

**Passing the Test**  
(Job 1:1, 2:1-10)

“Take out a piece of paper and a pencil and get ready for a pop quiz!” When I was in school, these simple words had the power to send waves of shock and fear throughout the class room. They had the power to bring even the largest football player to his knees. I know they always made my blood run ice cold.

Why does the thought of a pop quiz – a test – bring on feelings of fear and insecurity? The most likely answer probably lies within the realm of “preparedness.” If we were always and everywhere prepared for the test the notion of a pop quiz would not be so distressing. But as students of life we know that we are not always so prepared.

The fact is life is made up of all kinds of tests. A few of those tests stand out in my mind. I can still remember my dad making sure I was prepared for the weekly spelling test administered in my first grade class. Each night we would learn two or three of the ten words assigned. He would drill me each night and then, the evening before the test, he would actually give me a mock test.

Another test I recall with great anxiety is the exam for registered professional engineers. I actually spent several years trying to avoid it. The examination was administered in two parts – each four hours long. At the end of the first part I was convinced that there was no way I could possibly do well enough in the afternoon session to offset all the wrong choices I must have made in the morning session. My fears

were allayed six weeks later when I received my license in the mail.

In our United Methodist denomination there is another kind of test that all people going into the ministry must go through. This test is affectionately referred to as “the psychologicals.” The test is designed to determine whether or not an individual is mentally and emotionally fit for ministry.

It’s a confusing test. One of the 480 questions asked (five times) if I was attracted to tall women. Although I passed the Church’s psychological profile for ministry, I still don’t know the right answer to that question. And I have no idea what its purpose was, but I suspect it had nothing to do with tall women!

Perhaps the most demanding of all tests I have submitted to is the oral examination for my elders’ orders. For ninety minutes I was drilled by five pastors and laypersons on topics of theology and the practice of ministry. And like that professional engineers’ exam, when I walked out of the interview I was convinced that I had failed. To my surprise, later that evening I was unanimously elected an elder by the full Board of Ordained Ministry.

We spend a significant part of our lives preparing for all kinds of tests. Most of us don’t like tests – tests that measure our knowledge, our physical ability, our mental acuity, our emotional stability, even our medical condition. Passing the test becomes paramount in our lives, so much so that we often

become oblivious to the real purpose of the test. Please pray with me.

God of wisdom and knowledge help us understand the importance of adversity in our lives. Open our hearts and minds to the scripture read and your word proclaimed. Make my words your words this morning as we seek to be in relationship with you. Through Christ Jesus we pray. Amen.

God proclaimed Job to be blameless and upright – “one who fears me and turns away from evil.” God’s proclamation was made in the company of *the satan* and turned out to be bad news for the unsuspecting Job.

Before we go further here, let me say a word about “the satan.” That’s satan with a lower case “s.” In the Old Testament the word *satan* refers to both human and heavenly beings who act as adversaries or accusers. The term *satan* as used in the *Book of Job* refers to a function as much as it refers to an entity.

*The Book of Job* was probably written after the Babylonian Exile. In that context the expression “satan” had come to designate a particular divine being in the heavenly court whose specialized function was to seek out persons disloyal to God. The satan then reported such persons to God for further disposition. Hence the description of “accuser.” The concept of Satan – with a capital “S” – that hostile and dualistic opponent of God known as “the devil” did not develop in the biblical text until later in New Testament times.

So when God brought his blameless and upright servant Job to the satan’s attention, it worked almost

as a challenge. The satan responded to God’s challenge by saying “... stretch out your hand now and touch his bone and his flesh and he will curse you to your face. That’s your blameless and upright Job!”

And so, with God’s permission, the satan proceeded to test Job by afflicting him with all kinds of trouble. Job lost everything – all his worldly possessions – including his seven sons and three daughters. In what could be considered a test by God, Job’s entire life was plunged into pain and suffering.

If you aren’t familiar with the *Book of Job*, the story is a good example of “what goes around comes around.” The satan essentially makes a bet with God that his most blameless and upright servant Job is only blameless and upright as long as things are going his way. So God gives the satan dominion over Job’s life and stands by watching as Job suffers.

As the story unfolds Job is counseled by three friends and his wife before he speaks out against God and makes his plea for justice. In the end, however, we must presume that Job passes the test because God restores everything to Job – two fold!

When we study a passage or book in the Bible we are always asked to consider three questions. “What does this say about God?” “What does this say about humankind, or us?” And “What does this say about God’s relationship with humankind – God’s relationship with us?”

