

Our Citizenship is in Heaven

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Paul's letter to the church at Philippi is especially encouraging. For many saints, Philippians is their favorite letter. The text is filled with memorable statements that capture the essence of Christianity.

"And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more..." (Phil. 1:9).

"For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain" (Phil. 1:21).

"Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ..." (Phil. 1:27).

"...work out your own salvation with fear and trembling..." (Phil. 2:12).

"...I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 3:13-14).

"Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice" (Phil. 4:4).

"I can do all things through him who strengthens me" (Phil. 4:13).

When we are struggling, we would do well to read Philippians. Paul wrote this letter from prison; yet, he was calm and reassuring. His phrasing was not flowery words but rooted in the resurrected Lord and Savior, Jesus the Messiah. This was Paul's hope and can be ours if we believe.

There is another memorable passage in Philippians that will be the focus of this article. In the third chapter, Paul writes about the transforming power of God's grace. Despite his past, Paul had received mercy from the One he had persecuted. Grace strengthened him to move beyond his guilt and advance the Gospel.

But Paul and the Philippians were not without opponents. There were enemies of the cross of Jesus. The Philippians lived in a place unwelcoming of the Gospel. Yet, Paul reminded them of their responsibility to cultivate the kingdom of Jesus. He famously wrote, "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).

The Meaning of Heavenly Citizenship

1). Common explanations. First, this text has been used to remind us that our lives are temporary. After all, Jesus warned about the cares of the world and riches choking the Gospel out of us (Matt. 13:22). We need to be focused on Heaven. Second, this text has

been used to encourage Christians who are saddened by the sinful decline of society. The world is hopelessly lost, but we are to be glad that our citizenship is in Heaven, not this world.

Well, our lives are temporary, and sin does thrive in the world, but these are not Paul's points. These perspectives about Heavenly citizenship can produce a sense of isolation and self-righteousness.

The world was spiraling out of control in sin, yet Jesus left Heaven and came to earth. Paul cites a poem describing this in the second chapter (Phil. 2:5-11). Jesus was and is seeking to save the world. The people of Jesus are to share in this work. The Gospel must refocus our perspective on the world and our purpose in it.

2). Citizenship and Philippi. Paul's use of the concept of citizenship would have had a particular resonance with the saints in Philippi. The city of Philippi was a Roman colony. The Roman Empire had granted land to retired generals in the region of Macedonia. Like all colonizers, the people of Philippi were expected to cultivate the customs, practices, and laws of the Roman Empire.

Paul is using the culture of Philippi to make a point regarding the purpose of the Philippian saints. They had professed that Jesus was Lord, not Caesar. They had given their allegiance to Jesus. Their citizenship was in Heaven; therefore, they were expected to spread the culture of the kingdom of Jesus in Philippi.

The Philippians needed to look no further than Paul to understand this work. Paul greatly desired to be with the Lord (Phil. 1:23). However, he had no control over when he would be united with the Lord. Laboring to expand the rule of Jesus was his primary focus.

Paul did not run and hide from the world. He did not indict the world in self-righteousness. He used all his energy to spread the Gospel. Even in prison, he led members of Caesar's household to the true Caesar (Phil. 4:22).

3). Colonizing the kingdom of Jesus on earth. Paul said our citizenship is in Heaven and that from Heaven we "await a Savior." Like the Philippians, we are waiting. How are we to wait? By huddling with our families and churches? No. We wait by colonizing the kingdom of Jesus on earth.

At the end of the letter, Paul builds on this idea. In another memorable text, he wrote, "Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things" (Phil. 4:8).

We colonize the kingdom of Jesus on earth by radiating His beauty into the world. We are to seek and promote whatever is true, honorable, just, pure, and lovely. Determining

whatever things fit this description demands a discerning eye (Phil. 1:9-11). Whatever fits the description of this reflective of Jesus.

Conclusion

The world may be spiraling downward to destruction, but we must not allow this to discourage us from our purpose. Our citizenship is in Heaven. We are waiting for the glorious arrival of King Jesus. In the meantime, we must get ready for His return by colonizing the culture of His kingdom in our world.