

“Live as Citizens of the Gospel”

Philippians

Downtown

May 30, 2021

Here’s the thing about the Bible: it is so powerful that anyone can pick it up and learn truths about God. My favorite genre description of the Bible is that it is meditation literature, which means it doesn’t give up its secrets upon first reading, rather it takes a lifetime of study and meditation to plumb the depths.

Also, many sections, like Paul’s letter to the Philippians, were written to a specific people at a specific time. So in order to most fully understand the weight of the words, you have to understand how they would have heard them.

The passage we’ll cover today is a good example of that. Turn in your Bibles to Philippians 1:27-30. We will read these verses first, then go look at the background of how the original hearers would have heard them.

Philippians 1:27-30

Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel, and not frightened in anything by your opponents. This is a clear sign to them of their destruction, but of your salvation, and that from God. For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake, engaged in the same conflict that you saw I had and now hear that I still have.

Okay, so there’s a lot here that we could talk about. As a 21st Century American Christian, I see themes of unity in the gospel here. I see standing firm in opposition to opponents. I see the expectation of suffering. I would be interested in hearing a good sermon on any of those threads. But I think a closer look at the background of the Philippian church will give us even deeper insight.

If you’d like, you can flip over to Acts 16. I’m just gonna tell the story so you don’t have to, but that’s where you find the start of the Philippian church, so if you wanna fact check what I’m saying that’s where you’ll need to be.

It all starts when Paul has a vision one night while sleeping, where a man from a region of Macedonia urges him to “Come over to Macedonia and help us.” Now to Paul, help primarily means preaching the gospel of Jesus, so that’s what He does. It literally says based on this dream Paul concluded “that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.”

So they set sail to heed this call, and they wind up in the city of Phillipi, which Acts says is a Roman colony. And here’s where we need to do some work.

At this time, Rome was the most powerful empire on Earth. It is said to stretch from England to India, and to be sure it was an empire that spread through the sword, but over time as it gained more control it trumpeted what it called Pax Romana, or Roman Peace. When you and I hear about empires, we think of brute force and oppression and taking things by force, and to be sure there was a lot of that. But you also have to remember that this was a pre-modern, warring, barbaric-compared-to-us time. So for the millions of people who were brought under the Roman Empire, this was a profound relief. It was good news.

Roman citizenship brought with it profound benefits. It brought legal rights and protections, it brought monetary privilege through taxation status, it brought safety and security. At this point in history, you didn't mess with Rome.

Philippi is a Roman colony, meaning it's people have been granted Roman citizenship. The city was actually populated by a majority of veterans who fought in many of the wars that advanced Roman territory. So these people are set up to be quite loyal to the Empire.

And loyalty, bordering on worship, was required. As the Roman Empire progressed, by the time Philippians is written, the Caesars, or Emperors, actually thought of themselves as gods. There was a saying, known to all people groups in or around the stretches of the Roman Empire, which simply went "Caesar is kyrios," or "Caesar is Lord." There was another saying that went "There is no name under heaven by which men can be saved other than Caesar."

Just stopping real quick to check: do either of those sayings sound familiar? In a meaningful way, people actually understood being a part of the Roman Empire as a form of salvation.

Speaking of familiar terms, the word translated as "gospel" in the New Testament, and in these verses, is the Greek word *euangelion*. In origin, it is not a uniquely Christian word. It was used as a military or political term that broadly meant, "heralding good news about a king." So the picture would be that when there was a peaceful transition of power (or a not-so-peaceful transition of power if you know much about Roman history), these messengers would scatter throughout the Empire with the good news. And they would say "Octavian is Lord! Tiberius is Lord! Nero is Lord!" This was cause for rejoicing, because it meant the Empire was in tact and in power.

So all of this is the context for Philippi. This is the people we are talking about. It's very difficult to understand a culture so different from your own, but suffice it to say they did not relate to Caesar the way we relate to our president in our democracy. Americans look at the president and think, "You basically work for us. If we don't like you we'll get you out." #notmypresident That, umm, didn't fly with Caesar. And the people of Philippi were arguably quite okay with their status and privileges as Roman citizens in a Roman colony.

So circling back, after the dream Paul has he winds up in Philippi. Acts 16 gives us 3 people that were definitely or possibly converted in Philippi back to back to back. The first is a wealthy businesswoman named Lydia. Some scholars think that her house, being that she could afford a villa, was likely the home of the Philippian church.

