

**PSALM 27**

<sup>1</sup>The LORD is my light and my salvation;  
whom shall I fear?

The LORD is the stronghold of my life;  
of whom shall I be afraid?

<sup>2</sup>When evildoers assail me  
to devour my flesh —  
my adversaries and foes —  
they shall stumble and fall.

<sup>3</sup>Though an army encamp against me,  
my heart shall not fear;  
though war rise up against me,  
yet I will be confident.

<sup>4</sup>One thing I asked of the LORD,  
that will I seek after:  
to live in the house of the LORD  
all the days of my life,  
to behold the beauty of the LORD,  
and to inquire in his temple.

<sup>5</sup>For he will hide me in his shelter  
in the day of trouble;  
he will conceal me under the cover of his tent;  
he will set me high on a rock.

<sup>6</sup>Now my head is lifted up  
above my enemies all around me,  
and I will offer in his tent  
sacrifices with shouts of joy;  
I will sing and make melody to the LORD.

<sup>7</sup>Hear, O LORD, when I cry aloud,  
be gracious to me and answer me!

<sup>8</sup>"Come," my heart says, "seek his face!"  
Your face, LORD, do I seek.

<sup>9</sup>Do not hide your face from me.

Do not turn your servant away in anger,  
you who have been my help.

Do not cast me off, do not forsake me,  
O God of my salvation!

<sup>10</sup>If my father and mother forsake me,  
the LORD will take me up.

<sup>11</sup>Teach me your way, O LORD,  
and lead me on a level path  
because of my enemies.

<sup>12</sup>Do not give me up to the will of my adversaries,  
for false witnesses have risen against me,  
and they are breathing out violence.

<sup>13</sup>I believe that I shall see the goodness of the LORD  
in the land of the living.

<sup>14</sup>Wait for the LORD;  
be strong, and let your heart take courage;  
wait for the LORD!

### **PHILIPPIANS 3:17-4:1**

<sup>17</sup>Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us. <sup>18</sup>For many live as enemies of the cross of Christ; I have often told you of them, and now I tell you even with tears. <sup>19</sup>Their end is destruction; their god is the belly; and their glory is in their shame; their minds are set on earthly things. <sup>20</sup>But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>21</sup>He will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself.

<sup>1</sup>Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved.

### **SERMON**

Paul writes to the church in Philippi from Rome, where he was in prison, waiting trial for some unknown capital offence having to do with his evangelism. This letter has come to be known as a sort of cross between a love letter and a thank you note. Paul cares deeply for this little church, he is so grateful for the way they have provided for his continued ministry and care by sending help in the form of

both money and the person Epaphroditus, a member of their community they sent to care for Paul while he was in prison. Sometimes Paul would write to other churches because things were going off the rails, members were having big knock down, drag out fights over one thing or another. But not here. Not in Philippi. So far as we can tell, this was just a good, solid little church, and Paul was writing to them to express his affection and gratitude, and, you know, offer a bit of advice and counsel.

In order to understand Paul's letter to the church in Philippi, it's important to actually understand the town of Philippi. And for our story this morning there are really two relevant pieces of information. The first starts with one of the defining moments of the ancient world was the assassination of Julius Caesar. Et tu Brute? And all that. Famous enough to be immortalized in a play by the inimitable Shakespeare. The assassination of Caesar was the culmination of a long laid plan of partisans within the Roman Republic, led by Brutus and Gaius Cassius, and the assassination sparked the Roman Civil War. Brutus and Gaius Cassius amassed armies and went to war with Marc Antony and Octavian, who were loyal to Julius Caesar. The war was divisive and bloody, as civil wars always are, and it came to a culmination in the battle of Philippi, on the green outside of this small town on the north edge of the Aegean Sea, sort of smack in between where modern Greece and Turkey lie. The battle raged outside this little town, and to shrink thousands of years of military history into the merest highlight: Marc Antony and Octavian, representing the legacy of Julius Caesar, they won. Both Gaius Cassius and Brutus killed themselves upon witnessing the violent and crushing defeat. Antony and Octavian took the remaining enemy soldiers and brought them into their established

army. And in celebration of the end of this long, drawn out civil war, they released the oldest of the veterans from their service. Some of the veterans returned to Rome and lived out their retirement in Italy. But the rest of the veterans remained right there, in the small town of Philippi. They were given land and the ability to remain in peace. And Philippi sort of became a Roman Military Retirement village of sorts. A first century BCE VFW.

Philippi continued this tradition for years. Throughout the next generations groups of retired Roman military men and their families were given plots of land and the opportunity to live out their days in the community of Philippi. The residents there were very, very loyal to the emperor, as you might imagine, and the city grew to have a booming religious and political cult in celebration of the Caesar.

Now, the other thing you should know about Philippi is that it sat directly in the middle of the Via Egnatia. One of the things that made Rome so very powerful was their system of roads. The Roman Empire was famous for constructing and maintaining beautiful, well-travelled roads between major cities of the world. The Via Egnatia was the main East-West drag of the Empire, connecting the Western Empire, and the capital city of Rome to the Eastern Empire, whose capital was Byzantium. Sort of the ancient I-80 or I-90. It was an oft travelled and very important road, for political and communication reasons, but also for commerce and trade. Philippi, this little outpost of retired military folks, it was right on the Via Egnatia, a little gem in the Roman crown. Philippi was about as Roman a town as you could find. And this is part of the key to understanding the Apostle Paul's letter to the little church founded there.

It's a sweet letter, well worth your time to read as a whole, but today we're looking at just a short section. A few pieces of advice: live as imitators of Christ, not like those enemies, Paul says. "Their god is the belly. Their glory is shame." What he's talking about here is the cult of the emperor, the Roman pagan religion. He's making a comment on the fact that much of the emperor worship of the day involved sacrificing meat to idols, and then people would eat the meat, their god is literally the belly. But, Paul is also casting a side eye at this popular religion: it doesn't amount to anything. All they get is some meat sacrificed to idols. That's not a worthwhile faith. Their glory is their shame. They're only concerned about earthly things.

But not us. Not us, says Paul. No. Our citizenship is in heaven.

Now, just pause for a minute and remember who Paul is writing to. Think about this. The people of the Philippian church live in Philippi...the retirement home of the Roman Legion. Philippi was the heart of the cult of the emperor outside of Rome. This proud little town smack in the middle of the Via Egnatia. This wasn't just any random town. Paul is writing to people who represent the most Roman of the Roman Empire. Their citizenship is to Rome. They have flag bumper stickers. They wear flag draped bikinis to their BBQs. They always stand at attention for the pledge of allegiance, and baseball games do not start without singing the full national anthem. These, my friends, are the Roman-iest of Romans.

Now, granted, at this early point in Christian history, probably around 50 or 60 CE, the members of this little church, in all

likelihood they weren't veterans of the Roman Guard. But...they were the servants and slaves of the veterans. They were the wives and daughters of the Roman Guard. They were living in the homes and walking the same streets as the Roman Guard.

And here comes Paul, your citizenship is in heaven. Those are fighting words. And make no mistake, Paul knows **exactly** what he's saying to them and he's saying it intentionally.

Now, first of all, let's just make sure we make something clear here: Paul is not saying that their citizenship isn't with Rome. Not at all. In fact, Paul on many occasions wrote about his own Roman citizenship. He was proud to be a citizen, and he took advantage of the fact that his rights as a Roman citizen provided him with the right to a trial and a few other advantages while he was imprisoned over the years. Paul was not telling the Philippians to go out and burn it all down. Quite to the contrary, Paul valued his earthly citizenship to Rome and didn't take it for granted.

