significant further interpretive divergence exists** in this chapter beyond these two issues.

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## Key Canonical Support

- **Numbers 13:31–33** — The ten spies' report that Canaan contains Nephilim/Rephaim before whom Israel appeared as grasshoppers; this is the paradigm case of giant-induced fear that 1 Chronicles 20 systematically dismantles.
  - **Joshua 11:21–22** — Joshua destroys the Anakites from the hill country; the Rephaim remnant is specifically noted as surviving in Gaza, Gath, and Ashdod — precisely the cities whose descendants fall in 1 Chronicles 20. Chronicles completes the trajectory Joshua begins.
  - **1 Samuel 17:45–47** — David over Goliath: “The battle is the LORD's.” The theological logic of the Goliath encounter (“the LORD saves not with sword and spear”) governs the three giant slayings of this chapter as well, even when David himself is not present.
  - **2 Corinthians 10:3–5** — “The weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds.” The New Testament reframes the giant-slaying pattern at the spiritual level — the enemies arrayed against God's people are not ultimately overcome by human strength but by divine enablement through God's appointed means.
  - **Romans 8:37** — “We are more than conquerors through him who loved us.” Paul's language echoes the pattern of overwhelming, decisive, divinely enabled victory that the Chronicler is tracing through Israel's military history.
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**Aim:** To show that the systematic defeat of Israel’s most formidable enemies under David’s anointed leadership is a paradigm of divine sufficiency — confronting the reader’s giant-induced paralysis with the assurance that what God’s anointed warrior has overcome, the covenant community need not fear.

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## Content Table

| Verse(s) | Content                                                                                                                                                       | Notes                                                                                       |
|----------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 20:1a    | “In the spring, at the time when kings go to war” — Joab leads Israel’s army against Ammon and lays siege to Rabbah                                           | Temporal marker identical to 2 Sam. 11:1a; Chronicler omits what follows in Samuel          |
| 20:1b    | Joab devastates Rabbah                                                                                                                                        | David remains in Jerusalem; Joab does the fighting in the king’s name                       |
| 20:2     | David takes the crown of the king of Rabbah (weight: a talent of gold, set with precious stones) and places it on his own head; great plunder is carried away | The crown’s weight signals the totality of conquest; David receives what the king had       |
| 20:3     | David puts the people of Rabbah to labor with saws, iron picks, and axes; he does the same to all the Ammonite cities                                         | “Forced labor” reading (ESV) vs. “sawed them” (KJV); conquest is complete and comprehensive |
| 20:4     | War at Gezer: Sibbecai the Hushathite kills Sippai, a descendant of the Rephaim                                                                               | First Philistine giant account; Sibbecai is one of David’s thirty mighty men                |
| 20:5     | War with the Philistines: Elhanan son of Jair kills Lahmi, the brother of Goliath the Gittite (spear shaft like a weaver’s rod)                               | Explicit connection to the Goliath lineage; the giant’s signature weapon reappears          |
| 20:6     | Another battle at Gath: a man of great stature with six fingers and six toes (twenty-four digits) — a descendant of Rephaim — taunts Israel                   | Physical excess emphasizes the formidability of the opponent                                |
| 20:7     | Jonathan son of Shimea,                                                                                                                                       | The giant who “defied Israel”                                                               |

| Verse(s) | Content                                                                                                                                      | Notes                                                                                                                                      |
|----------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 20:8     | David's brother, kills him<br><br>Summary: these were descendants of the giants in Gath, and they fell by the hand of David and his servants | is dispatched — language echoing Goliath's defiance<br><br>Theological summary: corporate victory attributed to David's house collectively |

## Divisions Table

| Division | Verses | Label                                                                  |
|----------|--------|------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1        | 20:1–3 | The Ammonite Crown: Rabbah Taken, Plunder Received, Conquest Completed |
| 2        | 20:4   | Giant One: Sibbecai Kills Sippai at Gezer                              |
| 3        | 20:5   | Giant Two: Elhanan Kills Lahmi, Goliath's Brother                      |
| 4        | 20:6–7 | Giant Three: Jonathan Kills the Six-Fingered Giant at Gath             |
| 5        | 20:8   | Theological Summary: All Fell by the Hand of David and His Servants    |

## Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

**Subject Sentence:** Under David's reign, the LORD's warriors systematically defeat every oversized enemy of His people.

