

The Book of Philippians, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 10: Citizens of Heaven

Philippians 3:17-21

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

What is doctrinally at stake in this passage is the Christian's heavenly citizenship, the second coming of Christ, and the bodily resurrection and transformation of believers at his return. This is one of the great hope-filled passages of the letter, and it must be taught with both clarity and care. Paul presents the coming of Christ and the transformation of our bodies as a single, personal, visible event, the return of our Savior from heaven, at which our lowly bodies will be made like his glorious body. Be prepared to teach this hope simply and faithfully, and to set it apart from speculative schemes that fragment Christ's coming into multiple stages or postpone his reign to a future earthly thousand-year kingdom. Christ reigns now, his kingdom is already established, and we await his one return, resurrection, and the renewal of all things.

This passage is also sharply formational. Paul draws a stark contrast between two ways of living, the enemies of the cross whose minds are set on earthly things, and the citizens of heaven whose eyes are lifted to their coming Savior. Almost everyone in your class feels the gravitational pull of earthly things, comfort, appetite, status, possessions. The aim is to lift their eyes, to make the hope of Christ's coming and the resurrection so vivid that it reorders how they live now. Hope is not escapism here, it is the engine of holy, heavenly-minded living in the present.

So aim at both targets. Teach the second coming and the bodily resurrection faithfully and guard them from speculative distortion, and at the same time use that hope to lift your students' minds from earthly things and to form in them the outlook of citizens whose true home is heaven.

Question 1

Student Question:

Paul says, "join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us" (3:17). What does this teach us about the importance of godly examples in the Christian life, and why does Paul dare to offer himself as one?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul calls the Philippians to imitate him and to fix their eyes on those who walk by the same pattern. This may sound presumptuous until we remember that Paul has just spent a chapter pointing away from himself to Christ. He offers himself as an example precisely as one who is

following Christ, and elsewhere he makes this explicit, imitate me as I imitate Christ (1 Corinthians 11:1).

This teaches the necessity of living examples. The faith is not transmitted by abstract ideas alone but by watching it lived out in real people. Most of us learned to follow Christ as much by watching faithful believers as by reading instructions. God designed discipleship to flow through imitation, with Christ as the ultimate model and faithful saints as nearer ones.

Note the responsibility this places on mature believers. Paul could say follow my example because his life was worth following. The call to be an example is sobering, our walk is being watched, and others are learning to follow Christ by watching how we do it. This is not pride but stewardship of influence.

Help students see both sides. They are to choose their models wisely, fixing their eyes on those who genuinely walk the pattern of Christ, and they are to become examples worth following for those coming behind them. A healthy congregation is full of such imitation, flowing from the more mature to the less.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The faith transmitted through living examples, not abstract ideas alone
- Paul offering himself as an example only as one following Christ (1 Corinthians 11:1)
- The sobering responsibility of the mature, whose walk is being watched
- Choosing godly models wisely and becoming a model worth following

Discussion Prompts

- Why does Paul dare to offer himself as an example to imitate?
- How have living examples shaped your own walk with Christ?
- What responsibility does being watched place on a mature believer?

Question 2

Student Question:

Whose example are you actually following most closely right now, and are you the kind of example a younger believer could safely imitate? Name one way you could either choose better models or become a better one.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question works in both directions, the models we follow and the model we are. We all imitate someone, often without realizing it, absorbing the values and patterns of those we admire or spend time with.

Help students identify their actual influences. The voices and lives that shape us most are not always the ones we would choose on reflection, they may be celebrities, social media figures, or peers whose values are far from Christ. Naming our real models is the first step to choosing better ones.

Turn the question around as well. Would the people watching us, our children, younger believers, newer Christians, be safe to imitate us? This is not a call to perfection but to the kind of genuine, Christ-following life that others could follow without being led astray.

Press for one concrete step in one direction. Either a better model to fix their eyes on and learn from, or a specific way to become a more trustworthy example for someone coming behind them. Discipleship by imitation only works when someone decides to follow well and to lead well.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Recognizing that we all imitate someone, often unconsciously
- Identifying our actual influences versus our chosen ones
- Asking whether those who watch us would be safe to imitate us
- One concrete step toward a better model or toward being one

Discussion Prompts

- Whose example are you actually following most closely?
- Would a younger believer be safe to imitate you?
- What one step could you take toward better models or being one?

Question 3

Student Question:

Paul weeps over those who “walk as enemies of the cross of Christ,” whose “god is their belly,” who “glory in their shame,” with “minds set on earthly things” (3:18–19). What marks out a life lived as an enemy of the cross, and why does it move Paul to tears rather than mere disapproval?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul describes a way of life in stark terms. The enemies of the cross are marked by appetite as their god, shame paraded as glory, and minds fixed on earthly things, and their end is destruction. This is not merely intellectual opposition to Christianity, it is a whole orientation of life downward, toward self and the present world.

