

Killed, Not Coached

Romans 8:12-17

THE YELLOW FOOTPRINTS

The bus pulls in after dark. The doors open, and a man is shouting before anyone's boots hit the pavement. Find the yellow footprints painted on the pavement. Stand on them. Don't move. By the time the sun comes up over the depot, the young men and women standing in those rows are still, in the eyes of the law, the same people who climbed off that bus. But everyone training them already knows what is about to happen. The civilian who arrived last night is not going to be sanded down, polished up, and sent home a slightly improved version of himself. He is going to be killed, and someone else is going to be raised up in his place.

That is a strange way to build an army. It would be far more efficient, you would think, simply to coach the raw material: fix the posture, build the muscle, teach the customs, and send him on his way only lightly altered. But the Corps does not believe a lightly altered civilian can survive what is coming. Only someone made new will do.

Paul says the same thing about you, and it is just as strange to our ears.

So then, brothers, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh.

Romans 8:12

We assume our flesh, our sinful nature, simply needs management: trim the temper, budget the lust, schedule the patience. We treat sanctification like a renovation project on a house we still intend to keep living in.

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.

Romans 8:13

Paul does not offer us the renovation. A well-managed flesh is still a flesh marching toward the grave, however nicely it has learned to behave itself in public, and the Spirit's answer to it is not coaching. It is execution.

We do not want to hear that, because we have already decided which parts of us are negotiable and which are not. We will let the Spirit have our calendar, even our money, but we keep one locked room back: the grudge we are still nursing, the lie we have decided is harmless, the fleshly appetites we have made peace with. And we would, as it were, like to keep our hometown haircut.

ON THE QUARTERDECK

Recruits who try that arrangement get marched to the quarterdeck. There is no half measure there, no version of the drill that lets a recruit keep one habit in reserve while the rest of him gets remade. The old reflexes, the comfort, the version of himself he walked in with, all of it gets driven into the ground at once, because a person cannot be partly killed any more than he can be partly born.

This is exactly what Paul says the Spirit does to us. Not one deed. The deeds, plural: the whole sprawling project of the flesh. And notice who is named as the one doing the killing. Not us, gritting our teeth and trying harder. The Spirit puts it to death.

We feel that work whether we welcome it or not. We feel it when conviction lands somewhere we had carefully fenced off, when the Word will not let a particular sin alone, when the old self gasps and claws for one more breath under a correction we did not ask for. That gasping is not a sign that something has gone wrong in us. It is a sign that something true is finally happening. The flesh resists its own execution. It always has.

But here is what every recruit eventually learns on that quarterdeck, and what we have to learn too. We cannot kill ourselves into a new life. The very self that needs to die is the one trying to manage the dying, and it will always negotiate a surrender it can survive. Someone outside us has to finish what conviction only begins.

EARNING THE EAGLE, GLOBE, AND ANCHOR

It happens in the dark, usually, at the end of the Crucible: fifty-four hours with almost no sleep and little food, the last hard miles still ahead of one final climb. At the top, often before sunrise, the senior drill instructor stops calling them recruits. For the first time he calls them Marines, and pins the Eagle, Globe, and Anchor on their collars. They did not earn that title the way a man earns a grade, a little credit at a time. It is conferred on them whole, after the old self has been brought, in every sense, to nothing.

Jesus walked this same ground before you, and not as a figure of speech. He had his own yellow footprints: sinless, he still stood in the Jordan with sinners and let John baptize him there, the place where he formally took up our flesh, our debt, our case, as his own. He had his own quarterdeck: not a training exercise but Gethsemane and a cross, where the full discipline our flesh had earned was driven into his body completely, with no half

measure and no mercy spared him. And he earned his own title, but not by surviving the march. By dying it, and rising on the other side of it.

You did not, and could not, earn or manage your own death and resurrection either. Someone else's history had to become yours. Christ was crucified, and your flesh, the whole rebellious project of it, was put to death in him, once for all. He did not stay dead. He is risen. He has ascended, and he reigns even now at the Father's right hand, where he intercedes for you. He is not a drill instructor shouting orders from the rear that he never had to obey himself. He marched through every stage of this campaign first, in his own body, and he reigns now as the Commanding General of the army he has built out of people exactly like you. And because he reigns, he pours out his own Spirit: the very Spirit Paul has been describing, the one who takes Christ's finished death and applies it to you, in the water that named you, in the absolution you heard spoken over you a few minutes ago, in the Supper that will be placed in your hands.

For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, "Abba! Father!" The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God,

Romans 8:14–16

You are not a recruit still proving yourself for a title that might be taken back. You are not enlisted. You are adopted. The Spirit does not hand you a manual and step away. He himself testifies inside you. He himself prays inside you, "Abba, Father." Whatever record the old self racked up this week, whatever breath it is still gasping for, the verdict over you is already

in, sealed before you ever stood in line for it. You are his child. And the household you have been adopted into is led into the field by an elder Brother who has already fought and won the only battle that mattered, so you do not march behind a stranger, and you do not march alone.

ALWAYS FAITHFUL

Marines have a motto for what comes after the climb: *Semper Fidelis*, which means “always faithful,” because graduation is not the end of the fight. It is the beginning of it. They go on to hard postings, to long separations, to wounds, still wearing the title that was given to them whole, and they go out as a unit, under a command, not as individuals fighting a private war.

and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.

Romans 8:17

Your new self has been raised, but it lives in territory the old self has not quietly vacated, in a world that does not much care for the person you have become, the same world that did not much care for your Commanding General either.

You will know that suffering by its shape, and this week it will probably not look like a hill in the dark. It is the fear that grabs you at two in the morning over a diagnosis, a bill, or a phone call you are dreading, and you choosing to pray the Lord’s Prayer instead of running the worst case forward for the hundredth time. It is the timesheet, the expense report, the number you could round in your favor and no one would ever know, and you leaving it

honest anyway, because Christ did not die so you could keep one set of books for yourself and another for him. It is the slow or rude clerk, the driver who cuts you off, the sharp word already loaded on your tongue, and you choosing to let it go unsaid and answer gently instead. It is the hour you meant to give to the Word, handed instead to an hour of outrage, gossip, or immorality on a screen, and you closing it, and opening that book instead.

None of that feels heroic. It is simply the new self paying back, in small change, the comfort, the control, and the reputation the old self always wants to keep, because Christ has already paid the far larger sum on your behalf.

The Spirit who once stood you on those footprints and stripped the old self down to nothing is the same Spirit who today bears witness in you that you are God's own child. And the Christ who reigns now as your Commanding General is coming again, to receive you, his fellow heir, into the glory all this dying, his and yours, has been clearing ground for. Amen.

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