

Foreign Citizenship: Watching, Walking, and Waiting
Philippians 3:17–4:1
May 5, 2019

Anything you can read, I can read slower. This is, in part, because I'm not the fastest of readers. That's the simple version. It's also because I never read without a pen in hand, underlining things, making notes in the margin, in essence, talking to an author I'll never meet. I'm slow as well because I'll often obsess over the nuanced turn of phrase in this or that sentence. Or I'll read a paragraph and then just sit there and think about it for a while.

I've been reading Stephen Ambrose's *D-Day* for what seems like eons. Part of the reason is because the part of the book I'm in right now has a different person's story in every other paragraph. So, I'll read about a heroic Captain from Tennessee and I'll "Google" more information about him. Or I'll read about the ship he was on and I'll get interested in where that ship is today. If your goal is to turn the last page, this is *not* how you do it.

I'll tell you one of the many examples that caused me to stop reading and think. Ambrose¹ is talking about the scores of men storming Omaha Beach and the impossible firefight they met that June day. And, in something of a side comment, he wrote that a man named John "threw himself down beside his CO, Capt. Louis Drnovich, an All-American football player at the University of Southern California in 1939."² Ambrose then quickly moves on with the narrative. But I paused and wrote out in the margin something along these lines, "Can you imagine this today?"

Of course, we can't imagine the kind of battle that took place that day on Omaha Beach, nor the number of casualties. Warfare is just different now. But, what struck me in this paragraph or two was this: I cannot fathom an All-American football player from USC—a guy in our day whose image is polished by PR firms, whose nutritionist frets over three M&M's, a young man set to make millions on draft night—being put on the most dangerous beach in the history of the world for the sake of his country.³

Even though my grandfather fought in that same war, we don't live in the same world as 1944.⁴ This understanding of citizenship is foreign to us. That shift happened within our own country over a couple generations. Many of us could talk about visiting other countries and observing what seem to be foreign practices regarding food or dress or custom.

Our text today is largely about citizenship. Paul's going to instruct the Philippians concerning how they can live faithfully in the midst of one culture, world, or country, while belonging to another.

1. Watch those who walk . . .

Verse 17: *Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us.*

A close friend of mine named Walter once said to me, "You know how I know when I meet a Baptist preacher? Within moments, though we've just met, they call me brother." He meant that in good-natured fun, I think, but it's possible we use the term a bit too casually.

¹ Not the theologian.

² Stephen Ambrose, *D-Day*, 430.

³ Drnovich would die on Omaha Beach. After climbing into a knocked-out tank to see if he could get the cannon firing, that tank was attacked.

⁴ For both good and ill.

Though Paul used the term for brother 139 times in his letters,⁵ He didn't do so flippantly. In the New Testament world, as strange as this might sound, and as wrong-headed as this is, the bond between siblings was stronger than the marriage bond.⁶ So, when Paul used brother, we should attempt to hear it in the way that culture would've heard it. And they wouldn't skim past the word. To them, it meant something. Salvation birthed family.

And Paul was something of a father to them. A father that teaches, both by his words and by his life. So he writes, *Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us.*

It's helpful to keep in mind that these relatively new believers didn't have easy access to biblical texts. I can hold down a button, say, "Open ESV App" and immediately hear or read the words of Jesus, no matter where I am. I've also been around the Scriptures most of my life. These new believers, however, likely came out of a life of abject paganism.

In that context, discipleship relied heavily upon the art of imitation. Paul's way of life became a model for these new believers. But not just him. Note that Paul says, *keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us.*

I think the final word is important to stare at. Paul says, "us." He's likely referring to both Timothy and Epaphroditus, those whom he'd just mentioned a few verses prior (2:25–30). It's not as if Paul is saying, here, "imitate me, and me alone."

