

## CHAPTER 5

# In the Arena

Americans today do many things for entertainment and for amusement. Many flock to sporting events such as baseball, football, ice hockey or boxing. Others attend theaters or cinema complexes or concerts. Many enjoy "home entertainment" as they sit in the comfort of their own living rooms and watch TV, cable TV, satellite TV, or home video movies. Many Americans seem to have an **insatiable appetite** (an appetite that cannot be satisfied, which always wants more and more) for entertainment and excitement and pleasure.

Pleasure in and of itself is not sinful. There is nothing wrong with going to a baseball game or having an enjoyable time at the beach. The problem comes when we let pleasure become too much a part of our lives so that it overshadows and crowds out the things that are really important. This problem is mentioned in the last part of 2 Timothy 3:4-"(in the last days men shall be) lovers of

\_\_\_\_\_." Their time and energy will be spent seeking the pleasures that last only for a moment (Hebrews 11:25) while they completely neglect the pleasures that last forever (Psalm 16:11).

The ancient Romans were a pleasure-loving and a pleasure-seeking people. They had places where they could go to be amused and entertained. Many attended the theatre where they would watch actors perform plays and dramas. Often this would involve worldly music and licentious dances (women dancing in such a way as to arouse sexual passions). Many would attend the circus which would include horse and chariot races, wild beast hunts, athletic games, etc. But by far the most popular form of entertainment for the Romans was the **GLADIATORIAL CONTESTS**.

## The Gladiators

A **gladiator** was a person who would engage in a **fight to the death** in order to entertain the public. The word comes from the Latin word *gladius* which means "sword." Most of the gladiators would use swords as their most important offensive weapon. These men would fight to kill. They knew that if they did not kill they would **BE KILLED**. Today a professional boxer could lose a fight and still walk away with thousands of dollars. Even as a loser he is often a winner. For the gladiators this was not so. They knew that they must win. **TO LOSE WOULD BE TO DIE!** Gladiators did not have very long careers. The Roman people came to see bloodshed and death and that is exactly what they saw.

What do you think of people who delight in seeing bloodshed and murder? What do you think of people who are excited and thrilled by watching a fellow human being attacked and overcome and killed. What does this teach us about man's wicked and depraved heart (compare Romans 3:15-17)? Would modern day Americans delight in watching other people being slaughtered and murdered? (We will think more about this question later.)

## **The Roman Amphitheater**

An amphitheater is an oval or circular building with rising tiers of seats which surround an open space. The ancient amphitheater was very similar in many ways to our modern football stadiums. The word **amphi** means "on both sides." In a theater the audience usually sits on only one side. In an amphitheater the spectators are on both sides (sitting all around the theater).

The arena is the open area in the amphitheater where the gladiatorial combats take place. The most famous amphitheater in the Roman world was the Colosseum in Rome (the ruins of this amazing structure can still be seen today). This building was dedicated in 80 A.D. and it could hold about 45,000 spectators. It was often used for gladiator fights but it could also be flooded for mock-naval battles!

The Colosseum in Rome was not the only amphitheater. Every major city in the Roman empire, from Britain to Syria, had an amphitheater. The only exceptions were the cities of Greece because these brutal contests never became widely accepted among the Greek people. But in Italy, Gaul, North Africa and Spain, amphitheaters were very popular and found in every large city.

## **Any Volunteers?**

Thousands and thousands of men died in the Roman amphitheaters every year. Where did the Romans get all of these gladiators? It was not the kind of job or career that most people would eagerly apply for!

Where did the gladiators come from? Here is the five-fold answer:

1. **Prisoners** of war were often thrown into the arena. If Rome were victorious on the battlefield the soldiers would bring back the captives and these POW's would fight as gladiators in order to entertain the crowds. Different people from different parts of the world would fight in different ways and would use different weapons (different style swords and armor, etc.), and this would add variety to the contests.
2. **Slaves** were often used as gladiators. About half of the people in the Roman empire were slaves. In the Roman world slaves were considered as

PROPERTY, not as PERSONS. Since these people were thought of as only property, their owners believed they could do with them as they pleased. What's wrong with letting them battle each other in the arena? Often masters would sell their slaves to be gladiators. It was a profitable business.

