CITIZENS OF HEAVEN

RESIDENTS OF EARTH

Lindsey Garmon
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Introduction

Christians! Understand and Claim Your Identity!

As followers of Jesus, do we really know and understand who and whose we are?

Five significant words in our English Bibles capture the heart and core of every Christian’s primary identity. Paul wrote these gripping words to believers who lived in the city of Philippi in the first century. Even though they were caught up in the daily activities of life and the typical responsibilities related to citizenship on this earth, Paul made this amazing assertion in Philippians 3:20:

Our citizenship is in heaven.

Your Primary Citizenship—Where Is It?

How do you answer that question?

In view of Paul’s words in Philippians 3:20, where is your primary citizenship—is it on earth or in heaven?

When you hear the word “citizenship,” what immediately comes to your mind? Does this word prompt you to think about connections that you have on this earth, or does the word trigger thoughts of your spiritual link to a heavenly homeland? The goal of this book is to so thoroughly explore the benefits and responsibilities of heavenly citizenship that the very mention of citizenship will immediately rivet your mind first and foremost on your ties to heaven, rather than your connections to earth.

From time to time, we are required to complete official documents that ask for our “country of citizenship.” When filling out such papers, has it ever been your first inclination to write in the word “heaven”? As you are in the process of supplying answers to these questions, have you ever had to suddenly remind yourself that these documents are asking for information pertaining to your earthly status rather than your heavenly ties? Can you imagine being so focused on the significance of your heavenly citizenship that
your earthly connections pale in comparison? When the issue of citizenship arises, what immediately comes to your mind?

The more we study the implications of heavenly citizenship and learn to see the realities of our lives through eyes of faith, the more the unseen world will begin to appear in greater clarity. And, as our spiritual vision improves, the significance of our heavenly citizenship will gradually rise to a level that overshadows our earthly ties and connections—as important as they are.

The Bible Declares Our Heavenly Citizenship

The testimony of the Bible clearly indicates that, even though we are living as temporary residents of earth, our primary citizenship is in heaven. In numerous places, the message comes through loud and clear.

Look again at Paul’s words in Philippians 3:20. His point is amplified when you compare the wording of this verse in different translations of the Bible. Note the interesting variations.

But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ (NIV).

But we are citizens of heaven, where the Lord Jesus Christ lives. And we are eagerly waiting for him to return as our Savior (NLT).

But our homeland is in heaven, and we are waiting for our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, to come from heaven (NCV).

But we are a colony of heaven, and we wait for the Savior, who comes from heaven, the Lord Jesus Christ (Moffatt “1913”).

This idea that Christians are “citizens of heaven” aligns with the prayer that Jesus offered for His disciples just prior to His ascension. Speaking to His Father, Jesus said

I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world. My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth (John 17:14-17).

Other biblical references reinforce the idea that as citizens of heaven, Christians live on earth as strangers, pilgrims, and sojourners—outsiders.

Jesus said, “My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my Kingdom is from another place” (John 18:36).
All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them (Hebrews 11:13-16).

Since you call on a Father who judges each man’s work impartially, live your lives as strangers here in reverent fear (1 Peter 1:17).

Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us (1 Peter 2:11, 12).

Our Songs Declare That We Are Strangers on Earth
What about the wording in some of the great Christian hymns we love to sing? What do these songs say about our heavenly citizenship and the demanding journey that we are presently making through this foreign territory that we call earth?

Frequently, as we sing songs about heaven, powerful messages come through the lyrics. Are we paying attention? The messages are quite revealing—maybe even shocking to some. For example, we sing with great joy, “This world is not my home; I’m just a passing thru...And I can’t feel at home in this world any more!” Do those words resonate with you? With deep feeling and confident expectation, we declare in song that, in this world, we are straying pilgrims in route to a forever home, which is just beyond the rolling river of death. There really are powerful messages in our great songs of faith. As a Christian pilgrim, sing! Sing out with great confidence and faith as you make your way toward home. Try it and you will discover that the messages of our songs will give you added strength and endurance for the long haul.