Paul reproduced himself in others. I've always found fascinating the way Paul describes this in 1 Corinthians 4:16. There, Paul writes, *I urge you, then, be imitators of me.* Ok, that sounds similar to our text today. But the next phrase is what's unexpected. Paul continues, *That is why I sent you Timothy.* Now, wait a second Paul. If we're to imitate you, why are you sending this guy? Timothy wasn't a robot, but he'd learned enough about Paul's character that Paul could send him to represent him. As one man says, *to send Timothy was to send Paul.*⁷

This is good discipleship. And it ought to be something you consider with those you're teaching and with your kids. You teach. And you live your teaching. You teach by your living.

As just a practical example, and I in no way am comparing Paul, Timothy, and Epaphroditus to Pastor Phil, Chris, and myself. But at this point, I've been here for almost 12 years. Chris has been here longer than that. We've both worked down the hall from Pastor Phil for nearly 8 years. So, you might've wondered, how do we know what to do while Pastor Phil's been out these past few months? Well, since Debbie's worked here longer than either Chris or myself, and we've all been here a while, we've worked through a good number of scenarios. So, in this season, almost in every situation we can figure out together what our boss would have us do. Side note: he wrote the book on mentoring.

He's been a consistent example for years, reproducing himself in quite a few people. Imitation doesn't mean, however, that Chris, Phil, or I are by nature identical. In fact, we're pretty different.⁸ But inasmuch as each of us are looking to Christ, we can look to, and learn from, one another. As my closest friend, Josh Smith, says, "There's an exact image and there's an embodied image." In the exact image, Christ Himself, we won't find flaws. But there are embodied imagers in front of us that we're to seek to learn from as well, to the degree they seek to imitate the exact image.

⁵ Joseph Hellerman, *When the Church was a Family*, 77.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 50ff.

⁷ You know, "one man says," right? He's regularly saying the most profound of quotes, ones I know I didn't come up with, but still have no idea where I read it. Kudos to you, one man!

⁸ For example, Chris Wilbanks' rap game < Dr. Phil A. Newton's

Paul says, *brothers join in imitating me*. It might be, “imitate me with one accord.” There’s a new ethic, maybe an ethic that appears foreign at first, but one that we learn from one another. And this isn’t just elders. I could do a series on the things I’ve learned from saints a few years further along in my time here at the Woods. I’ll just tell one. I bet 9 or 10 years ago I heard a story about one of our families being out of town years prior with their four kids. In the middle of the night, the mom gets a call saying their house in Germantown had been struck by lightning and much of their house had burned. Multiple members of that family have told me that she, the mom, said, in that moment, “Everything I love is right here with me.” And they went back to bed.

That’s instructive. And I’ve not forgotten it. This is how we learn. The world doesn’t respond like that, most often. But we learn from one another how to live in this world as if we belong to another.

What’s this mean practically? It means if you’re in your thirties, you don’t just share meals with those in their thirties. God’s been gracious to us in giving us a gloriously multi-generational community of Christ-followers here. Don’t take it for granted. Offer to buy them breakfast and ask them questions about life. If you’re in your teens, by all means, have friends that are teenagers. But also pay attention to those older than you.

That’s what Paul says, *keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us*. Open your eyes. Pay attention. The word for example here contains the idea of a stamp or a pattern.⁹ I’m not only the slowest reader in the room, I might be the worst artist. The teenagers make fun of my Venn diagrams. But, give me something to trace, and I’m Picasso.

For those whom the Lord’s grown over the years, this means you have a responsibility to follow Christ close enough that you can be seen as an example. And then you have the responsibility to invest in, to disciple, the next generation. I know it’s easier to relate to people your age, but you’ve been bought, in part, for this. To reach and teach others. Don’t wait for one of them to say, “Will you be my mentor?” Just be intentional with your time. Many of you are.

For all of us, this means we need to be faithful to gather with other believers. You can’t imitate what you don’t observe.

Now, what in particular did Paul have in mind for these young believers to follow and imitate? It’s likely he would be thinking of the single-mindedness he’d just explained in chapter 3. Paul’s aim was to 3:10, *know (Christ) and the power of his resurrection and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death*. Paul was dying to self, sharing in suffering, being empowered to endure suffering by the power of Christ’s resurrection, and in all that, God was making him like His Son.¹⁰

And this was Paul’s single-minded aim, “one thing was necessary,”¹¹ *pressing on toward the goal of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus* (Phil. 3:14).¹² He was determined to finish the race. The zeal with which he persecuted the church he’d now redirected, channeling it to pursue the Christ.¹³

Others had followed his example in that. Paul calls upon the church in Philippi to watch those who walk in this way.

