

The following sermon was preached at Redemption Baptist Church on Sunday, 13 March 2022. We encourage you to look up the Scriptures that are referenced, and see the context for yourself. May the Lord speak to your heart as you study His Word.

Rehearsal for Calvary

Hebrews 11:17-19

Ever since September 11, 2001, we have gotten used to hearing about “emergency preparedness and prevention tests,” which are carried out by law enforcement and rescue departments, so that they can be ready for potential emergencies. In a sense, these tests are “dress rehearsals.” Rescue departments simulate the crisis as nearly as they can, and do everything the way they are supposed to do it in the event of a real emergency: except that there *is* no emergency. It is a *rehearsal* for the real event; and the rescue people who do the drills are given a score for how well—or how poorly—they did in the test.

There are some tests, though, whose score can be only 0%, or 100%. Either you pass, or you utterly fail. I remember those surprise, one-question “pop tests” that some of our teachers gave us when I was in school! Either you got it right, or you got it completely wrong; and if you got it wrong, it could really hurt your grade average for the class. I especially remember a one-question pop-test that I had when I was in 2nd year. Our history teacher asked us who founded “Herrn Hut” (a refuge for persecuted Moravians in Saxony, Germany, in the early 1700’s); and we had to spell the man’s name perfectly. The answer to the question was “Nicholaus von Zinzendorf”; and, as it turned out, I was the only person in the class who got the answer right. (My classmates weren’t very happy with me!)

That’s the kind of test that Abraham was faced with about 4,000 years ago--except that the outcome of this test was far weightier than a history grade. It was a spiritual “pop test” (Abraham had no idea that it was coming); it was a “pass or fail” test for himself, personally; and, though he didn’t know it at the time, it was a “dress rehearsal” for something infinitely greater. It was a “dress rehearsal” for the *real* crisis, which would be managed flawlessly by God Himself, about 2,000 years later. I am happy to say that Abraham *passed* his test. I am also happy to say that when the *real* crisis finally came, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, passed *His* test.

There were many tests in Abraham’s life; but the test that God gave to Abraham on a mountain called Moriah was the climax of them all. This was the point at which the quality of Abraham’s faith, which had been building and strengthening through the years, was finally shown for what it was. If you be God’s child, you may be sure that such a test is coming in *your* life. He is *constantly* testing His children. As a Christian’s faith grows, his tests get harder and harder. The Lord wants to bring us to the point where we are unquestioningly, implicitly trusting in His bare Word, and nothing else!

That is what we will be talking about in this morning’s message, which is entitled *Rehearsal for Calvary*.

Read Hebrews 11:17-19.

I. The “Test” (v. 17)

Before we focus on Abraham’s *faith*, I would first like us to look at his *test*. As we just read in **verse 17**, God “*tried*” (or, “tested”) Abraham.

It is extremely important to know what God means when He says that He “*tries*” us. The Greek verb for “tried” is *peirazo*. This word *peirazo* is also translated as “test”; but it can also mean to “tempt.” Let’s look at another instance where this word *peirazo* is used, so that we can get the full understanding of it.

Read James 1:13-14.

In **verse 13**, this word *peirazo* is translated as “tempted.” And what does James have to say about “temptation”? He says that God tempts *no* man. Yet, in **Hebrews 11:17**, when this same verb, *peirazo*, is used, Paul informs us that God *did* “**try**” (or “tempt”) Abraham. Paul says that God tried (or “tempted”) Abraham; yet, James says that God tempts no man!

Is this a contradiction? No, it is not! We must remember that Greek words, just like words in any language, can have different nuances of meaning, depending on the context. Such is the case here. This word *peirazo* can mean “to entice, allure, or entrap someone to do evil”; or, it can mean “to put someone to a test: to prove his character.” **That *second* meaning is the one that *always* applies to God.** God does not *allure* us to do evil: rather, He *tests* us. Satan, of course, *does* try to allure us to do evil. Our own sinful flesh also entices us to do evil (as we saw in **James**). However, *God* does not entice us to evil.

