

Homiletics Analysis: 1 Chronicles 21

Content & Intent

This Text — Content:

First Chronicles 21 records David's census of Israel, the divine judgment that follows, David's confession and intercession, the angel of the LORD's devastating plague, the angel's halt at the threshing floor of Ornan the Jebusite, and David's purchase of that site to build an altar and offer sacrifices. The Chronicler frames this episode with unique theological shaping compared to the parallel in 2 Samuel 24: Satan (the adversary) is named as the instigator, Joab's resistance highlights the sin's irrationality, the numbers differ slightly in ways that sharpen the drama, and the narrative culminates not in the plague's cessation alone but in the identification of Ornan's threshing floor as the site of the future temple. The chapter moves through five clear movements: the census and its sinfulness (vv. 1–6), the divine confrontation and David's confession (vv. 7–8), the three-option judgment (vv. 9–13), the plague and the angel's halt (vv. 14–17), and the purchase of the threshing floor and the altar (vv. 18–30). The chapter closes with an explicit editorial bridge (22:1) identifying this ground as the permanent site of the house of the LORD.

This Text — Intent:

God is using this chapter to accomplish several interlocking purposes simultaneously: to expose the lethal nature of self-reliant pride even in the greatest of His servants; to display the terrifying holiness of God before which even a king must prostrate himself in repentance; to demonstrate that genuine confession and substitutionary sacrifice — not human achievement — is the ground on which God meets His people; and, most remarkably, to show that the very site of Israel's gravest national sin under David becomes, by divine mercy, the permanent dwelling place of God's presence among His people. Tragedy becomes temple. The intent is both to humble and to assure — to slay confidence in the flesh and to ignite confidence in the God who meets sinners at the altar.

Subject Sentence: David's gravest sin becomes, through confession and sacrifice, the appointed site of God's dwelling.

Primary Claim: God so thoroughly governs even the catastrophic failures of His servants that the very ground of David's sin and Israel's judgment becomes the consecrated site of His presence — demonstrating that His temple is built not on human achievement but on acknowledged sin, costly sacrifice, and sovereign mercy.

Interpretive Evaluation

The identity and role of “Satan” in verse 1 is the most significant interpretive issue in the chapter, carrying both exegetical and theological weight. The parallel text in 2 Samuel 24:1 states that “the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel, and he incited David against them.” The Chronicler writes “Satan stood up against Israel and incited David.” Some interpreters, particularly those working in a dispensational framework, treat this as straightforward personal satanic activity directly opposed to God’s purposes. The Reformed reading holds that both accounts are true and complementary rather than contradictory: God’s sovereign governance uses even the adversary’s activity as an instrument of His own judicial purposes. The adversary’s incitement does not excuse David — the text is unambiguous that David sinned and that the sin was genuinely David’s own — but it does locate the episode within the larger cosmic conflict between the seed of the serpent and the covenant community. This reading should be preferred because it takes both texts seriously rather than forcing a choice between them, and because it coheres with the Chronicler’s consistent theological purpose of showing God’s sovereign governance over all of Israel’s history.

The nature of the census sin is debated. Some Wesleyan and Baptist commentators emphasize the pride of enumeration — that David was numbering his military resources as though Israel’s security rested on the size of its army rather than on the LORD. This reading is substantially correct and should be acknowledged. The Reformed reading deepens it: the sin is not merely tactical pride but a category error about the source of Israel’s identity and security. Israel’s strength was covenantally determined — the LORD fights for His people regardless of numbers (see Gideon, 1 Samuel 14, Jehoshaphat’s battle). To count Israel’s fighting men was implicitly to treat God as unnecessary, to reduce Israel from a covenant community to a military asset. Joab’s protest (v. 3) — “Why should he be a cause of guilt for Israel?” — reflects an instinctive sense that this action transgresses something fundamental, even if Joab himself cannot fully articulate it.

The three judgment options (vv. 11–12) — three years of famine, three months of military defeat, or three days of plague — have been handled in ways that range from allegorical application to flat puzzlement. The text itself provides the interpretive key: David chooses to “fall into the hand of the LORD” rather than into the hand of man (v. 13), which shows that he trusts the character of God’s judgment more than he trusts human enemies. This is not fatalism — it is a confession of theological trust even within the framework of punishment. The Lutheran Law/Gospel framework handles this text well in one respect: the judgment comes precisely to break David’s self-reliance and throw him back onto grace. However, the Reformed reading resists collapsing the scene into pure legal transaction. The mercy that halts the angel (v. 15) is not a legal credit applied — it is the living, personal, relenting compassion of the covenant God (“It is enough; now stay your hand”), anticipating the substitutionary altar that will follow.