⁹ Peter O’Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, 449.

¹⁰ See “Knowing Christ’s Resurrection” here: <http://www.southwoodsbc.org/sermons/knowing-the-resurrected-christ/>

¹¹ Not unlike Mary sitting at the Christ’s feet in the Gospel of Luke.

¹² See Chris’ excellent exposition, “Forgetting–Forward” here: <http://www.southwoodsbc.org/sermons/forgetting-forward/>

¹³ Chris pointed out how both terms come from the same Greek word, διωχω.

2. . . . with minds not merely on earthly things . . .

Watch those who walk as if they belong somewhere else. One of the reasons Paul is telling them to open their eyes and pay attention is because they were surrounded by bad examples. Example is effective, for good or ill. Note the word, “many” in the next verse. Verse 18, *for many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ.*

Paul had told them often about this other group.¹⁴ Here, he tells them, with present and palpable emotion,¹⁵ once more about that group that *walk(s) as enemies of the cross of Christ.*¹⁶

Who is this group? Because the text indicates they “walk” as enemies of the cross of Christ, many believe their opposition had to do with aberrant *behavior* more than unorthodox theology.¹⁷ The issue concerned their “walk.” It’s entirely possible, even likely, these were professing Christians who didn’t live out the implications of the Scriptures.¹⁸ Those of us who love to study the Scriptures and theology need reminding: just because someone articulates theological truths with articulate words, that does not mean he or she actually follows what he or she claims to believe.

This grieves Paul. It ought to grieve us.

Verse 19 describes this group more. You’ll notice, like Paul’s resumé we studied a few weeks ago, the short, staccato-like, description of this group. Paul lists four characteristics of those who walk as enemies of the cross of Christ.

First, v. 19, *their end is destruction.* Paul won’t mince words. Though they might claim to be followers of Christ, their behavior indicates otherwise. Their end would prove it. I read a helpful little article by 9Marks this week.¹⁹ The article pointed out why a biblical doctrine of judgment proves to be integral to understanding the gospel. The points were these: 1. Hell shows us how heinous our sin really is; 2. Hell shows us how unimpeachably just God really is; and 3. Hell shows us how horrific the cross really was, and how great God’s grace is. Paul will talk about the future of those who believe in the gospel soon, but not before he details the end of those who functionally oppose the cross of Christ.

Second, their end will come in that fashion because of their present idol. Verse 19, *their god* (lower-case), *their god is their belly.* It seems, though it’s not entirely clear,²⁰ that if the message of the cross of Christ would include suffering, as the letter has repeatedly said, that this group of people instead walked in wanton indulgence. Paul’s ambition was to become like Christ in His death as he shared in Christ’s sufferings. But this group’s god was their “own fleshly impulses.”²¹

It pains me to say this on “Dinner on the Grounds” day, but this very likely would’ve included gluttony. It definitely would’ve been broad enough to include sexual immorality.²² And it very well might even be broader than that, to include gratifying any and all lusts of the flesh. Whatever the flesh sought, the flesh got.²³ Paul’s point here, in part, is that our deeds put on display what we actually worship. This group’s god was their appetite. They regularly bent the knee.

¹⁴ Imperfect tense, emphasizing over and over.

¹⁵ Present Participle, emphasizing continuous action.

¹⁶ This is the only place Paul tells us in the Scriptures of his own weeping. Moisés Silva, *Philippians*, 182.

¹⁷ O’Brien, “by their manner of life that they spurned the cross and did not accept its implications for their daily living,” 453.

¹⁸ O’Brien, 451–452; Joseph Hellerman, *Philippians*, EGGNT, 215.

