

Homiletics Analysis: Genesis 21

Content & Intent

This Text — Content

Genesis 21 narrates three distinct but thematically unified episodes: the birth of Isaac, the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael, and the covenant between Abraham and Abimelech at Beersheba. The chapter opens with the fulfillment of God's long-deferred promise — Sarah conceives and bears Isaac exactly when God said she would (vv. 1–7). The tone is joy, wonder, and vindication. But the chapter immediately pivots: Ishmael's mockery of Isaac provokes Sarah's demand that Hagar and Ishmael be cast out (vv. 8–14). Abraham is distressed, but God confirms Sarah's demand and reasserts His sovereign governance over both lines — the covenant line through Isaac and a separate provision for Ishmael through Abraham's blood. Hagar and Ishmael are expelled into the wilderness, where they face death. God hears the boy's cry, opens Hagar's eyes to a well, and promises Ishmael a future (vv. 15–21). The chapter closes with Abimelech seeking a treaty with Abraham, recognizing that God is with him — a public acknowledgment of divine favor confirmed by oath at Beersheba (vv. 22–34).

This Text — Intent

God is seeking to accomplish several interlocking effects through this chapter. First, He is demonstrating that His word is unbreakable — Isaac's birth at exactly the appointed time is not a climax of human effort but a vindication of divine faithfulness, arriving when Sarah's womb was physiologically beyond hope. The reader is meant to feel the force of “the LORD visited Sarah as he had said” (v. 1) as the answer to every prior chapter of waiting, doubt, and misadventure. Second, through the Hagar and Ishmael episode, God is distinguishing between the child of promise and the child of the flesh — not to demean Ishmael, whom He also hears and blesses, but to establish that blessing through Abraham comes through the specific channel God has appointed, not through human improvisation. Third, Abimelech's treaty scene demonstrates that God's blessing on Abraham is visible and irresistible to the nations — the covenant promise that “all nations shall be blessed through you” is already beginning to materialize in the form of foreign leaders seeking covenant with the man God is with.

Subject Sentence: God's promise to Abraham arrives on His schedule, through His appointed heir, and under His sovereign care over all involved.

Primary Claim: God is demonstrating through this chapter that His promises are not aided by human engineering nor derailed by human failure — they arrive exactly as He said, through exactly the channel He appointed, while His sovereign mercy reaches even those outside the covenant line.

Interpretive Evaluation

The identity and fate of Ishmael — allegory vs. history

The most significant interpretive issue in Genesis 21 is raised not by Genesis itself but by Paul's use of the Hagar-Sarah narrative in Galatians 4:21–31. Paul reads the two women and their sons allegorically — Hagar represents the Sinai covenant and bondage; Sarah represents the covenant of grace and freedom. Some interpreters (particularly those in Lutheran and Reformed traditions) have used this allegorical register to evacuate Genesis 21 of its straightforward historical and theological content, treating the narrative primarily as a prefiguration. The more careful reading — which the Reformed tradition at its best has maintained — holds both the historical and typological registers simultaneously. Genesis 21 is first a real event in the life of a real family, making real claims about divine faithfulness and sovereign promise. Paul's allegorical use in Galatians 4 is a legitimate second-order reading that does not replace but rather extends the text's meaning. To preach Genesis 21 as *primarily* an allegory for law-versus-grace is to let a derivative reading displace the primary one. The historical narrative should control the exposition; the Pauline typological extension may be noted as confirming and deepening what the narrative already demonstrates.

Hagar and Ishmael — divine election and apparent divine cruelty

A recurring pastoral and theological difficulty is the apparent harshness of the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael. Some interpreters — particularly in traditions emphasizing God's universal love and human dignity — read this episode as morally troubling, either softening God's role (treating it as purely Abraham and Sarah's decision) or raising it as an objection against the God of Genesis. The text does not permit either move. God *explicitly confirms* Sarah's demand (v. 12) and tells Abraham to comply. This is not divine cruelty — it is divine governance of the covenant line combined with explicit provision for those outside it. Verse 20 ("God was with the boy") and the promise of Ishmael's future (v. 18) make clear that exclusion from the covenant promise through Isaac is not exclusion from divine care. The Reformed reading acknowledges that God's elective purposes are specific and particular — the covenant runs through Isaac — while refusing to read this particularity as indifference toward those outside the covenant line. This is the distinction between special grace (covenant promise) and common grace (God's ongoing care for all He has made).

The Abimelech treaty — a distraction or a theological statement?

