

WORTHY CITIZENS OF HEAVEN

Phil 1.27-30

INTRODUCTION

In the verses we're looking at this morning, Paul turns from speaking about *what God has done for us* (his amazing package of salvation that Paul has been enthusing about so much, in verses 19-26), to consider *what God expects of us* in view of the great salvation package he has gifted to us.

- And Paul does so by alluding to a privilege the Philippians prized highly – *their Roman citizenship*.

1. WHAT GOD EXPECTS OF US (v27) – a life worthy of our heavenly citizenship.

Philippi had been designated *a colony of Rome* in 31BC, after Octavian had defeated Anthony and Cleopatra at the battle of Actium. It was a rare privilege, one of the most coveted titles in the vast Roman Empire of Paul's day. It meant that the inhabitant of Philippi enjoyed all the same rights and privileges as the citizens of Rome itself.

- Their names were on the electoral roll in Rom. They enjoyed special tax concessions and land rights. It was a privilege everyone was very proud of, in Philippi.

But later in this letter, in 3.20, Paul is going to remind these Roman citizens of an even greater privilege that's theirs. God has made these believers *citizens of his heaven!* That's where their true home is, now. And so as a church, the believers in Philippi were a little colony of heaven - on earth. They enjoyed all the same rights and privileges as those who had already arrived in heaven.

But with such a great privilege comes very great responsibilities. So Paul says to the believers in verse 27: *Whatever happens, conduct yourselves [as citizens of heaven] in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.*

- The greater the privilege, the greater the responsibility that comes with the privilege.

Illustration. If a person is chosen to represent their country for a particular sport (football, cricket, or rugby, or whatever), they will rightly consider that to be a huge privilege. But that privilege carries with it the responsibility to conduct themselves in a manner worthy of the honour being bestowed on them. They will want to play to the best of their ability.

And so Paul says to the Philippians, "Think about the amazing salvation package God has gifted to you, in his mercy and grace.

- All your past sins have been forgiven and forgotten. The slate has been wiped completely clean.
- God has also empowered you for your daily life in the here and now, by bringing his Spirit to live within you.
- And as far as the future is concerned, he has guaranteed you a cast iron hope - the prospect of living forever in the presence of Jesus.

What a fantastic salvation package! – something so good, that our lives must now reflect that fact.

- We should never think of the salvation God has gifted us as being like a passport to heaven, which leaves us free to behave however we want until we get there. We must never presume on God's grace, Paul tells us elsewhere. We mustn't *show contempt for the riches of God's kindness*, Paul warns us in Romans 2.4, by carrying on living our lives as if he had done nothing for us. We must *realize that God's kindness* is intended to *lead us to repentance* – a change in the way we think, resulting in a change in the way we behave.

We should see that our citizenship of heaven, which God has so graciously gifted to us, makes us his ambassadors on earth. We are here to represent all that's so good about heaven in a dark and decaying world. This is what Paul urges upon the Philippians in the strongest possible language. The two words '*whatever happens*' in our NIV church Bibles translates the single Greek word '*only*'. In other words, Paul is saying to us, "If you remember only one thing, let it be this: Live on earth as citizens of heaven. Live lives worthy of the fantastically good news that Jesus has brought to you!"

But what will that mean in practise?

2. WHAT IT MEANS IN PRACTISE (vs 27-30)

2.1 Caught up in a conflict.

Well, notice from the four verses we're looking at this morning, how often Paul speaks of the Christian life as a struggle. We're not heaven's ambassadors on a tranquil, tropical island, like Barbados, a holiday resort. We're heaven's ambassadors in the middle of a war zone, like Beirut or Baghdad. Look at the kind of words Paul uses here.

- In verse 27, he talks about us *contending* for the Gospel, a word that was used of gladiator fights.
- In verse 28, he refers to those who *oppose* us, because of our faith.
- In verse 29, he talks about us *suffering* for Christ.
- And in verse 30, he speaks about the *struggle* that both he and his readers were caught up in. He uses a word from which we get our English words 'agony' and 'agonise'. The word meant to 'wrestle'.

In every verse here, he refers to the conflict we are caught up in as Christians. And in the midst of this battle zone, we're called to

- *stand firm* and *strive* for the Gospel;
- we're urged not to be *frightened* in any kind of way; instead we should be willing to *suffer* for Jesus;
- and all this as a united body of believers, not as isolated individuals.