Now, God often allows (and even provides the ideal circumstances) for the *wicked* to follow the wicked path they desire. Why does He do this? He does this because He knows that they have *already irrevocably hardened their hearts, and will not* repent; therefore, since they won’t repent, He uses their evil designs to accomplish His own purposes. A perfect example of this is Pharaoh.

Read Romans 9:17-22.

Read Exodus 7:21-22 / 8:13-15, 30-32 / 9:11-12, 34 / 10:19-20, 27.

As we just saw in **Exodus**, Pharaoh kept hardening his heart with each new plague. We are told either that he “hardened his heart,” or that “his heart was hardened.” Yet, we are also told, almost as many times, that *God* hardened Pharaoh’s heart. This doesn’t mean that God forced Pharaoh, against his will, to harden his heart. It simply means that after Pharaoh had hardened his own heart one too many times, God allowed Pharaoh to have his way, and didn’t try to convict or soften his heart anymore. Since Pharaoh refused to submit to God, God used Pharaoh’s hardness of heart to show His power and judgment to the whole world. Each time Pharaoh refused to let Israel go, God unleashed another plague, and demonstrated His power.

It was not God’s wish that Pharaoh should perish. The Bible makes it clear that God is “***not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance***” (**2 Peter 3:9**). God doesn’t delight in sending people to hell. God didn’t “predestine” Pharaoh to do evil, or to go to hell. However, because Pharaoh would not repent, God “***fitted***” him for destruction, and used him to accomplish His purpose, to boot! In the end, *God got glory out of Pharaoh’s life*—even though Pharaoh himself would not glorify God! The bottom line is this: **every person, saved or unsaved, is a “vessel.”** God wants to use every man’s life for His honour

and glory. Those who will not repent are vessels “*fitted to destruction.*” *Because* they will not repent, God fits them to destruction; and He uses them for His glory, anyway!

Now, what about the saved? What kind of vessels are they? They are “*vessels of mercy.*”

Read Romans 9:22-24.

Just as God uses the unsaved as vessels for His glory, so He uses the saved as vessels for His glory. What’s the difference between the lost and the saved, then? Plenty! First, they have completely different destinies. The lost are (after a certain point) fitted to eternal destruction--whereas the saved are (from the moment of their salvation onward) prepared for the glory of Heaven. However, the biggest difference between the saved and the unsaved is that the **saved actually submit themselves to be used of God, whereas the unsaved do not.**

Now, the reality is that Christians still have sinful human natures; and since we still have sin natures, we often fail to submit to God. However, as Christians grow in the Lord, there should be an increasing pattern of submission to God’s will. This is the whole reason that God *tries* His people. He isn’t playing games with us. He isn’t toying with us. He isn’t trying to get us to do evil, so that He can punish us. (If He did this, He would not be a God of truth and righteousness!) Rather, He puts us into circumstances where we must choose to obey Him or not, so that our faith in Him can be put to the test, and strengthened.

Earlier in life, Abraham failed some tests. For example, he left Canaan and went to Egypt during a famine, without consulting God; and he even told a cowardly lie to Pharaoh in order to save his own life! He told Pharaoh that Sarai was his sister, for fear that Pharaoh might kill him, and take Sarai anyway! By the way, do you see the pragmatism in that lie? *Technically*, Abraham didn’t tell a lie. Sarah *was, indeed*, Abraham’s actual half-sister. God did still allow brothers and sisters to marry at that point in history; and Sarai and Abraham were half-brother and sister. However, that wasn’t the whole story. Sarai was also his wife! The lie wasn’t in what he *said*: it was in what he *didn’t* say. That test didn’t end so well, did it? When Pharaoh found out that Abraham had lied to him, and that Abraham’s God had brought plagues upon his country in order to keep him from following through with his marriage to Sarai, he ended up expelling Abraham from his country! There was also the time when Abraham told that exact same lie to the king of Gerar, for the exact same reason; and, just as happened in Egypt, Abraham was disgraced, and his testimony for the LORD was sullied. There was also the time when Abraham consented to Sarah’s scheme, and married Hagar in order to have a child. Abraham *did* fail some big tests!

However, the good news is that as Abraham’s faith grew, his failures became fewer. By the time God announced to Abraham that he would have a son in a year’s time, his faith was so strong, that he did not doubt it in the least. However, the greatest test was yet to come. Twenty-some years after Isaac’s birth, God gave Abraham the greatest test of his life--the test on Mount Moriah.

