**Standing Firm in Christ: Citizenship in Heaven, Purpose on Earth**

 **Scripture** **Philippians 3:17-4:1 and Luke 13:31-35 (NRSVUE)**

This morning, we are going to review two passages that speak to our identity, our purpose, and our hope. In Philippians, Paul calls believers to a heavenly citizenship that transforms our earthly journey. In Luke, we witness Jesus’ lamenting over Jerusalem, revealing God's heart toward His people. These passages join to show you faithful discipleship amid life's challenges.

To understand the significance of Paul's words, we must first appreciate the unique setting of Philippi and the circumstances of Paul's letter. Philippi was a Roman colony in Macedonia, established primarily for retired Roman soldiers. As a colony, it operated as a "little Rome," so to speak, with residents who were proud of their Roman citizenship and the privileges it offered.

Paul writes this letter while in prison. Despite his imprisonment, the letter resonates with joy and affection for the Philippian community. It is a deeply personal correspondence to a church that had supported Paul financially and remained faithful to the gospel he preached.

The passage we are examining comes near the end of the letter, where Paul offers final encouragement to the community. He has just recounted his own spiritual journey, rejecting his former credentials and privileges for the sake of knowing Christ. Now, he calls the Philippians to follow his example and contrasts two ways of living: one oriented toward earthly values and one oriented toward heavenly citizenship.

Paul begins with a call to imitation: "Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us." This call was countercultural. Instead of pointing to wealthy or influential individuals as models, Paul—a prisoner—presents himself as an example. The emphasis on "us" suggests that Paul is not alone; Timothy and other faithful believers also embody this Christ-centered life.

Paul then introduces a stark contrast: "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." The cross represents self-giving love, humility, and sacrifice—the antithesis of self-indulgence, pride, and status-seeking. Paul's emotional response reveals his deep grief over their misguided path.

Paul reminds them of a more central allegiance—their citizenship in God's kingdom. This heavenly citizenship establishes present obligations and shapes their current identity. Just as Roman citizens in Philippi represented Roman values, Christians are called to embody heavenly values in the world—an outpost of heaven on earth.

Paul says, "we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ." The title "Savior" was commonly applied to the Roman emperor. Paul deliberately uses imperial language to make a subversive point: the true Savior and Lord is not Caesar but Jesus Christ. This coming Savior will "transform the body of our shame so that it may be conformed to the body of his glory." The scope of Christ's redemptive work encompasses not just individual bodies but the entire universe.

Paul concludes with a warm address: "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." The accumulation of endearments reveals the deep bond between Paul and this community. Standing firm is not an individual task but a shared one—a community collectively embodying Christ-like character.

Turning to Luke, his audience was mainly Gentile Christians who needed to understand Jesus' ministry within Jewish context. Our passage occurs during Jesus' journey to Jerusalem—not merely geographical but theological—as Jesus purposefully heads toward confrontation with religious authorities.

Some Pharisees approach with a warning about Herod. Jesus' response is bold: "Go and tell that fox for me..." The characterization of Herod as a "fox" is not flattering. In Jewish context, foxes were considered destructive pests and symbols of cunning but ineffective leadership. Jesus is dismissing Herod's threat as the scheme of a ruler who lacks true power to thwart God's purposes.

Jesus then outlines his determined course: "I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work." This figurative statement indicates Jesus will complete his divinely appointed mission regardless of opposition. The reference to "the third day" foreshadows his resurrection.

Jesus' tone shifts from defiance to lament: "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it!" The repetition reflects deep emotion—both love for the city and grief over its resistance to God's messengers. Jesus expresses his longing: "How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!"

Both passages read today address opposition to God's redemptive work while maintaining hope despite rejection. Paul envisions transformation despite present suffering. Jesus anticipates future reconciliation despite Jerusalem's rejection. This hope grounds Christian engagement with a resistant world, acknowledging present darkness while working faithfully for the dawn to come.

Philippians and Luke remind you that you are citizens of heaven called to embody Christ-like character amid your earthly pressures. They invite you to imitate Christ's self-giving love and lament in a world that often rejects it. In a society characterized by polarization, self-absorption, and despair, these ancient words offer a unique way—heavenly citizenship expressed in earthly faithfulness, truth-telling animated by unfailing love, and stubborn hope that persists even when rejected.

These passages do not offer simplistic answers or promise easy paths. They acknowledge the reality of suffering, opposition, and rejection. Yet they ground these realities within a larger narrative of God's unfailing love and ultimate redemption. They call us to "stand firm in the Lord" while remaining tender-hearted toward a world that God longs to gather under protective wings.

So, I urge you today: Embrace your heavenly citizenship. Like Paul, choose Christ above all earthly credentials and status. Stand firm together as a community that embodies Christ's values in a world that often rejects them. When faced with opposition, respond with both Christ's determined faithfulness and his compassionate lament. Remember that your truest identity is not found in your nationality, your occupation, or your social status, but in your belonging to God's kingdom.

This week, identify one area where worldly values have crept into your priorities. Release it, and replace it with a kingdom priority. In your daily interactions, live as an ambassador of heaven—speaking truth with love, extending grace to enemies, and continuing with hope that surpasses your circumstances. For you are citizens of heaven, eagerly awaiting your Savior who will make all things new.

Amen.