

Citizens of Heaven

Series: J.O.Y. Jesus, Others, and You - #7
A Study of the Book of Philippians

Text: Philippians 3:17-21

Introduction: In *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Miss Watson attempts to persuade Huckleberry to behave by explaining to him the difference between heaven and hell. Huckleberry responds with the following observation:

She went on and told me all about the good place. She said all a body would have to do there was to go around all day long with a harp and sing, forever and ever. So, I didn't think much of it. But I never said so. I asked her if she reckoned Tom Sawyer would go there, and she said, not by a considerable sight. I was glad about that because I wanted him and me to be together.

In his book about heaven, Randy Alcorn tells the story of an English vicar. When asked by a colleague what he expected after death, he replied, "Well, if it comes to that, I suppose I shall enter into eternal bliss, but I really wish you wouldn't bring up such depressing subjects."

George Bernard Shaw said: Heaven, as conventionally conceived, is a place so inane, so dull, so useless, so miserable, that nobody has ever ventured to describe a whole day in heaven, though plenty of people have described a day at the seashore.

A survey of American adults by the Barna group revealed that 76% believe that heaven exists but their views about heaven varies greatly.

- A state of eternal existence in God's presence – 46%
- An actual place of rest and reward where souls go after death – 30%
- Just "symbolic" – 14%

According to the Bible, heaven is not just a state of existence or symbolic. It is a physical place. Jesus said in John 14:2-3, ***"In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am."*** (NIV)

In the NIV translation of the Bible, the word **“heaven”** and other forms of that word are used over 600 times. There is nothing in the Bible that describes different levels of heaven that are to be obtained based on our good works, but there are three levels of the use of this word heaven.

o First heaven = atmosphere

The reference to this first heaven is found in the creation account in Genesis: **“Then God said, “Let the waters teem with swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth in the open expanse of the heavens.”** Genesis 1:20 (NASB)

o Second heaven = space

“And God made the two great lights, the greater light to govern the day, and the lesser light to govern the night; He made the stars also. And God placed them in the expanse of the heavens to give light on the earth.” Genesis 1:16, 17 (NIV)

The use of the word “heaven” here is very similar to the way the Psalmist often used the word to describe the place where the stars and the associated planets and their moons are located.

While both the first and second heavens are described frequently throughout the Scriptures, there is a third use of the word “heaven”.

o Third heaven = the dwelling place of God

In 2 Corinthians 12:2-4 Paul says, **“I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven. Whether it was in the body or out of the body I do not know - God knows. And I know that this man - whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, but God knows - was caught up to paradise. He heard inexpressible things, things that man is not permitted to tell.”** 2 Corinthians 12:2-4 (NIV)

The context of this passage makes it quite clear that the third heaven is the dwelling place of God.

“After this I looked, and there before me was a door standing open in heaven. And the voice I had first heard speaking to me like a trumpet said, “Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this.” Revelation 4:1 (NIV)

I like this description of the difference between the three heavens:

The first heaven we see by day, the second heaven we see by night, the third heaven we see BY FAITH.

When it comes to our citizenship, most of us consider ourselves to be citizens of the United States. But if you are a follower of Jesus Christ, the bible says your real citizenship is in heaven.

Being **Citizens of Heaven** is what I want to talk about today as we continue our series, J.O.Y. in the book of Philippians. Turn to Philippians., chapter 3, beginning with verse 17.

“Join together in following my example, brothers and sisters, and just as you have us as a model, keep your eyes on those who live as we do. 18For, as I have often told you before and now tell you again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. 19Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is set on earthly things. 20But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, 21who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.” (NIV) **PRAY**

The city of Philippi had been founded by Philip of Macedon in 386 B.C. It was located at a strategic and military crossroads in what is now northern Greece. It was located literally where the East (Asia) met the West (Europe).

It was a Roman colony, and they were very proud of their Roman citizenship. The architecture was Roman, they dressed in Roman fashion, the coins were Roman, and the leadership and elite spoke Latin.

The Philippians could relate to the idea of dual citizenship. Philippi was over 600 miles away from Rome. It was built by retired Roman soldiers. Though they lived in Philippi in Macedonia, these people were citizens of Rome. They didn't want to speak the language of Macedonia; they wanted to speak the language of Rome. When they put their children to bed at night, they did not tell them stories of Macedonia; they told them stories of the glory of Rome.

So, the believers in Philippi had an even higher calling than being citizens of Rome, they are citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven.

Just as Philippi was a colony of Rome on foreign soil, the church is a “colony of heaven” on earth. Christians are temporary residents of Earth but are citizens of Heaven.

