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You've probably heard the familiar warning on TV or radio, "This is a test of the emergency broadcasting system," followed by a high-pitched sound. The warning then concludes, "If this been an actual emergency, you would have been instructed what to do next."

Wouldn't it be nice if we had an emergency spiritual system, telling us what to do when a crisis enters our lives? Have you ever wished that God would send you a telegram or a tweet containing instructions on how to get out of mess you've gotten yourself into?

Sometimes life contains what seem like tests, and they may feel unfair, as was the case with a student in a biology class [who] was given the assignment to learn about birds. He was to learn the classification, the scientific name, the common name, and characteristics of all the birds. The professor said, "Learn everything about them."

The day of the exam, the student was horrified when he looked at the test giving the birds pictured from their knees down. He knew the birds well but he couldn't identify any of them from their knees down. He tossed his

paper onto the pile of exams on the instructor's table and explained his frustration.

The unsympathetic professor said, "Well, you'll just have to take a zero. I told you to learn everything about them. What's your name, Son?"

The boy reached down and pulled up his pants to [show] his knees and said, "You tell me!"<sup>1</sup>

Those tests we face in life often seem as unfair as trying to identify birds by their knees. I think Abraham might have agreed, for the story in Genesis 22 begins by stating, "After these things God tested Abraham." The phrase *All these things* refers to all the events that had happened in Abraham's life—leaving his homeland for a new place that God promised, the promise of many descendants and a child in his old age, the birth of Ishmael through Hagar, and the birth of Isaac through Sarah. So many blessings had come into Abraham's life, but now a new challenge was about to emerge, what the narrator tells us was a test from God.

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I don't know about you, but I find that idea troubling—that God would test us by intentionally sending challenges into our lives. I know that life does present numerous difficulties, but I view God as one who offers us possibilities to learn in these difficult times, one who gives us options for various pathways for growth and healing, who offers hope in the midst of the messes we've gotten ourselves into, but I do not view God as one who creates the difficulties just to "teach us a lesson." The narrator of Genesis and I may disagree about the idea of God testing us, but we do agree that God provides in these difficult times.

After Abraham had waited many years for a son, the narrator tells us that Abraham is to take his son Isaac to a mountain to offer him as a burnt offering as a sacrifice.

What? Aren't you going to argue, Abraham? Show a bit of opposition? If I were standing in his shoes, I might have replied to God:

"You want me to do what? I waited for so long to have a son. You promised me many descendants.

How can I have descendants if I destroy my son? Maybe you could offer me an easier task? Something else. Anything else."

Abraham didn't argue with God, but instead he saddled his donkey, cut and loaded the wood, and took his son and two young men for a journey. After a three-day walk, he said to the other men, "Wait here with the donkey, for my son and I will go over there and worship and will return to you." Abraham seemed to indicate that all would be fine, that he and his son Isaac would return, though in the back of his mind he may have feared that he would be the only one to return.

His son carried the wood, while Abraham carried the torch containing the fire. Isaac soon began to wonder: "Hey dad, we've got wood and fire, but where's the animal to offer as a burnt offering?" Dad replied, "God will provide."

This whole notion of burnt offerings and sacrifice seems a bit strange to our modern ears. Why would you want to burn up something as an offering to God? The Hebrew word for "burnt

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offering” means literally *to ascend* or *go up*, as in the phrase “to go up in smoke.” A verse in Leviticus suggests that the smoke was pleasant smelling to God.<sup>2</sup>

Let’s think of this pleasant smelling offering in today’s world. Today a guy might spend a considerable amount of money—what we could call a sacrifice of finances—to purchase perfume for someone special, for he trusts that the smell will be pleasant to the women he loves. Or maybe he would take her to an expensive restaurant where the aroma entices them from the very moment they enter the door. Smell is a powerful sense, and the ancient followers believed that God had a very good sense of smell.

In the ancient world, they believed God lived up in the dome that covered the earth, and they believed the smell of cooked meat would reach God. Just imagine the event as the ultimate cookout.

That background helps us understand the setting of the story—ancient worshipers wanted to provide God with a great smell. But the sacrifice of a

son? That pushes the boundaries of what sounds credible a bit too far, doesn’t it?

Abraham and Isaac arrived on the mountain, and then the terrifying part of the story occurs as Abraham stacked the wood, tied up his son, laid him on the wood, and lifted his knife. Those listening to the ancient story may have wondered, “Will God provide a way out of this situation?”

Even if we don’t believe that God sends us difficult tests, we may still wonder when facing difficulties: will God provide? We often wonder if we will have enough for today, tomorrow, or retirement. We often believe that we have to have more and more in order to feel secure. But oftentimes when we get more, we discover it just doesn’t feel like enough, so we pursue even more. As we get more and more stuff, we then discover how much time and energy is required to take care of all our stuff. We may even find ourselves worn out from trying to manage all our stuff.

Will God provide? Although we no longer live in a world of burnt offerings and sacrifices on the

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mountain, I think we still struggle with the same basic question: Will God provide?

In Abraham's case, God did provide, for Abraham heard God say "Stop: do not hurt your son." When Abraham looked up, he saw a ram tangled in the brush nearby, which he offered as a burnt offering. Some scholars today suggest that God never intended for Abraham to offer his son as a sacrifice, but possibly Abraham was influenced by the practice of neighboring tribes. In the ancient world some tribes did practice child sacrifice. Abraham may have assumed that this behavior was the norm, the thing to do, but the story in Genesis was a bold declaration that God does not approve of such behaviors—that God does not ask believers to make this great of a sacrifice.

Abraham faced a test, not one given by God, but a temptation by the surrounding culture to do what everyone around him was doing. We may not face the temptation of child sacrifice, but we may face the temptation of using violence to get what we want, or the temptation to ignore those in need, or the temptation to discriminate against those with different colors or skin or sexual orientations. Sometimes we forget that our Fourth of July celebration this week represents freedom for everyone, not just freedom for those who look and act like us.

When faced with the tests and temptations of life or the surrounding culture, God offers us another way. When you encounter days that feel like "this is only a test," trust that God does provide.

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<sup>1</sup> Hodgins, Michael. *1001 More Humorous Illustrations for Public Speaking* (p. 853). Zondervan. Kindle Edition, #801.

<sup>2</sup> Leviticus 1:9.