The purchase of Ornan's threshing floor has been read in some dispensational frameworks primarily as a literal real-estate transaction establishing Davidic ownership of the temple mount. This reading is not wrong, but it significantly under-reads the text. The Chronicler's purpose is theological: Ornan offers the site freely, but David insists on paying full price (v. 24) because he will not offer to the LORD "what costs me nothing." This is not merely scrupulous accounting — it is a statement about the nature of worship. Sacrificial worship requires costly substitution. The free gift would be convenient; the purchased sacrifice is theologically necessary. The Reformed reading presses this to its christological implication: the temple that will be built on this purchased, blood-consecrated ground anticipates the One in whom the true temple, the true priest, and the true sacrifice converge.

Key Canonical Support

- **Genesis 22:1–18** — Abraham's offering of Isaac on Moriah grounds the same site in the pattern of substitutionary sacrifice; 2 Chronicles 3:1 explicitly identifies Ornan's threshing floor as Mount Moriah, linking the Davidic altar with the Abrahamic test and establishing the continuity of the sacrificial-substitutionary principle across the covenant.
 - **2 Samuel 24:1–25** — The parallel account; comparison illuminates the Chronicler's distinctive theological shaping, particularly the naming of the adversary (Satan), the slightly different numbers, and the heightened emphasis on the temple-site identification as the narrative's culminating purpose.
 - **Romans 5:20–21** — "Where sin increased, grace abounded all the more" — the theological principle governing 1 Chronicles 21: the site of the greatest Davidic failure becomes the permanent site of divine grace; Paul's formulation gives the New Testament theological vocabulary for what the Chronicler is dramatizing.
 - **Hebrews 9:22–28** — "Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness"; the sacrifices on the altar at Ornan's threshing floor foreshadow the once-for-all sacrifice to which all Levitical sacrifices point; the costly substitutionary logic of verse 24 finds its culmination here.
 - **John 2:19–21** — Jesus identifies Himself as the true temple; the site that David purchased and Solomon built is ultimately fulfilled and superseded in the One whose body is the dwelling place of God — the ultimate "place" where sin meets sacrifice and judgment meets mercy.
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Aim: To confront the reader's confidence in human achievement and self-measurement, and to show that the only ground on which God's presence rests is the ground of acknowledged sin, costly substitution, and sovereign mercy.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1	Satan incites David to number Israel	Contrast with 2 Sam 24:1; God's sovereign governance over adversarial activity; neither account excuses David
2	David commands Joab to count the people from Beersheba to Dan	The geographic scope (Beersheba to Dan) signals the full census of the covenant people
3	Joab protests: "May the LORD add to His people a hundredfold — but why does my lord require this? Why should it be a sin for Israel?"	Even Joab senses the transgression; his protest heightens David's culpability — he proceeds against counsel
4	David overrules Joab; the census is carried out	The king's word prevails; leadership used for self-elevation rather than covenant service
5	Joab reports the total: 1,100,000 swords in Israel; 470,000 in Judah	Cf. 2 Sam 24:9 (different figures); Chronicler may exclude Levi and Benjamin (see v. 6); the numbers themselves are instruments of the sin
6	Joab did not include Levi and Benjamin because the king's command was abhorrent to him	Levi excluded (not to be numbered per Num 1:49); Benjamin's exclusion may reflect Joab's resistance; the Chronicler signals that the census was incomplete and tainted
7	God was displeased; He struck Israel	Divine judgment precedes David's personal conviction; Israel bears the

