

## **Citizens of Heaven**

July 2011

Dust leapt away and soared into the dry air as the apostle's feet settled in the midst of the coming storm. This was the eye of the storm, completely unlike the raging that had started outside with the crowds. There the dust was being flung into the air, but here as the dust settled, the piercing eyes sought to kill him with intense gazes. The Sanhedrin sat to hear Paul's claims. The worst of the storm was still to come. Sure the throngs of people had violently chased him out of the temple in Jerusalem, but this cold silence was more lethal than the noisy and confused mobs.

He had gained a hearing with the people purely because he was a Jew. The tribune had allowed him to speak from the barracks, but then thought better of it when his speech only made things worse. That's when the surprise came. That same Jewish citizenship that opened the crowds outside to hear the gospel of Christ now brought him to be stretched by a Roman centurion for flogging. The tribune who was so ready for him to calm the crowds with his hometown citizenship now saw him as more of a problem than a solution. But that fateful moment came when Paul asked the centurion if he was allowed to punish another Roman citizen. You could hear a pin drop in those barracks! The tribune himself had merely bought his Roman citizenship, but Paul was a citizen by birth, a citizen of two worlds, the Roman Gentile world and the world of the Jews.

And now these Jewish aristocrats sought to further condemn him. But Paul had an ace up his sleeve. The message did not hit its intended target. The hearts of the rulers were stone cold, a great shield against Christ's gospel. So the Jew from Cilicia decided to create his own little storm and left the council in disputes about the resurrection. Theology was always a great divider between Sadducees and Pharisees. Their limited view condemned them to ignore the gospel yet again, but citizenship made it possible for Paul to witness about His Lord.

The key to Acts 22-23 is to understand the dual citizenship of the apostle Paul. He used all kinds of political means to spread the gospel of Christ. He challenged the charges against him in order to get to Rome by prisoner transport, guaranteeing as a Roman citizen to be heard by the most powerful leader in all the known world, the Caesar. And when it suited him, Paul could use his Jewish heritage and citizenship to speak to Jews everywhere about Christ. And then there is the surprise that the tribune is introduced to in Acts 22-23, that Paul was also a Roman citizen because he was born in the Roman city of Tarsus. Paul used his citizenship purely for the gospel. At times, he allowed the flogging, but this time, the revelation of his citizenship would gain him a hearing in the Sanhedrin.

It is this same apostle who talks about an even greater citizenship in Ephesians 2:11-22. I want to take this Independence Day to walk through this passage a bit and see some

things you might miss on a cursory reading. You will notice that there is a strong sense of nationalism for Israel in this passage, especially when Paul talks about the “dividing wall of hostility” and the “commonwealth of Israel” and gentiles as “aliens and strangers.” This is on purpose. Paul describes the difference a life in Christ is for gentiles and Jews. Though there were two different “nations” that had no relationship with one another, and even despised one another, through Christ we have all been unified in a completely new “nation” or kingdom.

At front and center of this periscope is Christ’s death on the cross as a reconciliation between all peoples. It is through this death that we have all been granted a change in citizenship status. It is not just a citizenship change, but a life change! The atonement on the cross can be viewed in several different explanatory metaphors in the New Testament. They used imagery from the judicial system, from relational systems, from economic systems, and from social systems because the work of the cross is too cosmic to limit to one facet. It’s much bigger than any one image can handle! And so here, we get reconciliation between the Jewish nation and the rest of the world, the gentile nations. This is a relational image of atonement.

But this view of atonement affects every Christian living in any nation in the world because it creates for each of us a dual citizenship like Paul’s. You see, because of Christ, I am not only an American citizen, but also a citizen of God’s Kingdom. I have a different home, that of Heaven. I live and work in America, but I live and work for God’s Kingdom. When American laws call into question the laws of God’s Kingdom, God’s Kingdom is paramount. I must choose

like Paul which laws apply to my situation to best infiltrate my nation and world with the light of the gospel of Christ.

