

In the Arena

by Ray C. Stedman

I have entitled this study *In the Arena* because the whole passage seems to capture the atmosphere of the running of a race, a pressing on in the strength of the indwelling Lord to a goal or a prize to be reached. This is what the Christian life is.

The sports contest is a frequent source of illustration with the Apostle Paul. I rather imagine that he must have, on some occasions at least, frequented the Olympic Games back in those early days, and thus was well acquainted with the athletic contest, since he draws so many illustrations from this source. When he wrote to the Galatians, in his great letter to them, he reminded these people that they had begun in the Spirit, but were now trying to be made perfect by the flesh. He said to them, "You did run well, but who did hinder you?" {cf, Gal 5:7 KJV}. That is, you started the race very well.

Those of us who saw the great Russian-American Games here at Stanford last week will never forget the sight of that tremendous Russian distance runner, Bolotnikov. He, on one day, ran the 10,000-meter race, that grueling endurance grind, and then, the next day, came back to win the 5,000-meter race. I was there on Saturday, seated close to the front, and, as the contestants came around the track, I could see their faces clearly. I took special note of this great Russian runner as the race progressed. I could see his face as they came by, covered with sweat and grime, and evidencing a bit of pain. You could see the lines of increasing weariness as the race went on. Then, the thrill of that incredible last lap when he stretched out, and ran away from all the others, and left them far behind to win that race. It was a tremendous feat, and one that I will never forget.

That is where the race is run – right down in the grime and sweat and dust of the arena. Also, that is where the Christian life is lived – right down

in the pain and sweat and tears of life, with its mixture of joy and sorrow, its glory and grime, its triumph and despair. That is where the Christian life is designed to be lived, and if we don't get that out of the book of Romans, especially out of Chapter 8, we are missing the dominant emphasis of this passage.

Somebody has said that life is like a football game in which the real men are down on the gridiron playing the game while the Christians are up in the stands explaining it to the ladies. Now, if that is your concept of Christian living, you've completely missed the point.

The Christian life is the life of Jesus Christ lived again through you:

- It's not our trying to live like Christ – that is a misconception,
- Nor is it our trying to be Christ-like – that is another misconception,
- Nor is it even Christ giving us the power to live a life like his.

It is none of these. It is Christ indwelling us, living his life again through us. And that life was designed to be lived right in the roughest, toughest, hardest, most difficult spot on earth – your home, your job, your everyday circumstances – right there!

This is the test of whether you are laying hold of the power of the life of Christ in you. Is your home life different? If doesn't make any difference how well you talk out in public, but are you different at home? That is the test – for that is where the Christian life is designed to be lived.

Right here I think some of us need to hear the apostle's question again:

“You did run well, but who did hinder you?” {cf, Gal 5:7 KJV}

That is, you started out fine – many of us remember what a change came into our lives when we became Christians – habits changed, attitudes changed, outlook changed – we were *different*:

- We experienced new joy,
- We had new power,
- There was sense of victory –
- What a change it was!

Everyone could see it! But now, gradually, there has come, through the years, another change in which we evidence that we have lost interest – we have grown listless, we are indifferent to spiritual values. We may still go through all the motions of Christianity, but there is no power, no glow, no fruit in our lives. Many of us have found ourselves right here in Romans 7 – living the life of defeat and despair. We are running the race, but we are running it like a paralyzed man, hobbling along in the feeble efforts of the flesh.

Paul sets forth the reason this in the opening verses of Chapter 8: We are walking according to the flesh, and not according to the Spirit.

You say, “I don’t understand those terms; I have read that passage so many times, and it seems to say something, but I don’t quite get what. What does this mean, ‘walking according to the flesh’ and ‘walking according to the Spirit’?”

