

SPLASH!

GRUMBLE, GRUMBLE

It just wasn't fair, and it was so frustrating! That's what he used to think; and now, his once sincere resolve had faded into a fatalistic sense of purposelessness. Falling, or rather shifting to the rear of the crowd, he figured that this was really where he belonged. Perhaps, he surmised, someone else could take his place and get the blessing. So there he lay, pitifully and grotesquely lamed – like a 'slug' on the pavement just waiting for God's 'saltshaker' to end his daily despondence.

There was a certain sense of sad humor as he watched the crowded area occasionally come to a frenzy, erupting with cries and splashes followed by the inevitable melancholy and murmuring. The competition was incredibly intense, and as a result he had come to think of himself as the ultimate loser. 'Both lame and unlucky. You know, if I just had someone to help me into the pool, I'd have a chance,' he thought.

To many, if not most of the people there, God was the originator and referee of this contest. Everyone knew that upon occasion, there was a rippling in the pool that could only be caused by an angel. Everyone also knew that the first one who managed to get into the pool after this disturbance of the water would be healed. Needless to say, everyone was perpetually sopping wet and as a consequence, cold and grumpy.

In any event, he'd come to accept that God must be a grand competitor Himself or at least He enjoyed giving the prize of a miracle to the most dedicated, the quickest, the most resourceful or those that could push their way into position. It was clear that the healthy people in the area took delight as well in watching the chaos which spouted like a geyser now and then. Laughing mockery could be heard down every side alley.

After a long time, he was finally fed up with it all and resolved to his fate. 'God is for the strong, the successful, the popular – for them, not me,' he surmised. 'It was good of Him to make a way – I mean, at least some can get a new life. But obviously, it's not intended for me. My sins are just too ugly. I guess that's why He's judged me and here I am utterly hopeless. Reminds me of the ancient wilderness wanderings of our fathers.'

Sitting there, he had a lot of time to think about things and he developed a philosophy for most of what he observed, but God...? 'Well, He was watching too, probably, from far away in heaven... I suppose He doesn't care about me. Thirty-eight years like this!...Why...'

"Do you want to get well?" a calm inquiring voice tackled his attention.

'What was that?' Suddenly the shadow of a man nearby crossed his face blocking the blazing sun. He looked up and said, "Sir, 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."

'What is this fellow doing here at the rear of the crowd?' he wondered. 'Hey, maybe I can convince him to help me to get in first! Maybe, he'll push some of those big guys to the side. Maybe...'

"Get up! Pick up your mat and walk."

To his utter amazement, he immediately sensed strength in his legs. He heart was beating incredibly fast... he jumped up and grabbed his mat. He felt as though he'd never been lame. 'Where'd he go??' he exclaimed to himself, looking all around for the man who healed him and was now nowhere to be found.

The account of this wonderful miracle is found in John chapter five. Clearly, I'm taking some liberty in suggesting the thoughts that may have run through the lame man's mind. As you read it in the scripture though, you just want to shake your head in considering this poor man's plight. For thirty-eight years, a serious sin left him in his debilitating condition and ultimately he found himself hanging out at the only place he thought could help him yet he was no doubt hopeless in his pursuit for he apparently pictured God as a 'divine sports fan', an omnipotent umpire of sorts and he had to play the game in order to get the blessing.

But along came Jesus. Uninvited. Unannounced. Unknown.

One of the lessons we can glean from this story is how easy it is for us to think of God incorrectly -- in terms of what is valued in society. But God is not a competitor, nor is

He interested in our competition. Neither are His blessings the result of some heavenly lotto. Now, you may think, 'Of course not!' But for many of us, the subtle impression lingers that God does applaud the spiritually 'strong' and ignore or abhor the 'weak'.

Sadly, many people admire Billy Graham, not for the power of his preaching but for the numbers – the huge crowds, the vast organization, the thousands of respondents. Many people think large church organizations or glitzy Christian television programs are centers of Holy Spirit activity because of the sophisticated worship, the variety, the popular teachers, the radio, tape and TV options. Many people worship God with the attitude of Bethesda. That is, 'success' in the contest is the measure of spirituality.

The 'backwaters' of this place are where the off-scouring settle. Pushed aside by the 'healthy' they come to the pool. The irony is that Bethesda means house of mercy or kindness and that's what the spiritually hurting – the 'unsuccessful' are looking for. It's not a physical place but a mindset. Pushed aside or simply not included with the 'in' crowd, many of God's weaker sheep wind up discouraged and can get the impression that their Father in heaven is only interested in the 'winners', the spiritual people. Pastors whose pictures are prominent, lay leaders who are elders or deacons, anyone in 'ministry' – the spiritually bruised and beaten can often think that God really loves those people – He must – they made it into the pool so to speak before the rest of us.

Ministers become celebrities of the congregation rather than servants.

