

Ascension Sunday: *Citizens of Heaven – Phil 3:20-21*

Introduction – Forty days after His resurrection, during which time He established that He was in fact alive through many infallible proofs, Jesus ascended into the heavens (Acts 1:1-3, 9). Fulfilling the Father's plan, Jesus was received by the Ancient of Days and given universal authority over all of heaven and earth (Psalm 2:7-8, Dan 7:14, Matt 28:18). Jerusalem had been the capital city. But now, the King of the Jews and the King of all kings would rule from the throne in the new capital city: heaven.

The Roman Colony of Philippi – The city was named by Philip of Macedon (father of Alexander the Great) after his victory there in 356 BC. The city was established as a Roman colony in 42 BC when a battle was fought and won nearby by Octavian (later the emperor Augustus) and Mark Antony over Cassius and Brutus, and again by Octavian in 31 BC. In a move of political astuteness, Octavian populated the town with discharged veterans and endowed the populace with Roman citizenship, ensuring allegiance to the Empire and alleviating a population (and potential political) problem in Rome.

The Philippian Citizen of Rome – This made Philippi a proud Roman colony for Roman citizenship was a prize to hold with great privileges. They sought to influence the city as they ordered civic life, in the architecture, their dress, and their Latin. The new imperial cult demanded that Caesar be recognized and worshipped as Lord and Savior of the world. The empire and will of Caesar was to be done in Philippi as it was in Rome.

Citizenship in Heaven (Phil 3:20-21) – Paul uses this striking metaphor in this letter for a reason. We look to Jesus and His rule from heaven; a place from which He will come one day (Acts 1:10-11). Using this metaphor, Jesus is telling the Philippian Christians that they are to establish this heavenly colony on earth, not to later populate heaven, but rather because heaven is manifestly spreading its rule over the earth (Isaiah 11:9). This is being done by Christ through His church "*by which He is able even to subdue all things to Himself*" (v21). Jesus is Savior and Lord and not Caesar, and Paul used these titles for Jesus in direct contrast to Caesar (as in Phil 2:9-10). The Philippians were citizens of heaven.

Colonies of Heaven – Here it is important to also note the direction and flow of the story. Christians are living in colonies of heaven. The colonies are not established to recruit people to go to the mother country, quite the opposite. Jesus did not *retreat* to heaven where He will bring everyone to live at the Final Judgment. His authority over heaven and earth is *established* by the coronation of the God-Man on the throne in heaven. The resurrection will occur here, on earth, where His authority already resides and where He will come to reveal His victory over the final enemy, death (1 Cor 15:25-26).

The Invasion of Heaven – Christians live on earth as citizens of heaven because heaven has taken over the world. In this age, the church is the advance team, the vanguard of God's invasion. Colonies are established, banners are raised (through worship), and ultimate loyalties are proclaimed. Pulpits ought not to be safe places in such circumstances and neither should the Christian communities in many respects; we are well within our rights to meddle in the affairs of all human institutions. We are heaven, and we are charged with changing this world even though the world doesn't want to be changed.

Eagerly Waiting – We are not only the vanguard, we are a race of royalty and we have come to be and bring the firstfruits of the grace of God to the world. In many ways, our works today are still just the beginning of His labors while He rules from His Father's right hand (Psalm 110:1-2).

But Aren't We Just "a-Passin' Through"? – The old gospel song is only a half-truth. We certainly will die and our spirits will go and be with the Lord in heaven. But that is not the end of the story. We groan, as does all of creation, for the final promised transformation and victory which will come at the great Day of Resurrection (Rom 8:18-25). Jesus Christ purchased this world with His blood. He has established His colonies and promises to continue to do so. And when He returns, it will not be to write off this world as a bad debt. He redeemed it. He is restoring it. He is remaking it. And He will finally do so in a great cataclysmic act at His final coming. Heaven is the capital city of the world which is why the world is going to be redeemed (John 3:17).

The Means of Heaven – This takeover and remaking of the earth is not done in the domineering ways of previous empires with tyranny or by the sword. In the power of the Spirit, we take dominion by means of water, wine and bread. Our sword is the Word of God, our attack on the gates of unbelief is our public worship, and our weapons for fighting sin are God's law, His love, our gratitude and service. We imitate our King, the suffering servant, through dying, serving, and giving ourselves away. How did Jesus conquer the Jews and Gentiles? What did God do with His Son when they mocked Him, flayed Him open and hung Him on a Tree? He let His blood flow that their sins might be forgiven and that the world would be saved. And so this is how we ascend with Him as kings and priests on this earth as citizens of heaven in these colonies from heaven.