The second is a demonized slave girl. She made her money by doing magic tricks for her owners, but she, and I quote "greatly annoyed" Paul--I've always loved that part--so he cast the demon out of her. Her owners get really mad at this, because Paul just destroyed their income stream. So they drag them in front of the magistrates and claim that--listen to this part because it's important--these Jewish men are advocating customs that are unlawful for Romans to practice.

They are messing with the Empire. And for this, they were beaten by the Empire. With rods, by an angry crowd. And then taken away to the inner jail.

In jail, we find the third story. A supernatural earthquake happens, and it frees all the prison bars and loosens the shackles. This part also ties into life in the Roman empire, because the Philippian jailer woke up from the earthquake, rubble assumedly all around him, and he saw that the prison doors were open. This man we will find out later has a family, but he still in response to seeing this, draws his sword and is about to kill himself.

Why? Because he knows he'll be killed for failing to keep the prisoners.

Philippians 1:28-34

But Paul cried with a loud voice, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here." And the jailer called for lights and rushed in, and trembling with fear he fell down before Paul and Silas. Then he brought them out and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"

This is a profound moment, because here we have a Roman jailer, in the colony of Philippi, under the protection of Caesar, realize that he is in fact not saved by Caesar.

31 And they said, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." And they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house.

Believe in the Lord Jesus--the true King of the universe, and you will be saved. You and your family whom you were about to leave widowed and orphaned.

33 And he took them the same hour of the night and washed their wounds; and he was baptized at once, he and all his family.

I'd like to stop and think about this picture for a moment. I don't know how many Roman jailers you've interacted with, but this is the kind of man whom if you find yourself in a back alley, you really want to be on your side. This man is an enforcer of the Empire. He is likely a hardened man, who has numbed himself to chaining, imprisoning, and possibly torturing criminals. He has hard, calloused hands and almost assuredly a heart of the same nature, just by necessity.

And here he is getting into a body of water, likely a river, to be baptized. But first he washes the wounds of Paul and Silas, the wounds that they had from being beat by the Empire he enforced. He went from locking the stocks around their feet to washing their rod-inflicted wounds.

This is the type of transformation possible with Jesus. The kind that stuns, as you watch sore and aching Paul and Silas in the river, baptizing a hardened agent of the state and the rest of his family.

34 Then he brought them up into his house and set food before them. And he rejoiced along with his entire household that he had believed in God.

The end of Acts 16 reinforces the importance of Roman citizenship. The magistrates must have heard about the earthquake, because they send police to tell Paul and his friends they can now leave freely. But Paul says, "You mean they beat Roman citizens and threw us in jail, and now they want us to leave secretly? Nah."

The rulers, upon hearing that they are Roman citizens, are like "Uh ohhh." They come, apologize to Paul, and then ask them to please leave town. Paul and the others go and visit Lydia, the other Christians to ...encourage them, and then they depart Philippi.

So that gives us a fuller picture of who exactly Paul is talking to years later when he writes his letter. What experiences they share, what statuses they share.

We have Lydia, an international businesswoman. Possibly a formerly demonized slave girl. A converted jailer. Who knows what other converts have joined the church by now, but judging from the start we can probably safely conclude that this gathering is one of the most diverse places in Philippi. It's likely that

the little church was still meeting at Lydia's house, and with the concentration of veterans in the city and a jailer missionary, who knows how many of that ilk are now brought into the flock.

They would likely meet on Sunday evening, open the Jewish Scriptures and have someone teach before they sing and share a meal of bread and wine. Until this one week comes along, when they show up and someone reports that there is a letter from Paul of all people!

Someone that night would stand up and read the letter in its entirety, to encourage and strengthen the believers gathered there. They would hear word after word, phrase after phrase, and parts would stick in their minds to roll around.

With all of that in mind, let's go back through the passage and see if we can more clearly discern what *they* would have felt.

Philippians 1:27

Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ.

The part translated as "let your manner of life" is actually just one word in Greek, and it more directly means "live as a citizen." So at this point in the letter, they hear something that strikes them far more deeply than it strikes us.

This understanding is essential, because when I hear the word "citizenship" it doesn't move me very much. I'm grateful to be a citizen of America, but that word doesn't make me feel warm inside. It just feels kind of meh. So when I hear "live as a citizen" I'm like "Okay, cool. I don't really know what that means. Pay my taxes I guess?"

But for them, it was everything. And they knew exactly what it meant. It meant their foundational allegiance had to change.

Paul is saying, "All of you Roman citizens, historically privileged people--that is no longer your primary identity or allegiance. Instead, live as citizens of the gospel of Christ."