Well, that is right where we want to begin now, in Romans 8, with a look at these two divisions:

Verses 5 - 9: The Analysis of Paralysis
Verses 10-14: The Possibility of Maturity

Let’s look first at Verses 5-9, **the analysis of paralysis**:

For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God’s law, indeed it cannot; and

those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

But you are not in the flesh, you are in the Spirit, if the Spirit of God really dwells in you. Any one who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. {Rom 8:5-9 RSV}

We learned in Chapter 5 that there are two sources of life in this world. There is Adam, and there is Christ – the first man, and the second man. All of us were, by nature, born into Adam. We have the life of Adam, so we behave like Adam. We have the same difficulties that Adam had. But, when we are born again, by faith in Jesus Christ, we are no longer in Adam, we are in Christ. As Paul reminds us in the Corinthian letter, “if any one is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold the new has come,” {2 Cor 5:17 RSV}. But in this section before us we learn something further: We learn that the active agent, the motivating force, which takes this life of Christ and makes it available to us is the Holy Spirit – the indwelling Holy Spirit. In John 16:13-15, Jesus said to his disciples before his crucifixion, “When he shall come,” speaking of the Spirit, “he shall take of the things of mine and make them real to you,” {cf, John 16:13-14 RSV}. He shall take them and unfold them to you. So the agency by which the life of Christ (and all that we have in Christ) is made available to us is in the Holy Spirit.

Now, on the opposite side, the motivating force that makes the life of Adam available to us is the flesh (or the egocentric self). The reason behind all our actions when we were not Christians was invariably self-interest.

If you look back to those days before you knew Jesus Christ, you will discover, as you look within, that the motivating force – the thing that urged you on to do what you did – was your self-interest, your egocentric self, the promotion of self in some form or another. This self can be extroverted or introverted. It can be self which is manifested in self-confidence, self-aggressiveness, and so on, or it can be self which is manifested in self-pity, self-regression, timidity, and other things. But, once we learn what Christ is to us, and what he has come to be in us, then the normal state for a Christian should be one of continual fruitfulness. It is recorded in John 15:5, 8 that Jesus said, “I am the vine, you are the branches,” {John 15:5a RSV}; “if my life is abiding in you, you will bring forth much

fruit,” {cf, John 15:7-8}. This is the continual state that we can expect. This is what is called ‘walking in the Spirit.’ But, after we realize this, we discover that it is still possible to ‘walk according to the flesh.’ The key to victory or defeat in the Christian life is set forth right here in Verse 5:

For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. {Rom 8:5 RSV}

Here is the distinction, but I think that many people get a very false idea of what this means. They think that when it says to “set your mind on the things of the Spirit,” it must mean that you go around thinking holy thoughts about God, and meditating on Bible verses all day long, or thinking of heaven all the time. And they think “the things of the flesh” are your business life, the dirty dishes in the sink that need to be washed, the routine of life, the pleasure in which you are engaged, and so on. We seem to think that Christians who ‘walk in the Spirit’ are those holy men and women, remote from life, who are so heavenly minded that they are of no earthly use, but this is entirely wrong – nothing could be further from the truth. If you’ve got the idea that, when you become a Christian, you must put your mind on the shelf, and your social life in the closet, and become a ‘Holy Joe’ or a ‘Pious Pete,’ you have missed the point completely because that is not what it is.

No, “the things of the Spirit” include the whole range of life, the entire spectrum, with all its changing color, and the fascinating mystery of life: These are the things of the Spirit. Thus, it involves food and drink, clothing and music, life and art, politics and science, marriage and business – all of life! As Paul says to the Corinthians, “All things are yours” {1 Cor 3:21b KJV}, “and ye are Christ’s; and Christ is God’s,” {1 Cor 3:23 KJV}. So all of life is involved in this – in the things of the Spirit – and Christians make a great mistake in thinking that it is a limited, narrow, rigidly defined area that we are concerned with ‘in the Spirit.’

