

“Citizens of Heaven,” Philippians 3:21-4:1 (August 2, 2015)

<sup>17</sup> Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us. <sup>18</sup> For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. <sup>19</sup> Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things. <sup>20</sup> But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, <sup>21</sup> 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.

Therefore, my brothers, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm thus in the Lord, my beloved.

## PRAY

We are working our way through the book of Philippians this summer, and after today we have two more weeks in Philippians and then, Lord willing, we will have finished going verse-by-verse through Philippians begin a new series on 1 Samuel and the life of David that will begin August 23, and go on through the fall until December.

But in our passage for today, Paul uses a very powerful, evocative metaphor to describe Christians – he says that for those who follow Jesus, their “citizenship is in heaven.” There are really, ultimately, only two types of people on the planet: citizens of heaven and citizens of the world. Christians are citizens of heaven.

What I want us to do is reflect carefully on the metaphor of citizenship, and I think we will find much encouragement and instruction if we do so.

Three questions: *first, what does it look like to be a citizen of heaven? Second, what are the hopes of a citizen of heaven? Third, what does it feel like to be a citizen of heaven?*

First, what does it look like to be a citizen of heaven? I don’t know of any better place to go to answer that question than John 17, where Jesus prays his great high priestly prayer. It’s the Thursday night before Good Friday, the night before Jesus goes to the cross. And in this prayer he asks that God would keep and preserve his disciples – that by God’s power and grace they would remain faithful to him the rest of their lives, spreading the good news of Jesus Christ.

<sup>13</sup> But now I am coming to you, and these things I speak in the world, that they may have my joy fulfilled in themselves. <sup>14</sup> I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. <sup>15</sup> I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. John 17:13-15.

It’s from these verses that we get a phrase that many of you know and are familiar with – it’s the phrase “in the world but not of the world.” Citizens of heaven are in the world – we don’t live yet in heaven, we live on earth, we live in the world. *But we are not of the*

*world.* We do not take our cues from the world, our priorities from the world, we do not take orders ultimately from anything in the world, because we do not belong to the world. We belong to heaven.

The United States of America, the state of Mississippi, the city of Oxford, is not our real home. Our real home, our true home, is heaven. Therefore, Christians, we must live differently if our citizenship is in heaven and not in the world. I'll give four ways: *first, if you are a citizen of heaven you will feel alienated in this world.*

1 Peter 2:11 (Peter is writing to Christians): “Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul.” The old NIV says that Christians are “aliens and strangers” in this world. This is the thing about sojourners, exiles, aliens – they do not feel at home. They are not in their home country, so they never feel comfortable, they never feel like they fit.

When you travel abroad and go to another country, it's easy to experience alienation. The language is different (even if they do speak English, it's not the English you're familiar with), the customs are different, the food is different, the way people drive is often very different, and the bathrooms are even different. Now if you like to travel, if you like experiencing new things, it can be a blast, but *you do not feel at home.* You don't feel comfortable, you know you don't fit.

That's the way citizens of heaven should feel all the time in this world, because it's not our home. Citizens of heaven should feel a deep sense of alienation in this world – even in the United States, and even in a state like Mississippi where we have so many professing Christians, and even in Oxford we should feel alienation. Oxford's a great place, I'm so glad to be here, I'm glad I get to raise my family here, but contrary to what a lot of people might say, *it is not heaven.* The priorities of Oxford are very often at odds with the priorities of heaven.

Here's how I like to think about it: if you took a representative sample of people living in Oxford and looked at what they spent their money on and how they spent their time, and then compared it to how you spend your money and how you spend your time, if they match, if you couldn't tell a difference, then there's a problem. You say you're a citizen of heaven but really you're living like a citizen of the world.

But, if you look around Oxford, even at your friends, even at some family members, even when those who would never deny being Christian, but your values do not match up with theirs, you do spend money differently and you do invest your time in other things and you do raise your children a little differently than average, then almost certainly that's a good thing.

You will feel alienated from this country, but you should because your heart does not belong here. You long for a better country. <sup>16</sup> But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city. Hebrews 11:16.

Citizens of heaven should feel alienation. *Second, if you are a citizen of heaven you have a different allegiance than the people of this world.* Again, imagine you are a long-term exile in another country. You're not just passing through on vacation, but you actually live there. But you love the United States, and you plan on returning to the United States in ten years.

How will you live there? Probably you will assimilate to some degree, you'll learn the language and the customs. You'll get involved in the culture around you. You'll obey the laws of that country and participate in that society as much as is appropriate.

But you won't completely let go of everything American, and you'll never stop feeling like an American. Especially if you're married and you have kids – you'll make sure you're children know they are, first and foremost, Americans. You'll teach them American history, you'll make sure they speak English, you'll make sure they are taught basic facts about the United States and you'll expose them to American culture, so that when you all go home, they are to some extent, ready.

