

## Tests

On TV channel 18 ("Grit"), I recently saw a movie from the '90's entitled "The Quick and the Dead," starring Sharon Stone. At first, I thought this movie with its almost ridiculous series of gunfights ("contests" in the film) was a parody on Western flicks, or perhaps it was a take-off on Clint Eastwood's "spaghetti" westerns. But the more I thought about what was going on in the story, I realized that it was instead an allegory on life – and an absolutely brilliant one at that. In the movie, the name of the town is Redemption, and the name of the bad guy is Herod, an exceedingly wicked man who gloats over his power of life or death and tyrannizes the town's people. There's a hero, a mysterious person whose origin, and whose destination at the end, are unknown. This unique person is shot "dead" but subsequently reappears, symbolizing a resurrection. And of course the film's title gives it away as a story that derives from the Bible. Following is my understanding of the allegorical meaning of the movie, but it's also an elaboration or expansion of the Bible's story of Job, which allegorizes the meta-narrative that lurks between the lines of all Scripture.

All of human history, and all of any individual person's life, consists of a long series of contests between good and evil, between the side of Satan and that of God. Every day, there's another contest, or even on some days a bunch of contests. The contests may be public or private. They may be in matters huge or small. The matters can even seem trivial to us. (Someone eighty or so years ago, handing out Gospel tracts, gave one to a certain student, having no awareness what could or would result; that student was Billy Graham.) But the issues in these contests all involve choices.

These "contests" are really tests, tests of character, or tests that demonstrate whose side we take in life, whether that of Satan and evil, or the side of God. The tests may be what words we choose, what value judgments we make, or what acts we do – or don't do. Often they involve decisions that must be made. And God notices and remembers each one.

We all embody a sin nature. We're susceptible to demonic influence. We have a carnal nature that craves fulfillment. And we find the world and all that it puts on offer alluring, its values and beliefs compelling. And yet, if we're a Christian, God is present in our life in the Person of the indwelling Spirit. God expects us to mortify, that is, to reckon as dead the old self, and instead yield to the Spirit. The Spirit can enable us to pass every test, if we're yielded to Him. So inside each of us a terrible conflict, a contest, is going on almost all the time. Do we yield to the Spirit? Or indulge the sin nature, which is our default attitude? God places situation after situation in front of us to test us. Every interaction with others is a test. Every idea the media throws out is a test. How many missed opportunities, failures to act or to say something, or wrong behaviors are there in your history? How many times did you show God that you *passed* the tests?

At the end of the movie, Bible-based as it was (although I'm certain 99.999% of viewers, including all the film critics and reviewers, totally missed it), there was a great and climactic gunfight, representing the cosmic conflict between good and evil, between the Son and Satan. All the contests prior simply anticipated the great and final contest in which the really skilled, although mysterious, good gunfighter wins over the wicked one.

Testing began in the opening pages of the Bible, and it continues all thru history. Life is a probation. It's a period of testing, and God is the Judge. Each person in all humanity experiences testing, which recapitulates the testing of that first couple in the Garden. We cannot avoid these contests, they are forced upon us. God sees to that. And of course there's the really big test, What will we do with Jesus? But just because we've taken the side of Jesus doesn't mean all the other tests in life become irrelevant. No, to the contrary: the decisions and choices we make *as believers* are vastly more important than those of unbelievers who cannot help but fail each and every test they confront. All our testings mirror the testing, the great and ultimate Contest, that occurred at Calvary.

The tests aren't merely to satisfy the good, that is, to uphold God's goodness, although of course they do that. Rather, the tests are either to defeat Satan and evil, or to uphold Satan and evil. The consequences of the tests, even the ones we suppose are so trivial we don't recognize them as tests at all, may be enormous. That's because all the tests are supervised by God, and His holy will must be accomplished because He is sovereign in His creation. And our role in life is to glorify Him.

What I'm presenting here is not a new teaching based on a movie. We've talked about this matter of testing often in Sunday School over the years. And it's explicit here in 2 Corinthians, where Paul repeatedly states that he's putting the Corinthian believers to the "test." As an Apostle, Paul was God's agent of testing. For us today, testing is based on our adherence or loyalty to God's Word. Have we so thoroughly incorporated the Word of God – even the implications and applications of the Word of God – into our minds and lives that, led by the Spirit, we easily pass each test as it comes along? Or do we not even realize that we're being tested and, not knowing the Word, not having internalized God's infinitely holy wisdom and truths, flunk each test?

Don't be smug about your salvation. Most church-goers are. Christ Jesus is the greatest reality there is, and His cross is the most important event in your life. Let's live out these truths! Out of transcendent love, God has entrusted to us weighty responsibilities to go with the exalted privileges He's bestowed. We must be faithful.