

WHAT CITIZENS OF HEAVEN DO (Philippians 3:17-4:1)

I want you to picture in your mind a map of Oklahoma. On that map is the outline of our 77 counties. Also on that map are the 597 incorporated towns & cities of our state. In your mind's eye, can you picture Garfield County and the City of Enid?

Picture now, a map of the United States. On that map are the 48 contiguous states, and somewhere in the corner is Alaska and Hawaii. The map includes some of the major, metropolitan areas of our country.

Now, picture either a globe or a world map. You can easily distinguish continents, countries, and islands.

When we think of where the people of our world live, we usually think of cities and countries. This has not always been the case. Although there are none today, throughout world history, there have been numerous empires. An empire exists when a group of nations, lands or peoples are ruled over by a strong, central government usually headed by an emperor, empress, or another single, authoritarian figure. There have been many empires throughout history.

In the pages of the Bible, we meet the successive empires of Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Macedonia, and Rome. The Roman Empire was the world's longest-lasting Empire. It began in 27 B.C. when Augustus Caesar came to power and lasted almost 1500 years. The vestiges of the Roman Empire came to an end with the fall of Constantinople in 1453. It was replaced by the Ottoman Empire.

Can you guess which world Empire was the largest both in terms of land and number of people? It was the British Empire. At its height in 1922, the British Empire covered almost 25% of the earth's land mass, and it ruled over 485 million people. At that time, that was more than 1/5th of the world's population. Great Britain held colonies, protectorates, and territories in Africa, Asia, North America, South America, Australia, and many islands in the Caribbean, the Atlantic, the Indian Ocean and elsewhere. It was rightly said that the sun never set on the British Empire.

Living as we do in 2021, we really don't think in terms of empire, but those living in Paul's day were confronted with the reality of empire every day. For some, it was a good thing, and for others, not so much.

Those living in the City of Philippi knew what it was to be a colony of Rome. In 27 B.C., Octavian, the adopted son of Julius Caesar, was given the name Augustus and became the first Emperor of the Roman Empire. Fifteen years before that, in 42 B.C., he was a general in the Roman army as was Antony. In that year, they had just won a significant battle in Greece. Both didn't want to bring the entire army back to Rome; so, they gave them land in and around Philippi and declared Philippi to be a Roman colony.

New Testament Scholar N.T. Wright wrote, "The Philippian colonists were proud of being Romans, and would do their best to order their civic life so that it matched the way things were done in Rome."

In today's passage, Paul is saying, "Just as you residents were made a colony of Rome, you believers have been made a colony of heaven."

When you and I think of being a citizen of heaven, we may have some vague notion that it means when we die, we get to go to heaven and live there.

That is not what those believers in Philippi would have thought. As citizens of Rome living away from Rome, they were to reproduce in Philippi the customs and culture of Rome.

Likewise, God has sprinkled this world with little colonies of heaven. Liberty Southern Baptist Church is a colony of heaven. Our job is to reproduce the values and culture of heaven. That is why Jesus taught us to pray, “Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” We don’t need more marriages made in heaven. We need more marriages, families, and churches here on earth to look like heaven. The overriding concern in heaven is that God is glorified and that His will is done. That should be our priority, too.

Let’s read today’s passage—Philippians 3:17-4:1. From this text, we are going to look at “What Citizens of Heaven Do.” We are going to examine four things we are to do.

Citizens of Heaven Follow True Jesus Followers

Look at v. 17. Can you honestly and in good conscience look at someone else and say to them, “If you want to live a God-pleasing life, then live like I live; speak like I speak; think like I think; act like I act”?

The Philippian believers had seen Paul up close & personal. They were acquainted with what was important to Paul. They knew that honoring God was more important to Paul than just acquiring honor for himself. Paul was willing to sacrifice and suffer in order to do what God wanted him to do.

We know that Jesus is our prime example. We are to follow Him and pattern our lives after Him above all, but we have something the believers in Philippi did not have. We have the Bible. We have the four gospel accounts. I have no less than 16 Bibles and/or New Testaments in my office. I have a Bible app on my phone. I can use my tablet and computer to access multiple Bible translations in mere seconds.

The Philippian believers and all Christians in Paul’s day had none of that. Even if they had access to Scripture, many of them would have not been able to read it because they were illiterate. That is not a criticism. That is just the reality of life in the 1st Century A.D. They needed a flesh and blood model to follow. Despite all we have, we benefit greatly by looking at someone we really respect and thinking, “I want to be like him or her. I want to pray like he prays or know the Bible like she knows the Bible. I want the boldness that Christian possesses. I want to deal with loss and discouragement that way that person does.”

I challenge you to find a true follower of Jesus, and insofar as that person follows Jesus, pattern your life after him or her. There needs to be a point, however, when we go from needing a model to being a model. Are you modeling what you want others to follow?

