

CITIZENS OF THE CITY OF GOD

Hebrews 12:22-24

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PROLOGUE

Martin Luther found both strength and courage to face the difficulties of life by remembering his baptism. More and more churches today are providing ways for Christians to remember their baptism. Remembering your baptism does not mean recollecting the specific circumstances of the event. If you were baptized as a young child it would be difficult to recall the experience. On the other hand, if you were baptized as a youth or an adult you may well recall the experience and it may have been emotionally meaningful for you. I know it was for me. And that's wonderful. But, that also is not what we mean by remembering your baptism. Rather to remember your baptism is to remember what it means and resolve before others to live it out in daily life.

SCRIPTURE

But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, {23} and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, {24} and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel (Hebrews 12:22-24 NRSV).

INTRODUCTION

Seeking freedom and opportunity, more people want to become citizens of the United States than any other nation on earth. What is more, Supreme Court rulings (1967, 1980) have made dual citizenship possible. A person can be a citizen of the U.S. and a citizen of another country.

But the concept of dual citizenship is not new. Christians have known about it for two thousand years. Originally the word citizen referred to someone who belonged to a particular city. So we can say a Christian is one who is a citizen of a community on earth while also being a citizen of a heavenly-based community called the City of God. The first citizenship is temporary. The second is eternal.

There is a ceremony that represents becoming a citizen of the City of God. It called baptism. By itself it does not confer citizenship but points to the promise of citizenship through faith in Jesus Christ. I like the way Eugene Peterson describes a new citizen in his translation of Ephesians:

That's plain enough, isn't it? You're no longer wandering exiles. This kingdom of faith is now your home country. You're no longer strangers or outsiders. You belong here, with as much right to the name Christian as anyone (Eph 2:19 MESSAGE).

A century ago, before members of a Presbyterian Church were allowed to take communion, they were examined by the elders and asked, "Are you living your baptism?" This is no longer a requirement for communion but the question is still important, "Are you living your baptism?"

Unfortunately, for many Christians today, baptism is regarded as an isolated event from our personal past. We think of baptism in much the same way we think of the smallpox vaccination we received as children - a good thing at the time, perhaps, but not something you spend a lot of time contemplating in the present.

John Calvin argued that the benefits of baptism are not restricted to the time we experienced it. There are benefits to be gained the whole course of life and beyond because the promises which are contained in baptism are perpetually in force. One of these promises is the promise of citizenship in the City of God. There is much to be gained if we think about what this means.

1. CITIZENS OF A SPIRITUAL CITY

It means that those who trust in Jesus Christ are citizens of a spiritual city.

Many think if something is spiritual it must be boring. Look at the way heaven is depicted in popular fiction (walking around on clouds and playing harps all day). It makes it sound so dull so as to be avoided at all costs.

Three buddies die in a car crash then they go to heaven to an orientation. They are all asked, "When you are in your casket and friends and family are mourning over you, what would you like to hear them say about you? The first one says, "I would like to hear them say that I was one of the finest doctors of my time." The second one says, "I would like to hear that I was a wonderful husband and school teacher who made a huge difference in our children of tomorrow." The last one replies, "I would like to hear them say.....LOOK, HE'S MOVING!"

But spiritual refers to life that is more real, not less. The spiritual nature of the City of God means that it is not short-lived, superficial or shadowy. It is eternal, wholistic and full of life.

The City of God is created by covenant. A covenant is a relationship based on commitment

and promises. Marriage is an example of a covenant. When we talk about *The Covenant* we are talking about the special relationship that exists between God and his people.

The author of Hebrews contrasts the temporary nature of the old covenant with the eternal nature of the new. This is the difference between the physical mountain where the law was given, Mount Sinai; and the spiritual mountain, Mount Zion where grace and truth were made clear. Zion was one of the hills upon which ancient Jerusalem was built. After a time it came to represent the city in a spiritual sense. It is also known as the heavenly Jerusalem or the city of the living God.

The premise of the Old Covenant was that human beings have a broken relationship with their Creator. This is the result of humanity's sinful rebellion against God. The consequence is spiritual and physical death and separation from God. The Old Covenant, as instituted by Moses established animal sacrifice to communicate the seriousness of sin and the cost of repairing the damage.

"For the life of a creature is in the blood, and I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar; it is the blood that makes atonement for one's life" (Lev 17:11 NIV).

Atonement is a kind of reconciliation, specifically, reconciliation to God made possible by a costly sacrifice which removes the effects of sin.

The premise of the New Covenant is the same as the Old: Our relationship to God has been broken. Furthermore, while the animal sacrifices under the Old Covenant pointed to the possibility of atonement, the sacrifice of Christ on the cross makes this a reality. The blood of Abel cries out for retribution whereas the blood of Jesus speaks of grace and pardon. Through faith in Jesus Christ we receive the benefits of his death. We gain friendship with God, forgiveness of all our sins and the promise of eternal life. These are but a few of the benefits of citizenship in the City of God.