¹⁹ <https://www.9marks.org/article/why-hell-integral-gospel/>

²⁰ O’Brien favors interpreting this as Judaizers, though he writes, “Most commentators have read the expression in a libertine manner,” 456.

²¹ O’Brien, 443.

²² Hellerman, *Philippians*, 219.

²³ Silva says the terminology for belly is similar to Paul’s use of the term σαρκ (flesh), 181.

The church at Philippi was surrounded by this way of life. Not only in the pagan, Roman society of Philippi, but even with “many” who claimed to believe the gospel. That last part sounds a bit like the South we inhabit. “Hey Pastor, we want a Christian wedding! Will you preach the gospel at our ceremony? A: Maybe, who are you living with?”

Paul continues, v. 19, *their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame*. This group wasn’t secretive about their appetites it seems. That’s why Paul continued to warn the Philippian church of their example. They flaunted their liberty. They boasted in it. But, like the first phrase concerning their end being characterized by judgment, Peter O’Brien writes, “What they glory in will turn out to be their disgrace.”²⁴

Following Christ means self-denial. We will have desires that must be crucified, over and over and over again. Ultimately, this group embodied the hedonism of the rich fool in Luke 12: *relax, eat, drink, be merry*. They live as if *this* is all there is. Better get it all now. They live as if they are merely made for *this* world. Which is precisely what Paul writes, v. 19, *their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things*.

It’s not merely that they thought about earthly things, but that their minds were “set on” earthly things.²⁵

The church was surrounded by those who thought this way. Some of their enemies, the pagan neighbors and rulers, opposed the church because these Christians were too righteous and because they didn’t bend the knee to Roman rule or culture at every point (Phil. 1:27–30). Then, “supposedly” *inside* the church there were enemies—the Judaizers—who said the Philippians weren’t righteous enough (Phil. 3:1–3). Further, again claiming to be inside the church, there were enemies living as if the Philippians weren’t *free* enough (Phil. 3:18–19). The Philippian church had enemies all on sides, in all stripes, coming from every direction. Alec Motyer’s quote is appropriate, “There is an effective reply to a hostile world—a united church.”²⁶

The church watches those who walk, with minds not merely on earthly things, but those who walk . . .

3. . . . but as if their citizenship is in heaven.

You recall back at the beginning of chapter 3, Paul wrote, 3:2, *Look out for the dogs, look out for the evildoers, look out for those who mutilate the flesh. For we are the circumcision*. In essence, watch out for your enemies; and then he follows that by saying, in distinction from that, “*this* is who you are.” He does a similar thing here, describing enemies of the church, their characteristics, and then he reminds the Philippians of their controlling identity, v. 20: *But our citizenship is in heaven*. There is not a stronger contrast to those he’d just described.²⁷

We’ve mentioned this a few times, but it’s worth recalling that Philippi was a Rome-in-miniature. At various points since its founding, rulers populated the city—almost like we’d fill a small lake with bass—with Roman veterans from the war. This alleviated Rome’s population issues and helped to ensure allegiance to the Empire.²⁸ Because of this, the citizens of Philippi enjoyed many of privileges of the most powerful city on the planet, as if they themselves lived on Italian soil.²⁹ The city was modeled on Rome. It was governed by Roman law.³⁰ If you couldn’t say you

²⁴ O’Brien, 443.

²⁵ Gordon Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians*, NICOT, 374.

²⁶ Alec Motyer, *The Message of Philippians*, BST, 20.

²⁷ Fee, 378.

²⁸ Fee, 26.

²⁹ See Motyer, 15.

³⁰ O’Brien, 4.

were from swanky Rome, you could claim one of the next best things: the honored status of being a Philippian.