Over the years, *The Book of Job* has come to be understood as a study in patience. And certainly, it could be said that Job was a patient man to have endured extreme suffering for so long. But what does this passage say about God? Are we to believe that God goes

around testing us on a whim, for no good reason? This is a disturbing image of God to say the least. And it's important for us to wrestle with – even struggle with – this particular image of God.

To begin this struggle it might be helpful to understand the biblical context of the Test. Perhaps the best example of God's testing comes in the story of Abraham and his son Isaac in *Genesis* 22. God tells Abraham to make a sacrifice of his beloved son, Isaac. Dutifully, Abraham leads Isaac to a mountain top where they build an altar. Abraham places Isaac on the altar and is just about to plunge a knife into his heart when God lets Abraham know he has passed the test. His willingness to do the deed was sufficient obedience to God's will!

In this Old Testament context, God uses the Test to refine or strengthen the faith of God's followers. The Old Testament concept of the Test asks God's children to affirm their obedience to God no matter what the circumstances and consequences might be.

What was God intending with regard to Job? In the process of administering this test, God sees fit to take the lives of ten children. It's difficult for us to understand what purpose might be served here.

What does the story of Job mean for our lives today? At the risk of offending some of you I'm going to give you my take on this story. God created all things in this life – good and bad. Whether God deliberately intended the bad to be bad is not clear. What is clear is that all things are of God.

God never intended for us to be free of pain and suffering. God may have very well inspired that old country

western song that says, "I beg your pardon, I never promised you a rose garden." This goes hand in hand with the ideology that God creates bad right along side good. Our problem is we need to categorize everything as good or bad. Not so with God. Our perception of bad may not agree with divine understanding.

The pain and suffering we experience in this life is simply the consequence of our actions and the actions of others. God creates in us the ability to make choices. Our choices – good and bad – have consequences for us and for others – directly and indirectly.

So it's the consequences of life that cause our pain and suffering. God, I believe, does not deliberately inflict that pain and suffering on us for any reason. Not as punishment, not as a test. God suffers right along side us. God grieves our losses and feels our pain. How else could God be considered a compassionate God?

And likewise, the good things we enjoy in this life, while they are a gift from God, are not a reward or a passing grade for the good things we might have done. God rejoices in our good fortune. How else could God be considered a God of grace?

There is purpose in all that God creates. The purpose of pain and suffering is at least two fold. First of all, God expects, like Job, for us to be strengthened by adversity. It's our choice, just like it was Job's choice. We can sit here and revel in our feelings of abandonment. Or we can meet adversity in a non-personal way and know that God loves us none the less.

And secondly, God expects that we understand adversity – our pain and suffering – to be a way of reminding us that there is something better than this

temporal, physical life. If we lived every day in that rose garden, we would have no reason to look forward to God's promise of eternity. Pain and suffering are God's way of saying, "I don't want you to be too comfortable with this imperfect world. I have something more perfect waiting for you."

Finally, Job is a reminder to us that pain and suffering are a part of this life, even necessary to this life. Consider the process of chrysalis that takes place as a caterpillar is transformed into a beautiful butterfly.

A young girl once plucked the cocoon of a butterfly from a branch so she could see first hand this wonderful transformation. She watched the cocoon eagerly each day, anticipating the emergence of the beautiful butterfly.

Then one day, after what seemed like a long time, there was movement within the silky protective cocoon. The little girl watched intently as the new butterfly seemed to struggle against the tightly wrapped silk. Its slow progress in breaking into the world was beginning to cause her to wonder if the miracle would ever happen.

With every good intention of helping the struggling butterfly, the little girl carefully snipped away the silky threads with a small scissors. The cocoon immediately opened wide and the butterfly escaped without any further effort.

But the little girl soon noticed that something was wrong with the butterfly. Its wings were lifeless and colorless. Rather than spreading its wings and flying, the butterfly could only drag them on the ground. It lived this sickly and drab life for a few days and then died.

The little girl was saddened. But she became even sadder when she learned that it was her fault that the butterfly died. You see, the butterfly needed to go through the painful struggle in escaping the cocoon. It seems that all the pushing done inside the cocoon is necessary for the butterfly's life fluids to be pumped into the veins of her wings. Without that life-giving fluid the butterfly's wings were useless and colorless.

This is the purpose of pain and suffering in our lives. We need a certain amount of conflict and adversity in our lives to keep our souls from weakening. Pain, suffering, conflict, and adversity are necessary to strengthening our spiritual wings. It's all a part of a very complex plan for our lives – a plan we cannot expect to ever understand, at least in this life.

In some ways life could be seen as a test – a test worth passing. But to capture an old cliché life really seems more like a dress rehearsal. Through pain and suffering and conflict and adversity we are rehearsing for life beyond this life – eternal life – and not just simply passing the test!