

Essays in Philippians- Citizenship

Phil. 3:20-21

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The third chapter of Philippians is a warning against a specific group of false teachers. Paul finishes his warning by describing the ultimate end of this group: destruction (Phil. 3:19). While the warning was dark, he concluded the chapter with an encouraging contrast. The end of these false teachers was destruction; whereas, those of faith had hope of new, resurrection life.

But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself (Phil. 3:20-21).

About Citizenship in Philippi

This passage uses the word “citizenship” to convey the blessing of faith. This word comes from the Greek term “politeuma,” meaning “a community; the administration of civil affairs or a commonwealth.” To appreciate the meaning and implication of this term, we must remember the history of Philippi.

The city of Philippi was a colony of the Roman Empire. The city had become a place settled by veterans of the Roman army. The government did not want veterans staying in the city of Rome with nothing to do. Instead, Rome encouraged them to settle its colonies. As is true of all colonies, they were tasked with upholding the laws and advancing the culture of the Empire.

Like Paul, the saints in Philippi were citizens of Rome. They were expected to abide by Roman law, pledge allegiance to Caesar as lord, and promote a Roman way of life. For the saints in Philippi, however, everything had changed. They had obeyed the Gospel and become citizens of another kingdom. Their citizenship was in Heaven.

Clarifying Misconceptions

How does heavenly citizenship affect our earthly citizenship? Some have used this passage to justify isolation from and indifference towards the world. They take comfort in their salvation but ignore the world. They focus on Heaven at the expense of the world. This passage gives no such justification, nor does its context.

In chapter one, Paul wrote about his genuine desire to depart and be with the Lord. He wanted to be in Heaven. He said that being with the Lord would be far better, but concluded, “...to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account. Convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with you all, for your progress and joy in the faith” (Phil. 1:24-25).

We all desire to be with the Lord. Paul was no exception to this longing; however, he had no control over when he would depart to be with the Lord. Until that time, he recognized that

he had important work to do. He needed to help the saints in Philippi. He needed to preach the Gospel. He needed to expand the kingdom of Heaven on earth.

Expanding the Kingdom of Heaven on Earth

Being a citizen of the kingdom of Heaven is a blessing. As the text indicates, citizenship grants us the hope of resurrection life and being united with our Savior. However, our heavenly citizenship does not give us the freedom to ignore the world. Citizenship brings important responsibilities to our present lives.

1. Pledge allegiance to King Jesus. For citizens of Rome, Caesar was king. However, Caesar was a caricature of the true king. Caesar did not have power over death, but Jesus did. By the resurrection from death, God made Jesus the King of kings and Lord of lords. God placed the rule of Heaven and earth into His hands (Eph. 1:18-22). Therefore, saints throughout the Roman Empire declared that there was another King: Jesus (Acts 17:17). We too must pledge allegiance to King Jesus in word and deed.

2. Obey the laws of the kingdom of Heaven. Jesus often spoke of the kingdom of Heaven (Matt. 13). His message was about the values of this kingdom and the kind of person who could become its citizen. While there are specific commands of Jesus, more broadly, He described citizens as people who willingly, whole-heartedly serve Him.

The commands of Jesus are designed to transform our lives. This is how we reflect the glory of God in the world. We are to live a godly life. Paul wrote, “For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ” (Titus 2:11-13). Waiting for the future appearance of Jesus means obeying Jesus presently.

3. Promote the message of the kingdom of Heaven. As citizens, we are to be working to expand the kingdom of Heaven on earth. We must promote the Gospel: the good news of God’s love in Jesus and the hope of eternal life. We are to persuade others to become citizens by them pledging allegiance to Jesus and obeying His commands. The work of kingdom expansion had brought Paul, Silas, Timothy, and Luke to Philippi. They walked the streets teaching the Gospel. As sinners obeyed, the kingdom of Heaven gained a presence in Philippi.

4. Promote the culture of the kingdom of Heaven. Jesus once contrasted how the Romans used power with how power would be used in His kingdom. Jesus said, “...You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:42-45). The culture of the kingdom of Heaven is self-giving love. The King was a servant to

us. We become His servants by becoming the servants of others. Like the King, we must take an interest in the lives of other people and lead them to the kingdom.

Conclusion

Our citizenship is in Heaven. This is an encouraging truth. However, we must not relish in this at the neglect of expanding the kingdom of Heaven on earth. As long as we have life and breath, we have work to do.