3. **Criminals** were often sent into the bloody arena. This was equivalent to giving them the death sentence because most of them would die sooner or later.
4. **Persecuted people** were forced into the arena either to face the sword or the flames or the teeth of wild animals. This was true of Christian believers and also of Jews. Many innocent people died in this way. Many Christian martyrs laid down their lives in the amphitheater.
5. **Some would even volunteer to fight as gladiators!** Some young men would volunteer to be a gladiator for a certain amount of time and they would be highly paid for this (if they did not get killed). These men would trust their own **pro prowess** (their bravery, strength and skill) to survive. Thus they became "professional fighters" and they made a career out of it. Of course, as soon as they lost, their career would be over.

Today we have Army and Navy and Air Force Recruiting Centers. The Romans must have had some kind of Gladiator Recruiting Centers. Would YOU have volunteered for such a job? The pay may have been good, but the working conditions were far from desirable and the retirement plan was out of this world (either Heaven or Hades).

## The Awful History of the Gladiatorial Fights

Having slaves fight for their lives was an old Etruscan sport (Etruria was an ancient country in central Italy). The Romans revived this horrible sport in the 3rd century B.C. In 264 B.C. the first recorded gladiatorial combat took place in the forum at Rome. It involved only three couples (pairs) of gladiators.

In 174 B.C., 74 gladiators took part in a three day fight under Titus Flamininus. Soon gladiators were fighting by the hundreds. The crowds were not content to see just a few men fighting each other. They wanted to see the whole arena filled with men and they would try to guess which ones would survive. They were actually setting up their own war (battle) and then they would sit back and watch it. Real warfare is bad enough. Why would men want to create a war as a sport? Why would people want to be entertained by violence?

In the 1st century B.C. Julius Caesar exhibited no less than 300 pairs of gladiators. Emperor Titus ordered a show which lasted 100 days. In 90 A.D. Emperor Domitian disgraced the games even more by arranging a battle between DWARFS and

WOMEN. Emperor Trajan put on a big show in which there were 5,000 pairs of gladiators.

One Roman emperor even got in on the action himself. Emperor Commodus (end of the 2nd century) appeared no less than 735 times on the stage in the character of Hercules, with club and lion's skin, and from a **secure position** (where he knew he could not get hurt) he killed countless beasts and men.

Wild animals were often massacred. The crowds loved seeing men killed and they loved seeing animals killed. They loved to see the blood pouring out, whether from men or animals. For example, they took real pleasure in seeing an elephant slaughtered.

At the inauguration of the Flavian amphitheater, from five to nine thousand wild beasts (according to different accounts) were slain in one day. Under Probus (281 A.D.) as many as a hundred lions, a hundred lionesses, 200 leopards, 300 bears and 1000 wild boars were massacred in a single day. Would you pay money to see such a show? Do you find this to be entertaining and amusing?

The Roman public **wanted** these bloody games. They were very popular among the people. Very few Roman leaders spoke out against them.

## **The End of the Gladiatorial Contests**

Thankfully these games only lasted about 600 years. Even Constantine (whom we will learn more about in the next chapter), as late as 313 A.D. committed a great multitude of defeated barbarians to the wild beasts for the amusement of the people. But later, in 325 A.D. Constantine issued the first prohibition of these bloody spectacles.

Why did these bloody contests disappear and cease? The Church of Jesus Christ was the number one reason why the gladiatorial games ended. Because of the influence of believers and because of their strong opposition these contests, the gladiatorial games were banished from the civilized world. The only modern exception is that of Spain and certain South American countries which still entertain people by slaughtering animals. We call these bullfights.

## **The Life of a Gladiator**

Many gladiators were trained in schools and those who were successful made quite a bit of money. Those who owned the gladiators and those who operated the amphitheater certainly heaped up a huge profit! It was quite a profitable business. Is this true of sports today?

The life of a gladiator was not an easy life. These men knew that they would soon be killed unless they were part of the surviving few. Many tried to commit suicide. Those who were successful became quite famous. It has been said that a successful gladiator enjoyed far greater fame than any modern prize fighter or athlete. They were not just "super-stars" they were "super-super-stars"!

## **The Show Itself**

The shows were announced several days in advance. The information would be posted on the walls of houses and public buildings. This was the advertising campaign. The festivities of a show would begin with a ceremonial procession so that everyone could get a good look at the fighters. Next there would be a sham fight (a pretend fight). Perhaps this served as a "warm-up" for the fighters.