Some years ago, I read an article written by a well-known pastor. His big thing was leadership. He wanted to be a great leader, and he wanted to help others to become

leaders. He suggested that whenever you face a decision, you should ask yourself, “What would a good leader do?” Whenever you ask that question, you know what you need to do. Then, do it.

Let me borrow from his suggestion and change it just a bit. We need to ask ourselves often, “What would a good model do?” When we answer that question, we have determined what we need to do next.

Follow a good model. Then in time, become a good model.

Citizens of Heaven Oppose Jesus’ Enemies

Look at vv. 18-19. These enemies of Jesus were really enemies of His cross. That means, they opposed the message of the cross, and they opposed the message of the cross by teaching things that ran contrary to the way of the cross. The true message of the cross is that Jesus did everything necessary to accomplish our salvation. All we have to do is receive by faith what He has done on our behalf.

These enemies, however, taught there are things we have to do to secure our own salvation. We met these people earlier in this same chapter. Look back at vv. 2-3. We labeled these people as *Judaizers*. They taught that in order to be saved, you have to become Jewish. All males needed to be circumcised, and it was necessary for every one to follow the Jewish dietary laws. That is why Paul accused them of making a god out of what they eat.

If you believe that you have to do something to earn God’s favor and cause Him to save you, then you, my friend, are an enemy of the cross.

I have said before that one of my favorite hymns is “Jesus Paid It All.” The price of our salvation was not paid in part by Jesus, not mostly, not everything but the tax. He paid it all. The last verse and chorus of that hymn read:

And when before the throne I stand in Him complete,
“Jesus died my soul to save,” My lips will still repeat.
Jesus paid it all, All to Him I owe;
Sin had left a crimson stain—He washed it white as snow.

Instead of being enemies of the cross, we need to become students and proclaimers of the cross.

One a month, I have a conference call with two other men and we discuss a book that we have mutually read. Last month, I was asked to choose the book. I chose a book I had just picked up at the Hospice Circle of Love book sale. It was a book I had heard about but had never read. It was written by John R.W. Stott and is entitled simply, *The Cross of Christ*.

We met yesterday morning by phone. Two of us confessed that we weren’t finished reading the book, yet. I was one of the two. All three of us agreed to talk about the first half of the book and then cover the second half of the book next month. We were all surprised by how theologically deep the teaching of the cross of Christ actually is.

I have only gotten through seven chapters of this 13-chapter book, but so far, the

seventh chapter is my favorite. In that chapter, Stott explains four NT terms that are really images, and they paint a picture of what Jesus did for us through his cross. Those words are: *propitiation*, *redemption*, *justification*, and *reconciliation*. Concerning that imagery, Stott writes:

. . . *propitiation* introduces us to rituals at a shrine, *redemption* to transactions in a marketplace, *justification* to proceedings in a court of law, and *reconciliation* to experiences in a home or family.

My goal today is not to explain those terms, but rather to encourage you to study what Jesus did for us on the cross, and then, go public with that information. Instead of being an enemy of the cross, become an advocate for the cross.

Look with me at what Paul wrote concerning reconciliation. Let's read 2 Corinthians 5:17-21. Stott wrote that God is the author of reconciliation; Jesus is its agent, and we are the ambassadors of reconciliation. We proclaim its message. The message we are to proclaim is right there in v. 21. Jesus took what was ours so that we could have what was His. He became what He was not so that we could become what we were not. On the cross, Jesus took our place so that we could occupy His.

To be an enemy of the cross is to be an enemy to your own soul. Let's oppose the enemies of the cross by proclaiming the true message of the cross which is, "Jesus paid it all."

Citizens of Heaven Look for the Coming of Jesus

Look at v. 20. As a colony of Rome, if Philippi was being troubled by a foreign adversary, believe you me, Rome would have showed up with the unmatched might of the Roman army.

In the same way, we are a colony of heaven. There is no need for me to convince you that the world is messing with God's people. Believe you me, God is going to show up with His unmatched power to deliver His people.

You may be wondering, "Well, where is He?"

Peter wrote two letters that appear in our NT. He wrote those two letters to a beleaguered, persecuted people, who were being messed with by the world. They wanted to know, "Where is He?" Peter reassured them. He wrote, "The Lord is not slow to fulfill His promise" (2 Peter 3:9). In the preceding verse, he explained that to God, a 1000-years is like a day. God doesn't operate on our time table. When we want something, especially deliverance, we want it now. God, however, exercises much greater patience. He sees the big picture. He will surely show up at the right time, not our time. After telling us God is not slow to fulfill His promise, in the very next verse, he writes, "But the day of the Lord will come like a thief." He does not mean that Jesus will come secretly. He means that God is not going to announce His coming. He is going to appear when the world is not looking and when it is not expecting Him to arrive.

The church, God's people, however, are to be looking for His arrival. Over and over, Jesus told us to watch. We are to patiently, but expectantly, look for Jesus to come and

deliver us. He promised that He would; so, like a bride-to-be looks for the arrival of her groom, we are to look for Jesus to come. While we look, we are to make sure we are ready, and we are to help others get ready, too.

