

**Philippians 3:17 - 4:1** <sup>17</sup> Brothers and sisters, <sup>1</sup> join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us. <sup>18</sup> 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. <sup>19</sup> Their end is destruction; their god is the belly; and their glory is in their shame; their minds are set on earthly things. <sup>20</sup> But our citizenship<sup>1</sup> is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>21</sup> He will transform the body of our humiliation<sup>1</sup> that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, <sup>2</sup> 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.

### **“Citizenship in Heaven”**

In thinking about this sermon I decided to distract myself with seeing how much longer I have to wait before I can apply for citizenship in Canada. It's about 140 or so days. I also decided to look and see how the CIC defined citizenship. Basically, it's being entitled to certain rights and freedoms and having certain responsibilities while living within the borders of Canada. The rights were to justice, equality, and mobility and the freedoms were of speech, thought, religion, and assembly. Some of our responsibilities are to obey the law, express our opinions and respect the right of others to do so, to help others in the community, to care for and protect Canadian heritage and the environment, and to eliminate discrimination and injustice. Those rights, freedoms, and responsibilities pertain to anyone living in Canada even if you're not a citizen. Becoming a citizen here means that you are a resident who has the additional rights of applying for a passport, voting, and holding office and add to that the responsibility of actually voting.

Thus, citizenship boils down to being a permanent entitlement to certain rights, freedoms, and responsibilities within the boundaries of a particular nation especially the rights and freedoms to leave and enter that country (i.e., the passport), to vote in elections, and to hold office; and the particular responsibility of voting. Moreover, the rights, freedoms, and responsibilities that citizenship entails vary from nation to nation. Thus, when talking about citizenship one must not only say what it entails but also in what land. The title of this sermon is “Citizenship in Heaven”, so, guess what? We're going to define citizenship and heaven as it would have been understood by Paul.

Let me say something briefly about heaven. The Greek word for heaven is actually plural and would be better translated as the heavenlies. Paul did not think of the heavenlies as the place where immortal souls go after death. To the Hebrew mind that was a place called Sheol and it was under the earth and what went there wasn't an immortal soul. It may have been a soul but not an immortal one because it could be destroyed if God so chose. The heavenlies were actually a part of the creation, a big bubble within the heavenlies. The heavenlies were behind the dome of the sky. They believed the heavenlies to be the home of God where the will of God is being done already and from the heavenlies God rules the earth. It is from there that salvation was begun and the Lordship of Jesus Christ is being extended to earth. To the Old Testament Jews,

the Jerusalem temple was a bit of heaven on earth because God made his home there. God's will was down in the temple. And, it was at the temple that Israel's relationship with God was maintained by worship and sacrifice. The Temple was thought to be an exact replica of God's temple in the heavenlies.

To say that our citizenship is in heaven is to say that we have rights in the land where God lives, his will is done, and his rule and salvation are extended to earth. When a Christian congregation gathers for worship we are the new temple, a replica of the temple in the heavenlies. This one will blow your mind...we are presently occupying time and space in the heavenlies here on earth. Don't think of heaven as simply being somewhere up there. Think of heaven, the kingdom of heaven, the reign of God, breaking forth or opening up right here, right now as the Holy Spirit is in our midst. Indeed, God is in our midst. We are in heaven right now. It might be like looking through a mirror dimly but here as we are gathered together by the Holy Spirit into the body of Christ to worship God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, here is heaven on earth. God is here so therefore let his will be down on earth as it is in heaven. So, let's talk citizenship.

The Greek word for citizenship is *politeuma* which gets its root from the word *polis* meaning city. A *polis* was a fortified settlement. The city walls and military presence provided a sense of security and freedom which allowed for the development of arts, education, trades, and a middle class. In Paul's day cities were also sacred places. There was a god whom everyone believed had decreed the law upon which the city was established and whom was the ultimate protector of the city and therefore everyone worshipped that god not only out of devotion but out of civic duty. So, citizenship in a city was a very religious matter. Citizenship in a particular city usually involved being protected in a privileged way by the god, laws, and government of that city even beyond the bounds of the city.

Now, for our citizenship to be in heaven means very much that we have the Father's favour upon us because of Christ Jesus' faithfulness on our behalf, God's presence with us as the Holy Spirit indwelling us and our fellowship, and God's acting for our benefit as Paul says to transform us, to transform our bodies of humiliation to conform to the glorious body of Christ Jesus. Every Christian congregation is in essence a city, the New Jerusalem, a fortified settlement of God among his people, and, moreover, we have God's grace and protection wherever we are.

Our responsibility as citizens in heaven is to be fellow imitators of Christ Jesus. Our understanding of what it is to be an imitator is a bit different from what the word means in biblical Greek. We think of the act of imitating as something inauthentic, a copy; not the real thing and often a mockery of the real thing. Imitation sweetener though sweet is not the same thing as sugar. We also think of an imitator as someone who simply follows the example of another. The biblical idea of imitating is more like the phrase "like father, like son". Many sons try to be just like their fathers because they share a special relationship and they are blood related. To be an imitator of Jesus means we share a special relationship with him by means of the bond of his blood in the Holy Spirit who is

dwelling in us and therefore we are becoming like Jesus. We are not just following Jesus' example by simply imitating him, we are bond to him by his Spirit so that as he is so are we becoming simply because he lives in us.

So, as citizens of heaven we have been granted a right to God's grace and we have the responsibility of living out of the new life that we have been given through our bond with Christ Jesus in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. We are the one's through whom God is making obvious what it says in the Lord's Prayer, "Thy kingdom come. The will be done. On earth as it is in heaven."

It is neat that we are having a baptism today. I bet you didn't know that in the middle ages one's citizenship was determined by what kingdom one was baptized in. Oddly, back then, to not be baptized was treasonous and so was being baptized as an adult after having been baptized as an infant. Fortunately, all that mixing of Church and State has fallen by the wayside, but nevertheless today we are declaring a child's citizenship in the kingdom of heaven where God rules, where there is salvation. Today we are declaring that Hayden Noah Robinson is a citizen of heaven under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. We do so not on account of his faith or the faith of his parents or the faith of the people of this congregation, but rather on account of the faith-and-faithfulness of Jesus Christ who by means of God's grace has freely given us all a portion of his faith-and-faithfulness along with the Holy Spirit. That's why we call it saved by grace through faith. We all have before us now the responsibility to raise Hayden as a citizen of heaven. We do not do so hoping that he will one day choose to claim the rights of his citizenship and become a citizen of heaven. We do so because he already is. As much as Hayden is a natural born citizen of Canada, he is more so a born anew citizen of heaven because of God's steadfast love and faithfulness enacted in the faith-and-faithfulness of Jesus Christ. Just as we teach our children what it means to be Canadian and how to be a good Canadian, so we his parents, family, and church family have the responsibility to teach Hayden what it means that he is a child of God, a born anew citizen of heaven by God's grace. By our born anew living in the Spirit who conforms us to Christ, the Holy Spirit in whom Hayden also shares' he will learn what it is to be a Christian and by imitating the way we love he will learn what faithful citizenship is, like Father, like Son in the Holy Spirit as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be. Amen.