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
8	David confesses: “I have sinned greatly in that I have done this thing; please take away the iniquity of Your servant, for I have acted very foolishly”	consequence of the king’s sin — covenant solidarity Immediate, explicit, unqualified confession; no self-justification; models the posture required throughout the chapter
9–10	The LORD speaks to Gad the seer: “Go and speak to David — I am offering you three options; choose one”	Prophetic mediation; judgment is structured — David is not abandoned to unspecified wrath but given a choice that itself requires trust
11–12	Three options: (1) three years of famine, (2) three months of defeat before enemies, (3) three days of the sword of the LORD / plague with the angel of the LORD	The three options are calibrated — famine (natural), military defeat (human), divine plague; David’s choice reveals his theology
13	David chooses the third: “Let me fall into the hand of the LORD, for His mercies are very great; but let me not fall into the hand of man”	This is the theological heart of the choice section; David trusts God’s character more than human restraint — a statement of faith within judgment
14	The LORD sends a plague; 70,000 men of Israel fall	The scale of the plague underscores both the gravity of the sin and the holiness of God; the king’s sin costs the people
15	The angel of the LORD is about to destroy Jerusalem; God relents — “It is enough; now stay your hand”	Divine compassion interrupts divine judgment; the angel halts at Ornan’s threshing floor; the halt is not earned but granted
16	David and the elders, clothed in sackcloth, see the angel standing between earth and heaven with a	Visual theophany; the drawn sword signifies righteous judgment; the posture of prostration before the angel

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	drawn sword over Jerusalem; they fall on their faces	is the only appropriate human response
17	David intercedes: “Was it not I who gave the command to count the people? It is I who have sinned and done great evil, but these sheep — what have they done? Let Your hand, I pray, O LORD my God, be against me and my father’s house, but not against Your people”	The intercession is substitutionary in posture — David offers himself in place of the people; cf. Moses (Ex 32:32); anticipates the One who actually accomplishes substitution
18	The angel commands Gad to instruct David to set up an altar at Ornan’s threshing floor	The altar is divinely specified — not David’s initiative but God’s command; the place of judgment becomes the place of worship
19	David obeys	Simple, immediate obedience following confession and intercession
20	Ornan is threshing wheat; he turns and sees the angel; his four sons hide	The scene is domestic and abrupt; Ornan is at ordinary work when the sacred and terrifying intrudes
21–22	David approaches; Ornan bows before the king; David asks to purchase the threshing floor at full price to build an altar and end the plague	Full price from the beginning — David’s stated intention makes clear this is not negotiation
23	Ornan offers the site freely — threshing floor, oxen, wood, wheat — “all of it do I give”	Ornan’s generosity is genuine; the free offer makes David’s refusal more deliberate and theologically significant
24	David refuses: “No, but I will surely buy it for the full price; for I will not take what is yours for the LORD, or offer burnt offerings which	The theological climax of the purchase scene; costly worship is not negotiable; substitution requires cost

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	cost me nothing”	
25	David pays 600 shekels of gold (contrast 2 Sam 24:24 — 50 shekels of silver for the oxen only; the Chronicler records the full site price)	Different figures reflect different transactions (threshing floor only vs. full site); the Chronicler’s higher figure befits the site’s ultimate significance
26	David builds the altar and offers burnt offerings and peace offerings; the LORD answers with fire from heaven; the angel sheathes the sword	Fire from heaven: divine acceptance of the sacrifice (cf. Elijah at Carmel, Lev 9:24); the drawn sword is sheathed — atonement accomplished
27	The LORD commands the angel; the angel puts the sword in its sheath	Explicit divine command confirms that the sacrifice has achieved its purpose; not coincidental but ordained
28–29	David sacrifices at Ornan’s threshing floor because he is afraid of the angel’s sword; the tabernacle of Moses and the bronze altar are at Gibeon	Geographic dislocation: the tabernacle is no longer accessible to David; this crisis requires a new altar at a new site
30	David could not go before the tabernacle to inquire of God because he was afraid of the sword of the angel of the LORD	The fear is not irrational but appropriate — David has seen the angel; the old altar at Gibeon cannot serve this moment
22:1 (editorial bridge)	David says: “This is the house of the LORD God, and this is the altar of burnt offering for Israel”	The site of sin, plague, and sacrifice becomes the divinely appointed location of the permanent temple; the Chronicler’s theological purpose is complete

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	1–6	The Census: Pride Measured, Counsel Refused

Division	Verses	Label
2	7–8	Divine Displeasure and Immediate Confession
3	9–13	Three Options and a Theology of Trust
4	14–17	The Plague, the Angel, and the Interceding King
5	18–27	The Purchased Altar and the Fire of Acceptance
6	28–30 (+ 22:1)	The Threshing Floor Becomes the Temple Site

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: David’s gravest sin becomes, through confession and sacrifice, the appointed site of God’s dwelling.

