

Truth for Today

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Truth leaves its mark: The Truth of our Heavenly Citizenship

Citizenship is very important. It is about the rights and privileges of belonging to a particular country and the responsibilities this brings. These days, citizenship normally comes through being born in a certain place or by fulfilling certain qualifications. In Bible times, Roman slaves were not citizens. But it was possible to buy Roman citizenship, albeit at a very high price. We see the contrast between citizenship by birth and purchase in Acts 22, "Then the commander came and said to [Paul], 'Tell me, are you a Roman?' He said, 'Yes.' The commander answered, 'With a large sum I obtained this citizenship.' And Paul said, 'But I was born a citizen'" (verses 27-28).

In Acts 21:39, Paul also refers to himself as "...a Jew from Tarsus, in Cilicia, a citizen of no mean city." Tarsus, in Turkey, was the capital of the Roman province of Cilicia. It was an impressive city with palaces, marketplaces, roads, bridges and baths. Paul returned to Tarsus after his conversion in Acts 9:30. Barnabas went there in Acts 11:25 to look for Paul and take him to Antioch to help in the work there.

From Antioch Paul begins his missionary work which eventually leads him into Europe in Acts 16 via Philippi. Paul visited Philippi with his friend Silas and God blessed their ministry in the conversion of several people including the Philippian jailer. Following his conversion, the Philippian jailer takes Paul and Silas to his own home and takes care of them.

The next day the magistrates order their release, "And when it was day, the magistrates sent the officers, saying, 'Let those men go.' So the keeper of the prison reported these words to Paul, saying, 'The magistrates have sent to let you go. Now therefore depart, and go in peace.' But Paul said to them, 'They have beaten us openly, uncondemned Romans, and have thrown us into prison. And now do they put us out secretly? No indeed! Let them come themselves and get us out.' And the officers told these words to the magistrates, and they were afraid when they heard that they were Romans," (verses 35-38).

It is interesting that at Philippi Paul did not use his Roman citizenship to escape persecution. He does, however, use it to strike fear into the hearts of the magistrates in regard to the possible consequences of their actions against Roman citizens. Roman citizenship gave protection from degrading punishments. Paul knew his rights and you get a real sense of the importance of citizenship and the power of Rome. But Paul submits to persecution as a citizen of heaven. Paul writes about this citizenship in his letter to the Philippian church some years later.

In Philippians 3:20 Paul writes, "For our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ." He introduces a citizenship which is unique to the Christian – heavenly citizenship. To understand what he means by heavenly citizenship we need look at some of the themes in his letter to the Philippians.

The letter is about Christian experience, in fellowship with Christ, witnessing in a world that is resistant to the Christian faith. We have really seen that Paul's visit to Philippi with his friend, Silas, was blessed by God in the conversion of Lydia, a rich sophisticated business woman, a slave girl, the Philippian jailer and his family. The story demonstrates that the visit of Paul and Silas was planned by the Spirit of God (verses 6-11), that the conversions were preceded by prayer, (verses 13, 16 and 25), and that persecution led ultimately to blessing (verses 19-34).

God's work in Philippi brought people from quite different backgrounds into a new family – the family of God. This family has a Head, Jesus Christ, in heaven. The family is linked to one another and to their Head in heaven by the Spirit of God. Jesus describes His disciples in John 17:16 as "not of the world, just as I am not of the world." In other words the family of God does not belong to earth but to heaven.

Paul writes to the Thessalonians in a similar vein, "For they themselves declare concerning us what manner of entry we had to you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, even Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come" (1 Thessalonians 1:9-10).

Paul's relationship with the Philippian church continued for many years. They supported him in his missionary service. Sometimes they were the only church who supported him. He appreciated the Philippians' warm fellowship and it is one of the themes of his letter to them.

- In chapter 1 he writes about fellowship in the Gospel (1:5). Heavenly citizenship begins with conversion.
- In chapter 2 he writes about the fellowship of the Spirit (2:1). The Holy Spirit is the unifying power of heavenly citizenship.
- In chapter 3, he writes about the fellowship of Christ's sufferings (3:10). Heavenly citizenship is characterised by Christ-like behaviour; and
- In chapter 4 he writes about the fellowship of giving (4:15). Heavenly citizenship is evidenced by practical love and care – "By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35).

In addition to fellowship, Paul also writes about joy. Joy, or rejoicing, is mentioned in each chapter (1:18, 25; 2:2, 17, 18, 28, 29; 3:1; 4:1, 4 and 10). This is quite remarkable. In Acts 16, just before the Philippian jailor's conversion, we read that Paul and Silas prayed and sang hymns to God (verse 25). They rejoiced in the most difficult circumstances. "In body" they were in the jail. But "in spirit" they were enjoying a heavenly citizenship. Prayer is about communicating with heaven and praise is about rejoicing with heaven. Paul wrote his letter to the Philippian church from another prison and as he writes he demonstrates the same joyful spirit the Philippians had witnessed when he first visited them. The joy Paul expressed had its source in the spiritual life Paul enjoyed. When the Lord Jesus was on earth, He was constantly in communication with His Father in heaven. He gave us the words, "Our Father who is in heaven..." Paul lived in the good of his heavenly citizenship. Paul's heavenly citizenship governed his earthly experience.