Some expositional traditions treat the Abimelech treaty (vv. 22–34) as administrative background — a minor narrative detail that concludes a chapter otherwise dominated by the birth of Isaac and the expulsion of Hagar. This reading underestimates the episode. Abimelech’s testimony — “God is with you in all that you do” (v. 22) — is a Gentile king’s involuntary witness to the Abrahamic blessing. The nations are already seeing the blessing that God promised in Genesis 12:2–3. The naming of Beersheba (“well of the oath”) and Abraham’s planting of a tree and calling on the name of the LORD (v. 33) tie the treaty scene into the broader covenant geography and worship patterns of the patriarchal narrative. This scene is not a footnote — it is the first visible fulfillment of the promise that Abraham would be a blessing to the nations.

The Reformed reading

The text is best read as a unified demonstration of God’s sovereign faithfulness operating across three registers simultaneously: fulfillment of the promise through Isaac, governance of the covenant line through the exclusion of Ishmael (while providing for him by mercy), and the beginning of Gentile blessing through Abraham’s emerging visibility among the nations. The Primary Claim of this chapter is not merely that God keeps promises, but that He keeps them *on His own terms, through His own appointed means, without requiring human assistance* — and that His sovereign purposes are large enough to include both His elective purposes and His mercy toward those outside the covenant promise line.

Key Canonical Support

- **Genesis 12:1–3** — The original Abrahamic covenant establishes the three-part promise: land, seed, and blessing to the nations. Genesis 21 is the first concrete installment on the “seed” promise (Isaac’s birth) and the first visible installment on the “blessing to the nations” promise (Abimelech’s treaty).
- **Romans 9:6–9** — Paul’s argument that “it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise” draws directly on the Isaac/Ishmael distinction established in Genesis 21. The chapter is the biblical foundation for understanding election and the nature of covenant promise.
- **Galatians 4:21–31** — Paul’s allegorical extension of the Hagar-Sarah narrative demonstrates that the Genesis 21 narrative has ongoing canonical freight — it becomes the vehicle for explaining the difference between law-bondage and gospel freedom in the New Covenant. The historical narrative carries typological meaning that the New Testament draws out.
- **Hebrews 11:11–12** — Sarah’s faith and Abraham’s faith are cited as the means through which the “as good as dead” produced descendants as numerous as the stars. The Hebrews reading of Isaac’s birth emphasizes that the miracle required

faith, not human optimism — the promise arrived through the weakness of the recipients, not their strength.

- **Isaiah 51:1–2** — “Look to Abraham your father and to Sarah who bore you; for he was but one when I called him, that I might bless him and multiply him.” Isaiah invokes the Isaac-promise as the ground for confidence in God’s future faithfulness to Israel. The logic is identical to Genesis 21: if God could bring forth the covenant line from a barren womb, He can bring forth His people from any impossible circumstance.

Aim: To demonstrate that God’s faithfulness in Genesis 21 is not merely a historical fact to admire but a living claim on the reader — that the same God who brought Isaac from Sarah’s dead womb is the God who keeps every promise He has made, on His own schedule, through His own appointed means, and without requiring human assistance.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1–2	The LORD visits Sarah as He had said; she conceives and bears Isaac in Abraham’s old age, at the appointed time.	“As he had said” / “as he had spoken” (v. 1) — the fulfillment language is emphatic. The narrative points back to the promise, not to the human participants.
3	Abraham names the son Isaac and circumcises him on the eighth day.	Obedience to the naming instruction (Gen. 17:19) and covenant sign (Gen. 17:12). Abraham’s actions confirm he is receiving the child as the promised heir.
4	Abraham circumcises Isaac at eight days old, as God commanded.	Brief repetition emphasizing covenant conformity — Isaac enters the covenant sign immediately.
5	Abraham is one hundred years old when Isaac is born.	The age notation is theological, not merely biographical — it underscores the impossibility of the birth through natural means.

