

# FULLY ALIVE

## The Glorious Potential of Discipleship | Second City (Part 2)

Text: Ephesians 2:1-10

### Tainted Water

Years ago, I took a memorable walk down an ancient avenue in modern-day Turkey. To my left were the ruins of what had once been luxurious town homes, their marvelous mosaic floors still intact. On my right were foundations that long ago belonged to some of the trendiest shops in the Roman empire. Nearby were the remains of a spa once so cushy that it had featured heated toilet seats. Ahead, archaeologists were restoring the ornately painted façade of what had been among the most magnificent public libraries of antiquity. And, from there, my imagination took over.

Suddenly, the ruins seemed to reassemble and rise up to become beautiful balconied buildings. Out of the mist appeared busy pedestrians in bright robes. The smell of lamb sizzling on a food cart grill wafted through the air, accompanied by the shouts of children playing and vendors hawking and the roar of a crowd from the great amphitheater at the end of the street. Chills ran down my spine. For I was standing amidst the glory of first-century Ephesus, the second greatest city of the Roman world.

Cleopatra had made her home here, as had Alexander the Great. Tradition holds that Mary (the mother of Jesus) spent her final years in this city, and the Apostle Paul had lived here from A.D. 54-57. Paul had walked up this same avenue from the harbor over there and preached in that amphitheater over here. He'd been as familiar with this city as you and I are with Chicago. He loved this place and cherished its people and gazed upon them with pain in his heart, because he knew they were dead. Oh, on the outside, they still looked fine; but they were doomed and didn't know it. **They were the Walking Dead.**

That was true on two levels and the first in a purely physical sense. You see, beneath the city lay a deadly secret. The state-of-the-art plumbing system the Romans had installed to supply the city's plentiful drinking and bathing water had been installed using lead pipes. The lead was leaching into the water supply, slowly poisoning the people, literally causing brain damage. Years later, it would become a widely-published scandal – a bit like what happened in Flint, Michigan.

This problem, however, paled in comparison to the crisis the Ephesians faced with their spiritual water supply. As Tracey mentioned last week, the city's principal industry was the cult of the goddess Artemis (or Diana). This religion was supported by big businesses in ritual prostitution, animal sacrifices, and silver icons that pumped out a steady stream of messages aimed at increasing people's lust for **money, power, sex, and celebrity – the main idols of all misplaced worship**. Like spiritual lead, these elements were poisoning people's heart and damaging their thinking. People were, turning in on themselves, against one another, and away from the true God. How would

you assess the quality of the “water” in our city and its effect on our spiritual health? Could what we have flowing into our homes and minds be doing any damage to our moral vision, our personal character, our cohesiveness and condition as a people?

### **Dead in Our Transgressions?**

Imprisoned in far-off Rome, the Apostle Paul worried that even some of the Christ-followers he’d left in Ephesus (and the other churches of Asia Minor) might be drinking some pretty bad water. So, Paul writes the first part of this brilliant letter to remind the disciples there of all that God had done for them and what God longed do further in them, for the sake of their health. **As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world... the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient** (Eph 2:1-2) – which is to say those who’ve turned away from God.

Now, it is highly unlikely that the people Paul’s talking about had any idea they had a serious problem. If you’ve ever watched a TV show or movie about zombies, then you know that the Walking Dead aren’t particularly self-observant creatures. Why? Because they are so consumed by their appetite. We were like that once, says Paul, to the Ephesians. **All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts.** (Eph 2:3). How many of us can remember a period in our lives when we compulsively focused on satisfying our craving for more stuff, more sex, more power, praise, popularity, or control? How many of us still struggle with those appetites?

When self-awareness starts to dawn on us, we often anaesthetize it, by comparing ourselves to others. In zombie terms, our face may be falling off and our bones protruding through our flesh, but we look over at someone else and say, “Well, thank goodness I’m much healthier than THAT one. At least my eye-balls aren’t falling out! At least I don’t have blood on my hands, or had an affair, or stolen or lied – at least not much or deeply or lately.”

This is how sin-poisoning works on us. It impairs our judgment. We think: I’m sure God’s giving a big thumbs-up to the way I think and relate to others and manage my resources. It doesn’t seem possible that God sees us as stunningly selfish, shockingly hard-hearted, stupidly wasteful, and... **Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath** (Eph 2:3) – which is Bible code for “reaping the consequences of our attitudes and actions.”

Ten days ago, a 42-year-old man from Wheaton reaped a tragic end to his life. Maybe you saw his story in the news. Richard was a manager at the Heineken beer company and a life-long Cubs fan. But while making his way out of Wrigley Field around 11:00 p.m. – 45 minutes after the game had concluded – Richard toppled over an upper deck railing and fell to the seats below. He had a red cup in his hand. Paramedics rushed Richard to the hospital, but he died there of his injuries.