Christian, don’t despise God’s trials in your lives. They are necessary. God has a purpose in them! They are not easy; and God doesn’t expect that you should always have a smile on your face, and not shed any tears, during those times. God’s own Son shed tears during His earthly

tests! In fact, He was called “*a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief.*” Yet, because He passed *His* test flawlessly, we now have the wonderful gift of salvation!

The tests through which *we*, as believers, must go, are not for the purpose of determining our salvation. Christ already purchased our salvation; and we who are saved have received it as a gift, which will never be taken back. However, the result of passing God’s tests is that we have “*exceeding joy*” before God.

Read 1 Peter 4:12-19.

II. The “Score” (vv. 18-19)

(**Read Hebrews 11:17-19.**) We’ve seen what “testing” means, and what God’s purpose in testing us is. With this in mind, let’s go back to the Old Testament, and examine the test that God gave to Abraham. Then we’ll see how he scored.

Read Genesis 22:1-18.

There were times, earlier in Abraham’s life, when he didn’t score so well on his tests. However, on that day on Mount Moriah, Abraham scored “100%.” Make no mistake about it: this was one of those “pass-or-fail” tests. There was no “extra credit.” There was no “bonus” question. There were, of course, different *parts* to the command (such as going to the specific place of Mount Moriah, building an altar, and so on); but it all came down to one specific command: “*Slay thy son, thine only son Isaac. Offer him as a burnt offering.*” Compared to that last part of the test, all the other parts of the test paled in difficulty. The hard part was actually taking the knife and slaying Isaac. *That* was the real test. Abraham could have gathered the wood, walked the three-day journey to Mount Moriah, made up the altar and the wood, and even placed Isaac on the wood; but if he had not taken the knife in hand, and begun to thrust it toward his son, with the full intention of slaying him, he would not have passed the test!

By the way, the Greek verb for “offered up” is in the *imperfect* tense. This means that it was an ongoing action. In other words, he “was offering” up Isaac. He was in the process of doing it. He had not yet actually slain Isaac; but he had begun the action that would lead to the slaying; and he was probably a fraction of a second away from completing it. God stopped him, of course; but in God’s eyes, Abraham *did* “offer up his son,” because he had every intention of following through. If God hadn’t stopped him, the action *would* have been completed.

From what the Scripture indicates, I doubt that Abraham struggled with whether this was right or wrong to do. Murder, of course, is forbidden by God; but *God* is the giver and taker of life, and He does authorise men, in some circumstances, to take human life (always for wrongdoing). Isaac, of course, had done no wrong; but *God* was the one who had commanded this this be done; and Abraham knew God’s voice well. By the way, this was a unique, one-time command; and even at that, God didn’t actually intend to let Abraham slay Isaac. Slaying an innocent man has never been commanded by God (except in this one instance, on Mount Moriah); and even in this one special case, God did not actually let it happen!

So, what was the real “test” for Abraham? If his struggle wasn’t with the rightness or wrongness of the act, what *was* the source of the struggle? The test was whether he *actually would do it*. How could he slay his own son—the son he loved so dearly? How could he slay the son for whom he had waited for 25 years? Paul answers that question in **Hebrews 11:19**. He says, that Abraham accounted “***that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead.***”

Abraham really believed that God would raise Isaac from the dead! Abraham’s faith is amazing: and it’s even more amazing when you consider that, up to this point in history, no one had ever been raised from the dead! Abraham couldn’t even look back in history and say, “God raised *this* person from the dead; so surely He could do it again.” Abraham was expecting to see a miracle that had never happened before. How could Abraham have that kind of faith? How can *anyone* have that kind of faith?

Paul uses an interesting word here in **verse 19** to answer that question. He says, “***Accounting that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead.***” The word “accounting” is a form of the Greek verb *logizomai*; and it can be translated as “reckoning.” However, it has an even more interesting meaning. Let’s look at another place where this word is used.

Read Romans 4:1-3.