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
6–7	Sarah declares God has made her laugh; all who hear will laugh with her. She marvels that she has nursed a child in her old age.	The reversal of Sarah's earlier laughter of unbelief (Gen. 18:12) — this is laughter of fulfilled joy, not of incredulity. The name Isaac (=“he laughs”) is now fully vindicated.
8	Isaac is weaned; Abraham makes a great feast.	Weaning in the ancient world often occurred at age two to three — this is a recognized milestone, not a minor event. The feast signals joy and social recognition of the heir.
9	Sarah sees Ishmael (son of Hagar the Egyptian) laughing/mock.	The Hebrew <i>metsaheq</i> (“laughing/mock/playing”) — the word is from the same root as Isaac's name. The ambiguity of Ishmael's action has generated significant debate; Paul (Gal. 4:29) reads it as persecution.
10	Sarah demands that Abraham cast out Hagar and Ishmael — “the son of this slave woman shall not be heir with my son Isaac.”	The demand is sharp and socially recognizable in the ancient Near East. The distinction between the heir and the slave's son is the issue, not merely personal animosity.
11	The matter is very displeasing to Abraham on account of Ishmael.	Abraham's distress humanizes the episode and guards against reading God's confirmation (v. 12) as cold or mechanical.
12–13	God tells Abraham not to be distressed — to do as Sarah says, for through Isaac shall Abraham's offspring be named. God also promises to make Ishmael a nation	The divine word in vv. 12–13 is the theological hinge of the entire episode. Both lines are addressed: covenant promise through Isaac (v. 12); separate

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	because he is Abraham's offspring.	provision for Ishmael (v. 13).
14	Abraham rises early, gives Hagar bread and water, sets her and the child on her shoulder, and sends them away.	The "early" notation throughout Genesis marks obedient action in response to divine command (cf. Gen. 22:3). Abraham complies immediately, though grieved.
15–16	Hagar's water is spent in the wilderness of Beersheba; she places the child under a bush and sits at a distance, unable to watch him die.	The extremity of the crisis is the narrative setup for the divine intervention. Hagar's grief is presented with full pathos — this is not a bloodless theological episode.
17–18	God hears the voice of the boy; the angel of God calls to Hagar from heaven, asking what troubles her. God tells her not to fear — He will make Ishmael a great nation.	"God heard the voice of the boy" — the name Ishmael means "God hears." The narrative is fulfilling the meaning of Ishmael's own name.
19	God opens Hagar's eyes; she sees a well of water and gives the boy water.	The well was presumably already there — God opened her eyes to see it. Divine provision often works through the revealing of what was already present.
20–21	God is with the boy; he grows up in the wilderness, becomes an expert with the bow; his mother takes him a wife from Egypt.	"God was with the boy" — this is covenant-adjacent language used of someone outside the covenant line. Ishmael's life is not cursed; it is differently provisioned.
22–24	Abimelech and his army commander Phicol approach Abraham, recognizing that God is with him, and seek a covenant of loyalty. Abraham agrees.	Abimelech's speech ("God is with you in all that you do") is a Gentile witness to the Abrahamic blessing — the nations are already beginning to see what God

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
25–26	Abraham complains about a well that Abimelech’s servants seized; Abimelech claims ignorance.	promised in Gen. 12:3. Practical dispute over water rights in a well-scarce environment — historically realistic and legally significant in establishing future use rights.
27–30	They make a covenant; Abraham sets apart seven ewe lambs to witness that he dug the well.	The seven lambs function as a public, legally binding attestation of Abraham’s ownership of the well — a formal legal gesture, not merely a gift.
31	The place is called Beersheba because both swore an oath there.	Beersheba = “well of the oath” or possibly “well of seven.” Covenant geography — patriarchal narratives establish named places as memorials to divine and human covenant action.
32–33	Abimelech and Phicol return to Philistia; Abraham plants a tamarisk tree at Beersheba and calls on the name of the LORD, the Everlasting God.	The tamarisk tree is a long-lived tree — planting it is an act of claiming the land for future generations. “Everlasting God” (<i>El Olam</i>) — God’s eternal nature is the basis for long-term covenant confidence.
34	Abraham sojourns many days in the land of the Philistines.	Abraham is still a sojourner — the land is promised but not yet possessed. The chapter ends with Abraham dwelling in the land in faith, not yet in full inheritance.

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	1–7	The Promise Arrives: Isaac Born at the Appointed Time

Division	Verses	Label
2	8–14	The Promise Clarified: The Heir Identified, the Slave's Son Expelled
3	15–21	The Promise Extended: God Hears and Provides for Ishmael
4	22–34	The Promise Visible: Abimelech Witnesses the Blessing; Covenant at Beersheba

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim *(restated)*

Subject Sentence: God's promise to Abraham arrives on His schedule, through His appointed heir, and under His sovereign care over all involved.

Primary Claim: God is demonstrating through this chapter that His promises are not aided by human engineering nor derailed by human failure — they arrive exactly as He said, through exactly the channel He appointed, while His sovereign mercy reaches even those outside the covenant line.