Now, “the things of the flesh” cover the same range; it covers all of life. If you are concerned about living today, you are involved in all of these things – food, music, clothing, literature, art, politics, business, marriage – all of it. And these are

included in “the things of the flesh,” but from a different approach. In other words, the difference between the “things of the flesh” and “things of the Spirit” is not a *different kind* of thing, but it is the *different attitude* with which you come to them. It is a different approach, a different sense of values; that is what we are talking about here.

Let me paraphrase it this way:

He who sets his mind on the values of the Spirit, on the attitudes of the Spirit, on the point of view of the Spirit, walks in the Spirit; but he who sets his mind on the values of the flesh, on the attitudes of the flesh, walks in the flesh.

Let me illustrate, if I can, by asking you this question: How do you view your work? What do you think about your vocation, your calling, the way you make your living? Is it to you just a way to earn a living, to keep the wolf from the door, to feed and educate your children, to supply the fleshly needs of your life, and, perhaps, also, to give you a little status in society? Is this what your job means to you? If it is, you have the mind of the flesh, you are walking according to the flesh. On the other hand, is your work, to you, God’s chosen area for you to exhibit Jesus Christ, and the way that you have of glorifying him by faithfulness and willingness to do the tasks that are set before you? Is it the means that you have of earning money to give to those who are in need around you, and to share the abundance that God gives you with others? Is it the way that you have of fulfilling the joy of giving, and, incidentally, to provide the supply of food and clothing and education that your family needs? Well, if it is, you have the mind of the Spirit, you are walking according to the Spirit. It is the same work, but approached with a different attitude.

How do you view recreation? When you amuse yourself, why do you do it? Is a way to kill time? Is it a way to amuse yourself for an hour or two or maybe give you a thrill; all recreation or amusement exists only that you may have a thrill? Or is it a way that enables you to show off your unusual coordination of body?

If it is, you have the mind of the flesh. On the other hand, is it a way to refresh your body and soul, and to challenge your mind and your body to something that stimulates it, and presents a chal-

lenge to you? Is it a way to share the delightful activity of some occasion with others, to enjoy the gift of life and strength which God has given you, and to make you fit to get back to your regular work better able to accomplish God's purpose in you? If it is, you have the mind of the Spirit. It is the same recreation, but approached with a different attitude.

This is what the apostle means. All through life, the way in which you view these things is the thing that marks whether you walk according to the flesh or according to the Spirit. To what do you relate everything?

Psychiatrists tell us that every one of us needs a reference point, a reference group. This is the reason, for instance, that young people are under so much pressure, continually, to conform to the crowd. That is why they all have to have the same kind of hat or shirt or pants or hot-rod or something – because they are relating everything they do to their reference group, to the crowd that they are with – and that is the mind of the flesh. The mind of the Spirit is relating everything to God, and to his point of view and values. When you do this, Paul says, you are walking in the Spirit.

We see the practical results of these two ways of life in Verses 6-7:

To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law, indeed it cannot; {Rom 8:6-7 RSV}

Remember, the flesh is not only that which urges us to please ourselves and do the wrong thing, but it is also that which seeks to advance ourselves by getting us to try to do the right thing in our own effort. And, no matter which it is, the result is inevitably death in our life (death in this connotation means barrenness, fruitlessness, spiritual poverty) which is a stench in the nostrils of God; it is hostile to God.

It may look very good to man, and you may win your way to some position of favor or influence or position in the sight of men, but, in the eyes of God, if it originated from that self-effort

- to be somebody,
- to gain something,
- to advance yourself,

then it is a stench in the nostrils of God. We need to understand this clearly, and I think it is clearly evident in life.

I was listening to Dr. Vernon Grounds on the radio the other day, and he was recounting for us the sordid and unfortunate story that has been in our newspapers – the story of Billie Sol Estes down in Texas. I was interested to hear the facts about this man: This man is a Christian; he is a lay preacher, and his home has been a center of evangelical activity in the town of Pecos in West Texas. He is a fundamentalist. He neither smokes nor drinks. He has had meetings in his home specially set up for young people: When the world around was putting on enticing programs that would get them involved in worldly pursuits, he opened his home so that they could come in and have a time of Christian fellowship and keep them out of this. In other words, he was accepted and regarded in Pecos as the epitome of a Christian fundamentalist living for Christ in that town. But now we know the whole story: Outwardly, everything was right. Inwardly, the heart was wrong and continually conniving to advance itself.

