

Homiletics Analysis: Genesis 18

Content & Intent

This Text — Content

Genesis 18 moves through three interlocking scenes. In the first (vv. 1–15), the LORD appears to Abraham at Mamre in the heat of the day, accompanied by two men. Abraham responds with extravagant hospitality, and the visitors announce that Sarah will bear a son within the year. Sarah laughs in disbelief, and the LORD confronts her unbelief with the foundational question: “Is anything too hard for the LORD?” In the second scene (vv. 16–21), the LORD deliberates over whether to disclose His intentions to Abraham, then announces His purpose to investigate the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah. In the third scene (vv. 22–33), Abraham intercedes for Sodom with remarkable boldness — pressing the LORD repeatedly on behalf of any righteous who might be found there — and the LORD receives each petition without rebuke.

The chapter is not three loosely connected episodes but a single, unified movement: the LORD comes to Abraham, reveals His purposes, and draws Abraham into His own moral reasoning. The chapter demonstrates what it means to be in covenant with the living God — He comes, He speaks, He is questioned, He welcomes the question.

This Text — Intent

God intends through this chapter to accomplish several things simultaneously in the reader. First, He means to deepen trust in His power and faithfulness — specifically the kind of trust that survives personal impossibility (Sarah’s laughter) and the apparent triumph of wickedness (Sodom). Second, He means to draw the reader into a vision of covenant intimacy: God does not act in history as a remote sovereign who issues decrees; He invites His friend Abraham into His counsel and receives Abraham’s intercession as the act of a man who understands God’s own character. Third, God means to show that intercession is not coercing an unwilling God but reasoning with a willing one — the interceder’s boldness is grounded precisely in God’s own justice and mercy. The chapter asks every reader: Do you know God well enough to reason with Him? Do you believe He is capable of what He has promised? Will you stand between the living God and a dying world?

Subject Sentence: The LORD comes to His covenant friend, confirms the impossible promise, and invites him into His own moral counsel.

Primary Claim: God’s covenant intimacy with His people is not formal or distant — He draws them into His purposes, and those who truly know Him respond with both confidence in His promises and bold intercession for others, because they have learned to reason from His character.

Interpretive Evaluation

The identity of the three visitors (vv. 1–2): The text opens with “the LORD appeared to him” (v. 1), then immediately describes Abraham seeing “three men” (v. 2). The older tradition — reflected in Justin Martyr, Origen, and a strand of Christian typology — identified all three as a Theophany, sometimes reading the scene as a proto-Trinitarian appearance. The Reformed and broader evangelical reading is more precise: the LORD appears *through* the three men; two of them proceed to Sodom as angels (Genesis 19:1), while the third — the one who remains with Abraham through the intercession — is identified consistently as “the LORD” (vv. 13, 17, 20, 22, 26, etc.). The proto-Trinitarian reading, while not exegetically sustainable as a direct revelation of the Trinity in this text, points to something the passage does genuinely support: God’s willingness to appear in human form as a harbinger of His redemptive approach to humanity. The Reformed verdict is that this is a theophanic appearance — the pre-incarnate Son is a plausible identification of the divine figure — but the text is making a point about covenant presence and intimacy, not about the mechanics of the Trinity.

The nature of Abraham’s intercession (vv. 22–33): Some readers have detected presumption or even manipulateness in Abraham’s repeated intercessions, as though Abraham were bargaining God down. A careful reading refutes this. Abraham’s intercession is not downward bargaining but an appeal to God’s own self-declared character: “Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?” (v. 25). Abraham is not informing God of a moral principle God was unaware of; he is reasoning *from* God’s own justice and is invited to do so. The LORD’s patient reception of each petition — never rebuking Abraham, never cutting the conversation short — shows that God welcomes rather than merely tolerates this kind of intercession. The Wesleyan/Arminian tradition sometimes reads this passage as evidence of human cooperative agency influencing divine outcomes, drawing it into debates about free will and prayer. The Reformed reading does not deny that intercession accomplishes real things; it insists that Abraham’s boldness is itself evidence of grace — he reasons with God because God has first revealed His character and purposes to Abraham. The prayer is grounded in revelation, not in mere human persistence.

Sarah’s laughter (vv. 12–15): Arminian and some Baptist readings have emphasized Sarah’s laughter primarily as a moral failure to be avoided — a negative example, a warning against unbelief. This is a partial reading. The text does call out Sarah’s laughter and her subsequent denial, but the dominant purpose of the scene is not to condemn Sarah but to pose the governing question: “Is anything too hard for the LORD?” (v. 14). This question is not primarily an accusation; it is the theological center of the chapter, and it reaches the

reader as much as it reached Sarah. The Reformed reading emphasizes that the promise stands *despite* Sarah's unbelief, not because of her faith — which is itself a display of sovereign grace. The text is not a “believe harder” exhortation; it is a revelation of a God whose purposes are not contingent on the adequacy of His people's faith.

