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## **POOL OF BETHESDA**

(In searching through the internet for information on the Pool of Bethesda, John 5:1-9, for our cell-group meeting, my daughter Jeannine found a treasure in a field. She found it in the website, “Drive Through History.” I had always wondered about that part of the story that tells about an angel troubling the water, and the scholarly commentators did not have a satisfactory explanation. Some commentators said this part of the story was an ancient legend; some said it was a cultural superstition; some said it was a “gloss” – an unsubstantiated addition to inspired Scripture; and some modern translations deleted this part of the story. The following information certainly seems to solve the problem,)

“The Pool of Bethesda is just north of the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. In his Gospel account, John describes Jesus going to such a pool, surrounded by five covered colonnades:

*Jesus went up to Jerusalem for one of the Jewish festivals. Now there is in Jerusalem near the Sheep Gate a pool, which in Aramaic is called Bethesda and which is surrounded by five covered colonnades. Here a great number of disabled people used to lie - the blind, the lame, the paralyzed. (John 5:1-3)*

Before we jump into the Gospel story, here’s the cultural context of the Pool of Bethesda. The Greeks had created a cult around Asklepius, the pagan god of healing. (Note: Alexander the Great defeated the Persians and conquered the East, including Israel, in 334 BC. The Hellenistic – Greek – period lasted from 330 BC to 166 BC and greatly influenced Israel. That is the reason the earliest copies of Scripture were written in Greek. Rome conquered Israel in 63 BC.)

“During the Hellenistic period, the Greeks built “Asklepions” – or ancient healing centers, all across the Greek Empire. The ill and disabled would congregate at these regional healing centers. They would drink and bathe in the waters of the Asklepion and then sleep within the temple’s walls. They slept on mats laid out in a section of the inner sanctum of the temple called the “abaton.” The abaton was supposed to be the place of divine dreams, where Asklepius or his serpents (Note!) might appear to give the sick clues about their healing.

“In simple terms, the Greeks attributed the healing powers of natural springs to spirits. This belief made its way into the cult of Asklepius. His temples were typically built near sacred springs with shallow pools and baths. Participants would wait by the water, praying, fasting, chanting, etc., until Asklepius or his helpful “serpent spirits” (Note again!) churned the water. This was the best time for a healing miracle - when bubbles or ripples made their way from the spring to the pool.

“The association between divine healing and sacred water activity was a mainstay at every Asklepion. It was a cultural staple throughout the Hellenized world. Now, with that as background, let’s return to the Pool of Bethesda:

*One who was there had been an invalid for thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him lying there and learned that he had been in this condition for a long time, he asked him, ‘Do you want to get well?’*

*‘Sir,’ the invalid replied, ‘I have no one to help me into the pool when the water is stirred. While I am trying to get in, someone else goes down ahead of me.’*

*Then Jesus said to him, ‘Get up! Pick up your mat and walk.’ At once the man was cured; he picked up his mat and walked. (John 5:5-9)*

“So, in context, this wasn’t just another miraculous healing. Jesus had walked into another pagan territory and confronted a longstanding cultural myth. He wanted his Hellenized Jewish audience to gain a new understanding. As in his meeting with the Samaritan woman at the well, Jesus was making the claim that he was the true source of healing – He was the source of ‘living water.’

## **THE CAVE SYNDROME**

(Last month I shared the first of two messages, **The Samson Syndrome**, that were shared at the Regional Vineyard Conference by Pastor Abe Huber from Brazil. This is the second message, and since my notes were abbreviated I have taken the liberty of filling in some observations of my own. I apologize for that.)

“1 Kings 18 tells the story of how the Prophet Elijah was powerfully used by God to defeat the 450 prophets of Baal. But chapter 19 tells how Queen Jezebel was used by the devil to intimidate Elijah. When Jezebel threatened to kill him, he was filled with fear and fled far into the wilderness where he hid in a cave.

There seems to be an anomaly in this story, but I have found it to be true to life even today. It appears that those people who are leaders in the faith, those who are genuinely striving to walk in faithfulness and holiness, are in great danger of being compromised or of being intimidated and too frightened to continue in a life of obedience and service to the King.

Let me remind you that the Christian life is a life of spiritual warfare. Paul writes to the believers at one church and says, *It has been granted to you on behalf of Christ (It is a privilege that you have been given) not only to believe on him but to suffer for him. You are going through the same struggle I had and still have. (Phil. 1:29)*

If you have come to believe that you will eventually arrive at a place of safety in this life where the struggles and suffering and attacks of the enemy will be past, you are mistaken. Yes, God is our refuge and strength, but He is our refuge in the midst of the battle, not a place of refuge from the battle. That will come later, in heaven. Paul says further,

*Not that I have...already been made perfect..... One thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. All of us who are mature should take such a view of things. (Phil. 3:13-21)*

My friends, let me suggest that you and I need courage. It takes courage to live the Christian life. It takes courage, courage, and more courage. We need:

### **Courage before God**

The “fear of the Lord” is a good thing, and we are encouraged to have it in both the Old and New Testaments. But we need to study and understand what God means by that phrase. If you are afraid of someone, afraid they are against you and that they are out to get you, I don’t think it is possible to love and trust that person.

An officer on President J. F. Kennedy's security detail told about the time when JFK's son, John, was five years old and how he was allowed to open the door to the President's office and run to him. The President had tremendous earthly power, but to John-John he was simply Daddy.