Primary Claim: God so thoroughly governs even the catastrophic failures of His servants that the very ground of David’s sin and Israel’s judgment becomes the consecrated site of His presence — demonstrating that His temple is built not on human achievement but on acknowledged sin, costly sacrifice, and sovereign mercy.

Applications (Five)

1. (Mind/Belief) — Reframe what “measuring yourself” actually is. David’s sin was not a clerical error in military administration — it was a fundamental reorientation of identity, from covenant dependence to self-sufficiency. When you count your resources, your connections, your credentials, your accomplishments — not to give thanks but to reassure yourself — you are doing what David did. The census was a project of self-grounding. Notice the specific form this takes in your life: the compulsive return to checking numbers, comparing yourself to others, calculating whether you are adequate. That habit is not neutral anxiety management — it is a form of worship directed at the wrong object. This passage demands that you recognize counting-as-security for what it is: a declaration that the LORD’s covenant promise is insufficient.

2. (Will/Behavior) — Make the confession immediate, unqualified, and specific. David’s confession in verse 8 is a model of speed and specificity: “I have sinned greatly in that I have done this thing.” He does not say “mistakes were made” or “I may have gone too far” or “to the extent that anyone was offended.” He names it. He owns it. He does not negotiate the charge. The application is concrete: wherever you have delayed, softened, or conditioned your repentance — before God, before a spouse, before a colleague — this passage calls you to complete it today. Go back and name the thing. Say “I was wrong.” Do not improve your confession by reducing the charge.

3. (Affections/Worship) — Let the sight of the drawn sword produce appropriate fear. David and the elders fall on their faces when they see the angel standing over Jerusalem with a drawn sword (v. 16). This is not panic — it is the correct response of creatures before

the holiness of God. Contemporary evangelical culture has largely lost the capacity for this posture. We have so thoroughly domesticated the God of grace that His holiness generates nothing in us — no trembling, no prostration, no cry of “depart from me.” This passage is a summons back to the fear of the LORD that is the beginning of wisdom. Ask yourself: when did you last approach the living God with any sense of the weight of His holiness? When did corporate worship last feel like falling on your face? This text will not let you stay comfortable.

4. (Affections/Worship) — Receive the mercy that stops the sword as the gospel’s own pattern. The most astonishing verse in this chapter is verse 15: “It is enough; now stay your hand.” The judgment is legitimate. The plague is just. Seventy thousand have already died. And God Himself says: enough. Not because the account has been cleared — the altar has not yet been built — but because His compassion moves ahead of the transaction. This is the pattern the gospel will ultimately fulfill: the sword of God’s justice, which should have fallen on you, is sheathed — not because you have not earned it but because mercy has intervened before you could. Receive this. Sit with the specific reality that the judgment that was coming for you has been stopped. This is not a metaphor — it is the structure of your salvation.

5. (Will/Behavior) — Offer what actually costs you something. David’s refusal of Ornan’s free offer is one of the most practically instructive moments in the chapter: “I will not offer burnt offerings which cost me nothing.” The free option was available. Ornan was willing. The theological problem was that costless sacrifice is no sacrifice at all — it is merely convenient religion. Apply this to your own practice of worship, giving, service, and repentance. The question is not whether you are doing the right things — it is whether they are costing you anything. Giving that does not affect your lifestyle, service that does not inconvenience you, repentance that does not require you to go back and make things right — these are Ornan’s free offer. This passage will not allow you to accept it.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: This chapter is one of Scripture’s most concentrated displays of several interlocking divine attributes functioning simultaneously: God’s sovereign governance over even adversarial incitement and human failure; His holiness, which takes covenant transgression with deadly seriousness and will not be treated as permissive; His compassion, which halts judgment at the limit He alone determines (“It is enough”); and His redemptive ingenuity, by which the very site of catastrophe is consecrated as the permanent dwelling place of His name. The chapter also teaches with unusual clarity the nature of acceptable worship: it must be grounded in genuine confession, offered through specified substitutionary sacrifice, and costly to the worshiper. The divine fire that falls in verse 26 — consuming the offering and confirming acceptance — signals that the God who judges is also the God who receives. He is not simply the executioner of wrath; He is the One who meets His people at the altar He Himself has appointed.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: This chapter is a compressed drama of the Reformed ordo of grace applied to the covenant community: conviction of sin, repentance and confession, divine provision of a sacrificial means of approach, costly substitution, and divine acceptance signaled by gracious fire. The Chronicler's identification of this site with the future temple grounds the entire Solomonic temple-building project not in royal achievement but in royal failure and divine mercy — a thoroughly Reformed instinct about the basis on which God dwells among His people. The naming of Satan as instigator while preserving David's full moral responsibility is consistent with the Reformed doctrine of concurrence: God's sovereignty and creaturely agency operate on different levels without either canceling the other. Most significantly, the temple built on Moriah — the site of Abraham's test, David's sin, and Solomon's construction — is the typological anticipation of the One in whom all three converge: the Son whom the Father did not spare, the sacrifice that costs everything, and the true temple in whom God's presence permanently dwells. Reformed preaching of this chapter should make visible the line from Ornan's threshing floor to Golgotha.