At what point do you suppose Richard was in trouble? Was it when he was in the ER

with a massive head injury? Was it when he hit the ground? Was it when he toppled over the rail? Was it before that when he lost his balance? Was it earlier in the evening when he reached for that cup? Was it the steps he took or didn't take long before he got to that field? I don't know. I don't know Richard's full story and mainly grieve for him and his family.

But I'm compelled to observe that for most of us, there is an arc to our lives, a path we each choose. The little decisions we make daily, the investments we pour ourselves into, the convictions we set our compass by, the company we keep, the things we take into our minds and bodies, all help plot out a course for our lives that move us in the direction of Life or Death. Where is your life headed right now? What are the appetites, attitudes and actions that are leading you there?

### **By Grace We Have Been Saved**

What Paul says, in effect, to the Ephesians (and by extension to believers everywhere) is that none of us are immune to the poisoning effects of the water being pumped at us by the dominant culture of our city. We've all got the red cup in our hand. We've drunk sin's water, lost our balance, stumbled, and fallen. In God's eyes, every one of us was over the railing and headed toward a moment when the full impact of our moral plunge would bring about a terrible end. **BUT...** here is the Gospel, the good news... **because of HIS great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions...** (Eph 2:4-5).

Imagine that, somewhere below the upper deck from which the Wheaton man tumbled, the Owner of Wrigley field had placed a great net. Or suppose the Owner was down on the ground with a jetpack on his back and his arms stretched out, scanning the seats for any sign of someone in trouble. Imagine that He'd seen enough intoxicated fans to know that they could do some pretty stupid, selfish, or savage things – some things even worthy of "wrath" – of justified consequences.

But imagine that as Richard fell, it was not his nature or works but the Owner's grace and kindness that became the ultimate factor in the story. Just suppose that the net was there, or the Owner flew up and caught Richard. Imagine that Richard was not only spared from destruction, but that he was raised back over the rail from which he'd toppled, and lifted-up to a new seat... a life-long box seat... more exalted than any he had ever sat in before... from which he would get to enjoy a view that was incomparably glorious. Imagine that kind of turnaround, because THIS, Paul says, is what the Ultimate Owner has done for you and me.

We were dead in our transgressions, but **God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— not by works, so that no one can boast.** (Eph 2:6-9). **Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with**

**every spiritual blessing in Christ** (Eph 1:3).

### **Drinking in the Blessings**

If there's one great theme that runs through the first three chapters of the letter to the church at Ephesus it is this: God has blessed you. Please, drink that in. In the verses that follow (Eph 1:4-14) Paul then goes on to list out three of the principle spiritual blessings bestowed upon you as a disciple of Jesus. I hope you'll take these in.

First of all, God has chosen you and adopted you into his family. What that means is that you never again need to wonder if anyone sees you or values you or cares about you. The greatest intelligence in the universe so loves you that he picked you to be part of his eternal family. You'll have that family wherever you go in life. We're here for you today. So, go out and live your life with confidence.

The second blessing Paul challenges you to remember is that God has forgiven your sins. That thing you did that you're ashamed of... That thing you didn't do and feel such guilt about... God does not count that against you. It was washed away by the blood he shed on the cross. You've got a clean slate. So, let go of yesterday. Lean into the marvelous possibilities of today. His grace is enough for you. Go from here in peace.

Finally, Paul wants you to know that God has made you part of his marvelous plan. He has let you in on his plan to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under Christ. He has given you his Holy Spirit as the power source for your life. He has selected you to reflect the glory of his character to the world. What that means is that you never again need to wonder, "What's my purpose in life?" You know. You are a bearer of his life, his light, his redeeming love wherever you go.

This is why Paul writes: **I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better.** (Eph 1:17). This is why he says, **I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance...** (Eph 1:18). This again is what Paul trying to get at when he states: **I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so...that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.** (Eph 3:16-19)

Again and again and with such intensity, Paul is saying: God has blessed you. I so want you to know this, feel this, be filled by this. Please drink that blessing in. Because if you don't drink this GOOD WATER often, you'll get thirsty. You'll have cravings that tempt you to drink from the Red Cup, from the tainted water of all the idolatries, shallow securities, false hopes -- constantly being pumped through the pipes of our city in your direction. That sort of water only leads to sickness and death.

God doesn't want that for you or me – that we are just a slightly better version of the Walking Dead. On the contrary, as an early church leader once observed: **"The glory**

**of God is a human being FULLY ALIVE,"** someone, I pray like YOU and I are becoming as we take in with humble, joyful wonder that by his grace we who had fallen have been lifted above the railing and now sit in the presence of Christ. We have been chosen, adopted, forgiven, and commissioned to help others find the Water of Life.

Please pray with me...

Lord, we remember the words you spoke to the woman at the well: "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life." So fill us up, God, so we never want for more.