This is not just flowery language for them. It is eye-raising stuff. Citizens is a loaded word. Gospel is a loaded word. These are not frivolous details. He's saying, live as citizens of the euangelion of Christ. Live under his rule, not Caesars. Go and proclaim His Lordship, not Caesars.

We don't know the exact circumstances of Paul's death, but tradition has it that he gets out of jail after he pens this letter to the Philippians from his jail cell in Rome. But then a few years later he gets sent back to prison in Rome, and this time he is beheaded by Nero, believed to be Caesar at the time. And the reason that happened is because Paul wouldn't stop saying things like this, and telling others to live like this.

In chapter 2 Paul will say that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow, and every tongue will confess that He is Lord. That is treason on paper. It's a death sentence. It likely would have silenced the room when it was read aloud.

In our context things like this may read as a nice, kinda vague, spiritual platitudes. For the original audience, they probably couldn't stop cringing. Raising their eyebrows. They knew what was at stake for Paul, and also for themselves.

Live as citizens of the good news that Christ is the true King. Tell everyone that He is the incarnate Son of God who came to Earth as the Messiah. He lived a perfect, sinless, radiant human life that is pure enough

to cover all of our impurities and sins. Not only that but He died for our sins to pay the price we deserved, and he rose from the dead 3 days later to defeat sin and death for good. He has now ascended to the right hand of the Father, crowned as King of the universe.

There is salvation in no one else, no other name under heaven by which men can be saved other than Jesus, Jesus, Jesus.

Believe this, say this, proclaim this, Paul says. Even if it kills you. And it did just that for him, and possibly for some hearing these words read aloud at Sunday night church.

Philippians 1:27

So that whether I come and see you or am absent...

We don't know if Paul ever made it back in person to Phillipi.

...I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel,

Rome was a powerful unifying force. It held together meaningful group benefits and dynamics, and likely some swagger. Group identification is a deeply embedded part of human nature, and we naturally gravitate towards those like us or who like the same things as we do. Psychologist Jonathan Haidt says that we are "groupish" in nature.

Paul was likely writing to many Roman citizens, but possibly a former slave girl too. And maybe others like her, because it's estimated that about 1/3 of the Empire was enslaved.

There was likely some diversity of status, ethnicity, occupation and finances here. And Paul's instruction to them is that all of those smaller groups, labels, or identifiers--even one as powerful as Rome--no longer is central. They've now been grafted into a new group. A more foundational kingdom.

Called to stand firm in one spirit. With one mind. Striving together side-by-side for the spread of the good news that Jesus alone is King, and He's King of all nations, all peoples, all galaxies.

Imagine the different people sitting around the room hearing this read aloud. Maybe they are still at Lydia's house, and poor people have a tendency to sneer at the privileges of rich people. What with their fancy houses and all, they must think they are better than me. Some of them enjoy the massive benefits of Roman citizenship, others have to pay taxes out of their income to support the Empire they get no benefits from. Lydia has likely benefited from the structures of the Empire, and if the slave girl is there she's been nothing but oppressed by the Empire.

And Paul says, you are one in Christ.

Philippians 1:28

And not frightened in anything by your opponents. This is a clear sign to them of their destruction, but of your salvation, and that from God.

We don't know exactly who the opponents are that Paul referenced. It's possible with all of the political subversion through this letter that he may be thinking of those who would persecute the church. It would make sense in the juxtaposition of those who are "destroyed" and "saved."

Many Christians alive at this time would end up being martyred for their faith. Their bodies were physically destroyed, but the irony is that they were saved for all eternity. Meanwhile the ones doing the destroying thought themselves to be saved by the Roman Empire, but their end was actually destruction.

This proved prophetic, because let me ask you this: where is the Roman Empire today? For the people reading this letter, Rome felt like a bedrock certainty. Caesar being on the throne like a given. We can see something from our vantage point that they couldn't--namely...what was the Roman Empire like, again? Who was Caesar? That name I can't even pronounce? He was powerful once, I gather? In what history book might I find information about these evidently powerful people?

How many people are in the Christian church today, and how many belong to the Roman Empire?

Jesus is Lord--not Caesar.

We'll wrap up with the last encouragements from Paul in this section:

Philippians 1:29-30 For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake, engaged in the same conflict that you saw I had and now hear that I still have.

These people understood that citizenship was a privilege. It was good news, something to rejoice over. If you remember the Philippian jailer, when he was converted it says that "he rejoiced along with his entire household that he had believed in God."

