

## **Living As a Citizen of Heaven**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

In our own time, especially in the border states of the Nation, we are keenly aware of the significance of citizenship, with its privileges and obligations. Regardless of one's political preferences, that much of importance is involved in this debate is readily admitted. However, while we not only recognize the importance of earthly citizenship, even more importantly we should recognize that heaven has its own citizenship with associated privileges and obligations.

When Paul addressed this topic in his epistle to the Philippians, he was broaching a subject which would likely have been a point of great interest to those brethren. The history of that city would have made them particularly interested in such patriotic themes involving hearth and homeland. Our intention in this essay is to profile the features of the city of Philippi that would have made its residents so attuned to this message. This will include a helpful discussion of Roman citizenship, along with its privileges and responsibilities. Then the transition will be made to the examination of those same elements as they attach to heavenly citizenship for the Christian. The aim is to impress on us the solemn dignity and worth

associated with being a part of the heavenly nation, to the extent that it positively shapes our earthly walk.

### CITIZENSHIP IN PHILIPPIANS

The history of the city of Philippi plays an important role in understanding the content of Paul's epistle. The city itself was modeled after Rome and even called "Little Rome." The architecture of the city and the structure of its civil administration mirrored the features of the imperial city. Under Julius Caesar, the city was declared a colony, exempt from certain taxes and given a measure of autonomy exceeding that of the typical city. It also became a location for settling military veterans; as a part of their retirement, the soldiers were granted Roman citizenship (Hendriksen 4-7). This recalls the fact that not all residents within Roman controlled territories were citizens. Though the qualifications and extensions of citizenship varied somewhat by emperor, it was not until 212 that Caracalla declared all free inhabitants of the empire to be citizens. This "citizenship by fiat" had the practical effect of stripping this status of any true significance (Ferguson 62-63). As a result of these measures, the populace of the city would have been keenly cognizant of the privileges associated with citizenship and highly patriotic as a result.

These privileges of citizenship included several key factors. First, they enjoyed the protection at law not extended to non-citizens. They could not be "examined" – tortured as part of an investigation – but were instead protected by a type of "due process" (Acts 22:25-29). Nor could they be subjected to degrading types of punishment. Second, they were allowed to vote in elections, giving them a voice in local affairs. Third, they had the right to appeal to the emperor (Acts 25:11; 26:32) (Ferguson 63).

However, there were responsibilities that rested with citizenship. For example, the citizens of Philippi were expected to comprise a military force upon threat from external parties. In addition, they were to be zealous advocates of the various laws of the city, province and empire. They also would have been zealous for the worship of the various Roman deities and associated worship observances. To fail to participate in these activities would have been seen as unpatriotic and a violation of civic duty.

This citizenship was highly coveted and difficult to secure. Citizenship was granted automatically to the children of citizens; this was the situation with Paul (Acts 22:28). One could be awarded citizenship on the basis of some exceptional service offered to the emperor or empire. In addition, one could purchase citizenship, though perhaps it would have been more the case of a bribe of an official; this was the case of Claudius Lysias as described in Acts 22:28. Auxiliary military personnel were granted citizenship upon discharge. Finally, upon their manumission from Roman citizens, slaves were conferred citizenship (Ferguson 62-63).

It is in light of these factors that the epistle must be read. Notice that Paul directed the brethren at Philippi to:

- Preach the gospel whether opposed by brethren or not; he did so in Rome (1:14-18).
- Live in a manner befitting the gospel despite persecution or opposition; he did so in Rome (1:27-30).
- Share the gospel in the heart of a Roman populace; he did so in Rome (1:13; 4:22).
- Love being a citizen of heaven; he did, even as he was also a citizen of Rome (3:20).

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In Philippians 3:20, Paul wrote, “For our conversation [*politeuma*] is in heaven; from whence also we look for the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ.” [All Scripture references are taken from the King James Version unless otherwise noted.] The word *politeuma* indicates citizenship or participation in a commonwealth as a citizen of that region (BDAG 845-846). This reference to participation in a commonwealth as a citizen would have resonated with his readers, given that they understood what it meant to have the status of citizen in the Roman commonwealth. But Paul uses this analogy to speak of the Christian as a part of the heavenly community, with each Christian enjoying both the rights and privileges of this association.

This is not the first time the apostle had used this idea in his epistle to the Philippians. In 1:27 he said, “Only let your conversation [the root form is *politeuomai*] be as it becometh the gospel of Christ: that whether I come and see you, or else be absent, I may hear of your affairs, that ye stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel.” This verse makes use of the verb cognate of 3:20; it signifies the conducting of one’s life in accordance with the obligations of citizenship (BDAG 846). Hence, this forms an exhortation for the Philippian brethren to live in a fashion commensurate with their association with the gospel and the heavenly commonwealth. Paul knew of and discharged this obligation personally, stating, “Men and brethren, I have lived [*politeuomai*] in all good conscience before God until this day” (Acts 23:1). Paraphrasing, Paul said that he had “behaved as a citizen [of heaven] in all good conscience.”