Do We Understand and Own Our Heavenly Citizenship?
We’ve read these Bible verses and others like them numerous times. We have sung these songs and others like them again and again. Yet, many of us have never really understood or owned our spiritual identity as resident-aliens in this world. We’ve driven our stakes too deeply in earthly soil. We have traveled too heavily—loaded down with the stuff of this foreign country. We have become comfortable and cozy. As someone put it, “We are prepared to
go to heaven—just not ready.” We’ve adjusted to the good life in this world. Like foreigners who come to America and don’t want to go home, we have lost our deep love and longing for the homeland of heaven. Could it be that we need to get refocused on our primary citizenship?

**How Are We to Live As Citizens of Heaven While Sojourning As Residents of Earth?**

Living in this world as foreigners, strangers, and pilgrims is a common theme in both the Old and New Testaments. Thus, the Bible becomes our “Immigration Manual,” informing us about the few years we spend as foreigners in this present world. We look to the Scriptures as our dependable and practical guide for understanding how our heavenly citizenship should affect our daily behavior during this earthly residency.

Too many of us are living without a keen awareness of and appreciation for our heavenly citizenship—and all that it means. The appetites and attractions of this present world have a powerful way of blurring our vision of spiritual reality. Could we be living in a state of spiritual amnesia? Do we really understand and value our status as citizens of heaven? Do we grasp and accept the responsibility that this brings?

How we need to rediscover the exciting and life-changing fact of our heavenly citizenship! Though we live on this earth, we are members of the colony of heaven. We must learn how to effectively live “in the world,” while not being “of the world,” yet faithfully carrying out our God-given mission “to the world.”
The Meaning and Means of Heavenly Citizenship

Christians Hold Primary and Secondary Citizenships

As believers in Christ, we live simultaneously in two spheres. First and foremost, we live as citizens of heaven and consider this high calling as our primary and permanent citizenship. Our deepest loyalty will always be to the land of our “new birth”—heaven.

Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves (Romans 13:1, 2).

For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say “No” to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope—the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ (Titus 2:11-13).

Peter and the other apostles replied: “We must obey God rather than men!” (Acts 5:29).

Our situation is similar to that of Paul, the apostle. In a first-century setting, he boldly exercised his Roman citizenship and frequently took advantage of his rights as an earthly citizen (Acts 16:37-40; 22:22-29). Yet first and foremost, Paul understood that, as a follower of Jesus Christ, he was “a citizen of heaven.”

Understanding the Historical Context of Philippians 3:20

Because this five-word assertion—“our citizenship is in heaven”—provides the primary biblical text for the material in this book, it is imperative that we understand its historical background. This text has a colorful and interesting context. We will better understand the text if we understand the historical context in which it was written.
Paul wrote Philippians in the first century while he was a prisoner in Rome. He sent the letter to Christians who lived at Philippi, a city in the province of Macedonia. When Paul referred to Christians as “citizens of heaven,” the believers in this city knew precisely what that meant. Why? Because Philippi was a Roman colony (Acts 16:12). The Roman Empire established colony cities in key locations across the land. These unique communities were devoted to Rome—promoting, preserving, and protecting her interests in every way as the capital city of the empire.

A Roman colony city was an outpost of Rome. No matter how far from the capital city a colony city was located, the prevailing culture was Roman through and through. The laws, the language, the customs, the views, the values, the dress, the food, the smells, and the entertainment—everything was distinctly Roman. As a resident of or a visitor to a Roman colony city, a person would feel as though he were living in Rome itself. Philippi was such a city.

When Paul wrote the words “our citizenship is in heaven” (Philippians 3:20) to Christians in Philippi, they saw the deep implications of his analogy. Those words penetrated. Loudly and clearly, they understood the message that, even though they were citizens of earth, their primary citizenship was in heaven. While they would have appreciated their temporary citizenship “here,” they understood that their permanent and primary citizenship was “there”—in heaven. Even though their mailing address was in Philippi, they knew that their home city was heaven. This meant that no matter what the circumstances, conditions, or challenges of their daily lives on this earth, their character and conduct was to clearly reflect their heavenly citizenship.