The real fighting was heralded (announced) by trumpets. Gladiators who refused to fight for any reason were driven on by whips and hot irons. A wounded man would sometimes call for pity by holding up his forefinger. The spectators would then either wave their handkerchiefs as a token of mercy, or condemn him to death by holding out their clenched fists with the thumbs down. The slain and nearly dead were dragged out to a particular place (the **spoliarium**) where they were stripped of their arms and possessions, and those who had not already expired were killed.

## **Who Was Really Condemned?**

The fans (spectators), as mentioned above, would often condemn a person by giving the "thumbs down" sign. Actually these spectators were really condemning themselves. They were proving to everyone how corrupt and wicked they really were. They were making a sport out of murder. They eagerly watched myriads of men and animals being sacrificed and slaughtered in order to satisfy a savage curiosity and thirst for blood. You be the judge of these Romans. Were they innocent or guilty? Were they righteous or were they depraved? Could an honest and objective person do anything else except put thumbs down on these people?

## **Are Modern Americans Condemned?**

What about us? What about those living in civilized America? Do we attend the local football stadium and see soldiers killing and shooting each other? Of course not! ..... but let's think about this some more.

Do we make a sport out of murder today? Are people entertained by murder today? Do people delight in watching violence today? Are people amused by seeing blood poured out?

It's true that Americans do not go to the amphitheater. They just go to the theater! And it is there that they see violence that may have horrified even the ancient Romans! Only 45,000 people could fit into a large Amphitheater, but MILLIONS of Americans every week go to movie theaters or watch movies at home where, if they so choose, they can see VIOLENT R-RATED MOVIES that are filled with bloodshed, murders, cutting off of limbs and ears and eyes, and putting people to death in the strangest and most gruesome ways. Also the Romans had to watch violence from a distance, but Americans can look at the large screen and see everything CLOSE UP, with all the sound effects and computer generated visual effects which are quite life-like. Now with cable and satellite TV and home movies millions of Americans can watch these bloody movies at home whenever they wish.

It's true, there is a difference. The Romans actually watched people and animals being killed and their blood shed. In the movies, it is fantasy. The actors are not really killed and their blood is not really shed. And yet, it is depicted in a very realistic way.

Should a believer have any part in watching such violence? Someone might object: "But the murder the Romans saw was real. The murders we watch are not real. The people are just Hollywood actors. What could be wrong with watching that?" Is this really the kind of thing we should fill our minds with? Does Philippians 4:8 give us guidance in this matter? Are there better things with which to occupy our minds?

Are there better things that should fill our minds and feed our eyes?

## **The Christian Stand**

Should the Christian believer take a firm stand against such things as violent R-rated movies that are filled with bloodshed and murders? When your friends talk about such movies (as though they were greatly entertained by them) do you utter forth any kind of protest? Do they see that you have a "thumbs-down" attitude towards such things? Do you condemn such things?

What was the attitude of the early Christians toward the gladiatorial contests? The early Christians renounced such things at their baptism. In other words, they considered such things to be part of their past, sinful life and no longer a part of their new life in Christ. BELIEVERS WERE FORBIDDEN TO ATTEND THESE BLOODY GAMES AND ANY WHO DID WOULD BE EXCOMMUNICATED (thrown out of the church). Tertullian once said, "the condition of faith and the laws of Christian discipline forbid, among other sins of the world, the pleasures of the public shows." The believers of the first few centuries knew that such shows excited all sorts of wild and impure passions such as anger, fury and lust.

Do modern Christians take a firm stand against such things? May God help us to

separate from worldly and sinful practices and anything which is contrary to the Word of God and not pleasing to the Son of God.

## An Escaped Gladiator

In 73 B.C. all Italy was terrified by a band of gladiators led by Spartacus who had escaped from a gladiatorial "farm" at Capua. For two years Spartacus held out in Southern Italy. The Romans, for all their love of gladiatorial display, failed to appreciate this sport when the whole country was turned into an arena. They loved these contests AS LONG AS THEY WERE NOT PERSONALLY INVOLVED ("I love to watch violence but I certainly hope no one is ever violent to me!").

When Spartacus was finally overthrown, six thousand of his followers were crucified--long miles of nailed and drooping victims--along the Appian way.

