

## **Transcendence**

### **Essay 15 in the series “Ode to Joy”**

We can sometimes forget this, well, we can hardly ever remember this – that our citizenship is in heaven. Quick! Where is our citizenship? In heaven, Paul declares in Philippians 3:20. Now Paul’s readers in Philippi knew all about citizenship. The city of Philippi was a designated Roman colony, a little Rome in Macedonia, filled with retired Roman army veterans. Some hundred years earlier Octavian, later Caesar Augustus, had won a great victory just outside Philippi and in celebration he had declared Philippi a Roman colony. Its people were Roman citizens. They prided themselves on being Roman. They dressed like Romans. The rhythm of the city beat to the worship of Rome and its emperors and its gods.

So Paul back at the beginning of the Philippian letter, back in 1:27, wrote, “Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel.” And he used there a Greek verb for “conduct yourself” derived from “polis” for “city,” with the undercurrent of citizenship implied. That is, Paul is urging them to take an active part in the affairs of the “polis,” not Philippi or Rome now, but their new city, the church now as a colony of heaven. And if his point back then was subtle, now in Philippians 3:17-4:1 he drops the hammer.

We are reminded that much of the New Testament takes shapes partly in response to life under an empire. It’s about powers and authorities, about government forcing its ways on its subjects who have little or no voice in how they are governed. Much of it is written in the context of empire – certainly books like Philippians, Colossians, Revelation and, yes, all the Gospels. Why didn’t we see all this before? Maybe because until recently biblical scholarship was largely written by loyal citizens of empires. Only now are we beginning to see how large the issue of empire is. Even in America. Maybe especially in America as there are many who would call us away from our heritage as a republic to the seduction of empire.

So Scripture says a lot about empire. Empires by their very nature try to control everything. They are built upon centralized power. They are run by gender, race and class hierarchies. They are sustained by economic and military control. They are legitimated by powerful cultural myths. And they indoctrinate their subjects by innumerable images that capture the public imagination. In Paul’s day, images of Caesar were everywhere: in the market, the city square, the public baths, the theater, the gymnasium and the temples, on the coins, even in affluent households in the atrium, on jewelry, on utensils, even on paintings on the wall. The whole rhythm of life was shaped by the empire, by its feasts and festivals, by its athletic games and gladiatorial fights, by its triumphal processions.

And it is in this context that Paul in Philippians, back in 2:5-11, tells of a Lord who made himself nothing, emptied himself, took on the very nature of a servant, humbled himself, even as far as death on a cross! And then says: God exalts him. God gives him the name that is above every name. At his name every knee will bow, in heaven and on earth and

under the earth. Every tongue will confess Jesus Christ as Lord, not Caesar though “Lord” was one of his titles, not Caesar, instead a Lord who empties himself and takes the very nature of a servant.

Now in Philippians 3:20 Paul writes, “But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there.” “Savior” is a term Paul hardly ever uses, but it is a title of Caesar as the Philippians would well know, so here he uses it. Paul goes on, “We eagerly await a Savior from there [from heaven], the Lord Jesus Christ, 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.”

Paul is saying: Keep your eyes on what is above, beyond, ahead, that glorious time when you live again, in a creation restored and renewed, with bodies made new, no longer ravaged by disease, aging and sin, living out great adventure, taking on the task for which you have been being prepared your whole life on earth, surrounded by spiritual friends you can count on, enjoying peace, prosperity, justice and community in ways that intensify the meaning of those concepts beyond your imagining now, empowered by a new consciousness of Christ present within and all around you.

It, however, takes remembering that our citizenship is in heaven, that even in America we are primarily outposts of Heaven. And it’s that sort of transcendence that leads to joy, to radiant joy, to unshakeable, radiant joy. It’s this sense that our true citizenship is above, beyond, ahead, transcendent that sustains us whatever we now face. If criticized or attacked or even just misunderstood for doing what is right, we never lose sight of what is above, beyond, ahead, transcendent. If appalled by what’s happening in politics, or economics, or culture, or by anything we read in *The New York Times* or *The Wall Street Journal*, or by anything we see on Fox News or MSNBC, we never lose sight of what is above, beyond, ahead, transcendent. If life crashes in on us, we keep our eyes on what is above, beyond, ahead. As our physical powers decline, we keep our eyes on what is above, beyond, ahead. Even should we share in Christ’s sufferings, becoming like Christ in his death, we keep our eyes on what is above, beyond, ahead. We are not of this place. We are meant for another world. And that is where our citizenship is. Sometimes we even get a little homesick here – which, when you think about it, is to be expected.

But it all comes down to a simple question. Where is your citizenship? For many of us, America, yes, but because I ask this in the context of church, a church that belongs to Christ, and most readers should know what I mean, I ask it again. Where, O believer, is your citizenship? I’m not being hard here. I’m not being radical here. Well, maybe just a touch. But here’s the gospel. Here’s the good news. If you keep your eyes on what is above, on what is beyond, you can handle anything now. Absolutely anything. You can thrive. You can flourish. And you will live with radiant, unshakeable joy.

– Dale Pauls