

"JUST PASSING THROUGH"

Philippians 3:17-21

Last Saturday afternoon I began to write this sermon. It just so happened that right before that I had a phone conversation with Bill Gardella, Jr. and his sister Tracey Hughes. They were telling me that their Dad had died earlier in the day out in Surprise, Arizona. Bill Gardella, Sr.'s funeral will be held tomorrow evening at 6:30 p.m. here in this sanctuary. After sharing my condolences and talking with them about some preliminary arrangements, I sat down at the computer, opened up my Bible to our passage today and thought, given the news of Bill's death, how appropriate are these words from the Apostle Paul found in verse 20 where he says, "But our citizenship is in heaven." "But our citizenship is in heaven." Christian brothers and sisters, do you ever stop and think about your citizenship being in heaven?

A pastor was preaching about going to heaven one Sunday. He asked his congregation, "How many of you would like to go to heaven tonight?"

And everybody raised their hands but a little boy in the balcony. He tried again, "How many of you would like to go to heaven?" Everybody responded but that one little fellow in the balcony. So the pastor said to him, right then, "Son, don't you want to go to heaven?" The little boy hollered out, "Yeah, someday, but I thought you were gettin' up a load right now."

I don't think we, who live here on this earth, think much about what Paul said, "But our citizenship is in heaven," that is, until we are in the twilight of life and most of our friends have died or we are confronted with a serious illness or terminal illness or death, or a loved one or friend is in critical condition and we don't know if they are going to live or die or we attend a funeral like Bill Gardella's funeral tomorrow night. Maybe then we begin to think about eternal things. I still remember right after my sister-in-law was tragically killed in an auto accident 3 years ago, the night of July 11th, my wife, Margaret, began to read books about heaven as she was seeking comfort and assurance and hope.

And let me put in an advertisement- if you want to read a tremendous book about heaven that addresses some of the questions and issues we face regarding this topic, I recommend the book entitled ***Heaven, by Randy Alcorn.***

An English clergyman was once asked by a colleague what he expected after death, he replied, "Well, if it comes to that, I suppose I shall enter into eternal bliss, but I really wish you wouldn't bring up such depressing subjects." (Barry Morrow, *Heaven Observed*, Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2001, p. 89) Is talking about heaven really a depressing subject or is it the finality of death itself and not being here on earth and not being with our loved ones and friends that is depressing? I think that part of our problem is we are able to disassociate ourselves, for the most part, from death. I remember my grandmother telling me about her oldest daughter, Jean, who died when she was 16 years old and how, she died at home and they even had calling hours in the home because that is where they had them, not in

funeral homes like we do today. Back then there was no Hospice or nursing homes to speak of and people died at home with loved ones around them.

But today we have facilities where people can be even better cared for where they can die and so it is not always in the home. It is understandable that some people do not want to talk about death but we need to be hopeful because, for the Christian, death is not the end, but the beginning of eternity, and I pray that thinking and talking about the afterlife and heaven is not something that should be a depressing subject for the believer in Christ but something that we will come to embrace. I think the hard thing for us is that for believers in Christ, we will not see our loved one for a period of time while we are still alive and walking this earth. But we will be reunited with them in heaven and I believe we will recognize them.

Heaven, for the believer, is something that should be welcomed and embraced, for we are not citizens of this Old World but rather we can look forward to living with the resurrected Christ within the realm of the new heaven and the New Earth that will be created in the final climax of history.

I want us to spend a few moments and see what Paul is saying to the Philippian Christians in our passage today.

First, **Paul invites the believer to imitate him.** He says in verse 17, "Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me." Now this is a pretty dangerous thing for any preacher or speaker to say- designating oneself as an example. I mean, 99.9% of the preachers I know wouldn't touch this with a ten foot pole because they would only be setting themselves up for failure. And the person who would do so would, 1) have to be unbelievably arrogant or 2) transparently humble to project oneself as a model. I mean most preachers start out with a serious handicap to the point that they say not, "Do as I do," but rather, "Do as I say."

In my study of this passage I came across the name Johann Albrecht Bengel, who was considered one of the greatest interpreters of scripture who ever lived. He translated verse 17 in a different way so that it reads, "Become fellow-imitators with me in imitating Jesus Christ." And yet it is more likely, and most other scholars agree, that Paul was inviting his readers not only to listen to him, but also to imitate him. Paul was really sticking his neck out with such a statement. And yet remember that earlier in chapter 3 he says in verse 12 that he has not already obtained perfection. So he is pleading with his brothers and sisters to not follow him in his failures and imperfections, nor in his achievements, but in what really mattered- knowing Jesus Christ and making Christ his own. But why did he want these Philippian Christians to imitate him? Look at verses 18-19 and find out for it says, "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. Their end is destruction: their god is the belly, and their glory is in their shame; their

minds are set on earthly things.” Who were these “many [who] live as enemies of the cross of Christ?”