## Christian Persecution

We have already studied something of the Roman persecution against the believers, especially in the days of Nero the madman (see **Chapter 2**). Some Christian prisoners were thrown to lions and bears in the arena. Jews were also persecuted. General Titus presented thousands of Jewish captives after the capture of Jerusalem (70 A.D.) for slaughter in the arena. How did the early Christians deal with this persecution?

Did they band together to form an army so that they could fight against the Romans? Did they turn away from the Christian faith because it cost too much to be a believer? No, the early Christians met cruelty with courage, hatred with heroism and fierceness with faith.

One example of such courage and bravery is seen in the life and death of Polycarp, a man who had been personally taught by the Apostle John. Polycarp lived in the second century A.D. He was arrested and brought into the great amphitheater in Smyrna. Thousands of people were there to watch what would take place. The ruler reminded Polycarp of his great age and he urged him to deny his Christian faith: "Revile Christ, and I will release you." But Polycarp answered, "Eighty and six years have I served Him, and He has never done me wrong; how can I blaspheme Him, my King, who has saved me? I am a Christian."

The ruler then cried out to the crowd, "Polycarp has confessed himself to be a Christian." The crowds yelled, with their thumbs-down, "Let him be burned!" Wood was collected and made into a pile. Polycarp asked not to be fastened to the stake. "Leave me thus," he said. "He who strengthens me to endure the flames will also enable me to stand firm at the stake without being fastened with nails." As the

woodpile was lighted Polycarp bravely lifted up a final prayer to his God and finally the flames consumed him. He died in 156 A.D.

Before we start feeling sorry for people such as Polycarp we need to remember that the fires that this man went through only lasted for a brief moment. When the people threatened to burn Polycarp at the stake unless he would deny Christ, one of his enemies said, "I will have you consumed with fire unless you change your mind." Polycarp replied, "You threaten fire which burns for an hour and is soon quenched; for you are ignorant of the fire of the coming judgment and eternal punishment reserved for the wicked" (see Matthew 25:41,46). Do these words of Polycarp help us to see who we should really feel sorry for? In condemning Polycarp they were really condemning themselves.

Under Emperor Marcus Aurelius (161-180 A.D.) the believers also suffered greatly. This man decreed that the property of Christians should be given to their accusers. You can imagine that many were eager to lay their hands on the property of Christians and thus they eagerly turned them in at every opportunity. Those believers who were Roman citizens were beheaded. Others were thrown to wild beasts in the arena of the amphitheater.

As the heathen watched they saw the Christians bravely meet their death with a joy that could not be explained and with a courage that only God could give. The last to die was Blandina. She had been a spectator of the death of many others and she had constantly encouraged and exhorted them to remain steadfast to the end. With full trust in her Saviour she entered the arena. A net was thrown over her. Then she was exposed to the fury of a wild bull. Several times the bull took her upon his horns and tossed her into the air. At last she was dead.

In 205 A.D. other believers were murdered in the arena. Satur, Saturninus and Revocatus entered the arena and these three believers were ordered to run the gauntlet between the hunters, such as had the care of the wild beasts. The hunters being drawn up in two ranks, they ran between, and as they passed were severely lashed. Felicitas, and Perpetua were thrown to a beast. The beast made his first attack upon Perpetua, and stunned her; he then attacked Felicitas, and wounded her much; but not killing them, the executioner did that office with a sword. Revocatus and Satur were destroyed in the same manner; Saturninus was beheaded; and Secundulus died in prison (from *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*).

These are just a few examples out of many. These believers took a stand for Christ and they paid a price for that stand. God gave them strength and courage and even joy in their hour of need. What if your very life were on the line? Would you still be proud to be a Christian under such a circumstance? If attending church might cost you your life, would you attend? Suppose the Communists were to overtake our country and demand the death of every person who confesses Christ as Lord. Would you keep silent (see Matthew 10:32-33)? Have you ever confessed Christ as your Lord (Romans 10:9)? Be on the winning side! Christ never loses! He always wins, and, even in death we are the victors (1 Cor. 15:55-58)!



**Fear none of those things  
which thou shalt suffer:  
behold, the devil shall cast  
some of you into prison,  
that ye may be tried; and  
ye shall have tribulation  
ten days: be thou faithful  
unto death, and I will give  
thee a crown of life  
(Revelation 2:10).**

## Gladiators Fighting a Tiger



**Can you imagine unarmed Christian believers facing such a beast?**