This is a revelation of what is happening, more frequently than we even dream, in lives around us.

Now, if you begin to feel a little smug at this point, let me remind you that the mind of the flesh can be exhibited in an outwardly perfectly moral life. You don't have to have your life suddenly collapse, like Billie Sol Estes, and be exposed to the public gaze, and have everyone see the inward moral rottenness of your life in order to be living in the flesh. You can have a quite moral life, with nothing legally wrong about it, for the carnal Christian is not only (as we learn here) the hypocrite, but he is also the sincere Christian who is trying his best to serve Christ by his own efforts. This is what we struggle with, isn't it? This is what makes it so difficult for us. We say, "Well, what can be wrong with that?" Well, the answer is right here:

For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law, {Rom 8:6 RSV}

even though it tries to, for "it cannot." It simply cannot.

When the Russian astronaut, Gherman Titov, was in San Francisco, he was asked what he believed about God, and he said,

“I don’t believe in God. I believe in man – in his strength, his possibilities, and his reason.”

I thought, as I read that, there is a clear statement of what Paul means by the mind of the flesh: “I believe in man – his strength, his possibilities, and his reason.” Now, it’s possible to show that same attitude and yet begin your statement with the words “I do believe in God” as well as “I don’t believe in God.” In other words, you can say, “I believe in God” and then live as though everything depended upon you. This is the mind of the flesh that Paul is talking about here, and it is as hostile to God as the attitude of Titov is.

Let me show you something on that; it’s taught by type in many places in the Scripture, but there is one that is particularly interesting in Ezekiel 44. Ezekiel is speaking, in Verse 15, about the millennial temple and of the priests of God, serving God, and he says,

“But the Levitical priests, the sons of Zadok, who kept the charge of my sanctuary when the people of Israel went astray from me, shall come near to me to minister to me; and they shall attend to me to offer me the fat and the blood, says the Lord God; they shall enter my sanctuary, and they shall approach my table, to minister to me, and they shall keep my charge.” {Ezek 44:15-16 RSV}

Now these are priests ministering to God, which is a picture of the Christian today.

“When they enter the gates of the inner court, they shall wear linen garments; they shall have nothing of wool on them, while they are ministering at the gates of the inner court, and within. They shall have linen turbans upon their heads, and linen breeches upon their loins; they shall not gird themselves with anything that causes sweat.” {Ezek 44:17-18 RSV}

Now, why in the world is God so concerned about what his people wear? The answer is in that last statement: “They shall not gird themselves with anything that causes sweat.” Why? Because

sweat makes you stink, as any magazine will duly inform you if you read the advertisements. And God does not want people stinking as they serve him, to be perfectly blunt about it. Sweat comes from the flesh, and this is a picture for us of the hatefulness in the sight of God of self-effort when he has provided the fullness of the indwelling life of Christ to be the source of strength. To attempt to try to do the right thing and to do the best you can as a Christian is an insult to the indwelling Spirit who is there to be all that you need and more. The carnal Christian, you see, is the one who struggles to do something which is right, and perfectly good, but who ignores the life of Christ and all the wonderful provisions that God has made, at the infinite cost of the cross of Christ, to give to us an adequate source of power to live the Christian life.

So serious is that, that we have a warning against self-deception here, in Verses 8-9:

... those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

But you are not in the flesh, you are in the Spirit, if the Spirit of God really dwells in you. Any one who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. {Rom 8:8-9 RSV}

Notice the difference here between walking “according to the flesh” and being “in the flesh.” Those who walk “according to the flesh” are Christians who are living below their possibilities; they are carnal, either sinfully carnal or legally carnal. For it is possible, you see, to be “in the Spirit” but “walk according to the flesh.” But, on the other hand, those who are “in the flesh” aren’t Christians at all. This is what Paul means when he says, “Any one who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him.” He is still “in the flesh” – he is in Adam, and that is the only life that he knows, and that is the only power he knows.

