

Philippians 3:17-4:1

Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us. For many live as enemies of the cross of Christ; I have often told you of them, and now I tell you even with tears. Their end is destruction; their god is the belly; and their glory is in their shame; their minds are set on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. He will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself. Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved.

Luke 13:31-35

Some Pharisees came and said to Jesus, "Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you." He said to them, "Go and tell that fox for me, 'Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work. Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.' Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! See, your house is left to you. And I tell you, you will not see me until the time comes when you say, 'Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.'"

I know that we have quite a few here who like to travel. How many have travelled outside of the US or would like to? That's a pretty good number. Do you all have one of these? (Hold up passport)

This is a truly amazing document. You know, these things were not required in the US, for the most part, until the mid-20th century. Now, I'm not saying that they didn't exist before that. As a matter of fact, the earliest known reference to a travel document like a passport dates back to 450 BC. The reference and description of it came from the Book of Nehemiah in the Old Testament where King Artaxerxes signed a letter for Nehemiah so that he might return home to Jerusalem safely. That letter, that official certificate, was the first known document of its kind to insure safe travel issued by a government, in this case the King of that country. Here, in the US, the wide spread use of a passport didn't come until 1952 when they were required for travel to most places around the world.

Like I said, this little booklet is an amazing thing. It provides me with rights, and freedoms, and identity. I can take this document to any American consulate anywhere in the world and receive recognition and, if necessary, protection. But it doesn't stop there. Along with those rights and freedoms, and that identity, it also brings obligations, and restrictions, and expectations. Some of these rights and freedoms and obligations and restrictions are legal and some, at least I think, are more moral or ethical in nature.

Paul says in his letter to the Philippians something very important. He tells the Christians in Philippi that they are citizens of heaven. You know, to their ears that statement would have had a profound effect. Citizenship had a very specific meaning to them at that time. You see, they were right in the middle of the Roman empire and as such they were, of course, surrounded by Romans; troops, dignitaries, traders. And each Roman, all Romans, played to a different set of rules. They were subject to a different set of expectations. For one, their Roman citizenship meant that they could not be tried in local courts or be held accountable to local laws without the approval of Rome. Now, that is not to say that they weren't subject to any law. What it meant was that they were subject to Roman law. As they traveled outside of Rome, itself, as citizens of Rome, they had certain protections and certain obligations. Just as Paul did, as a citizen of Rome. When the local authorities wanted to try him, he could appeal to a higher authority. He could appeal to Rome and even to Caesar, himself, just as all Roman citizens could. Those in Philippi would have fully understood this concept. It was part of their lives. And they would have loved to have had a document like this one with Rome written on its cover.

Paul, however, is telling them that there is a citizenship that is even more profound and amazing than Roman citizenship. They, he told them, are citizen of heaven. They have all the rights and privileges of that citizenship. And he would have also told them that they have all the obligations and expectations that come with that citizenship.

I wonder what it would be like, if we had a similar document that verifies our citizenship in heaven. I was glancing through my passport as I was thinking about heavenly citizenship this week and I found some interesting information. It also made me wonder how that information might be translated into a heavenly passport.

For example, on pages 6 and 7 we find important information for the citizen. We know that it is important information because it is entitled, "Important Information." It tells the traveler to consult the authorities, our authorities, our consulates, regarding travel warnings and such things before they embark on their journey. It is saying that we need to travel with our eyes open to situations and dangers in the places where we intend to be. We need to understand that we are outside of our homeland, outside of our true homeland, and things are different out there. We need to know what those differences are and what dangers they might bring.

Within our heavenly passport, would we not have the same type of advice. Shouldn't we travel on our earthly journey having first consulted with our heavenly Father? Wouldn't we be

better prepared for this human life by fully understanding what we are going to be up against, as citizens of heaven within this world?

Our US passport goes on. In number two of the list of important information, it tells us to have our health attended to before we travel to a land outside of our true home. Be inoculated and have support, in the form of health insurance, in place in case we come up against illness or injury as we travel. Our heavenly passport would tell us the same on a spiritual level. It would tell us to strengthen our spiritual immune system so that when we encounter anything that would compromise our health, our spiritual health; things like lies that misdirect us, inappropriate enticements that tempt us, divisions that separate us; we would be strong and prepared to fight off such things along the way.

Number 4 says that this passport is your passport, in this case my passport. It is individual and unique and must be signed by the holder, by the person for whom it was made. It is personal and identifies one individual person. This has my picture in it and is signed by me as an acceptance of my citizenship and a proclamation of my identity. It is public and tells anyone who see this where my true home is and under what truths my fellow citizens and I exist.

In the case of this passport, it talks about who we are, as citizens of this country. It contains words like “We the people” and “blessings of liberty.” It speaks of how all people are created equal and that have rights, rights that cannot be taken away, rights that were put in place by God, our Creator, rights that include life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

In it, it quotes Anna Julia Cooper, an African-American scholar, who said that liberty is our cause. It was not about race or sect or political party or class of people. It is not about separation and division. Liberty, she says, and our document proclaims, is the cause of all humankind and the birthright of humanity.

This document contains words spoken at Promontory Point, as the golden spike was driven in on the transcontinental railroad, that asks God to continue our unity; it quotes Martin Luther King after sharing his dream asking God to help America be true to the dream that God laid on its heart from the beginning; and in it Dwight Eisenhower tells us that anything that we profess to the world must first be received and lived out within our own hearts, if we expect it to be listened to elsewhere.

This US passport is an amazing document, but the truth is that, while we are citizens of a truly amazing earthly country, our prime citizenship is within the Kingdom of Heaven. And that citizenship comes with great rights and privileges and real boundaries and obligations.

So what does our citizenship in heaven mean?

It means...

We have privileges:

1. That we are immediately recognized as citizens, as Children of God. At our baptism, we were marked as Christ's own forever and that identity remains with us unless we decide, unless we choose, to jettison it.
2. It means that God's forces within this world go with us on our journey through this world to protect us, and care for us, and to guide us.
3. It means that we have places of sanctuary in almost every town on earth. Places where we can go and be received and be with God, places where we can worship our Lord.
4. It means that when our journey comes to an end in this world, our true home awaits us in heaven.

And we have obligations and restrictions:

5. Our heavenly citizenship means that while we travel within this world that we adhere to the local laws. It is somewhat like being the holders of dual citizenship. But we always recognize that our primary citizenship is heavenly and our overriding law is God's. We are to always remember that, if the laws conflict, we are held first to follow God's law.
6. It means that we were ultimately made for a different place and our journey here is temporary. We are fitted for a heavenly life for it is there that we will spend most of our existence.
7. We are emissaries in this world. We are sent. We are to travel within this world as representatives of heaven not embracers of the ever changing conditions of the world during our time in it. As such, we are to always truly be who we proclaim we are. We are to bring love to all people. We are to encourage unity and peace for all people. We are share God's truth as a gift with all people. We are emissaries. We are examples. We are commissioned by our citizenship and called by the one true God to make disciples of all nations.

Paul tells us that we get trapped by setting our minds on earthly things. God tells us through Paul that, "We are citizens of heaven." It is who we are and it is a citizenship truly worth embracing to the fullest, not just for our own sake, but for the sake of all. Blessed are the *ones* who come in the name of the Lord.

Amen