**The Church As a Colony of Heaven**

We gain further insight into the concept of heavenly citizenship by noting the wording of James Moffatt in his paraphrase of Philippians 3:20. In a legitimate and thought-provoking way, he renders the verse with these words—“We are a colony of heaven.” What are the implications of the idea that the church is to exist on earth as “a colony of heaven”? Perhaps a definition and description of “a colony” would be helpful.

Clearly, a colony is an extension or outpost of one culture in the midst of another. For Christians, heaven is our homeland—our dominant culture. Temporarily, we are residents of the distant, and sometimes hostile, setting of this earth. Yet, as “citizens of heaven” and members of “a heavenly colony,” we continually seek to faithfully present and preserve the holy culture of heaven in the midst of the unholy culture of earth.
Heavenly Citizenship Requires a Birth from Above

People who are born in the United States or parented by a citizen of this country are automatically given legal status as American citizens. The process by which we become citizens of heaven has no such provisions. Bloodlines and geographical boundaries do not guarantee inclusion into the citizenry of heaven. Rather, the privilege of heavenly citizenship requires specific faith-action on the part of any and every person who seeks this high honor. There must be a direct appeal to heaven, based on the teaching of God’s Word, if one is to experience and enjoy heavenly citizenship.

“Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!” (Romans 10:13-15).

Entrance in the kingdom of God—heavenly citizenship—requires no less than a “new or second birth.” Amazing! A person’s first birth opens the way for citizenship in the universal kingdom of man, whose representative head is Adam. But, only through the new or second birth does a person enter the kingdom of God, whose head is Jesus Christ. At the time of this new birth, a marvelous transition occurs—citizenship in the old order of Adam is reduced to a secondary level, and heavenly citizenship becomes primary and pre-eminent. We actually experience immigration from the kingdom of this world to the kingdom of heaven. In fact, the transition of citizenship from earth to heaven is made official and validated when a person’s name is written in the Lamb’s book of life in heaven.

For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins (Colossians 1:13, 14).
But you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven (Hebrews 12:22, 23).

At the time of one’s new birth, a marvelous transition occurs. The person who previously was an alien and a stranger to the kingdom of God is graciously endowed with all the benefits of heavenly citizenship. He or she becomes a fellow citizen of heaven with all other obedient believers. Speaking to Christians in the first-century Ephesian church, Paul wrote

Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God’s people and members of God’s household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone (Ephesians 2:19, 20).

What Did Jesus Teach about the Birth from Above—the New Birth?

In John 3:1-21, we learn the details surrounding an interesting encounter that Jesus had with a highly religious man who was a Pharisee and member of the Sanhedrin—the highest ranking court within the Jewish community. His name was Nicodemus. This influential man had, for some reason, taken notice of Jesus. Perhaps he had heard people telling about Jesus’ miracle-working powers. He may have actually seen Jesus perform a miracle. Maybe he had heard the powerful teaching of the Master. It could be that the world of Nicodemus had been rocked by the boldness of Jesus when He entered the temple courts and “cleaned His Father’s house” (John 2:12-25). Whatever the motivation, it is clear that Nicodemus was a God-seeker and desired a face-to-face encounter with the man from Nazareth—Jesus.

In a humble and complimentary way, Nicodemus approached Jesus.

He came to Jesus at night and said, “Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him” (John 3:2).

Immediately, Jesus saw through Nicodemus (John 2:24, 25) and may have shocked him with such strong and direct teaching about new birth and his need for membership in the kingdom of God. During this period, many of the Jews were under the impression that their first birth—physical birth—entitled them to special favor and fellowship with God because of their biological link to Abraham (Matthew 3:9; Luke 3:7-9; John 1:10-13). Clearly, Jesus was
trying to challenge and change such ideas as He spoke these thought-provoking words to Nicodemus.