There was a time when a man who did not show the proper reverence to the presence of God in the Ark of the Covenant was instantly killed (2 Samuel 6). But Jesus taught us to call God "Abba, Daddy" – and the moment He died on the cross the veil separating us from God was torn. Now we are exhorted to come boldly into our Father's presence. Not irreverently, but with confidence that He loves us tenderly and that we can trust Him in every way. Paul assures us, *Since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand.* (Romans 5:1)

### **Courage before the devil**

We tend toward two extremes toward the devil in this era. We either dismiss the whole idea as superstition and treat him like a cartoon character, or we are afraid of him and won't even study what the Bible says about him. Remember that Jesus taught more about the devil than all the rest of the information in the Bible put together. James exhorts us, *Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.* (James 4:7) You are to resist him, not ask God to do it. And Peter teaches us, *Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith.....* (1 Peter 5:8) And Jesus tells all those who go forth in His name: *I give you authority over all the power of the enemy, you can tread on serpents and scorpions and crush them.* (Luke 10:19)

There is a devil and there are demons, whether anyone believes it or not, but we don't need to be afraid of him or of them. He is a defeated devil. His head (headship, authority) was crushed by Jesus' foot on the cross!

### **Courage before men**

Paul tells us, *Stand firm...contend for the faith of the gospel without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you.* (Phil. 1:27)

For most of us, it is not a matter of standing up to threats and persecution, we are too intimidated even to witness to strangers. One morning last week I (Glenn) was waiting in the Podiatry clinic in the V.A. hospital. (When you get decrepited you can't even trim your own toenails, for pity's sake!) There were four of us grizzled heroes there. I asked about everyone's age, and we were aged 90, 91 (me), 93, and 94. I was trying to think how to witness to the guys and said, "We're getting close to the end, aren't we?" One guy said, "Nothing is left for us but to be in the ground and push up daisies." My mouth got paralyzed. I was thinking, should I say this or that or what? Then the nurse came out and called my name and the moment and opportunity was past. I was so unhappy with myself. From a few other comments, I don't think any of them knew the Lord, and I was so afraid of saying the wrong thing that I didn't say anything. Forgive me, Lord. We need to be ready to share a courageous witness in season and out of season. Amen?

Dear friends, let us pray for courage before God, courage before the devil, and courage before men. Let us honor our great God and Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who bore a courageous witness, even to His death on the cross for us.

## **HAPPY HALLOWEEN! Really?**

No, not really. Halloween in our nation has become second only to Christmas as the most popular holiday – an \$8 billion dollar industry. It features trick-or-treating and parties for the kids; Halloween parties for the adults(?); featuring witches, zombies, ghosts, werewolves, demons, spiders, etc. The church usually goes right along with this abomination. We have lost our cotton-picking minds!

Halloween apparently originated as a Celtic festival in Ireland. It was known as “Samhain,” a belief that the dead returned to earth at the end of summer, or that the veil separating the living and the dead was thin at that time. The festival was rooted in ancestor worship. Wiccans, those devoted to witchcraft, regard it as the most sacred night of the year.

Early emigrants from Ireland and England brought their customs and idols with them. (Our big mistake as Native Americans was to let those dadgum foreigners from Europe and everywhere else come to our beautiful land where the deer and the buffalo roamed.)

Deuteronomy 18:10-12 says: *Never sacrifice your son or daughter as a burnt offering* (abortion). *Don't let your people practice fortune-telling* (astrology, crystal balls); *or use sorcery* (including alcohol, street drugs, overuse of prescription drugs); *or interpret omens* (ouija boards, crystals, tea leaves); *or engage in witchcraft* (Wiccans, horror movies, Halloween parties, dressing up children as witches, reveling in witchcraft games and movies like Harry Potter); *or cast spells* (putting curses on people is an integral part of many internet games and videos); *or function as mediums and psychics* (20 million Americans are actively engaged in the New Age movement, including Yoga); *or call forth the spirits of the dead* (this is a part of the “harmless” play of much psychic phenomena, and seriously pursued in occultic meetings and “spiritist churches” as well as in the “Day of the Dead” in Mexico and Latin America, the Latin counterpart to Halloween).

***Anyone who does these things is detestable to the Lord.*** (See also in the New Testament 1 Cor. 10:20-21; Ephesians 6:10-12; and many teachings by Jesus in the Gospels about demonization.)

In 1973 I was a Methodist pastor, and I was backslidden into addiction and uncleanness. God mercifully started the painful process of setting me free, and the first step was to deliver me from a passel of demons. That was such an awful, frightening process that I still shudder to think of it. Then He called me to the ministry of setting my brothers and sisters in the church free. Since that time I have ministered in the U.S., Mexico, and a few other countries to a great number of people, and I can tell you that the people who were the most demonized were people who had been involved in the “abominations” listed in Deuteronomy. We have even ministered to little children who had become demonized because of the participation of their parents and grandparents in things called curses in the Bible.

Letting your children participate in cultural practices that desensitize them to the danger in disobeying direct commandments of God is incredibly irresponsible. These practices are characterized as abominations by God, and He says, *Anyone who does these things is detestable to the Lord.* This is a warning for our protection.

If you agree with my perspective about Halloween (and I admit it is pretty extreme and not Politically Correct), but your family and friends are oblivious to its spiritual ramifications, you have to approach the subject carefully. You can't beat them up with the Bible. You must pray and ask God for his love and wisdom before saying anything. Remember if you have grown children or grandchildren it is their decision. All you and I can do is pray and speak a careful word.

God Bless

Glenn

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