Key Canonical Support

- **Romans 4:17–21** — Paul uses Abraham and Sarah's situation to expound justifying faith: Abraham believed in “the God who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist,” not staggering in unbelief despite the impossibility. This passage directly illuminates “Is anything too hard for the LORD?” and grounds it in Pauline soteriology.
- **Genesis 15:1–6** — The prior covenant-ratification scene establishes the relationship that makes Genesis 18 intelligible. The LORD counted Abraham's faith as righteousness, and that covenant relationship is the basis for the LORD's decision to disclose His purposes to Abraham in 18:17–19.
- **James 5:16–18** — “The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much.” Elijah is the explicit example, but Abraham's intercession in Genesis 18 is the Old Testament archetype for this principle. The passage grounds bold intercession in righteousness — the character of the one praying and the character of the God being addressed.
- **Jeremiah 29:7** — “Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf.” Abraham's intercession for Sodom — a city of which he is not a resident and whose inhabitants are enemies of righteousness — models the vocation of God's people to intercede for those under judgment, not merely for themselves.
- **John 15:15** — “No longer do I call you servants... I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you.” The LORD's decision to disclose His purposes to Abraham (v. 17: “Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do?”) is precisely this dynamic — the friendship of covenant intimacy in which God shares His counsel rather than merely issuing His decrees.

Aim: To demonstrate that genuine covenant knowledge of God produces both unwavering confidence in His promises and bold, character-grounded intercession for others — and to call every reader into that same posture.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1	The LORD appears to Abraham at Mamre, in the heat of the day	Theophanic opening; LORD = direct identification
2–5	Abraham sees three men, runs to meet them, bows, and urges them to rest and eat	Extravagant hospitality; running and bowing signal recognition of significance
6–8	Abraham directs rapid meal preparation — fine flour, choice calf, curds and milk	The speed and quality of provision display honor; this is not a casual meal
9–10	Visitors ask for Sarah; announce she will have a son “about this time next year”	The divine purpose of the visit surfaces; promise is now time-specific
11	Narrative aside: Abraham and Sarah are old, Sarah past the age of childbearing	The narrator underscores the impossibility before Sarah’s response
12	Sarah laughs to herself — “After I am worn out, and my lord is old, shall I have pleasure?”	Internal laughter; double impossibility — her age and Abraham’s
13–14	The LORD asks why Sarah laughed; poses the foundational question: “Is anything too hard for the LORD?”	LORD, not the men, addresses this; v. 14 is the theological apex of the first scene
15	Sarah denies laughing; the LORD says “No, but you did laugh”	The truth stands regardless of the denial; the promise does too
16	The men rise to go; Abraham accompanies them toward Sodom	Transition — the first scene closes, the second opens
17–19	The LORD deliberates: “Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do?” — grounds the disclosure in Abraham’s covenant identity and vocation	Key Bullmore content: God’s covenant intimacy involves disclosure; Abraham is not merely a recipient of promise but a participant in God’s purposes

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
20–21	The LORD announces the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah and His intention to investigate	“Going down to see” is anthropomorphic; expresses divine seriousness and personal engagement
22	The two men depart toward Sodom; Abraham stands before the LORD	The scene shifts; the intercession begins
23–25	Abraham’s opening intercession: Will the righteous be swept away with the wicked? Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?	Grounds all intercession in God’s own justice; v. 25 is the theological center of the intercession
26	The LORD: If fifty righteous found in Sodom, He will spare the city	First divine response — gracious, immediate
27–28	Abraham presses further — what about forty-five?	Self-description: “I who am but dust and ashes” — humility beneath boldness
29	The LORD: Forty.	Unrebuffed; patient
30	Abraham: Thirty?	Repeating the humble preamble; the boldness escalates
31	The LORD: Thirty.	
32	Abraham: Twenty? Then ten?	The final petition — ten is the apparent floor; Abraham stops
33	The LORD departs; Abraham returns home	The chapter closes; the intercession is complete; judgment proceeds

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	1–15	The Impossible Promise: The LORD Comes, Speaks, and Confronts Unbelief
2	16–21	The Covenant Friendship:

Division	Verses	Label
3	22–33	The LORD Discloses His Purposes to His Friend
		The Intercession: Abraham Reasons with God from God’s Own Character

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: The LORD comes to His covenant friend, confirms the impossible promise, and invites him into His own moral counsel.