The word “***counted***,” there in **verse 3**, is the same Greek verb that is used in **Hebrews 11:19**—the verb *logizomai*. It is a bookkeeping term. Here in **Romans 4:3**, it means “to put to the account of someone else.” In other words, because Abraham placed his trust in God, God took His own perfect righteousness, and put it in Abraham’s bankrupt account, as though it were his. On this basis, God was able to accept Abraham, even though he was a sinner. This is still the way *every* sinner must be saved. You and I need Christ’s perfect righteousness to be applied to our account! The moment you believe on Jesus Christ, and ask Him to save you, your sin is removed from your account, and Christ’s righteousness is placed there instead.

In **Romans 4:3**, *logizomai* means that God puts onto the *sinner’s* account something that *wasn’t there* before; and that thing is Christ’s perfect righteousness. However, here in **Hebrews 11:19**, Paul isn’t talking about the *sinner’s account*; he’s talking about *God’s account*. Abraham took inventory of *God’s* “account,” and found it to be absolutely perfect! The same is true for us today. When we look at God’s account, we can’t add anything to it: we simply “take inventory.” We look it up and down, and see what’s in it. We examine God’s promises; we see that God has *always* kept His promises in the past, without fail; and we “account” that God will keep His promises again!

What did Abraham see when he “took inventory” of God’s “account”? He saw these attributes of God.

First, he accounted that **God is all-powerful**. He remembered those words that the LORD had spoken to him many years earlier: “***Is anything too hard for the LORD?***”; and he reckoned that if God be all-powerful, then He can surely raise someone from the dead.

Now, as I mentioned a few minutes ago, no one had, up to this point in history, been resurrected from the dead; and no clear revelation had been given concerning resurrection (at least, none that is recorded in Scripture). However, Abraham *did* know about the prophecy that God had made in the Garden of Eden. He had heard, from his ancestors, about God's promise that the promised Seed (the Messiah) would be crushed in the heel by Satan, and that the Messiah would then crush Satan's head. Perhaps, as Abraham thought on that promise, he realised that the Messiah would die, yet rise again. At any rate, Abraham "took account" of the inventory of God's attributes, and "accounted" that God could raise Isaac from the dead. Secondly, as Abraham accounted that **God cannot lie**. In **Titus 1:2**, we are reminded that God "**cannot lie**." Time and time again, God calls us to remember that He is a God of truth and faithfulness. He *will* perform every promise that He has made.

God had promised Abraham, in no uncertain words, "***In Isaac shall thy seed be called.***" (**Genesis 21:12**). These words could not possibly be understood in some figurative way. Somehow, Isaac *would* live, and literally have a son, because God had promised that the Messiah would come through the line of Isaac. Therefore, if God was now commanding Abraham to *slay* his son Isaac, then God would *have* to raise Isaac back to life, in order to keep his promise! The "inventory" of God's character could lead to no other conclusion!

Christian, how are you "scoring" in your tests of faith? Oftentimes, as we take account of our own lives, we reckon that because we are "keeping our nose clean," and staying out of trouble, that we must be living by faith. But then, God brings along a test; and the evidence of whether you pass or fail is simply this: **Will you do what God commanded?** You may *begin* to make preparations to do God's will; but if you stop short of actually *doing* it, you have not passed the test. For example, there are Christians who know that God has called them to be a pastor or missionary; and they *begin* to prepare to go; but then, for one reason or another, they stop. Oftentimes, Christians begin to make preparations to share the Gospel with someone, or to teach a Sunday School class, or to disciple a young believer, or to give to someone in need; but then, they stop short of doing it. Don't stop short! Finish what God has called you to do!

III. The "Real Event" (vv. 18-19)

(**Read Hebrews 11:17-19 again.**) Thus far, we've talked about the "test"—the "dress rehearsal" for the *real* crisis that was to come. We've talked about how Abraham passed his test. Now, we will look at the "real event"—the *real* crisis situation.

Who was involved in the real crisis situation? **It was God the Father and God the Son.** Abraham and Isaac were the "actors" in the "dress rehearsal"; but God the Father and God the Son were the ones who came through in the *real* emergency. What *was* the emergency? The emergency was that mankind was lost in his sin, and under God's just condemnation, and sentenced to eternal death in hell. God's perfect justice demanded that every one of us be cast into the Lake of Fire, and be separated from Him forever. However, God, in His mercy, did not wish for this to happen. God had a plan to redeem mankind back to Himself: and that plan was to send His only begotten Son into the world to become a man, so that He could be our *Substitute*. Christ took the punishment for our sin, in our place.

