

Identity—Citizens of Heaven

Ephesians 2:19

On Thanksgiving morning, 1999, just off the coast of Fort Lauderdale, a group of fishermen noticed something bobbing in the water, something small, something that didn't belong.

As they drew closer, they realized it wasn't debris from a storm.

It was a five-year-old Cuban boy named Elián González, clinging to an inner tube.

A five-year-old boy is floating on nothing but a piece of rubber.

When the fishermen pulled him from the water, he was barely conscious.

His face was blistered by the sun.

His lips cracked from dehydration.

He had been drifting alone in the Atlantic for nearly two days.

His mother had tried to flee Cuba with him in a small boat, in search of a better, freer life.

But somewhere in the night, the waves swallowed the boat.

Everyone drowned. Except him.

He didn't know where he was.

He didn't know who rescued him.

He didn't even know if he was safe.

He entered America not as a citizen... but as a survivor.

Not as a guest... but as an orphan.

He had no rights. No identity. No home.

Nothing but the memory of the reality that his mother was gone.

This story captured the hearts of many Americans.

When he was released from the hospital, something extraordinary happened: he was brought to his great-uncle's house in Miami, and the family opened their home to him.

They didn't treat him like a political issue or a stranger from another country.

They spoke to him tenderly in his own language.

They sat him at their dinner table.

They put toys in his hands and clothes on his back.

He arrived as a boy with no place, but inside that home, he became a boy with people.

A reporter later said: "He washed up on shore as a stranger, but he walked into that house like a son."

[Read Ephesians 2:19]

Every person is like Elián spiritually:

We were drifting without hope.

Carried by forces we couldn't control.

Without status.

Without a home.

Unable to save ourselves.

But God rescued us and gave us a sense of belonging, citizenship, and a family.

In this verse, Paul uses two Greek words that carried loaded legal and social meaning in the Greco-Roman world, terms used for anyone who lacked recognized status, rights, or citizenship.

First, he tells the Ephesians, you are no longer foreigners (ξένος say-nos), which carried the legal reality.

Foreigners were outsiders, people who didn't belong to a community.

They had no legal standing, no rights, and no protections.

In the Greco-Roman world, a foreigner was someone living in a place but not accepted as a member of the community.

They were present, but never at home.

It was the label of "You don't belong here."

This was the Gentiles' position toward Jewish believers.

They were considered "foreigners" to God's kingdom.

"Remember that at one time you were Gentiles in the flesh—called "the uncircumcised" by those called "the circumcised," which is done in the flesh by human hands. At that time, you were without Christ, **excluded from the citizenship of Israel**, and **foreigners to the covenants of promise, without hope and without God in the world.** Ephesians 2:11-12

Gentiles to Israel were "strangers to the covenants" (same root)

"But now in Christ Jesus, you who were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ."

Ephesians 2:13

Before Christ, Gentiles were present in God's world but not part of God's people.

No claim. No covenant. No connection.

"The Gentile believers are not second-class citizens in someone else's territory. They are full members of the kingdom.

Foreigners in another city or country feel vulnerable... Paul says we do not have to feel this way. We belong. We are part of the kingdom that has no end, the only kingdom that has no end."¹

Second, Paul, you are no longer a stranger (πάροικοι par-oye-kos), which carried the social reality.

A stranger was a temporary resident, without permanent status.

Those who live "alongside" but not "inside"

A stranger was close enough to see community life, but not allowed to share in it.

Before salvation, Gentiles were near the things of God but not part of the family of God.

Paul chooses these words because he wants Gentile believers to feel the full weight of the before-and-after:

Before Christ:

- No status.
- No belonging.
- No legal standing.
- No inheritance.
- Near the house but not in it.
- No claim on God's promises.

After Christ:

- Citizens.
- Family.
- Heirs.
- Fully protected.
- Fully included.
- Fully home.

Paul is announcing:

You're no longer foreigners by law or by status.

You're no longer strangers by heritage or by identity.

¹ Tony Merida, Christ-Centered Exposition: Exalting Jesus in Ephesians (Brentwood, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2014), 63.

You belong, completely!

You are citizens of Heaven with the saints.

You are members of God's household.

Tony Merida says, "One might imagine Jew and Gentile together in one kingdom, but to think of them as one family is stunning."²

How are we one family?

[Eph. 2:18]

We've all been brought near to God and given full access to Him as our Father.

Because of Christ, we, both Jew and Gentile, stand together as His adopted sons and daughters.

Brothers and sisters in the same household.

As members of this one family.

[Eph. 5:1]

Every one of us has a God-given part in this family, and our lives are meant to display the character of our Father.

The church was never meant to be a building we step into.

The church isn't a destination.

The church isn't just a place we show up; it's the family God has placed us in.

To reduce it to anything else is to misunderstand our very identity in Christ.

² Ibid., 63.