As citizens of Heaven, believer’s actions and attitudes should reflect the place where their citizenship resides. Heaven is not just a place of future abode, but a place of which we are presently citizens.

Paul is telling the Philippian church and us about the characteristics of Christian citizens living temporarily in this world.

STORY: I read the story of a senior citizen who was driving down the highway when his cellphone rang through his Bluetooth car audio system. He pushed the button and answered the phone, it was his wife.

The elderly man’s wife urgently warned him, saying, “I just heard on the news that there’s a car going the wrong way on Highway 401. I know you are on that road on your way home, so please be careful!”

The elderly man replied to his wife, “Honey, you won’t believe it. It’s not just one car going the wrong way on the highway, it’s hundreds of them!”

The reality in life is there are only two kinds of people in this world: those who are going with the flow of traffic and those who are driving against the flow.

If we use driving and the flow of traffic as a metaphor, then we realize that Christians are called to live and walk in God’s ways, and to move with God’s flow, and many times that puts us against the prevailing worldly flow of traffic.

There are only two kingdoms, and everyone belongs to one or the other.

- Either you are a citizen of the Kingdom of heaven, or you are a citizen of the kingdom of this world.
- The Kingdom of God, or the kingdom of Satan.
- The Kingdom of Light, or the kingdom of darkness.

The Bible talks about the prince of the power of the air (Eph 2:2), who controls the lives of those who are not believers, and Paul contrasts this picture with terms that relate to the believer, such as. ***“Heirs of God and fellow heirs with Jesus Christ”*** (Romans 8:17) and ***“fellow citizens with the saints and ... of God’s household”*** (Eph 2:19)

The point is that **these terms are all in the present tense.** It is not a future thing that we look forward to ~ it is not a state or status that we hope to attain ~ it is not an honorary title like might be given to a well-loved celebrity in his old age by a prestigious university or fraternity.

As believers in Christ, we are raised up with Christ (Col 3:1), we have been delivered from the domain of darkness, and transferred to the kingdom of His beloved Son (Col 1:13), we are seated in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus (Eph 2:6).

We must begin to understand and believe in our hearts that we are, right now, as fully accepted and established by God as citizens of heaven as we shall be when we get there.

C.S. Lewis wrote in Mere Christianity: **“If you read history, you will find that the Christians who did the most for the present world were just those who thought most of the next...It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this world.”**

When our primary citizenship is in this world, then our eyes, minds and hearts are mostly focused on worldly things.

But when our primary citizenship is in heaven, then our eyes, minds and hearts are mostly focused on spiritual things.

Let’s contrast the two types of people Paul is talking about.

I. Earth Dwellers, who are Citizens of the World.

Paul began in verse 17 by saying, ***“Join together in following my example, brothers and sisters, and just as you have us as a model, keep your eyes on those who live as we do.”*** In other words, ***“Follow my example!”***

Paul has made similar appeals in his other letters.

- ***“For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example.” (2 Thess. 3:7)***
- ***“You became imitators of us and of the Lord...” (1 Thess. 1:6)***
- ***“Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ.” (1 Cor. 11:1)***

Why did Paul charge others to follow his example? He wanted others to know that he was intentionally trying to be the best Christ-follower he could.

Most of us would be uncomfortable making a statement like this. We would rather say, *“Do as I say, not as I do,”* or follow my example only at certain times, and I will tell you those times.

Over the years, we have heard many high-profile athletes and entertainers say, “I don’t want to be a role model for others. Don’t follow my example.”

But others are going to follow our example whether we like it or not.

- **Our brothers and sisters in Christ need our good example.**
- **Our children need a good example.**
- **Our neighbors, friends, and coworkers need our good example.**

Paul was so upset by how some people were living and the damage of their example, that he said that he wrote these things with tears.

18 “For, as I have often told you before and now tell you again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. 19 Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is set on earthly things. (Phil 3:18-19, NIV)

- o Paul may have been referring to the hostile anti-Christian world in general.
- o Paul may have been referring to a group who advocated false teaching.
- o Paul may have been referring to the Judaizers he discussed earlier.
- o Or Paul may have been referring to certain members of the Philippian church.

Whomever Paul was talking about, he gave five descriptions of them.

1. They are ***“enemies of the cross of Christ.”***

They may have been individuals who taught and preached against the saving power of the cross. They may have been people who denied the resurrection of Jesus and the salvation that was accomplished at the cross.

I am in gross violation of political correctness, when I say that all unbelievers, no matter how nice they are, no matter how noble and courageous they are, no matter how religious and faithful to their religion they are, no matter their status in society, no matter the level of their giving to charitable causes, no matter how influential they are by virtue of their fame or their wealth or their position...ALL WHO HAVE NOT BELIEVED IN THE SHED BLOOD OF CHRIST FOR SALVATION AND HIS RESURRECTION FROM THE DEAD TO GIVE THEM LIFE, are enemies of the cross of Christ.