## CITIZENSHIP IN CHRISTIANITY

That which we have already noted concerning Paul’s exhortation to commonwealth living for Christians

certainly speaks to our own day. The book of Philippians is pertinent and essential for the modern student of God's Word. Now we want to expand our discussion, using the epistle's language on citizenship as our starting point, to speak of the privileges and responsibilities inherent in citizenship.

These privileges of being part of a heavenly commonwealth are several. First, by virtue of the new birth (John 3:3-5), the individual has a new standing as a member of this heavenly community. Though the metaphors of this transition may vary throughout the New Testament—married to Christ (Rom. 7:4); become a new creature (Col. 3:10); become a part of Christ's body (1 Cor. 12:13); become a child of God (Rom. 8:16-17)—the imagery of a new association is the common feature of them all. When one becomes a Christian, his status changes in God's eyes, and he has a fresh beginning in relationship to Him and the heavenly realm. No longer is he a part of the lost world, but instead has been transformed and granted a place in the heavenly kingdom (Eph. 2:1-6). Literally, such a one is "in the world, but not of the world." Perhaps this notion of heavenly citizenship helps us to understand Ephesians 2:6, "And hath raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus." Though for the present we are still inhabitants of the mortal sphere, by our new birth we are also citizens of heaven, having now had a place made for us there through Christ and His atoning work.

As a result of this new relationship, the individual has the privilege of being able to call upon the Father and expect His attention and blessings in a way not extended to the non-Christian. Certainly God is gracious to all people, providing physical blessings like the sunshine and rain (Matt. 5:45), and providing at least the access to

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spiritual blessings found only in Christ (Matt. 11:28-30). But there are certain benefits enjoyed only by Christians. For example, only heavenly citizens can call upon God as a citizen might call upon his nation's civil government. When Jesus gave the model prayer of Matthew 6:9-13, it began with a personal address signifying a special relationship. Though the image is that of parent-child, the concept of special association is consistent with the idea of citizenship. One cannot approach the Lord in this fashion, expecting His attention and care, without having a relationship with Him through the blood of Jesus. And if this is true now, how much more true will this be when the heaven and earth are burned up, with all souls going to their eternal home? It is the Christian, the citizen of heaven, who will transition to the heavenly home for eternity (2 Pet. 3:10-13).

Just as Roman citizenship included legal benefits, so the Christian citizenship includes benefits before the Judge of Heaven. While the Christian and non-Christian may sin (1 John 1:9-10), the penitent Christian has Christ the Paraclete who intercedes for us before the Father (1 John 2:1). Though the service of Christ is available for all, it is not until one becomes a member of the heavenly state that His work becomes active on one's behalf.

Citizenship by its very nature has a communal sense; it denotes full and recognized participation in a particular community. Consequently, the privileges associated with this communal association should not be overlooked. In the first century, as Paul was writing the Philippian epistle, Roman citizenship represented not just individual privileges but a recognized standing in the empire. Citizenship records were kept, and Paul, for example, could have produced these documents

personally or had them retrieved from Tarsus, his birth city, to prove his standing (Acts 22:27-28) (Bruce 235).

Likewise in the Lord's church, there is a recognized standing as a part of this community. This does not require that an individual petition the community for admission in any way; as Luke noted in Acts 2:47, admission was granted by God upon a person's obedience to the gospel. However, the church has the responsibility of noting those who are in fellowship in this commonwealth and regarding them as fellow citizens. Paul spoke of this new recognition in Ephesians 2:19, "Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellowcitizens with the saints, and of the household of God." The encouragement, shared aims and purposes, and support that one would expect in an earthly relationship of this nature are mirrored and exceeded in the heavenly citizenship. The individual should not only look to God for strength and support, but also to God's nation, the church.

Finally, the privileges of citizenship include the end of our expectations, viz., the arrival at our national home at the end of this pilgrimage. The author of Hebrews stated that Abraham "looked for a city [*polis*] which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God" (11:10). Further emphasizing this heavenly nation imagery, the writer continued by saying, "If they had been mindful of that country from whence they came out, they might have had opportunity to have returned. But now they desire a better country, that is, an heavenly: wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God: for he hath prepared for them a city" (11:15-16). Though these patriarchs received earthly abodes, that of which the Hebrews text speaks is ultimately the heavenly dwelling place. Of whatever era, those faithful to the Lord will one day arrive at their eternal home. Peter wrote, "For so an entrance shall be

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ministered unto you abundantly into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ" (2 Pet. 1:11). From one aspect, Christians are already a part of the kingdom of Jesus Christ (see Col. 1:13); seen from another angle, however, the saints are not yet returned to the land of their citizenship. This "relocating" will take place at the return of Christ and the resurrection of the dead, as the people of God take up residence in their homeland. Paul concludes this discussion of citizenship in Philippians 3:21 by anticipating the transformation of the body of the Christian to that fitted for the heavenly home.