If you do not have the indwelling Spirit of Jesus Christ, received by faith in Jesus Christ, you are simply not a Christian:

- You may be a church member,
- You may be very faithful in religious matters,
- You may be trying to lead a moral life,

but, in the eyes of God, you have ignored the one great provision that he has made, at infinite cost,

for acceptance in his sight, and, therefore, you are not a Christian. “Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him.”

The clear implication here is that, if a man, though he profess to be a Christian, walks continually according to the flesh, he raises the grave suspicion that he is in the flesh and not in the Spirit – that he is not even a Christian at all. That is why it is such a serious matter when Christians fail to walk in the power of the indwelling Christ.

But now let’s move into the section which brings us good news of **the possibility of maturity**, Verses 10-14:

But if Christ is in you, although your bodies are dead because of sin, your spirits are alive because of righteousness. If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through the Spirit which dwells in you.

So then, brethren, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh – for if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body you will live. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. {Rom 8:10-14 RSV}

This phrase in Verse 10, “your bodies are dead because of sin” has puzzled many people. It simply means that, when you were not a Christian, the deeds of your body, the things that you did, motivated by the egocentric flesh or self, were worthless as far as God was concerned. But when you became a Christian, and the Spirit came to dwell within, that control by the self-life didn’t automatically change – it still continues. In other words, Paul is saying again that those in the flesh cannot please God – they simply cannot – and this is the first thing that we need to learn in our relationship with God. Your spirit was made alive by imputed righteousness. You have a new will and a new heart, as we read, but your body is still under the control of the self, or the flesh. You are what is called in Scripture “a babe in Christ” – carnal, not through willful choice, but through ignorance. This is what we have seen as the first stage of the Christian life, set out in Chapters 1-4 of Romans. However, the point is that you don’t have to remain

there. No Christian need remain in the place of carnality and defeat. Since the indwelling Spirit is in you, then you have all that you need to realize the victorious life of Jesus Christ in your body right now.

This is what Paul is saying in Verse 11:

If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through the Spirit which dwells in you. {Rom 8:11 RSV}

“Oh,” you say, “I thought that was a promise that we would be resurrected some day.” No, it isn’t that at all. I used to think that too, until I saw the phrase “mortal bodies,” not “dead bodies.” Now, “mortal” means “not dead yet,” and, as I read in my Greek reference indexes and concordances, I found that Mr. Thayer (than whom there is no whomer when it comes to the realm of Greek authority) says that this word means “subject to death, therefore still living.” So, this is not a promise that God is someday going to raise your body out of the grave; it is a promise that right now, in your life, your body can be made subject to the life of Jesus Christ, and his life lived through you will transform your whole experience – you become a genuinely new creature in Christ Jesus.

This is the same truth that you have in Second Corinthians 4:10, where Paul says we are “always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies.” Now, tell me, isn’t that what you really want? When you think of the life of Jesus –

- that life of courage, and power, and poise,
- that life of gentleness and calmness and peace and grace –

isn’t that what you want living in you and through you? Well, this is the secret: “Always bearing about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus,” {2 Cor 4:10a KJV}. That is, reckoning all my own self-efforts to be worthless, and useless, and nothing in his sight. Unable to do anything myself, I now lean back on the indwelling life of Jesus Christ and I find him present to live again, and to make my body live through him, so that his life is mani-

fest in my mortal body! Not resurrection someday, but resurrection life right now!

Paul concludes we owe nothing to the flesh with its urges to self-pleasing and self-effort, for it results in nothing but death and defeat. But, if we continually lean back upon the indwelling power of the Spirit and do everything in dependence upon that alone, then we learn what life can really be like. Our salvation begins to make sense, and we discover that the same body that once was helpless to please God now becomes the very instrument by which God is served. God's cause is advanced, and Jesus Christ is manifested to others.