And it's likely everyone in that city made sure to tell others where they were from. I think you can see Paul's point. As believers in Philippi, they didn't merely belong to a colony of Rome. That was true, to a degree; but they had a more controlling identity: the people of God, gathered together by Him, are a colony of heaven.³¹

One might think, "but that citizenship is later, Paul." But Paul intentionally uses present tense verbs here. This is *now*, in part. I've always found helpful Jonathan Leeman's illustration and explanation of this, "If you've ever stood outside the embassy for your own nation in a foreign country, your fellow citizens working behind the desk will tell you, "You are standing on the soil of our nation." Then Leeman writes, "The homeland of God's people is nowhere on this planet. There are only ambassadors and embassies. The church on earth is those embassies of ambassadors gathered together in the name of Christ."³²

That's *now*. But there is a *not yet*. Verse 20, *But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.*

"Await" isn't nearly strong enough. This isn't like watching your watch for the doctor to come get you out of the waiting room. The word is more likely translated, "eagerly await."³³ And that's because of what Paul says we're awaiting. Verse 20: From heaven *we (eagerly) await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.*

Roman citizenship was so integral to identity in this era that rulers of the empire assumed godlike position and reverence. An inscription from AD 48 in Ephesus designated Julius Caesar as "God and Political *savior* of Human Life."³⁴ Nero was described as the "savior and Benefactor of the World."³⁵ Because of the citizenship language employed here, and the use of a word often applied to Roman emperors, Paul is likely reminding these Philippians of their higher allegiance. He's subverting the spirit of the political age. You have a different, and better, citizenship because you have a different, and better, Ruler and Savior.

Our most defining citizenship is not here; but here we are. So, we eagerly await a *Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.*

What is it that He'll save? Paul continues, v. 20, *we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body.* Two full weeks after Easter, Paul's not over the resurrection. And he's elaborating on what he wrote in verse 10–11, *becoming like Him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.* "Our lowly body," might be understood as "the body of our humiliation."³⁶ This humiliation largely points to the body, and the corresponding life, that experiences the ever-present effects of the fall characterized by "physical decay, indignity, weakness, and finally death."³⁷ That's the body we know, and have. Heavenly citizenship sounds great, Paul, but right now *this* is the reality. Everything's not good. And the things that are good don't last.

In fact, you might say, *nothing* in this present life has actually brought lasting contentment. I desire this. Then I get it. And it fails to deliver on the anticipation, or the implied promise. That's the nature of this world. Our bodies know little experientially other than this: a world groaning for redemption.

³¹ Edmund Clowney, *The Church*; Trevin Wax, *Eschatological Discipleship*, 88–89. Helleman, *Philippians*, 222.

³² Jonathan Leeman, *The Church and the Surprising Offense of God's Love*, 201.

³³ NASB, HCSB.

³⁴ Helleman, *Philippians*, 223.

³⁵ Ralph Martin and Gerald Hawthorne, *Philippians*, WBC, 223.

³⁶ Fee, 382.

³⁷ O'Brien, 464.

C. S. Lewis would write, “If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world. If none of my earthly pleasures satisfy it, that does not prove that the universe is a fraud. Probably earthly pleasures were never meant to satisfy it, but only to arouse it, to suggest the real thing. If that is so, I must take care, on the one hand, never to despise, or to be unthankful for, these earthly blessings, and on the other, never to mistake them for the something else of which they are only a kind of copy, or echo, or mirage. I must keep alive in myself the desire for my true country.”³⁸

Paul writes, v. 20, *from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body*. “To be like” picks up on verse 10, where Paul wrote that we’re, *becoming like him in his death*. That verse referenced the continually true, slow but sure, process of being conformed to the image of God’s Son. Verse 20, however, speaks of the day each of those moments of grace foreshadow.

The parallels between this passage and the Christ-hymn of Philippians 2 bear mentioning. In Philippians 2, the One who shared in the ineffable glory of God became man, was found in human form, and humbled Himself to the point of death, even death on a cross (Phil. 2:6–8). Then, what happened? God highly exalted Him, raising Him and giving Him the name above every name. In this passage, we follow a similar pattern, those who’ve died to self (3:10), and share in His sufferings—Paul assures—will one day share in His resurrection. He became like us so that we might become like Him. The resurrection of the Christ foreshadows our own. Paul would write in 1 Corinthians 15:49, *Just as we have borne the likeness of the earthly man, so shall we bear the likeness of the man from heaven*.