**Primary Claim:** God demonstrates through David's warriors that no enemy — however physically overwhelming — can withstand the LORD's anointed leadership, so that His people need never shrink in fear before the giants arrayed against them.

## Applications (Five)

**1. (Mind/Belief) — Reframe the size of your enemy by the size of your King.** The ten spies at Kadesh-barnea were not wrong about the giants — they were wrong about whose

strength was in play. First Chronicles 20 names the Rephaim explicitly so the reader's imagination can be engaged: these are the giants. They fell. Not because Israel's warriors were stronger, but because they fought under anointed, divinely commissioned leadership. The reader who is sizing up an overwhelming circumstance — a diagnosis, a broken relationship, a besetting sin that feels like Goliath in the room — is being invited to reframe: the size of the giant is not the operative variable. Who is your King?

**2. (Will/Behavior) — Engage the fight in front of you rather than waiting for circumstances to become manageable.** Sibbecai, Elhanan, and Jonathan did not wait for smaller opponents. They engaged what was arrayed against them. The practical temptation in the face of a formidable situation is to defer — to wait until the odds improve, until the obstacle shrinks, until someone else goes first. This passage will not allow that posture. The servants of God's anointed go to war when kings go to war. Show up. Step into the arena. The victory belongs to those who engage, not to those who calculate from a distance.

**3. (Affections/Worship) — Let the accumulation of God's past victories build present confidence rather than fading into background noise.** The Chronicler is deliberately accumulating accounts. One giant. Two giants. Three giants. Then the summary: *they all fell*. This rhetorical structure is designed to produce something in the reader — a building, cumulative confidence that this is what the LORD does. Consider how easily God's past deliverances become data points we acknowledge without letting them warm our affections. The Chronicler calls his post-exilic readers — who have every reason for discouragement — to let the record sink in until it becomes fuel for present trust. Your instinct should not be “here we go again, another giant” but “here we go again, another giant — and I know how this ends.”

**4. (Mind/Belief) — Recognize that God's purposes advance even when His anointed leader is not at the front of the battle.** David is in Jerusalem when Rabbah falls. David's name is on the victory anyway — “they fell by the hand of David and his servants.” This challenges the assumption that God's work stalls when the visible leader is absent, compromised, or sidelined. The Chronicler is making a point about the Davidic covenant: the LORD's purposes in and through David's house are not contingent on David's personal moment-by-moment presence in every engagement. This has obvious implications for how we understand both the church's mission under Christ's lordship and our own participation in work that outlasts our personal involvement.

**5. (Affections/Worship) — Receive the plunder of Rabbah as a picture of the reversal promised to God's people.** David takes the crown from the defeated king's head and places it on his own head. The plunder of the enemy becomes the inheritance of the covenant people. There is something here for the affections — not merely a military fact but a theological image. The things that once dominated and oppressed do not merely cease; the resources they held are transferred. The post-exilic reader is being shown a picture of reversal that their own circumstances had called into question. The Christian reader may trace this to Christ himself, who “disarmed the rulers and authorities and put

them to open shame, triumphing over them” (Colossians 2:15) — the ultimate plundering of every enemy.

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## Theological Importance

**Theological Importance:** First Chronicles 20 teaches that the LORD is the decisive agent in the military security of His covenant people — not through supernatural intervention divorced from human agency, but through divinely commissioned warriors acting in the name of His anointed king. The chapter reinforces the Davidic covenant’s foundational claim: that God establishes, protects, and advances His people through an anointed house whose authority extends even when the king himself is not physically present. The Rephaim lineage, which stretches back through the conquest narratives as the most formidable human obstacle to Israel’s possession of the land, is here systematically extinguished — signaling not only military victory but theological closure: the LORD has done what He promised at every point along the way. The chapter also implicitly teaches the sufficiency of God’s appointments — the warriors He places around His king are fully adequate to what they face, not despite the enormity of the opposition but precisely in the face of it.