Some of them say, “I believe in God, and I believe in Jesus, and I’ve read the Bible, and I have nothing against Christians, but church isn’t for me”. But they are still enemies of the cross of Christ.

2. Their ***“destiny is destruction.”***

The destruction that enemies of Christ experience begin with the natural consequences in this world as they reap what they sow from their sin, and their ultimate destruction is concluded as they spend eternity in hell.

3. Their ***“god is their stomach.”***

Gluttony is the problem Paul was referring to. Rather, Paul was describing people who live for themselves and live to feed their own uncontrollable appetites for sin. Those who are focused on the things of the world worship their appetites as if they were gods.

4. Their ***“glory is their shame.”***

- These people boast about the very things that should make them ashamed.

- These individuals are proud of their sins.
- They might be the ruthless businessperson who boasts about their dishonest gains.
- They might be the adulterer who boasts about their sexual conquests.
- They might embrace the LGBTQ lifestyle, or anti-Christian movements, who are proud of their ungodly and unnatural lifestyle.

Romans 1:29-32 describes them perfectly as... ***“filled with all unrighteousness, wickedness, greed, evil; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malice; they are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent arrogant, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, without understanding, untrustworthy, unloving, unmerciful; and although they know the ordinance of God, that those who practice such things are worthy of death, they not only do the same, but also give hearty approval to those who practice them.”***

The things they glory in are to their shame and will result in God’s judgment.

5. Their ***“mind is on earthly things.”***

For these individuals, their whole focus and orientation is on the things of the world. They are spiritually blind and deaf.

Paul’s primary point is: Don’t be like these individuals - don’t follow their example – for their destiny is destruction.

In contrast to those individuals are those who are dwellers on earth, but also citizens of heaven.

II. Earth Dwellers, and Citizens of Heaven

Paul wrote in verse 20: ***“But our citizenship is in heaven.”***

In his commentary on Paul’s letter to the Philippians, D. Martin Lloyd-Jones wrote: “We have a new citizenship, we are in Christ, and because we are in Christ, we are seated in the heavenly places with him. Certain things will happen to us before we finally arrive in heaven, but our citizenship is as definite now as it will be then. There will be a physical translation when we die, but spiritually we are there already, we belong there.”

Philippi, being a Roman colony was a “Rome away from Rome.” There was a great sense of pride in their Roman citizenship, and so in Philippi they followed Roman law, Roman customs, Roman language, culture, and dress.

Paul was saying, in so many words, Just as the Roman citizen never forgets they belong to Rome, you must never forget that you are a citizen of heaven, and your conduct must match your citizenship.

- How different is earthly language from heavenly language?
- How different are earthly laws and heavenly laws?
- How different are earthly leaders and heavenly leaders?
- How different is the earthly cause from the heavenly cause?

As citizens of heaven, we are entitled to do certain things that the citizens of this world cannot do.

We have free and constant access to the King.

We are citizens of a Kingdom ruled by a King who wants our fellowship.

Nothing can happen to us without Him knowing about it.

Jesus said that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us and grants our request.

We have the right, acting as His ambassadors, to introduce anyone we want to the Kingdom and usher them into equal citizenship with our own; and our guest doesn't have to take a test or get shots or meet some other requirement first, other than laying their sins at the foot of His cross.

“20 But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, 21 who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.” (Phil. 3:20-21)

Paul reminds us of the wonders of our heavenly citizenship.

First, we notice that there is the JOY of the return of Christ.

24 out of the 27 New Testament books mention the second coming of Jesus.

“As the apostles stood looking into the sky after the ascension of Jesus, the angels said, “This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.” (Acts 1:11)

In John 14, Jesus comforted His apostles with the idea of going to prepare a place for them in God’s heavenly mansion and He promised, ***“And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.”*** (Jn. 14:3)

The apostle Peter wrote: ***“The day of the Lord will come...”*** (2 Pet. 3:10)

And some of the final words in the final book of the NT are these words: He who testifies to these things says, ***“Yes, I am coming soon.” Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.*** (Rev. 22:20)

For the Christian (a citizen of heaven) the promise of His coming is not spoken with a sense of dread or apprehension, but with a spirit of joyful expectation.

Second, we notice that another JOY of heavenly citizenship is our abundant resource.

Our Lord, whom we are waiting for, has the power to bring everything under His control.

While Jesus was on the earth, He regularly demonstrated His power over everything as He cast out demons, healed the sick, raised the dead, and even controlled the winds and waves of nature.