So, for Paul here, conducting ourselves as true citizens of heaven on earth boils down to two things. First

2.2 Loyalty under pressure

As Christians, we're not called to a cloistered existence, hidden away from all the struggles of life, someone has said. They are part and parcel of following Christ in a fallen and hostile world. We're called to be soldiers out on the battlefield, exposed to danger and vulnerable to attack.

And as such, our principle calling is to

(a) *Stand firm* (v27). We are called to stand our ground. We're not to succumb to the pressures all around us to compromise our conduct or waver in our beliefs.

Nor are we to be

(b) *Frightened* (v28) in any way by those who oppose us. Paul uses a very graphic picture here of horses being startled and going on a stampede! We mustn't let the opposition startle us, causing us to run away from our God-given position on the battlefield. There are times when we must dig our heels in and stand our ground. *God has said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you." So, we say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?"* [Heb 13.5-6].

And why do we stand firm, instead of turning on our heels to get out of the battle fire? Because Paul tells us in verse 29 that

(c) *Suffering for Christ* is just as much a gift from God as believing in him. *It has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him.* Suffering for Christ is not a sign that God is angry with us, or that we've somehow missed the way. Every time we're called to suffer for Christ, it's an opportunity to prove the genuineness of our commitment to him. *A faith that costs us nothing is probably worth nothing to us.*

Illustration. I received an e-mail during the week about some students from the *Gospel for Asia Biblical Seminary*, which sounded as if it was in India. This is what the article reported.

This morning, six Gospel for Asia Biblical Seminary students were forcibly abducted and beaten for sharing the Gospel. They were taken to a nearby hospital, where they are now recovering from injuries sustained during the attack. The six were involved in their regular weekly outreach, distributing Gospel literature, preaching and praying for the sick, when they were surrounded by a small group of men that quickly grew into a crowd. "We are going to talk about God," the men mocked, and began slapping the students around. Several in the group then dragged the brothers into three-wheeled taxicabs and drove them to a secluded house that was the local headquarters for an extremist anti-Christian organization. A crowd of men, some trained in martial arts, awaited them there. They pulled the students out and began

beating them. "There were no less than five to six people beating each brother," reports a GFA field correspondent. The students were repeatedly kicked, punched and slapped, three to the point of unconsciousness. This particular organization is known for its martial arts training, not so much for defence, but for inflicting intense pain and causing internal injury without much external evidence. At one point, the persecutors left the six students alone in a room for about half an hour. Writhing in pain, they feared what would happen next. But at the same time, these young men kept their focus and remembered their calling. Kiran spoke up: "**This is our reward, to serve the Lord,**" he reminded his co-workers. "Let's tell it to the Lord," Himansu encouraged them. They prayed, clinging to God for His strength and grace. Soon the group returned and dragged the students back into the cabs, drove them to the bus station, pushed them out, and left. The six young men were able to get on a bus and return to the seminary, where they were immediately taken to the hospital. They suffered from severe headaches and internal pain. Jaya was diagnosed with a broken left eardrum, in addition to bruising on his face. "Please pray for these six dear young men," says GFA President K.P. Yohannan, "that they will completely recover from their injuries and remain close to the Lord. **I have no doubt that their suffering is not in vain, and He will use their lives to bear much fruit in the days to come. My prayer and firm belief is that our brothers' willingness to faithfully represent their Lord Jesus in the face of such hatred and opposition will only serve to give boldness to all our missionaries as they continue to witness of the Good News of Jesus Christ.**" A caption on one of the photos in the article read, "Though the students were afraid, they didn't forget the Lord." And another one read, "These young men view their injuries as a privilege for the sake of Jesus."

The Founder & President of the Gospel for Asia, K.P. Yohannan, added this in a covering note. "Such a vicious attack has the potential to instil terror in the hearts of the persecuted. Yet I am reminded of the apostle Paul's perspective on his own suffering and imprisonment (which he speaks of in Phil 1.12,14): 'I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel. Most of the brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly.' Please pray for these six dear young men, that they will completely recover from their injuries and remain close to the Lord. I have no doubt that their suffering is not in vain, and that God will use their lives to bear much fruit in the days to come."

For me, articles like this highlight the danger of offering the Gospel as a cure for all our troubles in life. "Come to Jesus and all your problems will be over. Come to Jesus to enjoy peace and tranquillity in your life. Come to Jesus to discover a rich and satisfying fulfilment for your life. Come to Jesus to book your place in heaven." There's a danger in calling people to Christ, merely for what they will get out of him, instead of talking about what they must also give to him.