Note the central diagnosis, minds set on earthly things. The enemy of the cross is not necessarily a militant atheist, it is anyone whose entire horizon is this world, whose appetites rule them,

who lives for what can be consumed and displayed now. This is a far more common condition than open hostility, and far more seductive.

Explain why this opposes the cross specifically. The cross calls us to deny ourselves, to die to the world's appetites, to live for things unseen. A life ruled by appetite and earthly ambition is the cross reversed, self-indulgence in place of self-denial. One cannot fix the eyes downward on the world and upward on the crucified Christ at the same time.

Help students feel the weight of Paul's tears. He does not sneer at these people, he weeps over them, because their end is destruction. This is the heart of Christ for the lost, grief rather than contempt. It also warns us, the description is sobering because its symptoms, appetite, status, earthly-mindedness, can creep into our own lives by degrees.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The enemy of the cross marked by appetite, shame as glory, and earthly-mindedness
- Opposition to the cross as an orientation of life, not only intellectual hostility
- A life ruled by appetite as the cross reversed, self-indulgence for self-denial
- Paul's tears modeling Christ's grief for the lost, not contempt
- The sobering creep of these symptoms into the believer's own life

Discussion Prompts

- What actually marks a life lived as an enemy of the cross?
- Why does this way of life directly oppose the cross of Christ?
- Why does Paul weep over them rather than merely condemn them?

Question 4

Student Question:

Where do you notice the pull to set your mind on earthly things, comfort, appetite, status, possessions? How does that pull quietly shape your decisions and desires?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question presses Paul's diagnosis into the student's own mind. The phrase minds set on earthly things describes not an occasional thought but a settled orientation, and even devout believers feel its constant gravitational pull.

Help students notice where their minds drift when at rest, what they daydream about, what they worry over, what they cannot stop wanting. These idle inclinations reveal the true set of the mind more honestly than our stated priorities. Most of us are more earthly-minded than we realize.

Trace how the pull shapes decisions quietly. A mind set on comfort avoids sacrifice, a mind set on status chases approval, a mind set on possessions accumulates and worries. These orientations steer a thousand small choices without ever announcing themselves, which is exactly why they are dangerous.

Move toward the remedy the passage offers, which is not merely resisting earthly things but lifting the eyes to Christ and his coming. Press for one concrete way to set the mind on things above this week (Colossians 3:1–2), a practice, a reordering, a deliberate turning of attention upward.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Earthly-mindedness as a settled orientation, not occasional thought
- Idle daydreams and worries revealing the true set of the mind
- How the pull steers a thousand small decisions unannounced
- The remedy of lifting the eyes to Christ, not merely resisting (Colossians 3:1–2)

Discussion Prompts

- Where does your mind drift when it is at rest?
- How does the pull toward earthly things steer your quiet decisions?
- What one practice could help you set your mind on things above?

Question 5

Student Question:

Paul declares, “our citizenship is in heaven” (3:20). What does it mean that a Christian’s true citizenship is in heaven, and how should that reshape how we hold our earthly belongings, nations, and identities?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul reaches for an image the Philippians understood perfectly. Their city was a Roman colony, an outpost of Rome far from the capital, whose people lived by Rome’s customs and held Rome’s citizenship though they had perhaps never seen the city. Paul says the Christian is exactly this kind of colonist, a citizen of heaven living in an outpost far from home.

This means our primary identity and allegiance lie not in any earthly nation, culture, or possession, but in the kingdom of heaven to which we belong. We are resident aliens here, living by the customs of our true home while stationed in a foreign land. This does not make us careless about earthly responsibilities, but it relativizes them, none of them is ultimate.

Draw out the practical reordering. A citizen of heaven holds earthly belongings, nations, and identities with an open hand, valuing them rightly but never ultimately. We can love our country

without idolizing it, enjoy possessions without being owned by them, and engage the culture without being conformed to it, because our deepest citizenship lies elsewhere.

Help students feel both the freedom and the calling in this. The freedom is that we are not finally at the mercy of earthly losses, our true home and treasure are secure in heaven. The calling is to live now as faithful colonists, representing our home country well in a place that does not share its values.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The Christian as a colonist of heaven living far from home
- Primary identity and allegiance in the kingdom of heaven, not earthly nation or culture
- Holding belongings, nations, and identities with an open hand, never ultimately
- Freedom from the tyranny of earthly losses; calling to represent our home well

Discussion Prompts

- What does the image of a colony teach about heavenly citizenship?
- How should this reshape the way you hold your nation and possessions?
- Where is an earthly identity competing for the place of your heavenly one?