How wonderful it is to know that the One we belong to, the One who rules over our heavenly citizenship has the power to sustain all things and to do anything that needs to be done.

In the apostle Peter’s second letter, he says: ***“His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness.”*** (2 Peter 1:3)

Our heavenly citizenship guarantees sufficient resources for our needs.

Third, we see another JOY of heavenly citizenship is the resurrection.

Not only are we waiting for Jesus' return, but we are also anticipating an upgrade on our bodies... ***"who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body."*** (v. 20-21)

At the resurrection, our spirits and bodies will be reunited and upgraded from lowly to glorious bodies like Jesus.

One pastor said, "What will our new bodies be like? Better!"

"God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. 'He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death' or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away." (Rev 21:4)

No more cancer, or colds. No more depression, dementia, or death. No more saying goodbye. No more anxiety, brain tumors, or broken bones. No more shame, embarrassment, or regret. No more addiction. No more tears, sadness, or rage. No more abuse. No more abandonment. No more tornados, typhoons, or ingrown toenails.

I don't have the knowledge or ability to explain all there is to know about the resurrection body, but I like the simple explanation that the apostle John gave: ***"Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be, has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is."*** (1 John 3:2)

We are Citizens of Heaven and that should bring us great joy.

Joy Because Of The Assurance of Our Heavenly Home.

Joy Because Of Our Anticipation of Our Lord's Return.

Joy Because Of The Coming Transformation of Our Earthly Bodies.

But there is one more thing I want you to consider concerning your heavenly citizenship.

Fourth, we have the JOY of heavenly citizenship by Birth.

In Acts 22, Paul has been arrested and is about to be flogged by a Roman soldier. But Paul stops the scourging and injects fear into the heart of the Roman centurion standing by, with one question. ***“Is it legal for you to flog a Roman citizen who hasn’t even been found guilty?”***

You see, being a Roman citizen put a person under the protection of Roman law, and a citizen could not be punished or imprisoned without due process of law. This Roman centurion could have been put to death, had he carried out the flogging before discovering that Paul was a citizen.

The interesting part of this story comes, when the centurion’s commander, having heard the centurion’s report, comes out and says to Paul, ***“I had to pay a lot of money for my citizenship,”*** which was legal and a common practice for anyone who could come up with the means. Citizenship could be purchased.

But Paul was born in a Roman province and was therefore considered a Roman citizen by birth. And his response to the Commander was, ***“I was born a citizen.”***

Many Christians live as though they are second-class citizen of heaven. They live and think as though they are barely acceptable to God. They labor under a perception that their position before God is a tentative citizenship they have purchased with good works.

Jesus told Nicodemus, “You must be born again.” Jesus said that believers are born from above.

II Corinthians 5:17, says that ***“...if any man is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come.”***

We are ***“...born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead”***. (I Peter 1:3)

By virtue of Jesus’ accomplished work on Calvary’s cross, and His resurrection from the dead, our Savior was crowned with glory and honor, and to Him was given dominion over all things.

Believers in Christ, you are citizens born; sons and daughters in the heavenly kingdom, with all the rights and privileges inherent therein; and I will end with the exhortation Paul gave to the believers in Philippi:

“Therefore, my beloved brethren...stand firm in the Lord...”

Conclusion:

What does a citizen of heaven look like according to Philippians?

Joy is the theme of their spiritual journey.

They conduct themselves in a manner worthy of the Gospel.

They are marked by a desire for unity, a heart of humility, and putting others' interests above their own.

Obedience isn't a bad word to them, and they do everything without grumbling or complaining.

Like Epaphoditus, they are willing to risk their lives for the Gospel.

They passionately pursue knowing Christ more and more.

They are known for their gentleness, peace, and prayer.

Their thoughts focus on what is true and noble.

They are outrageously generous.

Do these things describe you? Are you a dweller on earth but more importantly a citizen of heaven?

William Barclay wrote, “Just as the Roman colonists never forgot that they belong to Rome, you must never forget that you are citizens of heaven; and your conduct must match your citizenship.”

- Which citizenship is influencing us the most? Your earthly citizenship or our heavenly citizenship?
- Whose example are you following?
- Are you oriented toward this world, or are you oriented toward things above?
- Do your goals, hopes and values reflect the heavenly things to which you are called?

When Paul wrote to the church at Colosse, he gave them a summary of the very things we have just talked about:

1 Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. 2 Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. 3 For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. 4 When Christ, who is your, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. (Col. 3:1-4)

Set your hearts and minds on things above...toward God's throne.

For our lives are now hidden with Christ in God!

When Christ who is our life appears – you also will appear with Him in glory.