Applications (Five)

1. Stop calculating whether God's promise still has time to arrive. *(Mind/belief)* The reader of Genesis 21 is meant to feel the weight of “at the appointed time” (v. 2) as a rebuke to every form of promise-math — the mental accounting we do when God's timeline seems to have expired. Abraham was one hundred years old. Sarah was physiologically beyond the possibility of conception. The promise arrived anyway, on God's schedule, not theirs. If you are in a season of waiting and have begun to conclude that the window has closed — that what God promised is now biologically, financially, relationally, or circumstantially impossible — Genesis 21 is speaking directly to you. God does not need your window to be open. He is the God who opens windows that are sealed shut. The appointed time is His to set, and He has not forgotten it.

2. Grieve the costs of your past attempts to help God along, and receive the grace that works despite them. *(Affections/worship)* The Ishmael crisis in this chapter is the consequence of Abraham and Sarah's attempt in Genesis 16 to produce the heir through human means. That decision caused real suffering — for Hagar, for Ishmael, for Abraham who loved his son, and for the household that had to absorb the fracture. Genesis 21 does not pretend those consequences are painless. Abraham's distress in verse 11 is real. There is appropriate grief to be felt over what our improvisation costs — in families, relationships,

ministries, and lives. But the chapter also demonstrates that God’s covenant purpose was not derailed by the Ishmael episode — Isaac arrived anyway, exactly as promised. The grief is real; so is the grace. Do not skip either one.

3. Trust that God’s sovereign purposes are specific enough to distinguish between covenant channels and broad enough to include mercy toward those outside them.

(Mind/belief) The expulsion of Ishmael troubles readers who rightly care about human dignity and the welfare of children and mothers. The text does not resolve this by softening God’s role — He explicitly confirms the expulsion (v. 12). What the text does is hold the particularity of covenant election and the breadth of divine mercy in simultaneous view. God has a specific channel through which the covenant promise flows — Isaac, not Ishmael. But God also hears the cry of the child outside that channel and provides for him (vv. 17–19). “God was with the boy” (v. 20) is not covenant language — but it is care language. Reformed theology at its best has always insisted that God’s election is specific without making God indifferent to those outside it. Genesis 21 is the biblical foundation for holding that tension without collapsing it in either direction.

4. Worship God as *El Olam* — the Everlasting God — who anchors your longest-term hopes.

(Affections/worship) Abraham plants a tamarisk tree and calls on the name of *El Olam*, the Everlasting God (v. 33). The tamarisk is a tree planted for shade and fruit that Abraham himself would likely not live to enjoy — it is a gift to future generations, an act of faith in God’s long-term faithfulness. Abraham is still a sojourner in a land he does not yet possess (v. 34), but he is planting trees. The question this poses to the reader is concrete: Are you making decisions — about family, finances, ministry, community — that reflect confidence in the Everlasting God’s long-term faithfulness? Or are all your decisions compressed to the horizon of your own lifetime? *El Olam* is the God of your children’s children. Plant the tree.

5. Let God’s visible blessing on your life become a point of access for those who need what He can give.

(Will/behavior) Abimelech comes to Abraham not out of theological interest but because he has watched the evidence — “God is with you in all that you do” (v. 22) — and wants access to that favor. He is not seeking the covenant God of Israel; he is seeking the man who is clearly under divine blessing. The Gentile comes to the covenant man, and the result is a treaty, a named place, and Abraham calling on the name of the LORD at Beersheba. The application is not abstract: your life under the blessing of God is itself a witness. The question is whether you live as if this is true — whether the visible shape of your life, your integrity, your generosity, your stability under pressure, makes the watching world want to know the God who is with you. Abimelech came to Abraham. Who is coming to you?

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Genesis 21 is a multi-register demonstration of God’s sovereign faithfulness in action. The birth of Isaac establishes that God’s covenant promises operate

outside the normal constraints of human capacity — Sarah’s barren womb is not an obstacle but the precise condition through which the miracle is made visible. God receives all the credit because there is no other explanation. The Hagar episode establishes a critical theological distinction between God’s elective purposes (through which He channels the covenant promise) and His merciful care (through which He provides for those outside the covenant line) — these are distinct categories that must not be collapsed. God’s election of Isaac is not God’s abandonment of Ishmael; His particular covenant purpose and His general mercy operate simultaneously without contradiction. The Abimelech scene establishes that God’s blessing on His covenant people is publicly visible and functions as a means of blessing to the nations — the Gentile recognition of divine favor in Abraham is the first concrete installment on the Genesis 12:3 promise.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: Genesis 21 is the foundational narrative for understanding what Reformed theology means by the particularity of election and the universality of divine care. Paul draws on the Isaac/Ishmael distinction in Romans 9 to establish that election is not by descent or effort but by promise — “it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise” (Rom. 9:8). This is not a Pauline imposition on Genesis — it is what Genesis 21 already teaches when read on its own terms. The chapter also grounds the Reformed insistence that salvation comes through the specific channel God appoints — not through human improvisation, religious sincerity, or national identity — while simultaneously refusing to make God indifferent to those outside the specific covenant channel. The Beersheba scene, where Abraham plants a tree and calls on *El Olam*, roots Reformed covenant confidence in the eternal, unchanging nature of God — not in the stability of human circumstances. The God who kept His promise to a hundred-year-old man and a barren woman is the same God whose faithfulness underlies every covenant promise, including the new covenant sealed in the blood of Isaac’s greater descendant.