But Jesus in this story blows that idea 'out of the water'.

As a lesson on the character of our God and Saviour, this story mirrors the Old Testament account of the Hebrew nation wandering in the wilderness. Deut 2:14 tells us that, like this poor man, they sinned a great sin and wound up in the most difficult of circumstances for the same time -- 38 years. You remember, the older generation died off. Only the new generation, the new man in type, could enter by faith into the land of promise. For 38 years, the ark of God's presence traveled with them but they remained homeless, because of their rebellious hearts.

It wasn't until Moses died and Joshua took over that they could cross the Jordan dry-shod. You all know that Joshua is the same name as Jesus, and in our New Testament story, it is indeed Jesus who enters the scene and takes charge. Now, as a symbol, Moses can be said to represent the law, the divine competition if you would. It was a godly game with hundreds of very good rules, but we all were quite hopeless to win it. And all our attempts to obey it, to win, to be the 'first into the pool' only drove us away, drove us further to the rear of the crowd. Do you know what I'm alluding to?

I suppose that there were those who pretended to have been healed in Bethesda's waters, but they were probably only fooling themselves. There are also still sincere people today who to varying degrees try 'faking it' -- oh, not so much with

healing -- that's really not the point; rather, we can be insincere, dishonest with others and ourselves about our condition -- our sin, our depravity, our total incapability to be good enough to please God on our own.

Referring back to the Jewish people in the wilderness, some of us also stumble in faith and then later try to make up for it by trying to do something like what we failed in earlier but on our own -- just to show God we're 'worthy of His grace' (which of course is an oxymoron). (See Num 14:39-45)

Now, prophetically, this story of Bethesda could be speaking of the Jewish people who did not recognize the Messiah partly because they misunderstood the true character of God. God loves the Jews, but for a long, long time they have missed it, they missed the opportunity to enter the spiritual land of promise and chose rather, like their forefathers, to wander with Moses in the wilderness, striving with their Maker. They sinned greatly in turning away from Christ, but one day soon, Jesus will enter the picture again -- unannounced, uninvited but this time KNOWN.

And they will be healed spiritually -- no more games, no more contests.

Practically, we as Christians each must realize the Bethesda contest is not God's way, the mechanisms of religiosity do not faithfully portray the character or intent of our Lord. Much, if not most of that has been invented by others.

We have sinned. We are lame. Our attempts to win the religious contest will only result in our being cold, wet, grumpy and disillusioned.

Clearly, we need a Savior -- both to enter the kingdom of God and to live abundantly in it. You may not yet know Him, but His question is simple and to the point -- "Do you want to be healed?"

Do you? Do you really? (Obviously, He asks the question for a reason.) Or do you just want Him to help you play the 'game', to help you into the 'pool'? It's a difficult choice because it comes to truly believing in grace, believing in a fantastically gracious God. And that's a stretch for our naturally self-righteous performance-oriented senses. But, Bethesda was framed by five colonnades or porches and as many of you know, five speaks repeatedly of grace in the Bible.

Nevertheless, how many of us encourage the Bethesda mentality? How many of us act like ministry is a club rather than a calling? How many sheep are shifting to the back unable to 'compete' with the 'winners'? We must take heed if we are to represent our Father faithfully -- He sternly warns, "*And as for you, O My flock, thus says the Lord GOD: "Behold, I shall judge between sheep and sheep, between rams and goats. Is it too little for you to have eaten up the good pasture, that you must tread down with your feet the residue of your pasture--and to have drunk of the clear waters, that you must foul the residue with your feet? And as for My flock, they eat what you have trampled with your feet, and they drink what you have fouled with your feet."*

"Therefore thus says the Lord GOD to them: "Behold, I Myself will judge between the fat and the lean sheep. Because you have pushed with

side and shoulder, butted all the weak ones with your horns, and scattered them abroad, therefore I will save My flock, and they shall no longer be a prey; and I will judge between sheep and sheep. Ez 34:17-22

We must realize how easily the weak sheep are shifted out of focus, pushed to the side, scattered because they're not gathered. The Bethesda-Christianity does that. But God is not impressed with the powerful personalities.

Rather, here is our Savior -- "*Behold! My Servant whom I uphold, My Elect One in whom My soul delights!*

I have put My Spirit upon Him; He will bring forth justice to the Gentiles.

He will not cry out, nor raise His voice, Nor cause His voice to be heard in the street.

A bruised reed He will not break,

And smoking flax He will not quench;

He will bring forth justice for truth." Isa 42:1-3

Jesus goes to the discouraged, seeks out the lame, those in the rear of the crowd both in the world and in His church. While some are entertained by the 'splashing around', He offers the real solution and suddenly the game is over. Grace is the only way, not just a way.

Like Jesus, may we not be afraid to ignore the contest, to see it for what it is. May we find the ones to whom God seeks to be gracious. May we never push the weak aside.