Retired pastor and author Lee Eclov once wrote:

I imagine a pastor being like an elderly uncle of refugee children. He often gathers them to himself and tells them stories of the homeland they have never seen. He tells them that on the day they go home they will be a beautiful bride coming down the aisle of the skies to meet her Bridegroom. The homeless children listen wide-eyed as he tells them that their homeland is a kingdom bright and righteous, where Life runs in the rivers and grows on trees. "Our King is the king of all kings," says the uncle. "He rides a mighty charger and the armies of heaven follow Him. He knows your name and he himself is waiting to be with *you*." The uncle tells these stories again and again because if he doesn't the children will forget who they are and put down their stakes in Babylon. The challenge isn't how to get them home. The King will take care of that. The uncle's challenge is that he cannot let the King's children forget their home.

Folks, this is not our home. This is a temporary dwelling at best. We will be here 70, 80, 90 years. Heaven is our real home. We will be with the Lord forever. Jesus said He is going there to prepare a place for us in His Father's house. He promised He would come back for us. As a citizen of heaven, keep looking.

Citizens of Heaven Stand Firm While We Trust in Jesus

We close with 4:1. As a doting grandfather, Paul expresses his love for the believers in Philippi, and based on that love, he gives them sound counsel. He tells them to stand firm in the Lord. This is military language. As soldiers, Paul tells them to remain at their post and not abandon it no matter the difficulties they face.

We are to do no less.

I love our hymn "Onward Christian Soldiers," but the interesting thing is that nowhere in the NT does it say that Christians are to march into battle. Over and over, however, we are called to stand. In the letter that precedes this one, Paul lists the spiritual armor that we are to wear, but he doesn't call us to march. Instead, he says we are to don this armor so that we can stand against the schemes of the devil. That is Ephesians 6:11. Two verses later, he calls upon us "to stand firm." Then, one verse after that, he begins that verse with that command, "Stand." Three times in a span of four verses, we are told to stand. We are to occupy, protect, and hold the ground that God wins on our behalf.

God has blessed the Church in America with great freedoms that are not enjoyed everywhere else. I fear, however, that little by little the Church has allowed the ground we once occupied to be taken. We no longer have the respect we once enjoyed. We no longer have the influence we once wielded. We have not done a good job of standing firm while trusting in the Lord's strength.

Just maybe, like Samson, we have compromised, been disobedient, and then we

presumed on the Lord. In his story, Delilah lulled Samson to sleep, and while he slept, his hair was cut. We read these sobering words, “And he awoke from his sleep and said, ‘I will go out as at other times and shake myself free.’ But he did not know that the LORD had left him” (Judges 16:20). Fortunately for us, our strength is in the Lord, not in our hair. What’s even better is that the Lord will not leave us. He has promised to never forsake us. Like Samson, however, we have allowed the world to lull us to sleep, and we’ve been sleeping rather than standing. If we do awake, we may assume that we will exert the power we once had not realizing that we are the ones who left the Lord. Is that not now happening?

Church, we are to stand firm while we trust in the Lord, our strength. The title for today’s message ends with a very small word. It is just two-letters long. We’ve been looking at “What Citizens of Heaven Do.” That word *do* is a small word but one that packs a powerful punch.

Our power is not exhibited in nouns. Nouns are facts we have committed to memory. That’s not where our power resides. Our power is seen in verbs. Let me read to you the following devotion I came across this past week.

Verbs—No one really knows what it is to live until he can truly say these eleven great verbs of life: I am, I think, I know, I wonder, I see, I believe, I can, I ought, I will, I serve. Life is but the process of learning through daily experience the meaning of these eleven, wonderful, little verbs of life and acquiring the personal power of each:

I AM: the power of self-knowledge.

I THINK: the power to investigate.

I KNOW: the power to master facts.

I FEEL: the power to appreciate, to value and to love.

I WONDER: the power of reverence, curiosity, worship.

I SEE: the power of insight, imagination, vision.

I BELIEVE: the power of adventurous faith.

I CAN: the power to act and the skill to accomplish.

I OUGHT: the power of conscience, the moral imperative.

I WILL: will power, loyalty to duty, consecration.

I SERVE: the power to be useful, devotion to a cause.

~ George Walter Fiske

Citizens of heaven exert the power of doing. We follow. We oppose. We look. We stand. Will you do those things? God has always blessed and worked through a people whose faith causes them to act.

The 11th chapter of Hebrews is known as the Hall of Faith. It memorializes the great men and women of the Old Testament who demonstrated their faith by what they did. By faith:

- Abel offered

- Enoch was taken
- Noah built
- Abraham obeyed
- Sarah received power to conceive
- Isaac and Jacob blessed their sons
- Moses refused to be called Pharaoh's son

On and on it goes telling us what God's people did by faith.

Christian citizens are a people of faith whose faith impels them to act. What are you going to do by faith?