Primary Claim: God’s covenant intimacy with His people is not formal or distant — He draws them into His purposes, and those who truly know Him respond with both confidence in His promises and bold intercession for others, because they have learned to reason from His character.

Applications (Five)

1. [Mind/Belief] Examine what you actually believe about God’s power relative to your specific impossibility.

Sarah laughed because she was reasoning from her own body rather than from the character of God. The question “Is anything too hard for the LORD?” is not a rhetorical flourish — it is a diagnostic. Many believers hold a general conviction that God is powerful but have quietly concluded that their specific situation is the exception: the marriage that cannot be restored, the prodigal who will not return, the church that cannot grow, the pattern of sin that will not break. Genesis 18 does not ask you to manufacture optimism; it asks you to identify the specific impossibility you have placed outside God’s reach and to hold it against the question of verse 14. Name the thing. Then name who God is. The chapter will not let you hold both assessments simultaneously.

2. [Affections/Worship] Let the disclosure of God’s purposes to Abraham — “Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do?” — recalibrate your sense of your standing before God.

The most astonishing feature of verses 17–19 is not what God decides but that He deliberates at all. He does not simply act on Sodom and inform Abraham afterward. He considers the intimacy of the covenant relationship and chooses disclosure. This is the posture of a friend, not a sovereign managing subordinates. If you have been approaching God as a petitioner approaching a tribunal — formal, distant, uncertain of your standing — Genesis 18 calls you to receive the covenant intimacy that is yours in Christ (John 15:15).

God shares His counsel with His friends. You are, in Christ, His friend. Worship the God who thinks of you this way, and let that intimacy reshape how you come to Him.

3. [Will/Behavior] Identify someone currently under judgment or heading toward destruction and begin interceding for them by name, grounded in what you know of God's character.

Abraham's intercession for Sodom was for people who were not his people — for a city the text has already described as grievously sinful. He did not intercede because he approved of them or because they asked for his prayers. He interceded because he knew the character of God well enough to appeal to it on their behalf. Who is the Sodom in your life — the colleague whose life is visibly unraveling, the neighbor whose household is under the weight of sin, the city or community you have written off? Genesis 18 is a call to stand between the God you know and the people He is pursuing in judgment. Begin the prayer. Reason from His character. Do not stop at fifty.

4. [Mind/Belief] Learn the difference between presumptuous prayer and character-grounded boldness, and identify which one governs your intercession.

Abraham's boldness is frequently cited as a model for persistent prayer, but the nature of the boldness matters as much as its persistence. Abraham is not wearing God down; he is reasoning from God's own self-disclosed character — "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?" He knows what God is like, and he prays from that knowledge. Much contemporary prayer is bold in its demands but shallow in its theology — it commands or claims or persists without grounding the request in anything God has actually revealed about Himself. Ask yourself: Is your intercession grounded in what God has declared about His own character? Are you praying from revelation, or from desire? The difference is the difference between faith and presumption.

5. [Affections/Worship] Feel the weight of what it means that the LORD received every one of Abraham's petitions without rebuke — and let this deepen your confidence in bringing your own requests.

Six times Abraham pressed. Six times the LORD answered without impatience, without rebuke, without any signal that Abraham had overstepped. The text is careful to record this. It is not incidental. God is displaying something about Himself through His patient reception of Abraham's intercession — He is not an irritable sovereign who wants to be left alone; He is a covenant Lord who welcomes the prayers of His people as acts of trust in His character. If you have been withholding requests from God out of fear of being too needy, too persistent, or too bold, Genesis 18 dismantles that fear. The God who stood and listened to Abraham stand and reason is the same God who invites you to come boldly to the throne of grace (Hebrews 4:16). He is not annoyed by your persistence. He is waiting for it.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Genesis 18 reveals a God who is simultaneously sovereign over history and intimately engaged with His covenant people. The LORD who will judge Sodom is the same LORD who sits at Abraham's table, who asks where Sarah is, who receives Abraham's intercession patiently. This passage is therefore a significant check against two equal and opposite distortions of the doctrine of God: the deistic God who governs from distance and the sentimental God who cannot bring judgment. The God of Genesis 18 is the Judge of all the earth — and precisely because He is, Abraham's intercession is intelligible. The question "Is anything too hard for the LORD?" (v. 14) is the chapter's unifying theological claim: God's power is not merely general omnipotence but specifically operative on behalf of His promises, applied to the specific impossibilities His people face. The chapter also displays divine patience as a moral attribute — the LORD's reception of Abraham's repeated intercessions is not weakness but a revelation of His character.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: Genesis 18 is exegetically critical for the Reformed understanding of prayer, election, and covenant. On prayer: the chapter shows that intercessory prayer is not a mechanism for bending an unwilling God but an expression of covenant intimacy in which the believer reasons from God's own self-revealed character. This is not less than the Reformed doctrine of prayer — it is its deepest expression: prayer that is shaped by theology, not merely by need. On election and judgment: the chapter's movement toward Sodom demonstrates that God's sovereign purposes in judgment are not arbitrary but morally grounded ("Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?"), which is the same principle that grounds the doctrine of reprobation — God does not act unjustly. On covenant: verses 17–19 are one of the Old Testament's clearest windows into what Reformed theology means by "covenant friendship" — God binds Himself to disclose His purposes to His covenant servant, not merely to execute them on His behalf. The passage anticipates John 15:15 and the full covenant friendship available to believers in Christ, who has disclosed to us everything He has heard from the Father.