I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God--this is your spiritual act of worship, Paul writes in Romans 12.1.

- A sacrifice is something that has renounced all its rights to a comfortable existence.
- A sacrifice is something that demands nothing but is willing to give everything.
- A sacrifice is something given over to death, for the benefit of the recipient.

That's the kind of loyalty Jesus looks for from his citizens of heaven during their time on earth.

- *Everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted,* Paul reminds us in 2 Tim 3.12. *So endure hardship with us like a good soldier of Christ Jesus* (2 Tim 2.3).
- *If we God's children, then we are heirs - heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory* (Rom 8.17).
- *If you will not wear a cross, you cannot wear a crown,* is how the old song used to put it.

Now this is a very tough calling to bear on our own. And so that's why the other strand of living a life worthy of our heavenly citizenship is

2.3 Solidarity in our struggles (v27)

Staying loyal to Jesus, standing firm when we're under pressure is too hard a calling for most of us to fulfil on our own. That's why we need the solidarity of a church fellowship alongside us in our struggles.

- A Christian was never intended to be a lone-ranger type of figure, going it alone as he fought the good fight of faith.
- Being a Christian is not an individual pursuit, like fishing or stamp collecting.
- It's a team game like cricket or rugby. It simply can't be done on our own. It's true that someone can run around with a rugby ball under their arm, throwing it up in the air to themselves, and catching it, or kicking it from time to time. But a person can't scrummage on their own. They can't push back the opposition on their own. They need to be tightly bound to others to do that.

And so Paul speaks here, not of us trying to stand firm on our own, but

(a) in one spirit. Most commentators take this to be a reference to the Holy Spirit, upon whom we must all rely. Paul has already spoken, in verse 19, of the way in which he relied on the Holy Spirit's support. And now he urges all his readers to do the same.

He also urges us to be

(b) of one mind. Rather curiously, the NIV leaves out this phrase, or perhaps subsumes it under the call to *contend as one man* for the faith of the Gospel. But it's there in Paul's original Greek. It's a calling, literally, to be of one *psyche*, or *soul*. The word indicates *how we feel about something*, and *how we will therefore react* to it. The word has to do with our aims and objectives, our values and goals, and desires and ambitions – both what we are striving for, and how we will attain it.

- Paul is writing this against a background of petty *rivalries* and *jealousies* amongst the Christians in Rome (vs 15,17). Some were being driven by *selfish ambitions*, or a morbid desire to make life uncomfortable for other people.
- And so Paul wanted God's little colony of heaven, there in Philippi, to be completely united in their purpose and practises. He wanted them to be bound together in their common pursuit of their common objectives – the defence of the faith (v16) and the proclamation of Christ (v18) – the *advance of his Gospel*, as Paul puts it in verse 12.
- It's what he will go on to urge at the start of the next chapter (2.1-2). *If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose.*

United we stand, but divided we fall, was the catchphrase of a previous generation. Unity is vital, not just to enable us to stand, but also to make advances. Our love for one another has to be visible for our message to be credible, one person has observed.

And so Paul also speaks about us being united in action, as well as in spirit and soul. He calls us to

(c) Contend as one man for the faith of the Gospel.

Our unity is not just to be theoretical; it needs to be practical, too. It's not enough to be united in principle; we must be united in action. And so Paul uses this very graphic picture of soldiers fighting side by side in battle. They used to lock their shields together in a long line, so each man was protecting his comrade. The word Paul uses here is the one from which we get our English word *athlete*. We're athletes together, seeking to win great victories for Jesus.

- Illustration. When I was at school, I used to play rugby in the winter, rather than soccer – not out of choice. It was simply all that the school offered us. During my not so illustrious career, playing for the third XV (yes, the school only had three XV's!), I ended up playing in almost every position in the team – because I was so poor. But I knew that when I was playing as a forward, I had two responsibilities. One was to bind myself to all the other forwards whenever a scrum, or a ruck, or a maul was being formed. And the other responsibility was to draw in all the other forwards who were on the same team as me.

Now that's the way it should be in a church. We are called to bind ourselves to all our fellow Christians, and draw in those on the sidelines to help us. Someone has said that being a Christian is something intensely personal, but is never intended to be something private. We're called to bind ourselves to our fellow believers, as we take our place on the battle line.