This is what God is doing in His Son. Verse 21 continues, saying that He will transform us, *by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself*. He is subjecting *all* things. Nothing will resist bending the knee. And it’s “in accordance with”³⁹ *that* power that He transforms us.

You don’t think He can heal *that* part of you? That shame? Everything will be subjected.

This is the citizenship that awaits us. All things subjected to Him. Even us, finally and fully the men and women God created us to be, redeemed and restored by His Son. That’s our future.

But it’s not yet. So what do we do?

4:1: *Therefore, my brothers, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm thus in the Lord, my beloved*. There’s a way to live now in light of what’s true now. And in knowing what’s to come. Paul unloads a deluge of affection for this congregation, unparalleled in his other letters.⁴⁰ returning first to calling them his *brothers*. In Christ, God created a new family. And Paul loves and longs for them, even though he’s far from them. There’s no “out of sight, out of mind” with family.

Then Paul calls these Philippians his *joy and crown*. This crown would refer to the crown of victory often presented by judges to the victor of the Olympian games of that era.⁴¹ In his letter to the Thessalonians, Paul uses the same language, *For what is our joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you? For you are our glory and our joy*. Paul saw these believers, or endeavored to see them, as God saw them, clothed in the righteousness of Christ, citizens of heaven. He even prays in Ephesians 1 that we might know *what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints* (Eph. 1:18). Whose inheritance? Not ours. Gods. And what is God’s inheritance? His people. And Paul prays that we’d see the glory of that. Again, I think C. S. Lewis captures some of this, “It may be possible for each to think too much of his own potential glory hereafter; it is hardly possible for him to think too often or too deeply about that of his neighbor . . .

³⁸ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*.

³⁹ O’Brien, 465.

⁴⁰ O’Brien, 474.

⁴¹ Hellerman, *Philippians*, 227.

remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship.”⁴²

He’s talking about those who share in Christ’s resurrection. The people you are sitting next to, if they trust in Christ, are now saints of the Most High, seated in the heavenly places. They aren’t just your neighbor; they are citizens of heaven. What if we saw our fellow believers the way God sees them?

Paul did. They were his *joy and crown*. And he concludes this section with a command. In light of being citizens of heaven, in light of the coming resurrection, he writes, v. 1, *Therefore, my brothers, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm thus in the Lord, my beloved.*

In last week’s text, Paul spoke about pressing on, running toward the goal for the prize. Much of our text today is about that prize. One interesting thing about running I never believed until recently is the well-attested extra dose of endurance that many runners talk about receiving on race day. The seemingly flawed-logic goes like this, “If you’re going to run 13 miles, you’ll be fine if you get to 11 sometime before in your training. You’ll be fine.” I thought, “What?! All of the sudden you can run 2 miles farther even if you’ve never done it before? Maybe I could add a half a mile to that distance, but not two extra. No way.” But, ten thousand runners will tell you, provided you train decently before, you can easily add a couple extra miles on race day. So, where does the extra endurance come from? Two things I’d say, 1. You’ve been working toward a goal for months. On this day, finally you can see the finish line. I think the second reason is more persuasive. 2. As you’re running toward the finish line, you’re surrounded by people running the same direction, with the same goal. Sociologists might call it peer pressure. A physician might call it adrenaline. Call it whatever you will, you can endure longer, and even run better, when you’re running with a group of people toward the same goal. In front of you, at all times, is someone a little farther along. You watch them. And you keep running.

Conclusion

The believer occupies two worlds. He or she still lives and breathes on this planet. But, in salvation, the future has invaded the present. He or she, according to this text, is now a citizen of heaven.

Because of this, something is almost always going to feel foreign. The question is: which one is it? A resurrected body, resurrected mind, resurrected affections, living under the reign of a good and holy King? Or this world? Which is the foreign country?

Paul says you need to watch those who belong to a different country than the one you inhabit. As you watch, you walk the same way. No matter what everyone around you is doing.

And as you watch, and walk, you also wait. We belong, ultimately, to a different country. And not just a different one, but a better one.

⁴² C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory*