

I am a citizen of heaven

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Preacher: Arthur Rankin

[0 : 0 0] of Christ. And Lord, we long to hear the voice of our kind shepherd. In Jesus' name, amen. Richard Baxter was a famous minister in the city of Kitterminster in the 17th century, and he was a leader among the Puritans. He was also chronically sick. He had many afflictions that often 17th century medicine couldn't solve and often really made worse. He suffered from a constant cough, frequent nosebleeds, migraines, digestive issues, kidney stones and gallstones, in addition to all the other periodic illnesses that he came down with.

And he said that from the age of 21 forward, he seldom had an hour free from pain. And at one point, he was forced to stop working for five months because he was literally bedridden.

And during that time, his pain was so great that he was convinced that he was going to die. And so he used his time to write his funeral sermon, and he decided to write that sermon on heaven. Now, much to his great surprise, he did eventually recover, but he was so changed by the experience of writing that sermon and thinking about writing it that he set forth from that day forward to spend 30 minutes every day thinking about heaven. And in typical Puritan fashion, what started as a small sermon ended up being a 650-page book that you can still buy today. It's called The Saints' Everlasting Rest. Now, thinking about heaven might seem like something that only super saints do, people like Richard Baxter. But Baxter actually thinks that it's something that is good for even ordinary Christians, even weak Christians to think about. He says this, for want of this recourse to heaven, your soul is as a lamp not lighted and your duty as a sacrifice without fire. Fetch one coal daily from this altar and see if your offering will not burn. Keep close to this reviving fire and see if your affections will not be warmed. Now, that's good advice. And what we're going to do tonight is hopefully fetch a coal or two from that altar. But we're doing that not just because Richard Baxter thinks it's a great idea and he recommends it. We're actually doing it because that's what we're taught in this passage by the Apostle Paul, and really Jesus Christ himself. Paul is telling the Philippians 2,000 years ago and us here today that heaven needs to be in our eyes and on our minds.

It is our goal. It is our destination and it is our home. It's really the only way we can live the Christian life at all. We need to live it as citizens of heaven. And it should impact every step we take, every word that we say, because heaven is not just something we look up to. It is the bedrock beneath Christians' feet as we walk. And really what we're talking about today is why heaven matters for our Christian lives. And to do that, we're first going to talk about why heaven matters because it's where we belong. That's our first point. Paul gets at that, he gets at this, when he says in verse 20 that our citizenship is in heaven.

Now citizenship is a word that would have really wrung inside the ears of the Philippians because Philippi was a very unusual city. It was a Roman colony. It was set up originally by the Emperor Augustus. He reformatting the entire city in order to plant Romans there. And everyone there, for the most part, could trace their lineage back to descendants of Roman soldiers who had originally served under Augustus. They could go to Rome and they could go to the record halls and they could find their names listed in the records there proving that they were citizens of Rome. And that citizenship meant a lot to the Philippians. It was extremely valuable in the ancient world.

[4 : 16] That citizenship meant that you were exempt from taxes. It also gave you enormous political, like legal protections. No one could torture you if you were a citizen of Rome. That was not allowed.

If you remember back in Acts 16, Paul shows up in Philippi and he begins to proclaim the word of God and people get upset. And the local magistrates try to solve the problem by taking him prisoner, having him beaten and thrown in jail. And then Paul afterwards kind of says, you realize I'm actually a Roman citizen.

And the magistrates kind of had their lives flash before their eyes because they understand what they've done. They have laid hands upon someone who is under the emperor's protection. And the Philippians were extraordinarily proud of their Roman citizenship. They looked to Rome for their orders.

The entire city was shaped like Rome, built like a mini Rome. They all went around dressed not like Greeks, but like Romans. And the official language of that city was Latin, not Greek.

They were Roman citizens and they made sure to live like it. They wanted you to understand who they were. And what Paul here is telling these Roman citizens is that their citizenship is really in heaven.

[5 : 37] They may have descended from a long line of Romans that you could go back and you can look at the tribal records and see what line they came from, possibly all the way back to the bounding of the Roman Republic.

But where it really matters is that their name is written in the book of life, in the heavenly Jerusalem. And it's the same for Christians today.

This is the most foundational thing about us. It's not that Paul wants us to travel to heaven in order to try and get citizenship, in order to try to apply for it.

Hopefully once they're there that maybe we get let in on a refugee program and then we're able to work our way up to citizenship. That's not the case. We already have citizenship in heaven.

We already are citizens of heaven. And we are called to live like the citizens of heaven that we are. Now what does it mean to live as citizens of heaven?

[6 : 36] Well, I have two words for you. It means to live as a pilgrim and it means to live as an exile. For a Christian to live as a citizen of heaven means that you cannot live like you are of this world.

To live like heaven is your home means that in some way this world cannot be your home. Now if I can shock everyone in this room for a minute, I'm actually not from around here.

I technically have some very distant ancestors who several hundred years ago were like a hundred miles northwest of here. But I'm not really from here. I'm not a citizen.

I do live here but I don't have citizenship. And it's only upon the goodwill of his majesty's home office that I'm allowed to stay here. And I actually found out this last week that my visa has been approved.

I'm here for a while yet. And that's, we're very thankful for that. But even with that visa in our hands, we are very aware that this is not our home. And as much as Anna and I may joke with each other whenever we get on the bus and we see some tourists get on and we just joke with each other about how obnoxiously American these fresh tourists are, everyone can tell that we are American too.

[7 : 50] That we are not really from around here. But what Christians are called to be is different and distinct, even inside their home country, even where they have their passport.

There should be something alien and distinct about us, something foreign about us, even inside our hometowns, even inside the same home that we've grown up from since childhood.

Christians, it's not that we're called to speak with the same language or speak with the same accent. But we do join together.

And we join together in speaking a similar way. We have new words for speaking about God. That we join together. And it's not that we're called to be different and distinct by having a different set of recipes.

You know, the Free Church of Scotland actually has a best-selling cookbook. And that's a good and wonderful thing. But that's not a fulfillment of this passage. To be slightly alien in this world. It means that we're supposed to walk to the beat of a different drum.

[8 : 59] Philippi took its orders from Rome. But we marched to the beat of heaven. Philippi looked to the emperor, to the savior of the world, as he called himself.

But we look to Jesus Christ, our Lord and our savior. He is our true king. And we are his people. And we obey every word that he has commanded us.

And that means that when we go around this world, we act as citizens of heaven. It should set us apart in some way. It means that when we speak, our language should be tempered.

There should be something gentle about it. Something Christ-like about it. It's not that you can't celebrate a burned supper. It's not that you can't sing Au Blanc Sign.

But we join together as the people of God. And we sing new songs, hymns and psalms. We gather together for new holidays. The Sabbath. And we gather together with a new people.

[9 : 59] The church. And we enjoy that fellowship with each other. It's not that when the world looks at us, they should see how Scottish we are or how American we are.

And they should see that. It's that they should see Jesus underneath. Slowly conforming us to be more and more into his image. You know, this is really what made moving across the ocean so comparatively easy for Anna and myself.

It would be over the top to say that moving here was like coming home. That's over the top. But coming to a gospel church is sort of like coming to see family in a foreign land.

There's something familiar about it. And there's a good reason for that. Heaven is where we all belong to. It is where we all are going towards.

And the church functions as an embassy of heaven. When we gather together, we gather together as the people of God. United in Christ Jesus by the Spirit as new creations.

[11 : 06] And that kinship with other Christians, that is a real spiritual thing. And it is the basis upon which the fellowship that we have here in Becloon and with other churches abroad.

It is more deeply ingrained in you than anything else. That citizenship in heaven is deep, deeply built and stamped upon your very soul.

It doesn't mean that you can't be a citizen of the UK. It doesn't mean that you can't serve in the British Armed Forces or do anything like that. But, you know, we see in Jeremiah 29 that exiles are called to live in the world in which they are placed.

That they are called to seek the good of the city where they are placed in. And we are called to invest ourselves deeply into the communities in which God has called us. And what it also means is that we are called to recognize that even if we have British citizenship or American citizenship, our heavenly citizenship matters more.

When being a British citizen comes into contact with being a heavenly citizen, British citizenship loses. Because we serve the King of Kings. We serve the King of King Charles and the King of Parliament.

[12 : 21] The one who oversees everything. And like the Apostle Paul, we are called to use our citizenship as a stewardship. Use it for the expansion of the kingdom of heaven.

And every so often, you should understand what it means to feel strangely homesick. Even inside your own home. Perhaps especially during worship.

Because this world is not your home. It's not where you truly belong. When we Christians die, we're not going off to some mysterious place that we hope everything is better.

We're going home. We go to a place that we know. And we may be going in sad circumstances. We may be even going in tears. But we also go in joy.

Because we are going to the place where our Savior said He is preparing a place for us. We are going to the place we belong. There's a second thing I want us to see.

[13 : 25] Is that heaven matters because it's where Jesus is. Paul doesn't have some sort of vague idea about what makes heaven wonderful. It's not that heaven is just like earth except better.

That we get a pie in the sky and we get as much pie as we want until we die. It's not like that. He cares about heaven because of the person who lives there.

I want you to look with me at verse 14. Paul says to the Philippians that they need to think about the Christian life as a race heavenward. And they need to throw off every burden.

They need to forget everything that's behind them. And they need to press onwards in their race. But I want you to think what is the prize that is mentioned in verse 14.

The prize is actually Jesus. The commentators all say that that little phrase in Christ Jesus at the end of that verse. That's actually doing double duty. We run the race in Jesus Christ as He strengthens us.

[14 : 27] But we also run the race towards Jesus Christ. You can see that even more clearly in verse 8 where it says, Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.

For His sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish in order that I may gain Christ. Whenever Paul talks about heaven, Jesus is not far behind.

Because Jesus is not just the main event. He is the event. Of heaven. And the great privilege of heaven is being able to behold Jesus in all His glory.

In some measure here on earth, we get to see Jesus now. As it says in John 1.14, And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. And we have seen His glory.

The glory of the only Son from the Father full of grace and truth. And anyone, if you take hold of Christ by faith, Then you can say, I have seen Jesus and I have seen the Father.

[15 : 34] That's true. But there's also a tension in the Bible. We do see Jesus now. But we see Him by faith. And there will be a time when our faith becomes sight.

And that is actually what Jesus longs for. John 17 is the great high priestly prayer. It is one of the most profound passages in all of Scripture.

It's extraordinarily moving because Jesus is praying. And at the end of that prayer, Jesus says, I do not ask for these only, But also for those who will believe in me through their word.

In that verse, Jesus is saying, I'm not just praying for my apostles. I'm not praying for my disciples. I'm not just even praying for the early church. I am praying for every Christian everywhere in all of time and space.

I am praying for the clue here tonight. And what does he pray for in that prayer? The last thing that he says in that prayer is in verse 24. When he says this, Father, I desire that they also whom you have given me may be with me where I am.

[16 : 44] To see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world. The day is coming when our faith will be made sight.

And Christians from every tribe and tongue and nation, We're going to gather together and we are going to behold Jesus. And we will gaze upon him in all his glory.

Just like he was seen in the transfiguration. That is what we are going to be able to see. This is something that the church has called the beatific vision. And it's on that day that our Savior longs for.

When all of his people will be gathered together and we will be able to see him face to face. And is it any wonder that if our Savior longs for that day, we long for it too.

Because we long to be with our Savior who loved us before the foundation of the world. Who died for us in our stead upon the cross. Who adopted us as children. To be with the one who saved us from all of our sins.

[17 : 53] And to meditate forever on the one who was our greatest thought by day or by night. We focus our eyes upon heaven and we run towards it because it is, Because as it says in verse 20, We eagerly await for a Savior from there.

The Lord Jesus Christ. Like the psalmist says in the Psalms of Ascent. Which were sung as you went up those twisting, rounding paths up to Jerusalem.

I lift my eyes to the hills from where does my help come? And we know, like the psalmist, that our hope is in the king of that heavenly Jerusalem.

He's on that spiritual mountain, ruling and reigning and saving. And what Christians do, what we are commanded to do, is just keep walking.

And really, just keep looking. Looking at the mountain from which our help comes. We're looking with an eye to what Paul says in verse 21.

[19 : 00] Who by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, Will transform our lowly bodies. So that they will be like his glorious body.

We hope for that great transformation that will come one day when we will be made perfect before God. When we will be able to gaze upon Christ and be changed in an instant.

But he actually changes us even now. He changes us even now, progressively, slowly. He sanctifies us to be more like himself. Whenever we behold him by faith, we become more and more like Jesus.

And that looking is a cry of hope. Jesus is the only one who can change us. He is the only one who can make us new. And he will, as long as we look at him.

You know, some people, they go around this earth and they try to turn earth into heaven. Rather than waiting for Christ to bring heaven to earth. In the new heavens and the new earth.

[20 : 05] When heaven and earth are going to overlap. But there is nothing more impossible than trying to make an earthly utopia without Jesus. Like as we sang in that hymn by Samuel Rutherford.

He is all the glory of Emmanuel's land. There is nothing else other than Jesus. And that's why Paul, he says that he's weeping over those who are not putting their eyes upon Jesus.

Look with me at verses 18 and 19. For as I have told you before and tell you even now, even with tears. Many live as enemies of the cross of Christ.

Their destiny is destruction. Their God is their stomach. And their glory is in their shame. Their mind is set on earthly things.

If you don't have your eyes fixed upon Jesus, that's what Paul describes you as. And the startling thing here, Paul is not describing people who are outside of the church.

[21 : 10] Actually, based on context, he's talking about people who are inside the church. People who are not focused upon Christ, even though they say they follow Jesus. These people, they're really enemies of Christ, even though they call out his name.

Their real God is their belly. It's their desires. And what they seek is just their own glory and just their own love and care and affection. They just care about themselves.

Spiritually, they're doing the spiritual equivalent of navel-gazing. Focused entirely upon themselves, upon this earth, and not upon heaven. And Paul says, if you don't run your race headlong towards heaven and headlong towards Christ, then you're like them.

You're really an idolater. And you've exchanged that glory of Christ for a lie. And what that most immediately applies to is actually false teachers.

People who are trying to spread a false gospel inside the church. But the passage is also something of a warning. It's applicable to all of us, even today. Perhaps particularly today.

[22 : 21] Because there's never been a time in history where more things have tried to grab your attention than now. Everything is seeking your attention. And it is so easy to go through your life in a daze.

From one thing to another. Following the latest fad, the latest trend. From entertainment to entertainment. Not giving a second thought for anything else. And that can happen to the best of us.

It can happen inside the church. But what we're called to do is refocus our eyes. To move them towards Jesus Christ once again. And to guard our hearts.

We need to be careful that the things of this world do not become more dear to us than Jesus himself. And we need to be careful that we don't find ourselves longing for earthly things more than heavenly things.

Because it is spiritually true that our home is where our heart is. It's just that Christians have our hearts with Jesus. We need to have our hearts with Jesus.

[23 : 23] Because Jesus is the one that we want truly. Now there's one final thing I want us to see here in this passage. One final thing I want us to talk about.

Heaven is important because it is where we belong. It's also important because it's where Jesus is. But it's also where we worship. And the truth is I could actually fit this underneath the second point.

But I'm trying to be Trinitarian. All right. So we long for heaven because we long for worship. It's what we were made for.

I want you to think back to your Westminster Shorter Catechisms. Question one. What is the chief end of man? To glorify God and to enjoy him forever. Man's purpose.

The reason he is here on earth is to worship God and to enjoy worshipping him forever. That's what it means to be placed here on earth. That's our goal.