And, you know, if there are other Americans, other expatriates living in that country with you, you'll probably gather together with them, and speak English together, and grill hamburgers and ribs and watch baseball and talk politics. Why? Because you owe a fundamental allegiance to your home country, and you're going back there one day, and you want you and your family to be ready when that time comes.

If that's true of citizens of the United States, how much more must it be true of citizens of heaven? Christians can be and must be good citizens of our country. We must pay our taxes, we must obey the laws, we must pray for those in authority over us – that's Romans 13 and 1 Timothy 2. But our ultimate allegiance is never to the United States of America; rather, it is to heaven.

So, a good exercise for every Christian might be that first thing in the morning, when you go into the bathroom to brush your teeth or splash water in your face, you look in the mirror and you say to yourself, "I am not a citizen of this world, I am a citizen of heaven." Remind yourself of what you really are – you could say, "I am a sinner, and what I deserve is to be forever cast off from God and consigned to hell. But because of his great love for me, God, who is rich in mercy, sent his Son Jesus Christ to die for my sins. And I've believed that good news and now I'm a child of God and I belong to him. My heart is in heaven; that's my true home." Then you leave the bathroom, get your coffee, sit down and open up the Word of God and you get this day's marching orders from heaven, and then you pray and communicate this day's needs, requests, and thanksgivings to heaven.

Finally, if it's important for expatriates to gather so as to be reminded of what it's like to be an American, how much more important for Christians to gather together on earth to be reminded what it means to be a Christian? *You will never be faithful to your citizenship on your own – there is no such thing as a Lone Ranger Christian. You need*

*the church* – you need the fellowship, the encouragement, the exhortation of other Christians in Sunday morning worship, in community groups, in prayer meetings so that you do not forget that you belong to heaven and not to the world, so that you remain faithful to the duties of your citizenship. “Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. <sup>24</sup> And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, <sup>25</sup> not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.” Hebrews 10:23-25. We have a different allegiance as citizens of heaven.

*Third, if you are a citizen of heaven, you have different aspirations from the world.* “For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. <sup>19</sup> Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things.” Philippians 3:18-19. I’m not sure what you think of when you hear those verses, especially, “Their god is their belly,” but perhaps you think of a drug addict or a whino passed out on in some alley, unable to control their physical appetites.

Now, it’s true, for that person, their god is their belly, but that’s far from the only way to have your “mind set on earthly things.” This past week the New York Times printed an article called “Campus Suicide and the Pressure of Perfection” (July 27, 2015). In that article the journalist interviewed several young women who were freshmen and sophomores at Ivy League schools, and these girls were unbelievably gifted students but, also, they were gifted athletes, and all very popular, very involved in community service, and most of them very attractive. They were as close to perfect as you could get. But then they got to these very competitive colleges and universities, and they began to experience their first taste of failure. They receive their first C, or D, or F. They weren’t the leaders in campus organizations. They didn’t win the medals in track.

And then, on top of it all, they begin to experience failure socially. They aren’t getting asked on the dates they thought they would, and all their classmates seem to have it all together. Some come to their 8AM Monday class all dressed up with perfect makeup on. Then social media just makes it worse. When these girls aren’t actually looking around at all these other awesome young women, feeling like failures, they then go on Instagram or Snapchat and see this highly edited version of their peers’ lives, where only pictures of smiles and pretty things and good food go up, and then feel even worse.

The result of all this, according to the article, is an epidemic of suicide and attempted suicide. In one 13-month stretch at the University of Pennsylvania, six female students committed suicide, and many others tried. And for every student that attempted suicide, a dozen were treated for depression.

Now, these girls have everything this world says is important. They have the best education, they have money, they have influence, they have looks, yet they are miserable. Why? The world’s aspirations have become their aspirations. They set their minds, as verse 19 says, on earthly things. Worldly success means beauty, it means money, it means power, it means acclaim. But if that’s how you define success, you’ll find that it is

relative, and only a few people can really get it. You can be a tremendous success, but if you're around people who are more successful than you, then you'll feel like a failure, and life isn't worth living and you'd probably be doing yourself a failure by going ahead and ending it early.

These girls made the world's aspirations their aspirations, but please don't think this problem is limited to them. It is all too easy even in Oxford, especially in Oxford, to set your minds on earthly things and look at your neighbors' success, your friends' success, your siblings', and realize, "I haven't had the success in this life they have, I haven't had the career they have, I haven't made the money they have, I'm not as skinny, I don't have the family they have," and feel miserable, become depressed, think life is not worth living. When that happens, the world's aspirations have become your aspirations.