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## Reformed Theological Significance

**Reformed Theological Significance:** Within Reformed theology, this chapter functions as a concrete instance of the sovereignty of God in history, specifically in the advancement of His kingdom through appointed means and appointed persons. The Chronicler’s theological project — tracing the Davidic covenant as the foundation for Israel’s post-exilic identity and hope — directly anticipates the Reformed insistence that covenant history is the spine of Scripture and that every episode of redemptive history finds its meaning in relation to the covenant of grace. The giant-slaying accounts in 1 Chronicles 20 are not isolated heroic episodes; they are covenant-advancing acts that demonstrate the LORD’s faithfulness to His promises to David (2 Sam. 7) against every enemy. For Reformed readers, the passage also grounds the anti-moralistic principle: the takeaway is not “be like Sibbecai” but “trust the King under whom Sibbecai fights.” The victory belongs to the covenant community collectively, grounded not in the individual warriors’ courage but in the LORD’s faithfulness to His anointed — a pattern the New Testament identifies as fulfilled and perfected in Christ, the ultimate Davidic King who has defeated every enemy on behalf of His people.

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## Main Takeaway

The giants that paralyzed the ten spies are dead. Every one of them. They fell — not because Israel's warriors were extraordinary, but because the LORD's anointed king was their king. The same LORD who put Goliath's lineage in the ground through David's servants has placed you under an even greater Davidic King. Whatever is arrayed against you today is not the variable that matters. Stop measuring the giant. Start trusting the King.

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## Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Moralizing the giant-slayers into models of individual courage.** The most common homiletical error with this passage is treating Sibbecai, Elhanan, and Jonathan as inspirational examples of personal bravery — “be like them, face your giants.” This collapses the theological architecture. The passage's organizing principle is *whose house they fight for* and *whose name is on the victory*, not the individual warriors' personal heroics. Application must be grounded in the Davidic covenant, not in human emulation.
- **Treating the Chronicler's omission of 2 Samuel 11–12 as a problem to solve rather than a hermeneutical key.** Preachers who feel compelled to explain why the Bathsheba narrative is missing will spend their exposition accounting for absence rather than expounding presence. The omission is compositional, not accidental. Acknowledge it briefly if the congregation will wonder, then move to what the Chronicler is actually doing with what he includes.
- **Flattening the Rephaim into generic “big problems.”** The Rephaim/giants carry specific canonical weight — they are the enemy that caused Israel's first-generation failure to enter the land. Preachers who reduce them to a metaphor for “whatever challenge you face” too quickly will lose the theological freight. Name them. Trace the lineage. Let the specific canonical history do its work before opening the application.
- **Preaching the passage without reaching Christ.** The Davidic covenant in Chronicles points forward. Any exposition that remains at the historical-David level without tracing the pattern to its fulfillment in Jesus — the ultimate Davidic King who has defeated sin, death, and the accuser — leaves the congregation with a powerful OT example but no gospel. Colossians 2:15 and Hebrews 2:14–15 are the New Testament landing points for what Chronicles 20 is showing.
- **Missing the corporate dimension of “David and his servants.”** The summary in verse 8 is deliberately corporate: the victory belongs to David *and his servants*. Preaching the passage in purely individualistic terms — “you can face your giant” — misses the Chronicler's point that the covenant community fights together under

shared anointed leadership. The application should have a corporate dimension: we are not lone giant-slayers; we fight as the people of the King.

- **Using the text to preach triumphalism.** The accumulation of victories in this chapter, if handled carelessly, can produce a prosperity-adjacent message: “the enemy always falls, life under God’s king is always victorious.” The passage sits within a larger narrative that includes David’s census failure (chapter 21) and the long exile. The victories of chapter 20 are real and paradigmatic — but they are eschatological promises being illustrated, not guarantees of uninterrupted earthly triumph. Preach the assurance; resist the triumphalism.