That is precisely what this entire situation on Mount Moriah was all about. It was a huge picture of what God the Father and God the Son would do one day for us. God the Father would allow sinful men to slay His only begotten Son, so that He could be the perfect Sacrifice for our sins.

By the way, look at what Paul called Isaac in **Hebrews 11:17**. (**Read Hebrews 11:17 again**.) Paul says that Abraham offered up his *“only begotten son.”* Does this name sound familiar? It is the same name by which Christ is called! Isaac is the only person in the Bible, other than Christ, who is called by this title! *Why?* Why did Paul call Isaac by such a sacred name? One thing is for sure: Paul was *not* saying that Isaac was Abraham’s “only” son! At that point in time, Abraham already had one other son (Ishmael); and after Sarah’s death, he had yet six more sons by his second wife, Keturah! Obviously, Isaac was not an only child. What does this name *“only begotten son”* mean, then? Simply this: **Isaac was Abraham’s “one-of-a-kind” son!** The word *monogenes* literally means “one of a kind.” Isaac was unique. His birth was by a miracle. Also, he was the unique son through whom the Messiah would one day be born. **Likewise, Jesus is called the “only begotten,” or “one-of-a-kind” Son of God.** Jesus wasn’t *created* by the Father. That is *not* what “only begotten” means, when applied to Jesus. It means that He has a very *unique relationship* with His Father. There is no other being that has the kind of relationship that Jesus has with His Father. He is one with the Father in being and essence; yet, at the same time, He is a distinct in His Person. He is equal to His Father in every way; yet, He is always in complete submission to His Father’s will.

In their unique, loving relationship, Abraham and Isaac are pictures of God the Father and God the Son. However, *what they did* on Mount Moriah is also a picture. It is a picture of what God the Father and God the Son would do one day on Mount Calvary, in order to provide a remedy for the crisis situation of man’s sin. In **Isaiah 53**, Isaiah prophesied that the LORD would make the Messiah’s righteous soul an *“offering for sin.”* When the real crisis situation came, there was no one to stop the slaying. There was no one to be a substitute, so that Jesus wouldn’t have to go through with dying. Jesus *was* the Substitute! He *was* the Offering! That was the whole point. Isaac was not actually slain, because he was only an actor in a “dress rehearsal.” Jesus, on the other hand, *was* really slain; and He *really* rose from the dead!

This brings us to **verse 19**. Before we close this morning, let’s look again at **verse 19**. (**Read Hebrews 11:19**.) What does Paul mean when he says, *“from whence also he received him in a figure?”* He is saying that when Isaac got up from the altar, and fell into his father’s embrace, it was a “figure,” or parable, of Christ’s resurrection from the dead. God was giving Abraham a prophetic picture of that future day when the Son of God would arise from the dead, and be received again to His heavenly Father.

This message—the message that Christ died for our sins, was buried, and rose again—is called “the Gospel” (the “good news”). Though Abraham lived many centuries before Christ, he was able to understand (and believe) the Gospel through this prophetic picture that God gave him. In **Galatians 3:8**, we are told that God *“preached before the gospel unto Abraham.”* Somehow, Abraham knew that what he and Isaac had done that day was a rehearsal for the “real thing”; and he placed his trust in the One who would become the *true* Sacrifice for sins.

Conclusion: I would like to close this morning by asking this question: **Have you believed the Gospel?** To “believe the Gospel” means to stop trusting in your own righteousness, and to acknowledge that Jesus is the only One who can save you. If you think you are on your way to Heaven because you are good, then you are not really saved. You must repent of your sin, and place your trust in the Sacrifice that Jesus made for you. You need to ask for His forgiveness. If you need to be saved today, *please* do not put it off! If you *are* saved, I would ask this: **Are you growing in faith?** Is your faith weak, and in need of strengthening? God has many more tests for you. Won’t you submit to Him, and let Him teach you?