

Tests in all forms: Genesis 2:15-17; Matthew 4:1-11

by [Christian Coon](#) in the [January 29, 2008](#) issue

Imagine being brilliant—Massachusetts Institute of Technology kind of brilliant. You’ve aced the course work in electrical engineering and computer science and you’re ready to work as a Wall Street analyst. But there’s one test left, and it has absolutely nothing to do with electrical engineering or computer science. You have to swim 100 yards.

That’s the situation Stephanie Yeh faced in the spring of 2006, according to Douglas Belkin in the *Boston Globe* (May 8, 2007). MIT is one of a handful of top schools in the country that require students to pass a swim test before they graduate. Yeh, who never learned how to swim, apparently wondered about the rationale for a swim test. Her response to the requirement was “I mean, who cares if you can swim?” In other words, is this test really necessary?

Many have probably asked this question about Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness. Was this test really necessary? After all, Matthew had already revealed some things about Jesus that make a wilderness trek seem superfluous. There are the miraculous conception, the remarkable visit from the magi and the voice from heaven that made it clear: “This is my son.” A sterling résumé, to be sure. And yet the text says that the Spirit led Jesus to a test in a place of desolation.

There’s a diversity of opinion in scripture about the nature of divine temptation and testing. In the lectionary text from Genesis, God seems to be testing Adam. In other passages, however, there is a question as to whether God tests us or whether temptation is even necessary. Jesus teaches us to pray in a way that asks us not to be tempted. James 1:13-14 stresses that God is not the source of temptation; instead, we are tempted by our own desires.

Nearly all people of faith would agree that we should ask for God’s guidance in our daily lives, and that we do receive guidance. Do we also believe that God leads us only into situations that are filled with warm affirmations given by, as the R.E.M. song goes, “shiny, happy people”? I don’t believe that, but as with any biblical interpretation, it’s a tricky balance. Regardless of whether one thinks tests come

from God or another source, it's helpful to reflect on how Jesus responds to tests.

Consider the swimming requirement. In the *Boston Globe* article, Belkin summarizes various ways that students respond to this requirement. About half of the first-year undergrads jump in and pass the test during their first two weeks on campus. Others procrastinate. Still others, those who can't swim or are afraid of water, take a Swimming 101 class. But for many the class is a daunting proposition: these are MIT students, after all. They overthink. "They want to learn what angle to hold their arms," said an MIT lifeguard. "I just tell them to go ahead and try it; don't worry about the numbers."

The students' reactions to the swimming requirement parallel the ways that we respond to our own daily tests, the ones that we face on land. Some of us meet our challenges head on. Some avoid conflicts and put them off. Some think too much without doing anything. Maybe you've employed all three tactics. Thankfully, Jesus shows us a better way.

Jesus doesn't race around calling out the devil so they can fight *mano a mano*; he waits and prepares, fasting and praying. He doesn't procrastinate; he confronts the tempter. He doesn't overanalyze the situation by thinking it to death; he uses the right amount of reason and faith to refute the devil. Intentional preparation and courageous confrontation are powerful tools. In the Christian faith, these are the Lenten disciplines that we can utilize when life's tests are before us.

Taking these tests will often leave us exhausted. I can swim, for example, but I'm not an active swimmer. When I do decide to get in the pool for some exercise, I take in huge gulps of air after only 100 yards of swimming. Likewise, Jesus' test takes its toll on him—angels arrive to nurture him. As soon as the test and Jesus' recuperation are complete, though, he leaves for Galilee to proclaim a message of repentance and to call others to join him on this mission. At this point, Jesus has been transformed from the one being tested to the one who will now test others.

I was hoping that Yeh had said something that would put an exclamation point on her experience. I was hoping for a quote like "I know this will change my life." But in response to the question, "Was it worth it?" she said, "Not really." She has no plans to swim again.

Hopefully one day Yeh will look back on this experience and decide that the time spent in the water encouraged her to take on future tests of all kinds. After all, tests

come in all forms. Thankfully we believe in a God who is with us as we pass through the waters and walk through the fire.