Jesus declared, “I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again” (John 3:3).

The Greek word translated “born again” in our English Bibles literally means “born from above.” Jesus was telling Nicodemus that heavenly citizenship can only be enjoyed when a person is ready and willing to receive new life from heaven. The strong words of Jesus confused Nicodemus.

“How can a man be born when he is old?” Nicodemus asked. “Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother’s womb to be born!” (John 3:4).

In an effort to clarify and amplify the precise meaning of new birth, Jesus got more specific.

Jesus answered, “I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit” (John 3:5).

Being “born of water and the Spirit” constitutes the means to new birth. Jesus was speaking of one birth, but He specified that there were to be two elements—water and the Spirit. To what was Jesus referring? How could a grown man like Nicodemus be born of water and the Spirit?

The words “born of water and the Spirit” refer to what would occur simultaneously in the life of Nicodemus should he, like many others, submit to the baptism being taught and practiced by John the Baptist (Matthew 3:1-17; Mark 1:1-13; Luke 3:1-22; John 1:19-28). Because he was a religious leader among the Jews, Nicodemus would have been keenly aware of the widespread teaching and evangelizing that John the Baptist was doing throughout the region of Judea. John was preaching, “a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins,” and crowds were coming to him to be immersed (Luke 3:3-7). Thus, Jesus was telling this man that if he, in obedient faith, would agree to have his body buried in the waters of baptism, at the same time God would immerse his inner person in the Holy Spirit. For Nicodemus, this would mean new birth.

An understanding of the historical context of that day helps us to understand this interesting conversation. Based on the Gospel accounts, it is clear that John’s preaching and baptizing were the talk of the entire Jewish community at this time. His message was the hot theological topic, which explains why Jesus said what He did to this religious leader. Large numbers of Jews were flocking to John the Baptist to be baptized in the Jordan River as they anticipated the coming of the kingdom of God (Matthew 3:1-12; Mark 1:4-8).
In fact, because John was such a fascinating character and was creating such a stir in the region, the Pharisees sent a delegation to him to check out his identity and ask for his credentials to be engaging in such a widespread ministry that affected so many people (John 1:24, 25).

It is against this contextual backdrop that you should read the passage in John 3. Jesus must have known that Nicodemus was struggling with the meaning of John's message and his own personal need to prepare for the coming kingdom by being baptized in water. Jesus knew that for too long this important religious leader had, mistakenly, trusted his biological tie to Abraham. He was keenly aware that Nicodemus needed to experience a new birth. In spite of all his good qualities and strong religious leanings, Nicodemus had not yet entered the kingdom of God—a very serious problem. Thus, in a loving yet firm manner, Jesus spoke boldly to this truth-seeking man and gave him the clear command: “You must be born from above—you must be born of water and the Spirit in order to enter the kingdom of God!”

And what would be the evidence of this birth from above? How would a submissive person know that a new birth had taken place? Jesus explained to Nicodemus that the redeeming and saving work of the Holy Spirit in the new birth is similar to what happens when the wind blows objects in its path. We don’t see the wind, but we do see its effects. So it is with the spiritual birth process. We don’t actually see the Holy Spirit as He moves within the human heart, but we do see the life-changing results of His powerful work. Jesus explained

> Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, “You must be born again.” The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit (John 3:6-8).

**What About Us? Must We Be Born Again to Be Citizens of Heaven?**

What Jesus told Nicodemus to do to be born from above is what we, too, must do in order to enjoy membership in the kingdom of God. Yes, we must be born again—born of water and the Spirit. This is confirmed in other biblical passages where sinners are told what they must do to be saved. For example, note the message of the Spirit-led apostles in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost. When sinners asked what they must do to be saved, Peter responded with the following words, which are strikingly similar to what Jesus said to Nicodemus in John 3:

> Peter replied, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift
of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call.” With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, “Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.” Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day (Acts 2:38-41).