Main Takeaway

The God who came to Abraham's tent, confirmed the impossible, and stayed to hear his prayers is not a formal sovereign issuing decrees from a distance — He is a covenant Lord who discloses His purposes to His friends, who stands and listens when His people reason with Him from His own character, and who has never yet rebuked a bold prayer that was grounded in what He has revealed about Himself. You know what God is like. Pray from that. Stand between Him and the world He is pursuing. Do not stop at fifty.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Treating the three scenes as loosely connected episodes rather than a unified movement.** The most common structural failure with Genesis 18 is to preach three separate mini-sermons — one on hospitality, one on Sarah's laughter, one on Abraham's intercession — without demonstrating how they form a single argument. The chapter's unity is its point: the same LORD who makes the impossible promise is the one who discloses His purposes and receives Abraham's intercession. A fractured structure produces a fractured takeaway.
- **Preaching Sarah's laughter primarily as a negative example to avoid.** While the text does confront Sarah's unbelief, reducing the scene to a warning against laughing at God's promises misses the chapter's dominant intent. The centerpiece of the scene is the question of verse 14 — "Is anything too hard for the LORD?" — which is addressed to every reader, not merely to a woman who laughed in her tent. Preachers who hammer Sarah's failure typically leave congregants feeling guilty for their doubts rather than confronted with the character of the God who asks the question.
- **Missing the theological grounding of Abraham's intercession.** Abraham's intercession is frequently cited as a model for persistent prayer, but persistence is the least interesting thing about it. What matters is the basis of the boldness: "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?" Abraham is not wearing God down by repetition; he is reasoning from God's own declared character. Preaching persistence without preaching the theological grounding produces a doctrine of prayer that is emotionally driven rather than theologically shaped — which is the opposite of what Genesis 18 teaches.
- **Reading "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do?" as merely a narrative device.** Verses 17–19 are sometimes treated as a literary transition explaining why the text shifts to the Sodom narrative. Exegetically, they are far more significant: they reveal God's deliberation about disclosure as itself an act of covenant love. The LORD is not obligated to tell Abraham anything. His decision to do so is a window into what covenant friendship means — God binds Himself to share His counsel with those who know Him. Preachers who skip or minimize these verses lose one of the chapter's most distinctive theological contributions.
- **Preaching Abraham's intercession without addressing the question of why Sodom was ultimately destroyed.** Genesis 18 ends with the intercession apparently in process — Genesis 19 reveals that Sodom was destroyed anyway, because ten righteous were not found. If the sermon treats Genesis 18's intercession as a template for guaranteed outcomes ("pray boldly and God will spare"), it sets up a theological and pastoral problem Genesis 19 will immediately destroy. The chapter teaches that bold, theologically-grounded intercession is right and God-honoring — not that it always produces the outcome we are praying for.

The intercession was not wasted; Lot was saved (Genesis 19:29 explicitly credits Abraham's intercession). The scope of what was spared was narrower than Abraham hoped, but the prayer was not refused.

- **Domesticating the chapter's vision of intercession.** The dominant application in many treatments of this chapter is personal — pray boldly for your personal needs. But Abraham is praying for a city full of sinners who are not his family, not his community, and not people who asked for his prayers. Genesis 18 models an expansive, others-directed intercession for those under judgment. A sermon that shrinks this to personal petition has missed the chapter's primary application: the people of God are called to stand between the living God and a dying world, reasoning from His character on behalf of those who cannot reason that way themselves.

*Output file: **01 Genesis 18.docx** Framework: CLAUDE2.md — Bullmore Primary Claim methodology, Content/Intent discipline, Interpretive Evaluation, Key Canonical Support, Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls*