

SERMON DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

January 16, 2022

Joy to the World
Philippians 1:20-30
Living in the Light of Eternity
Rev. Mike Fordham

Have you ever heard the hit country song by Joe Diffie entitled, “*Prop Me Up Beside the Jukebox*”? If not, here is a taste of it with the first verse and chorus that says: “Well I ain’t afraid of dying, it’s the thought of being dead / I wanna go on being me once my eulogy’s been read / Don’t spread my ashes out to sea, don’t lay me down to rest / You can put my mind at ease if you fill my last request / Prop me up beside the jukebox if I die / Lord I wanna go to Heaven, but I don’t wanna go tonight / Fill my boots up with sand, put a stiff drink in my hand / Prop me up beside the jukebox if I die.” Obviously, it’s just a song with some very creative poetical lyrics but what the song says is exactly opposite of what the Bible says in Philippians. For us Christians, we understand that life does not end at death’s door but continues on in a manner that far exceeds anything this life has to offer. Until the day we step through death’s door, we are to live our life to the fullest for Jesus Christ, as His representative in this world. Let’s hear it straight from the Apostle Paul here in Philippians.

Philippians 1:20-30

²⁰ For I fully expect and hope that I will never be ashamed, but that I will continue to be bold for Christ, as I have been in the past. And I trust that my life will bring honor to Christ, whether I live or die. ²¹ For to me, living means living for Christ, and dying is even better. ²² But if I live, I can do more fruitful work for Christ. So I really don’t know which is better. ²³ I’m torn between two desires: I long to go and be with Christ, which would be far better for me. ²⁴ But for your sakes, it is better that I continue to live.

²⁵ Knowing this, I am convinced that I will remain alive so I can continue to help all of you grow and experience the joy of your faith. ²⁶ And when I come to you again, you will have even more reason to take pride in Christ Jesus because of what he is doing through me.

²⁷ Above all, you must live as citizens of heaven, conducting yourselves in a manner worthy of the Good News about Christ. Then, whether I come and see you again or only hear about you, I will know that you are standing together with one spirit and one purpose, fighting together for the faith, which is the Good News. ²⁸ Don’t be intimidated in any way by your enemies. This will be a sign to them that they are going to be destroyed, but that you are going to be saved, even by God himself. ²⁹ For you have been given not only the privilege of trusting in Christ but also the privilege of suffering for him. ³⁰ We are in this struggle together.

You have seen my struggle in the past, and you know that I am still in the midst of it.

HEAVENLY CITIZENSHIP

Everyone who knew Paul, knew that Paul was not only a Jew but also a Roman citizen. Roman citizenship had many advantages in the 1st century. Paul would even use his Roman citizenship to help him in his ministry on several occasions. In the first century, Rome was undoubtedly, the greatest, most powerful, and most prosperous nation of all and was growing rapidly as it was taking the world. To be a member of that great, mighty nation was very prestigious. As important and influential as it was for Paul to be a Roman citizen, Paul made it clear that he was a Christian, more than anything, though, a citizen of heaven. Paul was proud more than anything else to be a citizen of the Kingdom of Heaven. Anyone and everyone, no matter their nationality, place of birth, language they speak, skin color, educational or financial status, can be a member of the Kingdom of God. *Ephesians 2:19* says, *"¹⁹ So now you Gentiles are no longer strangers and foreigners. You are citizens along with all of God's holy people. You are members of God's family.*" The requirement to be a member of God's eternal kingdom is to be born again into this Kingdom. This is a spiritual kingdom that entry into is made possible if we will follow Jesus as our Lord and Savior. Jesus is the ruler, the king over this mighty, eternal, everlasting kingdom and all those who will say yes to His love, pledge their allegiance to Him are welcomed into this unseen Kingdom. Today, the Kingdom of God is found in the hearts of women and men of God who have the reign of Jesus Christ in our lives.

Just as the Apostle Paul may have been proud to be a Roman citizen, so I am proud to be an American citizen and enjoy all its countless benefits. Yet, I realize that this American citizenship will not last forever and doesn't hold a candle to being a citizen of the Kingdom of Heaven. My number one allegiance is given to the Kingdom of Heaven over and above being an American citizen. This understanding of being a citizen of heaven makes all the difference in my entire life and is one of the greatest blessings God has given me as a child of God.

In his 2010 memoir, *A Journey: My Political Life*, former British Prime Minister Tony Blair shares the following story: "A friend of mine whose parents were immigrants, Jews from Europe who came to America in search of safety, told me this story. His parents lived and worked in New York. They were not well off. His father died when he was young. His mother lived on, and in time my friend succeeded and became wealthy. He often used to offer his mother the chance to travel outside America. She never did. When eventually she died, they went back to recover the safety box where she kept her jewelry. They found there another box. There was no key. So they had to drill it open. They wondered what precious jewel must be in it. They lifted the lid. There was wrapping and more wrapping and finally an envelope. Intrigued, they opened it. In the envelope were her U.S. citizenship papers. Nothing more. That was the jewel, more precious to her than any other possession. That was what she treasured most." As much as we may cherish our American citizenship, as Christians we cherish far more

our citizenship in the Kingdom of Heaven. We now realize that this world will not last forever and as such is only our home away from our true home. For Paul this identity as a citizen of heaven impacted his life and ministry in 2 important ways.

DEATH WAS A WIN

The first is that as a citizen of heaven, he was excited and just couldn't wait for the day when he will finally enter into heaven. For Paul then, ***DEATH WAS A WIN***. We are now citizens of heaven, but we have not fully entered into, and experienced our full membership into the Kingdom of Heaven. The only way to do so is either Jesus comes back and brings in this kingdom before we die, or we die and enter fully enter into God's heavenly Kingdom. As we shared last week the Apostle Paul is writing this letter to the church in Philippi while in chains as a prisoner in some unknown prison cell. Paul was in the midst of really tough times, and he knew that one possible end to his imprisonment was the possibility of death, whether from the conditions in the prisons or death at the hands of government officials. Paul wanted the Philippian Christians to know, though, that as a citizen of heaven he wasn't afraid to die and actually looked forward to the time when he would step through death's door. Paul even writes this letter sounding excited for the day that he will one day enter into heaven. How is this possible to feel this way?

Paul David Tripp states that the Bible says the temporary state of life on earth we all have now is like living in tents. Tripp writes: "Most of us have no pilgrim experience, so perhaps the closest thing in our experience to the journey of a pilgrim is rustic camping. I am persuaded that the whole purpose of camping is to make a person long for home! On that first day in the woods, putting up the tent is exciting, but 3 days later, your tent has unpleasant odors you can't explain. You love the taste of food cooked over an open flame (that's ash!), but three days later you are tired of foraging for wood and irritated by how fast it burns. You were excited at the prospect of catching your dinner from the stream running past your campsite, which is reported to be teeming with trout, but all you have snagged are the roots on the bottom. You're now four days in and your back hurts, there seems to be no more felled wood to forage, and you're tired of keeping the fire going anyway. You look into what was once an ice-and-food-filled cooler to see the family-sized steaks you have reserved floating gray and oozing in a pool of blood-stained water. Suddenly you begin to think fondly of home You stand there hoping that someone will break the silence and say, 'Why don't we go home?' Your 4 days in the wilderness have accomplished their mission. They have prepared you to appreciate home! Tripp adds: 'Our world isn't a very good amusement park. No, it's a broken place groaning for redemption. Here is meant to make us long for forever. Here is meant to prepare us for eternity.'" Paul's imprisonment, persecution he suffered, the many challenges of leading the churches, his health, and all the other trials of life, compared to what he knew about living in heaven, experiencing all the many benefits of one day living fully as a citizen in heaven, made him long for the day he will step through death's door and be delivered from all the challenges of life and enter into God's perfect heavenly kingdom.

Another great Christian leader, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, wrote these words from prison about death shortly before he was executed. Bonhoeffer wrote, "Death is the supreme festival on the road to freedom." As Christians, we have a hope of the life to come, eternity, heaven, and we long for the day when our broken, hurting, dying bodies will be healed and transformed into heavenly bodies that will live forever and we will enter into our heavenly citizenship and enjoy all the eternal benefits God promises us. When that day comes there will be no more prisons, no more persecution, no more pain, no more sorrow, no more fear, no more violence, no more hatred, no more pandemics, no more cancer, no more death. We will be set free from it all forever. Why do we cling so tightly to this broken, hurting, temporary world when what we have coming to us is far beyond our comprehension. I love the way the Apostle Paul puts it in *Romans 8:18-23*, ¹⁸ *Yet what we suffer now is nothing compared to the glory he will reveal to us later.* ¹⁹ *For all creation is waiting eagerly for that future day when God will reveal who his children really are.* ²⁰ *Against its will, all creation was subjected to God's curse. But with eager hope,* ²¹ *the creation looks forward to the day when it will join God's children in glorious freedom from death and decay.* ²² *For we know that all creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.* ²³ *And we believers also groan, even though we have the Holy Spirit within us as a foretaste of future glory, for we long for our bodies to be released from sin and suffering. We, too, wait with eager hope for the day when God will give us our full rights as his adopted children, including the new bodies he has promised us."* This though, is not meant to downplay, the importance of the life we are now living.

