



CITIZENS OF HEAVEN

Kingdom Values in a World of Empire

Philippians 3: 17-21



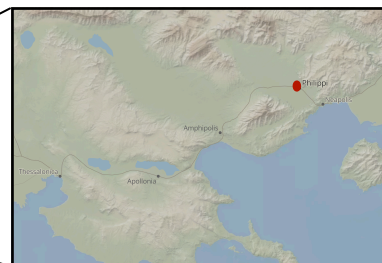
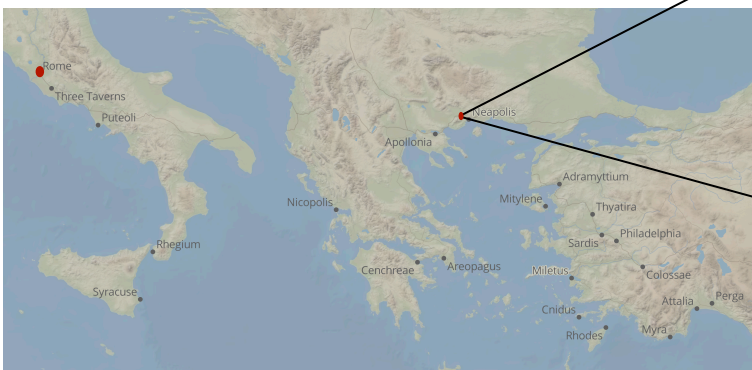
Citizens of Heaven

Text: Philippians 3:17–21

Steve Ellis | November 2, 2025

The believers in Philippi lived in a city proud of its Roman identity. Philippi was a Roman colony, a “miniature Rome,” planted as a military settlement under Emperor Augustus. Roman veterans were given land there, and the city was governed under Roman law by officials directly appointed from Rome.¹ Roman citizenship was a mark of honor and status; to be Roman was to belong to the world’s most powerful empire.

Paul, however, writes to this proud Roman colony with a radically different message: *our true citizenship is in heaven* (Philippians 3:20). For the followers of Jesus, their identity is not rooted in Rome, nor in earthly status, but in the kingdom of the risen Christ.



Atlas, Biblical World of the Early Church
Logos Bible Software
* modified by Steve Ellis



The Context

Before we read the passage, it's important to remember what Paul has been developing throughout Philippians.

In **chapter 1**, Paul calls the believers to live **“in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ”** (1:27). He urges unity, courage, and steadfast faith in the face of suffering.

In **chapter 2**, he points to Christ's humility as the model for life in God's kingdom, Christ, who **“emptied Himself,”** taking on the form of a servant, and was exalted by God (2:5–11).

By **chapter 3**, Paul contrasts confidence in the flesh, human achievement, status, or heritage, with knowing Christ and sharing in His resurrection life (3:4–11).

Now, in **3:17–21**, Paul brings these themes together: **Christian maturity is shaped not by earthly privilege but by heavenly citizenship.**

The Passage

Philippians 3:17–21 (NASB95)

“Brethren, join in following my example, and observe those who walk according to the pattern you have in us. For many walk, of whom I often told you, and now tell you even weeping, that they are enemies of the cross of Christ, whose end is destruction, whose god is their appetite, and whose glory is in their shame, who set their minds on earthly things. For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ; who will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory, by the exertion of the power that He has even to subject all things to Himself.”

Walking Through the Text

After reading the passage as a whole, we can trace Paul's thought more naturally. Paul begins by inviting the Philippians to imitate him and others who live as faithful examples (v.17). The contrast quickly follows, **“many walk as enemies of the cross”** (v.18). Paul's tone here is deeply pastoral; he writes *with tears*, not condemnation. These “enemies” are those who live with minds fixed on **“earthly things”** (v.19), people whose lives revolve around personal gain, pleasure, or status.

Then comes the contrast: **“For our citizenship is in heaven”** (v.20). The Greek word

πολίτευμα -ατος, τό; (*politeuma*), n. *commonwealth*.

Noun Usage

1. **state**[†] — a politically organized body of people under a single government; especially as the place where one's citizenship and loyalties lie.

Rick Brannan, ed., [Lexham Research Lexicon of the Greek New Testament](#), Lexham Research Lexicons (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2020).



πολίτευμα (politeuma)² evokes civic identity, one's community, allegiance, and way of life.

For the Philippians, proud of their Roman colony, this would have been a striking redefinition of belonging. **The colony of Philippi may mirror Rome, but the church is a colony (an outpost) of heaven on earth.** Believers are to reflect the values, honor, and character of God's kingdom here and now.

Paul adds that from heaven **“we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.”** This, too, carried weight in a Roman world where Caesar was hailed as *savior* and *lord*. Paul redirects that language: Jesus, not Caesar, is the true Lord who brings redemption, justice, and transformation.

Finally, Paul points forward to the resurrection hope. Christ will **“transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory”** (v.21). The power that now rules all creation is the same power that will one day make us fully new.

a savior, the Lord Jesus Christ In the Roman Empire, the emperor was known as the savior and lord. By applying these titles to Jesus, Paul is calling the Philippians to live under the authority and reign of the universe's true Savior and Lord, Jesus Christ. It was likely this kind of message that landed Paul and Silas in jail in Philippi (Acts 16:21).

John D. Barry et al., *Faithlife Study Bible* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012, 2016), Php 3:20.

This heavenly citizenship doesn't detach us from the world; it redefines how we live within it. As citizens of heaven, we live out the values of Christ's kingdom, *humility, service, love, and hope*, amid a culture that glorifies power and pride.

Crossing The Context

For the Philippians, this meant living faithfully under the shadow of Rome. For us, it means remembering that our primary identity is not in our nationality, achievements, or politics, but in Christ. Our loyalty, conduct, and values flow from the kingdom to which we belong.

To live as citizens of heaven means:

**We imitate Christ's humility rather than Rome's pride
We hope in resurrection rather than human progress
We serve our true Lord, Jesus, not the empires of this world**

Paul's closing in Philippians 3:17–21 reminds us that heaven is not a distant realm but the source of our identity and allegiance today. We live as colonies of the coming kingdom, anticipating the return of our Savior who will make all things new.

Reflection

Identity and Allegiance:

Paul reminds the Philippians that their **“citizenship is in heaven.”** How does this truth reshape your understanding of identity and belonging in today's world, where national, political, or cultural identities often take center stage?

Imitating Kingdom Examples:

Paul calls believers to **“follow my example.”** Who in your life reflects the humility and hope of a citizen of heaven? What specific attitudes or habits could you begin practicing to model this same heavenly perspective?



Hope and Transformation:

Paul says that Jesus “**will transform our lowly bodies to be like His glorious body.**” How does this future hope affect the way you face suffering, aging, or loss in the present? What would it look like to live each day with your eyes set on that coming transformation?

Endnotes

1. M. G. Easton, *Illustrated Bible Dictionary and Treasury of Biblical History, Biography, Geography, Doctrine, and Literature* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1893), 546.
2. Rick Brannan, ed., *Lexham Research Lexicon of the Greek New Testament*, Lexham Research Lexicons (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2020).
3. Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are from the *New American Standard Bible: 1995 Update (NASB95)*, The Lockman Foundation, 1995.