[24 : 18] It's what's behind everything that we do. We seek to worship God in everything. And to glorify him. And to enjoy glorifying him. And it is true that the Bible says that even today we are in some way lifted up to heaven when we worship.

In Hebrews 12 the author tells his readers you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God. The heavenly Jerusalem and to innumerable angels and festal gathering.

And to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven. But the key there is that we still aren't there yet fully. We are in some measure lifted up to heaven as we worship.

But we're still here on earth. What we're doing here tonight is really a dress rehearsal. A dress rehearsal for the big event that is to come.

And if you want to know what heaven is like. You should look at worship. You should look at worship services. That's what the Bible says gives you the tiny foretaste of heaven that is to come.

[25 : 26] When the countless saints from every tribe and tongue and nation. When they all stream in. When they're all worshipping father, son and holy ghost. United in their adoration of Jesus Christ for all eternity.

And fully devoted to it. And fully enjoying it. That is the moment that our worship longs for. And the problem is.

That our worship doesn't get to that level here on earth. We're still sinners. We still worship in some way. In a way that's tainted by sin.

we don't pay attention as much as we should. We have our attention wane. Our hearts are not as warmed as they should be when we hear about the things of God. And that's a normal thing.

We're this side of heaven. But we're called to focus ourselves more and more upon Jesus Christ, to seek to worship him, all the better to be there on the final day worshipping him, fully changed by him.

[26 : 25] In that moment, our worship will be perfect. And if you could compare that worship on the final day with our worship today, you would see two shades of white, one blazing white that your eyes can't look at, and another one that is white, but you can still see some shadow mixed in.

But what we long for is when we will be united, worshipping God for all eternity. What we do in heaven is not just sitting around on clouds with harps in permanent retirement, in boredom.

We engage in work. We engage in the work of worship. But our work of worship is going to be the deepest rest that we could ever imagine.

We will be refreshed, even as we are glorifying God and enjoying him forever. And what we are called to do as Christians is to try to get that little taste of heaven into our mouths now, to keep getting a stronger and stronger taste for it, striving to be more like Jesus, worshipping him all the better.

Even as we know we're not going to reach perfection, we're not going to be there, and we're not going to be able to reach that perfect perfection. We need Jesus, and we need to be changed by him. But we still need to try to get that taste of heaven into our mouths.

[27 : 51] We still need to get that subtle, homesick longing for heaven into our hearts. And if you do, you'll find your love for your Savior growing all the more.

And you're going to find it burning with a fire that will burn in good times and in bad times. And you'll find that it will help you dedicate your life to him and to his glory, both in this world and in the world to come.

And it will help you prepare to die well, resting upon promises that will be fulfilled on the final day. And if you're not a Christian, then what you need to know is that Jesus stands before you, clothed in his promises.

And if you trust in him alone for your salvation, to save you from your sins, then those promises will be yours. And that does mean that you have to give up this world.

It does mean you have to give up everything you own, but it means you get a hundredfold. It means that you get a Savior who embraces you and welcomes you home to be with him forevermore.

[29 : 04] Now, pilgrims, what we're called to do is journey. But don't journey without thinking about what awaits you in the life to come.

We are called to live in a happy expectation about what comes after. As the hymnist says, haste thee on from grace to glory, armed by faith and winged by prayer.

Heaven's eternal days before thee, God's own hand shall guide us there. Soon shall close thy earthly mission. Soon shall pass thy pilgrim days.

Hope shall change to glad fruition, faith to sight, and prayer to praise. Let us pray. Lord, we are thankful for what you have promised us in Jesus Christ.

And we ask that we would be able to run in Jesus Christ towards Jesus Christ. Lord, we long to rest our eyes upon him, to meditate upon him, and to be with God's people forevermore, transformed into new creations on that final day.

[30 : 22] Be with us now. Work inside us. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Now, if you would, let us conclude our worship, and let us stand and sing our final song, Psalm 84.

We'll be singing Psalm 84. Psalm 84.

Heart and flesh cry out aloud, For the true and least.