Question 6

Student Question:

If you truly live as a citizen of heaven, what would change about how you spend your money, your time, and your loyalties? Name one area where your earthly citizenship currently outranks your heavenly one.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question turns heavenly citizenship into a budget, a calendar, and a set of loyalties. It is easy to affirm that our citizenship is in heaven and to live, in practice, as thorough citizens of earth. The test is where our resources and allegiances actually go.

Help students examine their spending and scheduling honestly. Where money and time go reveals citizenship more truly than what we profess. A heavenly citizen invests in things that outlast this world, the kingdom, people, eternity, while an earthly citizen pours everything into what cannot survive death.

Press on loyalties as well. We all hold allegiances, to family, nation, party, team, career, that can quietly outrank our allegiance to Christ and his kingdom. The citizen of heaven keeps every earthly loyalty in submission to the one that matters most.

Press for one concrete area and one concrete adjustment. Ask each student to name where their earthly citizenship currently outranks their heavenly one, and one specific way to realign

their money, time, or loyalty this week toward their true home. Citizenship is proven in concrete choices, not sentiments.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Heavenly citizenship tested in budget, calendar, and loyalties
- Where money and time go revealing true citizenship
- Earthly loyalties that quietly outrank allegiance to Christ
- One concrete realignment toward our true home

Discussion Prompts

- What would change in your spending and scheduling if heaven were truly home?
- Which loyalty competes most with your allegiance to Christ?
- What one realignment could you make this week?

Question 7

Student Question:

Paul says that from heaven “we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ” (3:20). What does this teach us about the second coming of Christ, and what should it mean to live as people who are actively awaiting him?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul says we await a Savior from heaven, the Lord Jesus Christ. The word await carries the sense of eager, expectant looking, the posture of someone watching the horizon for an awaited one. The early Christians lived leaning forward toward the return of their Lord, and Paul assumes this expectancy is normal Christian life.

This teaches the certainty of Christ’s return. The same Jesus who ascended will come again (Acts 1:11). His coming is not a vague hope but the fixed appointment toward which all history moves and for which his people watch. The Christian life is lived between his first coming and his second, in expectant waiting.

Note that the one we await is called Savior. His coming completes our salvation. We have been saved from the penalty of sin and are being saved from its power, and at his coming we will be saved from its very presence, our bodies redeemed, all things made new. The second coming is the consummation of everything the gospel promises.

Help students feel how expectancy shapes life. People who genuinely expect their Lord live differently, more watchful, more ready, less entangled in what they will leave behind, more invested in what will last. The fading of this expectancy is one reason believers grow worldly. To recover the watch is to recover a powerful motive for holy living.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The eager, expectant awaiting of Christ as normal Christian life
- The certainty of Christ's personal return (Acts 1:11)
- Christ as Savior whose coming consummates our salvation
- Expectancy shaping watchfulness, readiness, and holy living
- The fading of expectancy as a cause of worldliness

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean to actively await Christ rather than merely believe he will return?
- Why is the one we await called our Savior?
- How does genuine expectancy change the way a person lives?

Question 8

Student Question:

Be honest, do you actually live with any expectation of Christ's return, or has it faded into the background? How would living in genuine expectation of his coming change the way you live this week?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question presses the expectancy of verse 20 into the student's actual outlook. For many believers, the return of Christ, though firmly believed, has quietly receded into the far background, exerting little practical pull on daily life.

Help students diagnose honestly. When did they last think about Christ's return with any seriousness? Does it shape any decision, any priority, any sense of urgency? Most will admit that they live, in practice, as though this world will simply go on indefinitely.

Recover the expectancy gently, not through fear or date-setting, but through a renewed awareness that we are waiting for a person we love, who has promised to come. The aim is not anxiety but readiness, the glad watchfulness of those expecting one they long to see.

Press for one concrete change. Ask each student how living this week in genuine expectation of Christ's coming would alter one priority, one entanglement, one use of time. The hope of his return is meant to be a daily motive, not a distant doctrine, and recovering it begins with one specific reorientation.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The quiet recession of Christ's return into the background of belief
- Living, in practice, as though this world will continue indefinitely
- Recovering expectancy as glad readiness, not anxiety or date-setting

- The hope of his return as a daily motive, not a distant doctrine

Discussion Prompts

- When did you last seriously consider Christ's return?
- Does his coming shape any of your actual priorities?
- How would genuine expectation change one thing this week?

Question 9

Student Question:

Paul promises that at his coming Christ "will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body" (3:21). What does this teach us about the resurrection and transformation of our bodies at Christ's return, about the nature of his coming and reign, and about the Christian's final hope?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the doctrinal summit of the lesson, and it deserves the fullest and most careful treatment. Paul caps the chapter with the believer's final hope. When Christ comes from heaven, he will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body. The hope of the gospel is not the escape of a disembodied soul but the redemption of the whole person, including the body, made like the risen body of Christ. The aches, weakness, decay, and death we carry now will be swallowed up in resurrection glory.