If there are privileges associated with the heavenly state, there are also obligations for the citizens, as they continue their earthly pilgrimage. We have already noted one obligation, viz., that of living in a way befitting citizenship. Paul had declared that he had lived that way (Acts 23:1), and he exhorted the Philippian brethren to do the same (Phil. 1:27). This reveals the ethical obligations for the Christian; one cannot be a faithful citizen of heaven without living according to rule of heaven (Phil. 3:16) (Weaver 200). In a post-modern context, it is not uncommon to hear the claim that religion is divorced from morality and ethics. However, the entirety of the New Testament speaks of the ethical responsibilities that derive from Christian identity. In arguably the most famous of all ethical statements, the religious figure Christ instructs, "Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets" (Matt. 7:12). Often called the "golden rule," these words call for moral and ethical conduct, but they do so predicated upon a religious basis. This is similar to Jesus' words of Mark 12:29-31:

The first of all the commandments is, Hear, O  
Israel; The Lord our God is one Lord: And thou



shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart,  
and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and  
with all thy strength: this is the first  
commandment. And the second is like, namely  
this, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.  
There is none other commandment greater than  
these.

The proper qualities of social interaction are enjoined in relation to the proper reverence for Jehovah and His mandate for human living.

In Ephesians 4:17-24, the apostle reminds his readers that there has been a total transition that has taken place in their obedience to the gospel. By “total” we mean that it involves knowledge and training which overcomes ignorance; it involves a break with the common lifestyle of the world; it involves a re-creation of the individual in putting “on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness” (4:24). This is no mere theoretical discussion absent the practical expression of this new identity. Ephesians 4:25-5:1 details the various behavioral elements that are to characterize the new life. One simply cannot live up to the expectations of heavenly-commonwealth living without practicing righteousness. Just as being an American or Canadian or Mexican citizen would ideally lay upon such a citizen the responsibility for thinking and acting in concert with the national interests, so being a citizen of heaven should affect all decision making, all valuation, and every interaction and relationship with others. Kingdom living is a natural and expected outplaying of the new identity of a Christian.

Another responsibility linked to citizenship entails the individual’s role in the church family. If it is a privilege to have a citizenry that shares aims for life and eternity while providing encouragement and support, then the

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individual must remember that he or she is to be that type of blessing for the other citizens. Paul said that Christians ought to “bear ye one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ” (Gal. 6:2). The author of Hebrews counseled the beleaguered Jewish Christians, “Wherefore lift up the hands which hang down, and the feeble knees; And make straight paths for your feet, lest that which is lame be turned out of the way; but let it rather be healed” (Heb. 12:12-13). Christians should know that they are intended to work in solidarity with the brethren to advance the cause of Christ on earth while helping one another to reach the Christian homeland successfully. This can only be accomplished when brethren appreciate the company of their brothers and sisters in Christ.

## CONCLUSION

While many are focused upon the importance of earthly, national citizenship, we should not neglect the far more important spiritual citizenship that is enjoyed by Christians. Its value is far greater, as we have seen, and its significance is far more enduring. We can also rejoice that the offer of citizenship is open to every individual regardless of gender, ethnicity, age, national ties, education level or social status. There are no elaborate and extended bureaucratic hoops through which to jump. Instead, the words of Peter, a Christian apostle of Jewish ancestry, spoken to Cornelius, a Gentile, are instructive and encouraging. Peter said, “Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons: But in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted of him” (Acts 10:34-35). Citizenship is open to all.

However, the foregoing does not mean that there are no ceremonies or actions associated with becoming a Christian. Every nation has its own requirements for

acquiring citizenship, and heaven is no different in that regard. One must hear the gospel, believe that Christ is the Son of God, be willing to act upon the gospel's teachings and repent of those actions at odds with God's rule, and then acknowledge Christ and be baptized; these elements constitute the requirements for becoming a citizen of the heavenly commonwealth. But certainly this process can be followed and a person can become a citizen without lengthy delays or awaiting human approval. The Acts of the Apostles gives nine detailed accounts in which individuals became Christians under this very process (Acts 2:37-47; 8:5-12; 8:26-39; 9:6-19; 10:1-48; 16:13-15; 16:23-34; 18:1-8; 19:1-7). The same process and opportunity are available to all today.

On becoming a citizen, every Christian should understand the tremendous rights and privileges that are associated with participation in this commonwealth; this will cause the brethren to be ever grateful for God's care and generosity. At the same time, disciples of Christ should never forget the wonderful responsibilities that rest with citizenship. Our lives should demonstrate that we, too, are awaiting our transition to our homeland, honoring the Father with the ways we think and live during this earthly pilgrimage.

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