But if you are a citizen of heaven, you must have different aspirations from the world. You must have a different definition of success. Do you know what that definition is? Success for a citizen of heaven means only one thing: are you loving one another? John 13:34: "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another."

1 Peter 1:22: "Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly [old NIV says "deeply"] from a pure heart ..."

Galatians 5:6: "For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love." The only thing that matters for a citizen of heaven, the only thing that counts, the only aspiration we should have, is loving one another – faith in Christ working itself out through love.

When you go to your bathroom mirror in the morning to remind yourself of your citizenship, you might also want to say something like this: "It does not matter how much money I make today, how much acclaim I receive today, how well my kids do today, how good I look today, how hard I work today unless, *unless*, I succeed in serving and loving those around me deeply from the heart." That's heaven's definition of success, and it's so liberating. *Because now your success is not defined by the results you can accomplish. Rather, it's defined by the condition of your heart – it's not "did I win?" But it's "did I love?"*

And your act of love doesn't have to be some great big thing – it can be the smallest thing. There is a place in the gospels (Matthew 10) where Jesus says that if you offer a cup of cold water in love to one of these little ones, you will certainly not lose your reward.

*Fourth, if you are a citizen of heaven, you use your treasure differently than the world.* You know, I hope, that most of the immigrants who come to the United States and find jobs do not spend most of their paycheck here. Rather, they send large portions of it back to their home country to provide for their families. They live on far less than they make so that they can give big chunks of their compensation away.

It should be no different for citizens of heaven. Christians, we should work hard to be frugal, to live on less than we make, so that we can invest in kingdom business. I'm not just talking about giving to the church (though we are not turning away any gifts), but also giving money to organizations that support missionaries and the poor directly. "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal,<sup>20</sup> but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal.<sup>21</sup> For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." Matthew 6:19-21.

Citizens of the world view their treasure this way: they say, "Be conservative with your money, don't give it away. It's your treasure. You might need it. But you can be promiscuous with your body. It's not that important. You have physical appetites, so satisfy them anytime you want, with whomever you want." But citizens of heaven say, "Be conservative with your body – sexuality is a precious gift and it's only meant for one other person of the opposite sex; your husband, your wife. In the grand scheme of things, it's a great treasure and closely tied to your heart. But you can be promiscuous with your money – because it's just money. And God will meet all your needs in Christ Jesus. Give as much of it away to as many different kingdom causes as you can, because great then will be your treasure in heaven."

That's what it looks like to be a citizen of heaven. But that's all very hard to do, isn't it? To live with your heart in a different world, a different world which you cannot see, by the way, which means you must swim upstream against all the currents and pressures of this world, to put your money on the line for heaven – that's very hard? How can we do it?

Second, what is the hope of a citizen of heaven? Several months ago I watched the movie *Interstellar*, with Matthew McConaughey, and the premise of the movie is that planet earth is dying, and so NASA sends scientists to a distant galaxy to explore several planets to see whether or not a human colony can be established there and the people of earth can move there and survive. But NASA only has enough resources to send one scientist to each planet, and these scientists, once they land, can't go home. And they know it will be years and years before anyone comes to rescue them, and likely no one is coming. Their only hope is a very, very slim hope.

Now, Christians, one way you could translate verse 20 is for it to say we are a colony of heaven on earth. We have been in some sense "sent" from heaven to help establish God's kingdom on earth.

Now what is the focus of hope for a member of a colony of heaven? "But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ,<sup>21</sup> 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." Philippians 3:20-21.

Friends, your hope, if you are a citizen of heaven, is a confident, joyful certainty that one day Jesus will return and *he will rescue us*. The scientists on *Interstellar*, they had the slimmest of hopes that maybe someone from earth would come for them, but still they'd have to face death. Still, there is a great frontier they'd have to cross all alone.

But there's no doubt about this – Jesus is the Savior, he is the Rescuer, and one day he will come for his colony, his church, his bride, his people! We can be sure because Jesus Christ has been raised from the dead, so we can be confidently sure he will raise us up, too.

Our colony *will be successful*. His kingdom will come. Jesus will come and he will take our hands and with his mighty power he will usher us through even death and transform our bodies, our lowly, frail, weak bodies, into bodies that never grow old, never wear out, never have any kind of weakness, and then we will get to enjoy him and know him forever in the new heavens and the new earth.

Those who wait on the Lord shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run and not be weary, they shall run and not faint. That's from the prophet Isaiah, and so is this: <sup>9</sup> It will [will!] be said on that day, "Behold, this is our God; we have waited for him, that he might save us. This is the LORD; we have waited for him; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation." Isaiah 25:9.