I love that picture. Look at me! I believed in God. I didn't expect my Tuesday to go like this. This is radically different from how I saw my life going. But I now have stumbled upon something so stunning, so profound, so undeniably true, that I almost have to laugh at the thought. I believed in God! I trusted the good news that Jesus is King. Jesus is Lord.

There is this feeling that this profound fortune has been granted to me that I didn't expect or earn. This is, for many of us, possibly the way we feel. Like, I did not see my life going this way. Look at me, I'm at church! On a weekend! I go to LifeGroup, and most of the time I actually like it!

It has been granted to you for the sake of Christ to believe in Him, and what a privilege that is. What a remarkable kingdom and destiny to find yourself grafted into.

But with this profound new citizenship that lasts far longer than Rome, something else comes along. Notice it says not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake, engaged in the same conflict that you saw I had and now hear that I still have.

There are innumerable benefits of believing in the saving work of Jesus and being grafted into His Kingdom. Eternal life is just one of them, albeit an important one.

But allegiance to King Jesus will cause some suffering in this life. It will bring with it some hardships, some conflict. Paul says you saw I had the same experience, and now still have it as I'm locked up in chains in Rome, the seat of the Empire, writing you this letter.

For Paul, suffering is a privilege too. It is nothing more than following Jesus, the suffering King who conquered sin through a cross and death through a grave. Paul's logic is that if Christ suffered on His way to glory, why should we expect anything different?

We don't know what fates the specific individuals in the Philippian house church faced after hearing this letter, what choices they came up against, what suffering they endured. But we know that allegiance to Jesus as King was unspeakably costly to many in the early church. And Paul just equipped them with a stunning call to lock arms together in unity as a church in aggressive allegiance to King Jesus, come whatever may.

I realize that we do not live in first century Rome, and that is the reason why we needed to do the background work we did today. The context is different...but the call is the same: live as citizens of the gospel of the King.

With this historical context in view, we'll spend the rest of our time quickly discussing 3 markers of Citizenship and how they apply to us, in hopes that we'll understand how we obey this command.

3 Markers of Citizenship

1) Allegiance to the King

The same test they had applies. Where does our citizenship lie? Do we actually accept Jesus as Lord? Are we willing to swear allegiance to Him when some other force demands it?

We have the same pressures on us to conform to our time and place. It comes to us in different forms than it did for the Romans, but it's really the same. When we fit in, there are social privileges we accrue. When we say the right things that fit the times, people accept us.

There is profound pressure in that. I do not want people to think little of me. I do not want people to reject me and dismiss me. Just like with Rome, there are special privileges that come with being allegiant to the dominant narrative of secular democracy. There are rewards.

And forsaking allegiance to that kingdom and all its values will have some costs. It likely won't cost you your life here, thankfully, but that doesn't mean the costs aren't real and meaningful.

The secular empire that vows for our attention has a bit of a different twist than Caesar in Rome, because it tells us there actually is no king, and we must primarily be allegiant to ourselves. You get to decide what you like and what you don't like, what's true and what's not. This is a powerful, shaping influence that effects us in ways we can't even see.

But when the New Testament says "Jesus is kyrios--or Jesus is Lord," it means all of that is vapid, nonsensical foolishness. There may be things about the Bible you find difficult. Me too, you're not alone. There may be things you find hard to obey. I'm with you. I want you to hear this because I might be the only place you hear it from: none of those things are primary considerations. They are important and worthy to discuss, for sure. But they are not primary.

What's primary is the question: Is Jesus the Son of God who died for your sins, rose from the dead and declared Himself King of the universe? If He is, then our first response is to join with all of the created world, hit a knee, bow our heads, and confess with our self-obsessed tongues that He is Lord.

2) Precedence of the kingdom as my primary group

Just like in Philippi, we exist in a place with many different affiliations and subgroups. We have economic differences, political differences, ethnic differences, personality differences, sports allegiance differences.

We tend to be groupish just like all humans. We naturally gravitate towards people who are like us and who like the same things we do. Part of this is human nature, and it's not always necessarily wrong.

But the problem comes when we over-identify with our other affiliations. Like, sure I'm a Christian, I go to church, but my real group is my nuanced political tribe. Those are the people I have the most in common with. That's where I really belong.

Every empire tries to get you to conform using the means they have to shape you. Our current context tends to do this through perfectly personalized media where bots choose what to show you next based on what you've already proven to click on. Your phone knows what you love. It knows where your allegiances lie.

This over-identification with groups is exactly what Paul is confronting. The rich businesswoman, the former slave girl, the rough jailer--they all had their affiliations too. They had their groupishness. The people they gravitated to, the group that in some instances would probably look at others in their house church and identify them as the problem. The outgroup. And Paul says:

Philippians 1:27

So that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel,

Different people, one spirit. Different affiliations and groups, one mind. Striving side-by-side for the gospel together.