But what Paul told the Christians at Philippi, and I think he'd say to us today, is that as people of faith, we hold a higher citizenship: we are citizens of the Kingdom of God. And sometimes, as was the case then and is the case now, our citizenship in the Kingdom of God will run counter to our citizenship in the nation to which we belong. And that's the friction we should take note of. In Paul's theology there's an order of operations for citizenship. Our citizenship in the kingdom of God trumps our earthly citizenship, although so often the two coexist perfectly peacefully together.

So, here's an example of how this would have been a challenge in Philippi: in the Roman Empire, people were not just expected, but actually required to worship their emperor as the very son of God, the great leader and god of the people of Rome. It was a national religion. The Emperor was both political leader and god. The people of Philippi loved this. They were good Roman citizens and they were a key outpost in the cult of the emperor. When I say "cult" of the emperor, you just go ahead and imagine the whole nine yards: temples, idols, sacrifices, festivals and celebrations. This wasn't an optional thing for the people of Rome, it was a requirement of their citizenship.

Now, of course, that seems to stand in pretty clear odds with our citizenship in the kingdom of God, no? How about "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, you shall have no others Gods before me"? Sound familiar? Yep. First Commandment. Or how about not bowing down to idols? Yeah, that's number 2. Or, the greatest Commandment of Jesus, to Love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength? Not a lot of room for honoring the idol of the emperor in any of those three!

So, Paul is setting up a real conflict here. Kingdom of God, Republic of Rome. And Paul's asking kind of a big thing from his little church: your citizenship is to God's kingdom, first. If the state is asking you to worship idols, you just can't do it. Even at great personal cost. Even if you look foolish to your neighbors. Even if you run the risk of a criminal offense. Your citizenship is in the kingdom of heaven, first. You're a citizen of Rome, second. And remember, Paul is actually in prison as he writes this letter, thrown in there for the

very act of putting his heavenly citizenship and loyalty to Christ above the requirements of the Empire.

But, Paul assures the church, you don't need to worry about this. All of your humiliations, all of your struggles, any shame you suffer as a citizen of heaven, it will be transformed. Christ will come, and as all things were made by God and ultimately belong to God, everything will be put right, in its correct order. In the end, the Kingdom of Heaven will prevail over the kingdoms of this world.

For Paul, he never saw this come to fruition. In fact, Paul took his own advice to the extreme. So far as we can tell from ancient sources, Paul was beheaded in Rome under the Emperor Nero, for refusing to put the demands of the Roman Empire and its religion before the convictions and laws of the Christian God. Your citizenship lies in heaven. This is not mere whimsy or puffy, sweet theology. This is the very concept that cost Paul, and so many other early Christians, their lives. It's an idea that costs Christians their lives still, today. In Germany, many Christians who hid Jews in their homes, in order to live out the commandment to love our neighbors, they were killed. In China, many Christians who gathered to read scripture, to pray, and to sing together suffered life long prison sentences and even death for practicing their faith in defiance of the state. And for us, I am so utterly grateful that in America we aren't even thinking about the cost of our worship, because we're allowed to do so freely. But I do wonder, when the values of our government or our economy or our culture run counter to our citizenship in heaven, how do we respond? Do we speak up for Muslims, in order to fully love our neighbors, when they are maligned in the press or used by politicians as rhetorical punching bags? Do we resist the



urge to buy more and more stuff, when confronted with a Jesus who said, sell everything you own, give it to the poor? Faith is going to convict us each a little differently, but there isn't a government in the history of humankind who hasn't had a bit of friction with the commands of the Christian faith.

So, like the church in Philippi, let's consider these words of Paul, and let's try to have eyes to see and hearts to understand the places of conflict in our dual citizenship, and then let's trust that the promises of Jesus are durable and real: that in everything we give up to be citizens of the kingdom of God, we're doing so because we believe in a God who made all things, and to whom all things belong, and that in the end, everything will be brought to fulfillment in Christ, and as citizens of Christ's kingdom, we can be participants in this good work.