So, while we sojourn in this world, while we live as aliens in this world, Christian friends, we will suffer. We will doubt ourselves and the Lord. We may suffer persecution. We will be despised by the world around us, mocked, laughed at, thought fools. All this may happen, but our response can be and must be this: let illnesses and poverty strike, let cancer happen, let friends betray us, let the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain, let hell itself let loose her fury, *it does not matter*. We can be faithful to our citizenship because we know that the day is surely, certainly coming when our eagerly awaited Savior the Lord Jesus Christ will return for his people.

And when he does, (this is Revelation 21:4): "He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away." Now, here's how you need to think about it: if one day Jesus himself will wipe away every tear (and that means that he will one day more than make up for all your pain and suffering on earth – one hundred thousand times over he will make up for it and you will be glad), then can it really matter what you have to go through on earth? It can't, can it? No matter how hard your sojourn on earth is, if Jesus is going to make everything right, then can it really matter what we go through on earth? And the only rational answer is: no.

At this point some people say, "But J.D., I don't know if I can enjoy heaven if all my loved ones can't be there." I've had many people say that. How can Jesus wipe away my tears if I know this child won't be there, this parent won't be there, this friend won't be there? I'll have to have amnesia – that's the only way I'll be able to enjoy heaven."

In response, I try to say a few things: first of all, there will be surprises in heaven. We'll be surprised to not see certain people, and we will be pleasantly surprised to see others whom we did not expect. You say, "I know so-and-so won't be there." Well, no you don't. You and I have no idea what really goes on between the Lord Jesus and the heart of another human being. The Lord Jesus is unbelievably merciful and they may have in their own way repented of their sins and placed their faith in Christ without telling you. There will be surprises.

But more than that – I have loved ones I'm worried about. We all do. But do you know what no one will doubt on the Day of Judgment, the day when all the books are opened and the Book of Life is opened? Do you know what no one will doubt? No one will doubt 1) the Lord Jesus's fairness and no one will doubt 2) his goodness.

"Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God." Romans 3:19. You realize what that passage is saying? Even those being condemned to hell will be unable to say anything in their defense. Their mouths will be stopped. If they do say anything, it will only be a paraphrase of Psalm 19:9: "the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether." No one on the last day will even begin to accuse the Lord Jesus of being unfair. I can't say I really understand how that will be, but I believe it will be.

And we will also know that the Lord Jesus is good. You know how we will know he is good? We'll see his scars. Jesus will give us a perfect, glorified body when he returns, but his glorified body will always carry around scars – wounds in his hands, wounds in his feet, a wound in his side. And we will see those scars and we will be reminded that God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life. We will see with our own eyes how good the Lord Jesus is, and we will know that if someone is not in heaven it will not be because of any lack of desire on Jesus' part.

If you are absolutely convinced of the Lord Jesus Christ's fairness and goodness, then somehow he really will be able to wipe away every tear. Every tear. "All the saints have their own measure of winter before their eternal summer, [but] O! for the long day, and the high sun, and the fair garden, and the king's great city up above these visible heavens." Samuel Rutherford. Friends, you can know that with certainty, and that is the hope of a citizen of heaven.

Third, what does it feel like to be a citizen of heaven? A few weeks ago I heard a story on the radio about the Green Card Lottery Program. It's a program set up by the State Department where each year they give out permanent visas to people in countries around the world which, for whatever reason, don't have many people immigrating to the United States. Millions of people enter this lottery every year, and only 55,000 actually win.

But this story followed one young man from Somalia who had entered this lottery program year after year after year, and then finally, one year, he won. He won the

permanent visa lottery – he was going to live and study in the United States. And he was thrilled. He said it was the best day of his life.

Friends, the United States of America is great, and citizens of this country should be thankful and proud. But it is nothing – *nothing* – compared to being a citizen of heaven. If you're a Christian, then you've won the ultimate lottery (and, of course, it's not really a lottery – people don't become citizens of heaven by chance but by grace). You've won the ultimate lottery, so your fundamental disposition every day of your life should be one of joy and determination to live out this calling we've received.

Philippians 4:1: “Therefore, my brothers, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm thus in the Lord, my beloved.” Friends, if you are a citizen of heaven, the God will give you the grace and the power to live out the duties of your citizenship. It will be hard, it will involve sacrifice, it will certainly take faith in things unseen, but you will be able to stand firm, because God will make you able.

Christians, we are citizens of heaven. “I'm but a stranger here, Heaven is my home; Earth is a desert drear, Heaven is my home; Danger and sorrow stand, Round me on every hand; Heaven is my fatherland, Heaven is my home.

“Therefore I murmur not, Heaven is my home; Whatever my earthly lot, Heaven is my home; And I shall surely stand there at my Lord's right hand. Heaven is my fatherland, Heaven is my home.”