There were two very good reasons why this was the case. If we go back to the first time Paul is mentioned, as the young man Saul, in Acts 7 we read, "When they heard these things they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed at him with their teeth. But [Stephen], being full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God, and said, 'Look! I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!' Then they cried out with a loud voice, stopped their ears, and ran at him with one accord; and they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul. And they stoned Stephen as he was calling on God and saying, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.' Then he knelt down and cried out with a loud voice, 'Lord, do not charge them with this sin.' And when he had said this, he fell asleep." (verses 54-60). Paul witnessed in Stephen the remarkable death of a man whose citizenship was in heaven. Stephen was a man whose relationship to Christ in heaven deeply affected the way he lived and died on earth.

Paul, of course, resisted this witness until he met Jesus on the road to Damascus in Acts 9, "As he journeyed he came near Damascus, and suddenly a light shone around him from heaven. Then he fell to the ground, and heard a voice saying to him, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?' And he said, 'Who are You, Lord?' Then the Lord said, 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. It is hard for you to kick against the goads.' So he, trembling and astonished, said, 'Lord, what do You want me to do?'" (verses 3-6).

As far as we know, Paul never met Christ on earth. First, he met Stephen who lived in relationship to a risen glorified Christ in heaven. Then he met Christ Himself, glorified in heaven but in a living relationship to His people on earth. This relationship was evidenced by the Lord's question, "Why do you persecute Me?" In other words, Christ was saying to Paul that He felt personally in heaven the persecution His people were experiencing on earth. From then on Paul lived out his Christian life in reference to the risen Christ in heaven. He was certain of his own heavenly citizenship which superseded his Jewish nationality and his Roman status.

In his letter to the Philippians Paul gives a framework to his experience of heavenly citizenship. This framework is built upon the Person of Christ and can be seen in the following themes of each chapter of his letter:

- Chapter 1: The Life of Christ "For to me, to live is Christ..." (verse 21)
- Chapter 2: The Mind of Christ "Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus..." (verse 5)
- Chapter 3: The Knowledge of Christ "That I may know Him..." (verse 10)
- Chapter 4: The Strength of Christ "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (verse 13)

Chapter 1: The Life of Christ: "For to me, to live is Christ..." (verse 21)

In chapter 1 Paul describes Christ as the centre of his life. He had served the people of God and preached the Gospel for many years. In doing so Paul had endured much suffering throughout his ministry and undoubtedly he felt he was nearing the end of his service on earth. He looked forward to being with Christ in heaven. He describes both his present and his future in relation to the Lord Jesus. "For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain. But if I live on in

the flesh, this will mean fruit from my labour; yet what I shall choose I cannot tell. For I am hard-pressed between the two, having a desire to depart and be with Christ, which is far better" (1:21-23).

Heaven is characterised by Christ. He came to where we were so that we could be with Him where He is. Jesus describes this in John 14, "Let not your heart be troubled; you believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father's house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also" (verses 1-3). The Lord Himself establishes our heavenly citizenship.

Chapter 2: The Mind of Christ: "Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus..." (verse 5).

In chapter 2, Paul encourages his fellow Christians to have the mind of Christ "Let this mind be you which was also in Christ Jesus..." (verse 5). When we first read of Paul, he is a proud, young Jewish zealot. His relationship with Christ changed him into a lowly, gentle, kind apostle who cared for the churches he once strove to destroy. Citizenship often generates pride. The greater the place a person is from, the greater the pride in being a citizen of that place. Sometimes where we come from brings derision. The Lord lived in Nazareth of which Nathanael said, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" (John 1:46). But the greatest citizenship – heavenly citizenship – should stimulate the mind of Christ in the Christian. Heaven's greatest citizen took the lowest place – "even death on a cross" (2:8)! Paul encourages us to demonstrate our heavenly character by being Christ like. I remember being told at school that when Richard the Lionheart was trying to escape from his enemies in Europe, he disguised himself as peasant. What led to his capture was the fact that although he dressed as a peasant he had the bearing of a king. Christ's lowliness was real and so should ours be. This can only be achieved by responding to Christ's words, "Come to Me, all you who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light" (Matthew 11:28-30). The nearer we are to Christ the more like Him we become.