Main Takeaway

The ground on which God's presence rests is never the ground of your achievement — it is always the ground of your need, your confession, and His costly mercy. David's worst day became the address of God's house. That is not an accident of history; it is the grammar of the gospel. Bring your failure to the altar. Bring what it actually costs you. The fire that falls there is not judgment — it is acceptance.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Moralizing the census sin into a lesson about numerical humility.** The most common mishandling of this passage reduces it to a generic warning against pride or ambition — “don't count your blessings in a self-congratulatory way.” This flattens the covenantal specificity of the sin. The census was not a temperament problem; it was a theological category error about the nature of Israel's identity and security before God. Preach the specific content of the sin — self-grounding in place of covenant dependence — or you will produce only vague conviction about hubris, which is Law without specificity and therefore of limited gospel use.
- **Treating the Satan/2 Samuel 24 tension as a problem to explain away rather than a truth to preach.** Preachers often spend significant time in apologetic mode harmonizing the two accounts, which consumes the sermon's energy on a

defensive project rather than a proclamatory one. The harmonization is real and defensible, but it is a footnote — the Chronicler's theological point is the main thing: God's sovereign governance uses even adversarial incitement without transferring guilt from the human agent. Say this quickly and clearly, then preach it.

- **Missing the “costly worship” principle by focusing only on David’s scrupulousness.** Verse 24 (“I will not offer burnt offerings which cost me nothing”) is frequently preached as an admirable character trait of David — his honesty, his thoroughness, his fairness to Ornan. This personalizes and morally domesticates what is actually a theological claim about the nature of substitutionary worship. The application is not “be like David — be honest in your transactions.” The application is: costless sacrifice is theologically impossible. Press the principle into the congregation’s actual worship practices.
- **Failing to land the connection to the temple site.** The Chronicler’s entire narrative purpose in this chapter is the identification of Ornan’s threshing floor as the permanent temple site (explicit in 22:1). Preachers who do not reach this identification have not finished the passage. The theological payoff — that the site of David’s sin and Israel’s plague becomes the house of God — is not a footnote; it is the chapter’s proclamatory culmination. Do not stop the sermon at the fire from heaven without identifying where the fire fell and what will be built there.
- **Under-reading the substitutionary logic of David’s intercession in verse 17.** David’s cry — “let Your hand be against me and my father’s house, but not against Your people” — is not merely an expression of kingly responsibility or noble self-sacrifice. It is a posture of substitutionary intercession that the text deliberately echoes (cf. Moses in Exodus 32). David cannot actually accomplish the substitution — 70,000 have already died and David does not die. But the posture points forward to the One whose intercession does accomplish what David’s could only gesture toward. Reformed preaching that notices this without pressing the christological fulfillment has done the exegesis but not the homiletics.
- **Allowing the plague and the 70,000 deaths to become background scenery.** The scale of the judgment — 70,000 deaths — tends to be mentioned in passing and then moved beyond. But this number is load-bearing: it establishes the deadly seriousness of covenant sin, the reality that the leader’s failure affects the whole community (covenant solidarity), and the utter inadequacy of any response other than full prostration and costly sacrifice. Do not race past the 70,000 on the way to the altar. The magnitude of the judgment is precisely what makes the mercy of verse 15 and the fire of verse 26 so astonishing.