



CAPITOL COMMISSION

“Citizens of Heaven”: Studies in Philippians

PHILIPPIANS 1:27; 3:30

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West Virginia has three official state songs: “The West Virginia Hills”, “West Virginia My Home”, and “This is My West Virginia”. All three songs speak of great love for the Mountain State and for the people who live here. They remind us not only of the beauty of the land but of the character of the people. They also speak of those who have left our great state and of their longing and yearning for home. Though we may not hear these songs often outside of our eighth grade West Virginia Studies class, they remind us of our pride of being from “Almost Heaven”. We love the beauty of our state. We love our unique history and heritage. We are proud of West Virginian’s reputation for being honest, friendly, hard working, and independent. Indeed, we are proud to be citizens of the great state of West Virginia.

In Paul’s letter of Philippians, he is writing to a group of people who are proud to be citizens as well – citizens of the Roman Empire. In our studies of this letter during the legislative session we will see how this pride in their citizenship is important. We have great privileges in being citizens of West Virginia and of the United States of America. There are also responsibilities that go along with our citizenship. The residents of Philippi had tremendous privileges as a colony of Rome and citizens of the Roman Empire. They also had responsibilities to go along with their privileges. As Paul writes to the believers in the church at Philippi, he calls upon their pride as Roman citizens to remind them of the privileges and responsibilities they have as citizens of heaven. In so doing, he shows them, and us, how to live and serve as “heavenly citizens” in the challenging circumstances of our daily lives here on earth. Paul’s reference to this citizenship is found in two verses in Philippians:

Only conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ... (1:27)

...Our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ... (3:20)

Considering these two verses as well as the general background of this wonderful letter will help us learn more as we begin our study of Paul’s wonderful message to the believers in this proud Roman colony.

BACKGROUND OF THE LETTER TO THE PHILIPPIANS

It is always helpful in understanding a book of the Bible to know the background, including its author, the audience to whom it was written, and the unique circumstances that occasioned its writing. Philippians was written by the Apostle Paul along with his protégé and disciple Timothy to the believers and leaders of the church in Philippi (vs. 1). It is what is known as one of Paul’s prison letters since Paul wrote it while imprisoned for preaching the Gospel of Christ. It is the most personal of any of Paul’s letters to churches and shows the close relationship he had with the believers there. It is a letter of thanksgiving to people for their involvement in Paul’s life and ministry and for financial gifts they had provided for his work. Paul visited this city on his second missionary trip. He boldly preached the gospel while facing severe persecution and imprisonment.

We find the dramatic account of the beginning of this church in Acts 16. Paul and Silas were led by God to the city to preach the gospel. The first person to respond to the message and trust Christ was a businesswoman named Lydia, along with her family (Acts 16:14-15). As Paul and Silas continued sharing the good news of the death and resurrection of Christ, the changes in people’s lives began to affect the income of some prominent businessmen. They drug Paul and Silas before the city rulers who had them severely beaten and thrown into prison. At midnight, Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns when a great earthquake rocked the prison. The foundations were shaken, the prison doors flung open. The jailor, thinking the prisoners had escaped, was prepared to kill himself. Paul assured him the prisoners were all there. The jailor brought Paul and Silas out of the prison, asking them the all-important question, “*Sirs, what must I do to be saved?*” Their answer rings down through the years, “*Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved...*” These believers formed the nucleus of this first church on the European continent. Remembering these dramatic events will help us better understand

BIBLE STUDIES

LOBBYIST / STAFF STUDY: **TUESDAYS, 12:00 NOON**, TREASURER’S CONFERENCE ROOM (EB 54)
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“Citizens of Heaven”: Studies in Philippians

many of the things Paul later writes to this outpost of heavenly citizens in the Roman Colony of Philippi.

Philippi was an important city in Macedonia (northern Greece). Perhaps most significant is the fact that Philippi was a colony of Rome, which was a very big deal. Pastor John MacArthur describes it this way:

“Philippi had the distinction of being a Roman colony (Acts 16:12), a highly privileged status that gave its inhabitants many of the rights enjoyed by citizens of Rome itself. Such colonies considered themselves “little Romes” and took great pride in that association. They gave unqualified allegiance to Rome and to the emperor, adopted Roman dress and Roman names, and spoke Latin, the official language of Rome.”¹

It is this pride in Roman citizenship to which Paul is alluding in 1:27 and 3:30 when he speaks of heavenly citizenship.

CITIZENS OF ROME – CITIZENS OF HEAVEN

Only conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ... (1:27)

“Conduct yourselves” is a very interesting word in the language in which this letter was originally written. It is from the root word for “city” and is actually the term from which we get our English word “politics”. Here it literally means “live as citizens” or to “conduct oneself worthily as a citizen of the nation to which you belong”. This would have been a powerful statement to those who lived in a city where Roman citizenship meant so much. Roman citizenship brought great privileges and responsibilities. Citizens of the Roman colony took this very seriously (see Acts 16:21-22) and most sought to honor this in every area of their lives. Paul is saying the believer is a citizen of a higher “nation”, citizens of heaven. Paul’s letter to the Philippian believers is encouraging them to live in a way that honors this heavenly citizenship.

...Our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ... (3:20)

Here Paul makes an even clearer statement regarding the location of the believer’s true citizenship. “Citizenship” is a noun from the same root word as the verb “conduct yourselves” in 1:27. It refers to the place where one has official status, the nation or city where

one’s name is recorded on the register of citizens. Though believers live in this world, they are ultimately citizens of heaven.

In this particular section, Paul is encouraging the Philippian believers that those who are ultimately citizens of heaven will have their true focus there. They will be awaiting the coming of their true King and Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.

In these two verses we find a help in understanding the entire letter to the Philippians. Paul was encouraging the believers (and us), to live in a way that is worthy of our true heavenly citizenship. He was reminding the members of the church in that Roman colony that their real citizenship lay in heaven, not in the great earthly kingdom of Rome. The Christian’s ultimate allegiance is to Jesus Christ, not earthly kingdoms or earthly leaders. Paul and Silas had already experienced persecution from earthly leaders, right there in Philippi and as he wrote from prison in Rome. Believers in the Roman Empire would ultimately have to declare their true allegiance. Roman citizens soon had to declare allegiance to the emperor as a god. Believers who proclaimed “Jesus is Lord” soon had to face persecution and even death. This is what it meant for them to be citizens of heaven.

“PAUL IS ENCOURAGING THE PHILIPPIAN BELIEVERS TO LIVE OUT THEIR BLOOD BOUGHT, HEAVENLY CITIZENSHIP.” R. KENT HUGHS

THE PRIVILEGES AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF HEAVENLY CITIZENSHIP

In this letter Paul shares both the great privileges and responsibilities that come from being citizens of heaven. We will be looking at these privileges and responsibilities as we study this wonderful letter throughout the regular session. Please join us in studying how we might live as “Citizens of Heaven” in the challenging world of the capitol.

➤ **HAVE YOU BECOME A CITIZEN OF HEAVEN BY BELIEVING ON JESUS CHRIST? ARE YOU SEEKING TO LIVE AS A GOOD CITIZEN OF HEAVEN IN THE CHALLENGE OF LIFE HERE ON EARTH?**

¹ MacArthur, John. *MacArthur New Testament Commentary: Philippians*. Moody Publishers. 2001. pg. 85.