Be Certain That Your Heavenly Passport Is Sealed

It is faith and trust in Jesus that leads one to genuinely repent and be immersed in water in order to receive forgiveness and the presence of the indwelling Holy Spirit. These acts of obedient faith are not—they are not—works of human merit but beautiful expressions of reliance upon the crucified and resurrected Christ.

When a sinner walks into the watery grave of baptism, he or she is saying to God and anyone else who may witness the event, “I am a sinner. I cannot save myself. I am dead in sin. I am ready to bury the old person and experience the resurrection life of Jesus. I believe in the saving work of Jesus at Calvary, and I am putting my faith in the power of His cleansing blood. I am calling upon the name of Jesus for salvation.” Motivated by a spirit of faith and dependency, the sinner is buried by baptism into the benefits of Jesus’ atoning death (Acts 8:35-39; 22:16; Romans 6:3-11; Galatians 3:26, 27; Colossians 2:11, 12). The blood of Jesus washes our sins away and the Holy Spirit comes to live within us (Acts 2:38, 39; 5:32; Galatians 4:6). In this beautiful faith response, one is being born of water and the Spirit—born again—born from above.

Even in the case of Jesus Himself, there was a direct connection in time between His baptism and the coming of the Holy Spirit (Matthew 3:13-17; Mark 1:9, 11; Luke 3:21, 22). Other passages that help us to understand the significance of being born of water and the Spirit include Titus 3:5-7; Matthew 28:18-20; and Mark 16:15, 16.

Be a citizen of heaven. Make sure that your heavenly passport is clearly sealed with the cleansing blood of the Lamb of God. This is very important as you make your appeal for heavenly citizenship and enjoy the blessings and benefits thereof.

Heavenly Citizenship—a Present Reality

Do we see that when Paul wrote those words, “Our citizenship is in heaven,” he was not speaking about a future promise, but a present reality? The content of this study is not as much about going to heaven some day as it is about living as citizens of heaven today. Because we hold the high and holy citizenship of heaven, we are called by God to live high and holy lives on earth.
But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us (1 Peter 2:9-12).
1 Discuss the depth of your understanding of “heavenly citizenship.” Has the principle been adequately taught in our churches? How firmly has the biblical principle gripped you as a Christian? To what extent has this concept influenced your daily views, values, convictions, and behaviors?

2 How meaningful to you is the song, “This World Is Not My Home”? Explain your response.

3 Do you agree with the assertion that we are to be Christians first and Americans second? When is patriotism healthy? When could loyalty to the state become unhealthy?

4 Identify five practical ways that a Christian’s daily character and conduct can reflect his or her heavenly citizenship and culture.

5 Paul used the benefits of his Roman citizenship to spread the gospel in the first-century world (Acts 16:37-40; 22:22-29). Are there ways for us to use our legal rights as American citizens to promote the proclamation of the gospel? As an American, do you see signs that changing legal policies may hinder or even block our constitutional rights to openly proclaim and practice the Christian faith in the present or future?

6 Moffatt’s rendering of Philippians 3:20 refers to the church as “a colony of heaven.” What do those words mean to you? Would this view of God’s church change the way modern-day Christians see themselves and their mission in the world? If yes, explain why?

7 Our first birth entitles us to earthly citizenship. Our second birth, of water and the Spirit, opens the way for us to enjoy heavenly citizenship. Discuss the significance of your second birth as a transition point when your heavenly citizenship became primary and your earthly citizenship became secondary. Even in our day, is it still essential for a person to be “born of water and the Spirit” in order to be a citizen of heaven?

8 Our modern-day religious setting is one in which carefully reasoned out biblical doctrine is frequently devalued and freedom to believe as one chooses is valued. In view of this reality, how do you think Jesus would be viewed in our day if He were to approach a highly religious person and boldly say, “I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit . . . You must be born again” (John 3:5-7)?
Have we tended to view heavenly citizenship as a future promise rather than a present reality? How has the material in Chapter 1 reinforced or changed your view in this regard?