LIFE IS A WIN

While the Apostle Paul was longing for heaven, he also realized that God had a calling for his life in this world and therefore for Paul and for us we also realize ***LIFE IS A WIN***. Paul believed he would get out of prison because God was not finished with him yet. He understood that God still had work for him to do for the churches and therefore, he would live whatever days he had left all for Jesus. Paul was living his life as if how he lived his life today was getting ready for eternity. Paul was living his life as God's representative in the world. Paul was bringing God's heavenly kingdom to this world through how he lived his life. Every day that God gives us life is a gift from God until we are with Him fully in eternity. We then give back each day to God by living for Him with our every breath. We know that this is not our home, that this is just a temporary stay in this world, therefore, we are going to give our best to the little bit of time we have as God's representatives in this world.

When Secretary of State during the Reagan administration, George Shultz kept a large globe in his office. When newly appointed ambassadors had an interview with him and when ambassadors returning from their posts for their first visit with him were leaving his office, Shultz would test them. He would say, "You have to go over the globe and prove to me that you can identify your country." They would go over, spin the globe, and put their finger on the country to which sent--unerringly. When Shultz's old friend and former Senate majority leader Mike Mansfield was appointed ambassador to Japan, even he was put to the test. This time, however, Ambassador Mansfield spun the globe

and put his hand on the United States. He said: "That's my country." On June 27, 1993, Shultz related this to Brian Lamb on C-Span's "Booknotes." Said the secretary: "I've told that story, subsequently, to all the ambassadors going out. 'Never forget you're over there in that country, but your country is the United States. You're there to represent us. Take care of our interests and never forget it, and you're representing the best country in the world.'" So also, we are never to forget that while we live in this world our true country is the Kingdom of Heaven, and we are in this world to represent God's Kingdom, the best kingdom that has, does, and ever will exist.

Our goal in this short, temporary life here in our home away from home is exactly what 2 *Corinthians* 5:8-9 says, *"⁸ Yes, we are fully confident, and we would rather be away from these earthly bodies, for then we will be at home with the Lord. ⁹ So whether we are here in this body or away from this body, our goal is to please him."* Our goal in our lives in this world and in the one to come to do please God. We then live on earth as citizens of heaven where the norm in God's kingdom is treating others as you would have them treat you, where we are people of the Fruit of the Spirit who are all about love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. As heavenly citizens in this world, we love God with all our heart, soul, mind, strength, and we love our neighbors as we love ourselves. As heavenly citizens in this world, we daily die to selfishness and continually live lives of sacrifice through serving each other. That is just a taste of what it looks like to live our lives for Christ until the day we will all enter fully into the perfectly heavenly kingdom God has for us. What a wonderful calling we all have from God to live this life to its fullest extent for Jesus.

Are you ready to live every moment of your life as citizens of heaven in this world for Jesus Christ and then be used by God to bring a taste of God's heavenly kingdom into this world? That is the expectation that God has for all of us who are Christians, followers of Jesus, citizens of God's heavenly kingdom.

1 Thessalonians 3:12-13, "¹² And may the Lord make your love for one another and for all people grow and overflow. . . . ¹³ May he, as a result, make your hearts strong, blameless, and holy as you stand before God our Father when our Lord Jesus comes again with all his holy people. Amen."

Icebreaker I – If you were to choose a "theme song" for your life or your death, what song would you select and why?

Icebreaker II – What is your country of origin? Your parents? Your grandparents? Where can you trace your family's first arrival to the United States?

1. Which option (life or death) does Paul personally desire (vv. 22 – 23)?
2. Why does Paul feel it is more necessary for him to do the opposite (vv. 24 – 25)?

3. What is something you would like to accomplish before you die?
4. What difference has your personal faith in Jesus Christ made in your attitude toward death and dying?
5. Are you ready to live every moment of your life as citizens of heaven in this world for Jesus Christ and then be used by God to bring a taste of God's heavenly kingdom into this world?
6. If yes, what does that look like? What are some practical steps you can do to live your life as a citizen of heaven and allow God to use you to help bring about His kingdom here on earth?
7. How are you serving others?
8. How can this group pray for you this week?