I love being in America. It is a beautiful nation with beautiful people and cultures. There are some really wonderful foundations for freedom in America that we all enjoy. But there is also a dark side to America, a completely unchristian underbelly. America is indeed a greatly blessed nation. But America is not heaven. America is not the Kingdom of God. America is not “perfect.” Nor is any other nation in all the earth. As a dual citizen of both Heaven and America, I must maintain a deep seated desire to be influential for the Kingdom of God over America. I don’t evangelize for democracy. I evangelize for the freedom of Christ. I love democracy. I prefer it as an American. But I can’t wait until the day I’m in heaven, in a theocracy, trusting in Jesus, and so I attempt to do that now.

There are a number of verses that we often quote but rarely truly grasp the meaning of the context. One of them is Psalm 20:7 that reminds us not to trust in military might but to trust in the Lord. Even American money has “In God We Trust” on it. But how much do we as American Christians trust in politics, economics, or social “superiority” or whatever that is American and not Kingdom of God? These are challenging questions. When our soldiers do their job with excellence and kill the enemies of America, do I wrestle with the death of human beings realizing that they may not know Jesus? Do I encourage physical war even knowing the Bible tells me in Ephesians 6:12 that we don’t fight flesh and blood but spiritual powers? Another verse is quite telling of how we trust in the Lord in Zechariah 4:6. It’s not by my resources or

my nation's resources that God's will and purposes are accomplished, but by His Spirit alone.

These are hard words for a nation like America that has many resources and a firm foundation of freedom. As we return to Ephesians 2:11-22, we also glean from the text this idea of the dividing wall of hostility. Paul is referring to the Temple. In between the Court of the Gentiles, a place where even gentile God-fearers could worship, and the Court of Israel there was a wall that had a sign on it before you entered. It essentially promised that if any gentile passed that line, he or she would be killed. It created separation between Jews and gentiles. But Jesus in His death on the cross made the two one nation, the people of God.

This is precisely why Jesus said in John 4:21-24 that God would be worshipped without respect to geographical or national lines. Instead, every nation and every tongue would give glory to God in unique ways. That's the beauty of the nation that God is making for Himself, the Kingdom of God, that is uniquely diverse and yet untied in Christ. We may come from many nations, but we have access to one Father by one Spirit, the Holy Spirit. This makes all of us friends and neighbors rather than aliens and strangers. There is peace in the Kingdom despite the diversity.

Then one of my favorite images of the body of Christ is used in reference to the Temple, a building made of believers who like living stones are being built into a holy temple unto the Lord. Ephesians 2:21-22 speak of the house being built for God consisting of the saints who are fellow citizens of heaven and of the Kingdom. This corresponds to the same image used in 1 Peter 2:4-5, as we as living stones, like Paul's living sacrifices,

are chosen and precious to God. We are being built into that holy house for God, based on Jesus our cornerstone, the Stone upon which the whole building rests, along with the apostles and prophets, the Word of God, as our foundation. And then in just a few more verses, Peter reminds each of us that we belong to a different nation than just America. 1 Peter 2:9 calls us specifically "a holy nation."

So I do not believe that I'm anti-American at all. How can someone who is American be anti-American? I support our troops. We pray for them almost every Sunday that God would save those who don't know Him and that He would protect them. I truly enjoy the freedom to worship Jesus and to witness about Him here. I am thankful for the graces that our freedoms supply. But at the same time, I must, as a dual citizen of America and the Kingdom of God, always be evaluating my culture and my nation, making sure that I do not put America above God's priorities and laws. I must always be aware of elements of America that are nothing like God's Kingdom. I must hold fast to the good things in my culture, and reject the evil things. I do believe America is great, but its greatness is a direct gift from God. I don't ever want to settle for anything less than the Kingdom of God and being a citizen of Heaven. I want to embrace my King Jesus and His reign, and someday be embraced by Him with the words, "Well done, my good and faithful servant."