There are different interpretations as to the “who”- one scholar suggests it was the Judaizers who were enemies of the cross in that they gloried in perfection of faith in obedience to the law, rather than embracing the crucified life committed to Jesus Christ. But there are scholars who focus on the issue at hand, namely conduct and attitude toward and use of the physical body. The great Scottish theologian, William Barclay is not quite sure either but listen to what he says about these enemies of the cross. “Who they were is not certain. But it is quite certain that they lived gluttonous and immoral lives and used their so-called Christianity to justify themselves. We can only guess who they may have been. They may have been Gnostics. The Gnostics were heretics who tried to intellectualize Christianity and make a kind of philosophy out of it. They began with the principle that from the beginning of time there had always been two

realities—spirit and matter. Spirit, they said, is altogether good; and matter is altogether evil. It is because the world was created out of this flawed matter that sin and evil are in it. If then, matter is essentially evil, the body is essentially evil and will remain evil whatever you do with it. Therefore, do what you like with it; since it is evil anyhow it makes no difference what you do with it. So these Gnostics taught that gluttony and adultery and homosexuality and drunkenness were of no importance because they affect only the body which is of no importance. There was also another party of Gnostics who held a different kind of doctrine. They argued that a man could not be called complete until he had experienced everything that life had to offer, both good and bad. Therefore, they said, it was a man's duty to plumb the depths of sin just as much as to scale the heights of virtue."

(end quote) The point is this, my friends, there were those back in Paul's day who were distorting the idea of Christian liberty- they were saying in

Christianity the law was obsolete and the Christian could do whatever he or

she darn well pleased. They distorted the whole Christian doctrine of grace. Interesting- maybe we have some people today who are secret Gnostics as they have the "do whatever feels good to you" attitude as long as it doesn't hurt anyone else, who justify behavior even though it might be totally contrary to the teachings of the church and more importantly Holy Scripture. Paul recognized that there were some so immature in the faith that they had bought into a liberty-become-license mentality which really lead to a new kind of bondage. So Paul takes these enemies of the cross head on, and he even weeps for them for they claim to be Christian but don't act like it.

Which leads to my second point and that is, **Christians are just passing through; our citizenship is in heaven.** These Philippian Christians could relate to what Paul was saying. You see, Philippi was one of a number of Roman colonies where the Romans had set up a strategic military center. And the citizens of these colonies were mostly soldiers who had served their time, 21 years and who then, after service, were rewarded

with full Roman citizenship. And a great distinction of these colonies was that, no matter where they were, these citizens of Philippi were a part of Rome. I mean, Roman clothing was worn; Roman magistrates governed; Latin was spoken; Roman law and justice was handed down; Roman morals were observed. They remained Roman no matter what. And so, Paul, declaring that, "our citizenship is in heaven," is saying to the Philippian Christians, "just like a Roman colonist never forgets or questions that they belong to Rome, so you, Christian, must never forget that you are a citizen of heaven." And Paul would take it one step further and say, and because you are a citizen of heaven, make sure your conduct matches your citizenship.

This brings me to my third and final point. **Because we are citizens of heaven we can live in great expectation of Christ's return.** Paul says in verse 20, "But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ."

With Paul and all the early Christian preaching, there was this view of history that looked forward to Christ's return. Friends, no matter how bleak things might be in the here-and-now, no matter what difficulties we face now or in the future, we can live in the hope that one day, we will see His face, that one day we will be with Him in glory and all the loved ones and saints who are in Christ, and one day, Jesus Christ will return in all, I mean, in all His glory. Friends, remember, we are **Just Passing Through**. Amen.

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Introduction: Last Saturday afternoon...

"But our citizenship is in heaven" Phil. 3:20

An advertisement- a book about heaven: *Heaven*, by Randy Alcorn

What Paul is saying to the Philippian Christians in our passage

First, **Paul invites the believer to _____ him** vs. 17

Johann Albrecht Bengel's translation: "Become fellow-imitators with me in imitating Jesus Christ"

Vs. 18-19 "For many live as enemies of the cross of Christ"

The "who"- maybe Judaizers, maybe Gnostics

Second, **Christians are just passing through; our _____ is in heaven** vs. 20

Philippi was one of a number of Roman colonies

Third, **because we are citizens of heaven we can live in great _____ of Christ's return** vs. 20

Conclusion: Friends, remember, we are **Just Passing Through**.