2. CITIZENS OF A GLORIOUS CITY

Those who trust in Jesus Christ are also citizens of a glorious city.

John of Patmos tries to describe the City of God in the Book of Revelation. Among other things he says:

The wall is built of jasper, while the city is pure gold, clear as glass. {19} The foundations of the wall of the city are adorned with every jewel... {21} And the twelve gates are twelve pearls, each of the gates is a single pearl, and the street of the city is pure gold, transparent as glass (Rev 21:18-19, 21 NRSV).

Some people think this means that heaven will be a place of great material wealth. You may have heard the story of the rich man who died and went to heaven and then complained that he wasn't allowed to bring his wealth with him. So he was told he could return to earth and bring back just one suitcase full of his possessions. Trying to be clever he filled his suitcase with gold bars. When he returned to heaven he was asked to show everyone what was in his suitcase. When he opened it Saint Peter said, "You brought pavement?"

Heaven is good. John uses priceless materials to describe a spiritual reality. The symbolism is not meant to point to wealth or luxury but to glory – the glory of God and his people. This is a vision of the completed company of the people of God, assembled around Christ in the heavenly places. D. A. Carson says:

We may now enjoy membership of that church by faith. If our names are written on the roll of the heavenly city, we will one day enjoy the full rights of citizenship.

Heaven is good. John says there will be no sea. If you are like me and enjoy the water then this may come as an unpleasant surprise. But the word "sea" here is being used symbolically. The ancient Israelites had a fear of the sea. For them it represented chaos and destruction. So what John is saying is chaos and destruction will be absent from heaven.

There will be no tears. God will wipe them away. Perhaps as a small child you fell and hurt yourself and then with tears streaming ran to find your mother who would kiss it and make it all better, wiping away your tears with her gentle hand. John is telling us that God is like a loving mother. This life is a life of tears with all the pain and hurt that causes them. But someday that will end. God will kiss it and it will be all better. God will wipe away every tear.

Heaven is good. It is important to note what else will be missing in heaven. Other things that will be absent include: sorrow, death, darkness, ungodly people, sin, and the curse from Adam's sin.

Heaven is good. There are things that we know will be present: believers (saints), the river of the water of life, healing fruit, the lamb of God, worship, service, the wedding feast of the Lamb and his Bride, the unveiled face of God, and the Sun of Righteousness.

Heaven is good. While believers will enjoy fellowship with their God and Savior there is no reason to suppose they will not recognize and fellowship with those believers they knew on earth. It is, after all, a glorious city, the abode of all things good.

3. CITIZENS OF A REDEMPTIVE CITY

Those who trust in Jesus Christ are also citizens of a redemptive city.

Many people are bothered by the fact that heaven is described as a city. This is not what we expected. It goes against our experience. We tend to associate large urban areas with bad things like pollution, crime, noise and overcrowding. We long to escape from such places and seek the beauty and solace of natural surroundings. We feel especially close to the Creator when we behold the breath-taking majesty of high mountains, the robust symphony of the ocean, the artist's canvass of colors by lakes and forests. So it comes as quite a shock to think that heaven is more like New York City and less like the Grand Canyon.

To understand this we need to look at what the Bible means by city. The first biblical city was Enoch, built by Cain and named after his son. Cain was the one who asked the haunting question, "Am I my brother's keeper?" (Gen 4:9). The answer was supposed to be "yes" but Cain gave it a murderous "no" and slew his brother. Ever since then, the word "city" has been symbolic in the Bible for brother-hating.

Here then is the message of heaven. Heaven is not escape from the city. It is the redemption of the city. To use the language of Augustine - The City of Man has been invaded by the City of God. It is the end of hate and the restoration of brother-keeping, that is, caring for one another regardless of our perceived differences. It is the end of the earthly Enoch and the establishment of the heavenly Jerusalem.

As citizens of the City of God we are ambassadors for the city. We are to represent the redemptive power of God's love in the world. We are to proclaim the end of hate and the triumph of compassion. We are to tell the world the Good News of Jesus Christ.

CONCLUSION

U.S. astronaut Shannon Lucid spent six months on the Russian space station Mir back in 1996. She accidentally set the American record for time in space. This was because her ride home was delayed several weeks by two hurricanes and various technical problems with the shuttle and the station. At first she met the delay with patient resolve. But as the days wore on, she knew where she would rather be. According to a report from CNN, she said, "I'm very, very anxious to go back to my real home." Finally, the shuttle Atlantis arrived to take her home. But before she left, she said these words, "Rest assured, that I will not be on the wrong side of the hatch when they close it." And she went home.

This is not unlike our journey of faith. The City of God is our home, our real home. And Jesus Christ is the hatch, if you will. Through him we enter this vast new country of grace and freedom, where we will love and be loved, enjoy and be enjoyed forever as citizens of an eternal kingdom.