

The Book of Philippians

Lesson 10: Citizens of Heaven -- Philippians 3:17-21

Philippi was proud of one thing above all, its Roman citizenship. Though the city sat hundreds of miles from Rome, its people held the rights and privileges of the capital itself. They dressed like Romans, spoke like Romans, lived by Roman law, and carried themselves as citizens of an empire whose center lay far away. They were a colony, an outpost of a greater city, living its life in a foreign land. Paul takes that image, which every Philippian understood in their bones, and lifts it to the highest possible level.

But our citizenship is in heaven, he says. The Christian is a colonist of a greater city, living far from home, carrying the customs and allegiance of a kingdom whose center is not on this earth. We are not primarily citizens of any nation here. We belong to heaven, and we are meant to live now as outposts of that home, even while surrounded by a culture that lives for very different things.

And Paul draws a sharp line. Some walk as enemies of the cross, he says with tears, their god is their appetite, their glory is their shame, their minds are set on earthly things, and their end is destruction. That is one way to live, with the eyes fixed downward on what this world offers. The citizen of heaven lives the opposite way, with the eyes fixed upward, awaiting a Savior from heaven, the Lord Jesus Christ.

For we await him. Paul ends with one of the most thrilling promises in all his letters. When Christ comes, he will transform our lowly bodies to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him to subject everything to himself. The aches, the weakness, the dying frame we carry now will be remade like the risen body of Christ. This is the Christian's hope, not a vague survival of the soul but the redemption of the whole person at the coming of our Lord. As we study, the question presses, are we living as citizens of heaven, with our eyes lifted to the One we are waiting for?

Group Discussion: Paul says, "our citizenship is in heaven" (3:20), picturing Christians as a colony of heaven living far from home. In what ways should a Christian actually look and live differently because their true home is elsewhere?

Personal Reflection: Paul warns of those whose "minds are set on earthly things" (3:19). Be honest, where does your mind most naturally drift when it is at rest, toward earthly things or toward the things of God?

Read Philippians 3:17-21

Study Questions

1. 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?
2. 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.
3. 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?
4. 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?
5. 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?
6. 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.
7. 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?
8. 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?
9. 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?
10. 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.

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: 1 Corinthians 15:20–26, 42–57, Christ the firstfruits, the resurrection of the body, and the reign of Christ until every enemy is subdued; 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18, the Lord descending and the dead in Christ rising at his coming; Colossians 3:1–4, setting our minds on things above where Christ is seated; 1 John 3:2–3, that we shall be like him when he appears,

and this hope purifies us; Acts 1:9-11, the same Jesus returning in the same way he was taken up.