Teach the nature of this hope simply and biblically. At Christ's coming the dead in Christ will be raised and the living transformed (1 Corinthians 15:51–53; 1 Thessalonians 4:16–17). This is one personal, visible, glorious return of the Lord Jesus, the same Jesus who ascended, coming in the same way he went (Acts 1:11). It is not a secret or staged event, and it is not the first installment of a multi-part program. It is the great day toward which all of Scripture leans, when Christ raises and transforms his people and makes all things new.

Here you must guard the hope against a popular but mistaken scheme, premillennialism, which teaches that Christ will return to set up an earthly, political, thousand-year kingdom and reign from a throne in Jerusalem, often with multiple stages of coming and resurrection. Present the New Testament's actual teaching plainly and without ridicule. The kingdom of God is not a future earthly political reign awaiting establishment, it arrived with the ministry of Jesus and was established when his church began on the day of Pentecost (Daniel 2:44; Mark 1:14–15; Mark 9:1; Acts 2; Colossians 1:13). Christ is reigning now, exalted at the right hand of the Father, and he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet, the last enemy being death itself (1 Corinthians 15:25–26). His coming does not begin his reign, it concludes it, when he hands over the kingdom to the Father after raising the dead.

Note the very words of our passage, which point to one event, not a staged program. Paul says Christ will subject all things to himself, and it is by that same power that he will transform our

bodies. The transformation of the body, the resurrection of the dead, the final subjection of all things, all belong together at his coming. There is no room here for a thousand-year earthly kingdom inserted between his return and the end, and no second-chance program after his appearing. We await one Savior, one coming, one resurrection of the just and the unjust (John 5:28–29; Acts 24:15), one judgment, and the renewal of all things.

Land the hope on the heart, for this is meant to comfort and to purify. The believer carries a lowly body now, often weak, suffering, and dying, but the day is coming when it will be made like Christ's glorious body. This hope steadies us at gravesides, sustains us in suffering, and purifies us in the present, for everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself as he is pure (1 John 3:2–3). Lead your class to lift their eyes from their present weakness to the glory that awaits at the coming of their Lord.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The final hope as the redemption of the whole person, including the body, not the escape of a soul
- The bodily resurrection and transformation of believers at Christ's coming (1 Corinthians 15:51–53; 1 Thessalonians 4:16–17)
- One personal, visible return of the same Jesus who ascended (Acts 1:11), not a secret or staged event
- Against premillennialism: no future earthly thousand-year political reign; the kingdom already established at Pentecost (Daniel 2:44; Mark 9:1; Acts 2; Colossians 1:13)
- Christ reigning now, until the last enemy, death, is destroyed; his coming concludes his reign rather than beginning it (1 Corinthians 15:25–26)
- One resurrection of the just and unjust and one judgment at his coming (John 5:28–29; Acts 24:15)
- The hope that comforts at the grave, sustains in suffering, and purifies the present (1 John 3:2–3)

Discussion Prompts

- What does Paul teach will happen to our bodies at Christ's coming?
- Why is the kingdom of God a present reality with Christ reigning now, rather than a future earthly reign to come?
- How does the hope of resurrection comfort and purify us in the present?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back over the whole passage. Paul calls you to live as a citizen of heaven, eyes lifted, awaiting your Savior. Name one specific way Jesus is using these verses to form you, to lift your eyes from earthly things and to set your hope on his coming.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This capstone gathers the passage into one personal response. Its great movement is upward, from minds set on earthly things to eyes lifted toward a coming Savior and a glorious hope. Help each student name where Christ is lifting their gaze.

Press for the specific. Not I want to be more heavenly-minded, but I will reorder this use of money toward what lasts, or I will recover a daily awareness of Christ's coming, or I will set down this earthly loyalty that has outranked him. The citizen's life is concrete.

Connect the response to the hope just taught. The transformation of our bodies and the coming of our Savior are not merely doctrines to affirm but a hope to live by, a hope that lifts the eyes, loosens the grip on earthly things, and purifies the present. Let the doctrine become a daily motive.

Close the lesson in prayer, asking God to make your class true citizens of heaven, to lift their eyes from earthly things, and to fill them with eager hope for the coming of the Lord Jesus, who will transform their lowly bodies to be like his glorious body. Invite one concrete step this week.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The upward movement of the passage, from earthly-mindedness to heavenly hope
- Choosing one specific, concrete way to live as a citizen of heaven
- The coming of Christ as a hope to live by, not merely a doctrine to affirm
- Hope that lifts the eyes, loosens the grip, and purifies the present

Discussion Prompts

- Where is Christ lifting your gaze from earthly things?
- What one specific step toward heavenly citizenship will you take?
- How will the hope of his coming shape your week?