Main Takeaway

God kept the promise He made to Abraham — not because Abraham earned it, not because Abraham helped it along, not because the circumstances were favorable, but because He said He would and He is that kind of God. The same God who brought life from Sarah’s dead womb and heard the cry of Ishmael in the wilderness and made the nations come seeking Abraham’s blessing is your God. His promises arrive on His schedule, through His appointed means, and His mercy is wider than you are afraid it might be. You do not need to engineer the outcome. You need to trust the God who has already spoken.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Preaching the birth of Isaac as primarily a reward for Abraham's faith.** Abraham's faith was real and significant — but Genesis 21 deliberately frames the birth with the language of divine initiative: "The LORD visited Sarah *as he had said*" (v. 1). The emphasis is on God's faithfulness to His own word, not on the faith that received it. Expositors who emphasize Abraham's faith as the operative cause of the miracle move the credit from God to Abraham and subtly reinforce a transactional theology: enough faith produces the promised result. The text will not support this. Faith is the posture of the recipient; the promise arrives because God is faithful, not because the recipient achieved the right level of belief.
- **Softening God's role in the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael.** It is pastorally tempting to frame the expulsion as primarily Abraham and Sarah's decision — their family conflict, their household problem — while distancing God from the outcome. Verse 12 does not permit this: God tells Abraham to do as Sarah said. Expositionally, the preacher must name this and then explain it within the framework the text itself provides: God's confirmation of the expulsion is an act of covenant governance, not cruelty, and it is accompanied by explicit care for Ishmael (vv. 13, 17–21). Avoiding the discomfort of God's sovereign direction here produces a sermon that is more comfortable but less true.
- **Reading the Hagar/Ishmael episode only through the Galatians 4 allegorical lens.** Paul's allegorical use of the narrative is legitimate and important — but it is a second-order reading that depends on the first-order historical narrative being understood on its own terms. Preaching Genesis 21 primarily as "an allegory for law versus grace" evacuates the chapter of its historical and theological content and produces a passage that is about Paul's argument rather than God's faithfulness in the life of a real family. Establish the historical and covenant-theological meaning first; then the Pauline extension may be noted as confirmation and canonical deepening.
- **Treating the Abimelech treaty scene as narrative filler.** The final section of the chapter (vv. 22–34) is frequently treated as administrative context or passed over quickly in exposition. This misses its theological function. Abimelech's testimony ("God is with you in all that you do") is a Gentile king's involuntary witness to the Abrahamic blessing — the first visible installment on the "I will bless those who bless you, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" promise of Genesis 12:3. The naming of Beersheba and Abraham's worship at *El Olam* are not minor notes — they are acts of covenant faith that interpret the entire chapter.
- **Moralizing the chapter into a story about human virtue or failure.** The chapter contains morally complex characters: Sarah whose demand is sharp, Abraham who fathered Ishmael through Hagar, Hagar who is a victim of household dynamics she did not create. The temptation is to sort these characters into moral categories —

Sarah as the villain, Hagar as the sympathetic protagonist, Abraham as the passive middle figure — and preach accordingly. The chapter is not primarily about the moral quality of its human characters. It is about God's sovereign governance of His promise through imperfect, conflicted, grieving human instruments. The primary agent is God; the human characters are the terrain through which He works.

- **Failing to apply the “appointed time” theology pastorally.** The most load-bearing phrase in the chapter for congregational application is “at the appointed time” (v. 2). This phrase addresses directly the experience of those who are waiting on God for something He has promised — children, restored relationships, health, vocational direction, gospel fruit — and who are beginning to conclude that the window has closed. An exposition that does not apply the appointed-time theology to this pastoral reality has left the text's primary intent undelivered. This is not a minor application point — it is the pastoral heart of the chapter.