Chapter 3: The Knowledge of Christ: "That I may know Him..." (verse 10)

In chapter 3, Paul takes up the issue of confidence in an earthly citizenship, particularly in regard to his Jewish background. "I also might have confidence in the flesh. If anyone else thinks he may have confidence in the flesh, I more so: circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews; concerning the law, a Pharisee; concerning zeal, persecuting the church; concerning the righteousness which is in the law, blameless" (verses 4-6). Naturally he had much to be proud of but he then explains the change that took place: "But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ. But indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith" (verses 7-9).

Paul describes how his knowledge of Christ had set him free from attempting to find righteousness in religion. He had found life by faith in Christ. Then he brings us to the theme of chapter 3, the knowledge of Christ, which is summed up in verse 10, "that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death."

"That I may know Him" means to know Christ in all His fullness and to enter into all His power and goodness. Christ as the Son, Saviour, Lord, Shepherd, Priest, Head, King, Hope, the Beginning and End. We know Christ today by faith, by the Holy Spirit, through the Scriptures and experimentally in our lives. We never stop learning about Him.

"The power of His resurrection" is to know Christ, who is the resurrection and the life, being effective in our lives through the gift and indwelling of the Holy Spirit (John 7:39). The Holy Spirit is the power for godly living and service. Identification with the resurrected Christ is the source of energy for the fulfilment of the will of God now. We know Christ as risen and we will experience the power of resurrection in the future. We also have a spiritual understanding of the Lord Jesus as the "resurrection and the life" because we have a new life and the Holy Spirit indwelling our hearts.

"The fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death," involves the suffering, choices, denying self, and persecution that are part of the Christian life. Paul was eventually martyred. Paul faced death wanting to die in a way that would glorify his Lord. As he contemplated this, he must have remembered the death of the first martyr, Stephen, which he had witnessed and which was so Christlike. We are not all called to be martyrs. However, we can live our lives in the will of God and bring glory to our Lord. The greatest stimulus for this is to know what Christ did for us and to respond by living as He did. "Attain to the resurrection of the dead" is not physical resurrection but identification with Christ in His resurrection and its effects. To live in such a way that manifests the power of Christ in me – "for to me to live is Christ."

“Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me. Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus” (verses 12-14).

These verses are about Paul wanting to complete his service by the power of Christ living in Him. At the last Olympics Usain Bolt of Jamaica won the 100 metres in a world record time. He was so fast and so far in front he eased up as he approached the finishing line. Paul gives us the picture of an athlete running toward a heavenly finishing line. Every muscle and ounce of strength is channelled into that one final effort to finish the race. There is no easing up until the race is complete! This is summed up in his words, “I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.” The upward, or heavenly calling (Hebrews 3:1) is in view. The well known quote that “some Christians are so heavenly minded they are of no earthly use” is challenged by Paul’s experience. Paul discovered the true sense of heavenly citizenship through his living relationship with the Saviour in heaven. This made him into the most useful and committed of servants.

Paul finishes this chapter with the words, “For our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body that it may be conformed to His glorious body, according to the working by which He is able even to subdue all things to Himself” (verses 20-21). These words describe the reality of the Christian’s hope. After a life of constant service, Paul had known what it was to be a Jew and a Roman citizen. He had used both his Jewish heritage and his Roman citizenship to further the work of God. It was because he was a Roman citizen that he had appealed to Caesar and witnessed in Rome. We too, should take appropriate advantage of what privileges we may have to serve God. But ultimately Paul awaited the fulfilment of his heavenly citizenship – his heavenly home.

Chapter 4: The Strength of Christ: “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me” (verse 13).

In the final chapter of his letter to the Philippians Paul, in spite of imprisonment, failing health and advancing age, highlights a vital aspect of heavenly citizenship – the strength of Christ. When Napoleon, and later Hitler, tried to conquer Russia they were defeated by the vastness of the land and the fact that, in retreat, the Russians destroyed what would feed and supply their enemies. Paul’s final point at the end of this letter is that the strength of Christ is always available to the Christian. So he writes, “Indeed I have all and abound. I am full, having received from Epaphroditus the things sent from you, a sweet-smelling aroma, an acceptable sacrifice, well pleasing to God. And my God shall supply all your need according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus. Now to our God and Father be glory forever and ever. Amen” (verses 18-19).

In these verses, the concept of heavenly citizenship is still in the mind of the apostle: the belief that God, from heaven, will supply every need His people have – spiritual or material - from His boundless riches. Paul relates earthly need to heavenly provision.

During the Berlin Blockade between 1948 and 1949 by the Soviets, the citizens of West Berlin were entirely dependent on a massive airlift of supplies. At the time, it seemed impossible that such an airlift would succeed but it did. For more than two thousand years, there has been a spiritual operation going on during which time heaven has been caring for the needs of its citizens on earth. We need to be more aware of the value of our heavenly citizenship and, in the words of Matthew Henry, “always to keep heaven in our eye and earth under our feet.”

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