I'm not trying to take away all of our other group identities. I'm just saying that allegiance to Jesus as King means His people are now my people. My primary group. So when other affiliations compete, this one wins.

If you are in Christ, you have more in common with the fellow Christians in your church community than you do with whatever group you feel most at home in. And we are called to lay all of our differences at the door, put on our new citizenship and lock arms together to herald good news about King Jesus.

You have different opinions than me on things I care deeply about? That's fine. We can talk about that later, if we have time. But it's not our priority.

You voted differently than me? Maybe I'll ask you why at some point, but you are my people in the most important sense.

You have a different personality wiring than I normally like being around? That's okay.

You are the type of person who I would never be friends with outside of Jesus. What a miracle then, because as we lock arms I'm really starting to like you.

3) Willingness to suffer for the sake of the kingdom

Every nation or empire has had people who sacrificed for it. Think of the countless soldiers who died making America what it is today. Think of the many veterans that lived in Philippi, who fought for the advance of Caesar's power. Sometimes citizens are called to step up and do something really, really difficult for the sake of the kingdom.

Jesus' kingdom is no different. He was made king through intense suffering, and the Scriptures tell us that we will follow Him into the same sacrifice and hardship. This was most certainly true for the early Christians in these cities.

Emperor Nero was famously hostile toward Christians. In the year 64 a great fire broke out in Rome, and in order to deflect blame he unfairly blamed the Christians. Writing about this time of persecution for Christians, Roman historian Tacitus wrote: *"A vast multitude were not only put to death, but put to death with insult, in that they were either dressed up in the skins of beasts to perish by the worrying of dogs, or else put on crosses to be set on fire, and when the daylight failed, to be burned for use as lights by night. Nero had thrown open his gardens for that spectacle, and was giving a circus exhibition."*

"Not only to believe in him but to suffer for his sake," Paul said.

Historian Seneca, speaking of the same, said *"In the midst of the flame and the rack...I have seen them smile, and smile with a good heart."*

These were men and women willing to suffer for the sake of Jesus' Kingdom. Who refused to recant or deny allegiance to Jesus. They had their eyes on a more lasting kingdom.

Praise God that I don't see that in our cards here. But citizenship calls us to the same sacrifice. To do the hard thing. To tell people about Jesus even though they may think you're weird. To lead the LifeGroup. To take that really difficult step out of love for others. To give away the money you'd like to keep. To adopt the kid or be a foster parent. To risk being alienated from your subgroups because you are most aligned with God's people. To volunteer at Kidtown even though you're with your kids all week.

And maybe most simply, to obey Jesus as King. Even when it doesn't make sense to you, even when you don't want to. The empire we belong to has essentially framed obedience as injustice. We are taught that to deny ourselves and our desires is repressive. That any outside constraints are evil and wrong. But obedience is not an injustice. It's a sacrifice, but it's not evil. It's not an injustice. And biblically speaking, the irony is it's actually for your good and joy and flourishing.

I don't know which of these things you may be struggling with. Whether it's having your foundational allegiance be to Jesus, being more unified with Christians than your other subgroups, being willing to suffer or sacrifice for His Kingdom. Whatever it might be, I want to end by pointing our attention to what allowed the New Testament church to live as citizens of the gospel of Jesus in such profound and moving ways.

Paul's focus, their focus...was not on how hard all of this can be. Rather, their eyes were on their King.

Do you see the Son of Man having no place to lay his head? Do you see Him being despised, hated for no reason? Do you see Him being falsely accused? Do you see Him sweating drops of blood knowing the pain coming His way, but still submitting to the Father's will? Do you see Him being beaten, tortured, ridiculed? Do you see the King of distant galaxies hanging on a cross, with a sign above mocking Him, repeating the claim that He's King of the Jews?

This was the coronation path for Jesus. He rose victorious over sin, death and hell and Revelation says our King rides a white horse, glows like lightning and has a voice of a waterfall. He died, but He will never die again. His Kingdom is here, it's spreading through all nations and lands and ages, and it will be here far after the Empires of Rome and America are dust.

Those of us in Christ will be there too. That is our home and our eternal citizenship. But our path is the same as His. Through living as citizens of this King here and now, and accepting any difficulty that comes with it. Knowing that however weighty they feel now, one day they will appear light and momentary, a small cost for such a glorious and unending kingdom that will outlive the sun.

Pray.