Paul then says, "For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God." This is an important point. This means that only when we begin to let Jesus Christ live through us do we pass

- from childhood to manhood,
- from carnality to spirituality,
- from infancy to maturity.

Then we begin to demonstrate what it is to be a son of God in the world, for only those who are led by the Spirit of God are the sons of God. Paul goes on to show us that we are the children of God the minute we believe in Jesus Christ, and cry, "Abba, Father." We are the children of God, but we have no right to call ourselves the sons of God until we learn to be led by the Spirit in the victory of Jesus Christ.

I am not going to stand here this morning and belabor you with exhortations to grow up and get out of the kindergarten and stop being children and become sons of God – I never saw a boy yet that didn't want to be a man, and nobody needed to urge him on. I believe that if you are a child of God by faith in Jesus Christ you will never be content to be just that. You will want to be more – you want to fulfill all the possibilities of life in Jesus Christ and to be a son of God, visibly manifest to the world as such.

What Paul is saying is that you don't need anything new for this. You don't need a new experience. You don't need a special gift of the Spirit – or crisis time. You don't have to plead and wait before God before this can come to pass:

- You need to get serious about obeying the voice of the Spirit of God,

- You need to take the Word of God seriously,
- You need to begin to believe him.

We don't have to beseech him, and pray, "Lord, give me strength." He is there to be our strength. We don't have to say, "Lord, give me grace, give me peace; Lord help me through this." He is there to help us, and we just need to begin to take it, and live it, and claim it, and quit kidding ourselves, and start obeying the Word we already know.

You don't need to run away from life to be a Christian – a victorious Christian. But, rather, the call is to:

- Face life, and
- Rise up like men, and
- Walk in the strength of God in the midst of this 20th century world.

I close with this word from Jim Elliott, one of the five missionaries who laid down their lives in Ecuador among the Aucas. He is writing to his parents, and he says,

Mr. and Mrs. Blank have a nice home, and belongings, and two cute kiddies, but are so like the rest of us that it is disheartening. We are so utterly ordinary, so common-place. We profess to know a Power the twentieth century does not reckon with, but we are harmless and therefore unharmed. We are spiritual pacifists, non-militants, conscientious objectors in this battle to the death with the principalities and powers in high places. Meekness must be had for contact with men, but brash, outspoken boldness is required to take part in the comradeship of the cross. We are sideliners, coaching and criticizing the real wrestlers, while content to sit by and leave the enemies of God unchallenged. The world can not hate us; we are too much like its own. Oh, that God would make us dangerous!

I echo that prayer. I don't know what your heart says, but, if I know my own heart, I am so aware that this is the great need of this hour in which we live –

- That men may see Christians for what they are,
- That they may see something else than this namby-pamby, watered-down, milksop kind of Christian living that is content with defeat.

It is time that we take seriously the possibilities that God in Christ offers us, to be a disturbing factor in our generation. This is what God calls us to, and (may I say this to my own heart as well as to yours) you can have just as much of this victory as you really want, because it is when we really begin to take God seriously that these things become possible. Christ is not waiting. It is we who are hindering and holding back the manifestation he wants to make of his life in this world.

Prayer:

Our Heavenly Father, we pray this morning that we may sense the possibilities that are hidden in the words of this chapter, and call into action that manifestation of the life of Jesus Christ – not by the clenching of our fists and the gritting of our teeth, not by the effort of ourselves to try to be something for you, but by the quiet resting upon your desire to be something in us. Lord, forgive us for the way we set your Word aside in our lives, and do not give heed to it. Teach us to pay no attention to the continual amassing of material things, placing our values on the things of the world rather than the things that you count valuable. Lord, forgive us; we would now begin to rise up and walk like men in this generation. We pray in Christ's name. Amen.

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