Illustration. Rick Warren has some very pertinent things to say about this in his book, *The Purpose Driven Life* (Pages 130-137). *You are called to belong, not just believe. ... We are created for community, fashioned for fellowship, formed for a family, and none of us can fulfil God's purposes by ourselves. The Bible knows nothing of solitary saints or spiritual hermits. ... While your relationship to Christ is personal, God never intends it to be private. ... To Paul, being a 'member' of the church meant being a vital organ of a living body. ... For the organs of your body to fulfil their God-given purpose, they must be connected to your body. The same is true for you as a part of Christ's body. You were created for a specific role, but you will miss this purpose for your life if you're not attached to a living, local church. You discover your role in life through your relationships with others. ... If an organ is somehow severed from its body, it will shrivel and die. ... This is why the first symptom of spiritual decline is usually inconsistent attendance at worship services and other gatherings of believers. Whenever we become careless about fellowship, everything else begins to slide too. ... The person who says, "I don't need the church," is either ignorant or arrogant – or both! ... I can't imagine saying to Jesus, "I love you but I don't like your body!" But we do this whenever we dismiss or demean his church. ... The Bible says that a Christian without a church is like an organ without a body. ... Today's culture of individualism has created many spiritual orphans – 'bunny believers' who hop around from one church to another without any identity, accountability, or commitment.*

- *A church family identifies you as a genuine believer. I can't claim to be following Christ if I'm not committed to any specific group of disciples.*
- *A church family moves us out of self-centred isolation. The local church is the classroom for learning how to get along with other members of God's family. It's his laboratory for practising unselfish love.*
- *A church family helps us develop spiritual muscle. You will never grow to maturity just by attending worship services and being a passive spectator. It may seem easier to be holy when no one else is around to frustrate your preferences, but that is a false, untested holiness. Isolation breeds deceitfulness. It's easy to fool ourselves into thinking we are mature if there is no one to challenge us. Satan loves detached believers, unplugged from the life of the body, isolated from God's family, and unaccountable to spiritual leaders, because he knows they are defenceless and powerless against his tactics. Why is it important to join a local church family? Because it proves you are committed to your spiritual brothers and sisters in practise, not just in theory. The Christian life is more than a commitment to Christ. It includes a commitment to other Christians. I am called to belong, not just believe.*

In verse 28, Paul tells us

3. WHAT'S AT STAKE (v28) in all this. First,

3.1 Our witness to unbelievers

Our loyalty to Christ when we're under pressure from them, and our solidarity as Christians in all our struggles – these things send out a powerful signal to the world - *a sign to those who oppose us that they will be destroyed, but that we will be saved--and that by God.*

Our loyalty and solidarity is a sign to our opponents that they're on the losing side. When a church presents a united front in the face of fierce opposition, it sends out a strong signal that our attackers are fighting a losing battle. And our steadfastness under pressure and our solidarity with our fellow believers may even be the means of some of our opponents turning to Christ in repentance and faith. This is how Alex Motyer puts it (p98f).

The problem of producing real spiritual conviction in the unconverted is a daunting one. It is a humbling exercise to estimate the ratio of the number of sermons preached to the number of souls won for Christ; or the number of churches in a city to the level of public interest in the Gospel. Paul locates the problem in the church. Is the church concerned for the glory of Christ and the honour of the Gospel? Is the church experiencing and benefiting from true unity in Christ? Is the church facing up to its opposition, undaunted? It's from these qualities that convicting power flows to challenge the world. [What Paul is speaking about here] is a real dawning of eternal truths. ... So often, the last bastion of hope for the unbeliever is that somehow all will be well after death. The truth that will not be faced is the eternal

judgement of God. It was the first ploy of the tempter to deny a God of judgement (Gen 3.4), and human eyes remain sealed to this truth until they are opened by a true spiritual conviction. Paul speaks here about the 'destruction' of the ungodly. Here indeed is a conviction of sin – a person gripped by the awfulness of eternal loss. It arises from seeing a church standing united and loyal to Christ, however strong the opposition arrayed against it.

As well as our loyalty to Christ and our solidarity with one another being a convicting sign to the world, it is also

3.2 An assurance for every believer

Opposition is not a sign that God is angry with us; it is often a sign that he has set his love on us to save us – a sign that he considers us the genuine article.

Through faith, you are shielded by God's power, until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time, Peter reassures us (1 Peter 1.5-7). In this, you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith -of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire - may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed.

May it be, that as citizens of heaven, we are worthy ambassadors on earth.