

# Citizenship of Heaven

By Doug Hamilton

## Paul refers to Christians as Citizens of Heaven

Philippians 3:20-21 For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ; <sup>21</sup> who will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory, by the exertion of the power that He has even to subject all things to Himself.

- Having citizenship in the United States is a great thing, but it is not the greatest citizenship we share. It is the citizenship of heaven that is far superior. When Paul uses that word, it carried great significance and meaning, for it is being used in the context of Roman citizenship.

## What did it mean to have Roman citizenship?

- New Century version calls it *homeland*. Darby calls it *commonwealth*. The Basic English Version uses the word *country*. All three kind of catch the meaning of the word pretty good, because it was all was all about rights afforded those residents of the land. When it referred to Roman Citizenship in the first century, it took into consideration this basic list of rights:
- It meant that you had a right to be free of certain taxes.
  - Matthew 17:25-26 He said, "Yes." And when he came into the house, Jesus spoke to him first, saying, "What do you think, Simon? From whom do the kings of the earth collect customs or poll-tax, from their sons or from strangers?" <sup>26</sup> When Peter said, "From strangers," Jesus said to him, "Then the sons are exempt."
- It meant that you had a right to own property.
  - Ephesians 2:19-22 So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God's household, <sup>20</sup> having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner *stone*, <sup>21</sup> in whom the whole building, being fitted together, is growing into a holy temple in the Lord, <sup>22</sup> in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit.
- It meant you had the right to speak to the assembly.
  - Acts 21:37-39 As Paul was about to be brought into the barracks, he said to the commander, "May I say something to you?" And he said, "Do you know Greek? <sup>38</sup> "Then you are not the Egyptian who some time ago stirred up a revolt and led the four thousand men of the Assassins out into the wilderness?" <sup>39</sup> But Paul said, "I am a Jew of Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of no insignificant city; and I beg you, allow me to speak to the people."
- It meant you had a right to legal trial.
  - Acts 16:37 But Paul said to them, "They have beaten us in public without trial, men who are Romans, and have thrown us into prison; and now are they sending us away secretly? No indeed! But let them come themselves and bring us out."
- It meant that you had a right to be free from torture or scourging.
  - Acts 22:24-29 "...the commander ordered him to be brought into the barracks, stating that he should be examined by scourging so that he might find out the reason why they were shouting against him that way. <sup>25</sup> But when they stretched him out with thongs, Paul said to the centurion who was standing by, "Is it lawful for you to scourge a man who is a Roman and uncondemned?" <sup>26</sup> When the

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centurion heard *this*, he went to the commander and told him, saying, “What are you about to do? For this man is a Roman.”<sup>27</sup> The commander came and said to him, “Tell me, are you a Roman?” And he said, “Yes.”<sup>28</sup> The commander answered, “I acquired this citizenship with a large sum of money.” And Paul said, “But I was actually born *a citizen*.”<sup>29</sup> Therefore those who were about to examine him immediately let go of him; and the commander also was afraid when he found out that he was a Roman, and because he had put him in chains.

- Acts 23:27 "When this man was arrested by the Jews and was about to be slain by them, I came up to them with the troops and rescued him, having learned that he was a Roman."
- Note: Jesus was not afforded this right because He was born in the Province of Judea. John 19:1-3 Pilate then took Jesus and scourged Him.<sup>2</sup> And the soldiers twisted together a crown of thorns and put it on His head, and put a purple robe on Him;<sup>3</sup> and they *began* to come up to Him and say, “Hail, King of the Jews!” and to give Him slaps *in the face*.
- It meant that you had a right to make an appeal to Caesar when facing a death sentence.
  - Acts 25:11 “If, then, I am a wrongdoer and have committed anything worthy of death, I do not refuse to die; but if none of those things is *true* of which these men accuse me, no one can hand me over to them. I appeal to Caesar.”

## Expectations of the Roman citizen.

- What citizenship would it be if you were not willing to fight for it? Freedom is not free in any century, including the first-century. Typically the average citizen would spend a few years in the service to his country and then return back to the civilian life to raise a family. They called that branch of the service the Roman Legion.
- The Roman citizen would still maintain their citizenship even when they relocated in any of the Roman colonies or provinces. Their children would also share in the same citizenship.
- On rare occasions when a citizen was found to have committed acts of treason, they could have their citizenship revoked.

## Three ways to Acquire Roman Citizenship

- Acts 22:28 The commander answered, “I acquired this citizenship with a large sum of money.” And Paul said, “But I was actually born *a citizen*.” Two of the three ways to acquire Roman citizenship are mentioned in this verse.
1. Born Into It: If you were born on any Roman soil and to legally-married Roman citizen parents, you were a Roman citizen. You would have all the rights of a Roman citizen from infancy. You could lose the citizenship under terms of treason or betrayal, but that was rare. This was the status of Paul, for he was born in the city of Tarsus, a Roman city at the time.
  2. Purchase It: The commander stated that he had actually purchased his citizenship status with a “large sum of money”. We do not know the exact amount, but it was a LARGE sum. This would vary based on the economy. It would have been equivalent to many years worth of wages.

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3. Earn It: The third way to acquire citizenship of Rome was through military service. That military path was called the Roman *auxiliaries*, the non-citizen army. If you were willing to serve for at least twenty-five years, citizenship was granted for you and your children.

### Our citizenship of heaven is very much the same.

We are not born into the citizenship, but Born Again into it.

- John 3:3 Jesus answered and said to him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.”

We are not purchasing it with earthly treasure, but through investments in heavenly treasure.

- Matthew 6:20-21 “But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in or steal; <sup>21</sup> for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

We are not to serve twenty-five years in the army, but we serve the rest of our life in the Lord’s army.

- 2 Timothy 2:3-4 Suffer hardship with *me*, as a good soldier of Christ Jesus. <sup>4</sup> No soldier in active service entangles himself in the affairs of everyday life, so that he may please the one who enlisted him as a soldier.
- After the term of service was over, there would be a diploma issued to the soldier. It would list the soldier’s name, his auxiliary, hometown, his wife and children. The marriage would be considered legal and all the members declared as free.
- Archeologists have discovered some of these diplomas from soldiers. One tells of the account of a man named Galba that served for twenty-five years on the Parthian front. When that service was complete, the government finally recognized his marriage to his wife, Pamphylian. Their two sons, who had been illegitimate, were also finally recognized as real citizens. They could buy a home and legally participate in the workings of the government. Imagine the joy that was experienced the day that their citizenship was proclaimed! They were finally somebody!

Closing Point: We were sworn into the Citizenship of Heaven when we were baptized. It was then that we wholeheartedly obeyed a form of teaching that freed us from sin to serve the living God. It was then that we were born again, surrendered our treasures and joined His army as a soldier of God. We are the thrice-confirmed, heaven-bound, hope-having, resurrection-expecting citizens of heaven! Now go out and live the part!