

# Gospel Gleanings, “...especially the parchments”

Volume 32, Number 17

April 26, 2015



## Heavenly Citizenship: Homeward Bound

*For our conversation is in heaven; from whence also we look for the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ: Who shall change our vile body, that it may be fashioned like unto his glorious body, according to the working whereby he is able even to subdue all things unto himself. (Philippians 3:20–21, KJV 1900)*

Our English language is a “Living” language, meaning that people still speak it and write it, so it undergoes continuous change. Words that meant one thing a generation or a century ago evolve and take on different meanings. Such is the case with the word “conversation” that appears in our study passage. For us, “conversation” exclusively refers to verbal communication, to dialogue. In past times, the word had a different meaning. Consider the first three definitions that appear in the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*.

1 The action of living or having one's being in, among.

G. Stanhope. Proneness to Idolatry, which a long Conversation in Egypt had disposed them to.

2 The action of consorting (with); intimacy.

Milton. The good and peace of wedded conversation.

3 Behaviour, mode of life. arch.

AV. Ps. 50:23 Him that ordereth his conversation aright.

The fifth definition relates to our present use of the word as verbal dialogue. Obviously, over time this word has undergone changes in its accepted meaning. Without some appreciation for what the word meant to former generations, it would seem that the King James translators chose an unusual word in “conversation” in this passage.

If we think in terms of verbal dialogue, and if we recall that our God is omniscient, all-knowing, not only is the conversation of saved people known in heaven, but God knows all the words spoken by all people, and even their secret most thoughts. This word meaning doesn't relate well at all to the passage.

In the first definition above, one could easily and logically move from living among a certain people to being a citizen in that culture or country. All respected New Testament Greek dictionaries that I've checked agree on the word used and its meaning.

...the place or location in which one has the right to be a citizen—'state, commonwealth, place of

citizenship.' ...'our place of citizenship is in heaven' Php 3:20.<sup>1</sup>

I was born in the USA and, with brief exceptions, lived my whole life within its borders. Last summer Sandra and I spent almost two weeks in Europe with our daughter and her family. While we enjoyed our time there, I noticed that the longer we were there the more we talked and thought about home. Reflecting on this experience, I am quite comfortable with the word the translators chose. Paul proved his “Citizenship” by his frequent references to his true “Homeland” in all of his letters. Given the general belief that 2 Timothy was Paul's last letter, possibly written shortly before his death, his “...the time of my departure is at hand” comment is quite revealing. (2 Timothy 4:6) At that time, Paul was thinking far more about going “Home” to the Lord than about his present pilgrimage, soon to end. Earlier when he wrote to the Philippians (Philippians 1:21-24), he acknowledged the conflicting tugs at his heart. On one side, he longed to depart this alien world and go “Home” to be with Christ. On the other side, he longed to remain and minister to the Philippians and others for their spiritual growth and comfort. Even as he found peace for the moment in remaining, Paul longed for and “Talked about” his home in heaven.

If we fully embrace the pilgrim mindset that Scripture urges upon us, the trials of this life diminish in significance to us, and we long increasingly for “Home.” This outlook views our present life as a journey away from our true native land, but we are ever traveling toward that land which draws us to long for it and to eagerly anticipate our arrival there. Home, home at last.

We often overlook Scripture's connective words, those simple parts of speech that link a present thought to something before or after in the contextual flow. Paul begins our study verse with “For,” so we need to associate his present longing

<sup>1</sup> Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 131.

reflection of heaven with what he had just mentioned to the Philippians.

Brethren, be followers together of me, and mark them which walk so as ye have us for an ensample. (For many walk, of whom I have told you often, and now tell you even weeping, that they are the enemies of the cross of Christ: Whose end is destruction, whose God is their belly, and whose glory is in their shame, who mind earthly things.) (Philippians 3:17-19)

If the conduct of the wicked people whom Paul described in these verses at all reflected their "Citizenship," their country of origin, no wonder that Paul urged the Philippians to manifest by their lifestyle that they belonged to a different world, country, and culture. By standing distinctly apart from this world's wickedness, we may become followers of Paul, and we are definitely inclined to notice and take note of, or "mark" other people whose lifestyle reveals that they also belong to our "Homeland." Paul sets two options before us and urges us to adopt one and to utterly reject the other. We may follow Paul as Paul follows Christ. (1 Corinthians 11:1) Or we may follow those whose walk, whose "Citizenship" is characterized by their conduct; they are enemies of the cross of Christ. When people who claim to be believers in Jesus strive to live as Christians on Sunday, but invest much of their time during the other six days of the week trying to live wholly in the world, to fit into the culture and twisted morality that it imposes on its "Citizens," they are trying to claim dual citizenship, in conduct denying their exclusive citizenship in heaven. This conduct brings the Lord's chastening heavily down upon those who choose this path. How effective will their life's testimony be to their native country? To borrow from an old movie, they sadly become "The Ugly American," someone whose lifestyle reflects badly on their homeland. When the inevitable trials and disappointments of life shatter their fantasy world, and they try to pray for help, what is likely to occur?

*If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me.* (Psalm 66:18)

*...from whence also we look for the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ.* Don't put too much emphasis on the fact that the Second Coming didn't occur in Paul's lifetime. His spiritual journey was no different from ours. Just as you and I think of the Second Coming and quietly hope that it might come in our lifetime, so did Paul. In the scale of eternal reality, whether we are alive at the Second Coming or dead, the actual difference to us will likely be no more than about six feet, the approximate depth of our casket in the cemetery. Whether He comes in our lifetime or thousands of years yet future, Paul's generation of believers looked for Him, and so do we. As they struggled against the hostile climate of

a world that refused to respect their citizenship, so do we.

*Who shall change our vile body, that it may be fashioned like unto his glorious body.* Only God could consistently fill human language with such precision and supernatural efficiency. How much do these words communicate? How much error do they refute?

*Who shall change our vile body...* In simple words that can comfort a child, Paul affirms the truth of a literal bodily resurrection. God shall not leave our present physical body in the ground. He shall not fabricate a new and different body for us for heaven and eternity. He shall change our present body, our body that is presently "vile" according to heaven's holy measure of purity. This language cannot be credibly twisted so as not to refer specifically and exclusively to the same body in which we presently live. As full of conflict as we now are in this body, as focused as our present conflict is on this "vile body," it is this same body that the Lord redeemed (Ephesians 1:14) and shall change in the resurrection at His return.

*...that it may be fashioned like unto his glorious body.* Paul does not leave the change to our imagination. Scripture doesn't tell us everything about heaven, but make no mistake. **Scripture tells us much about that world of our true citizenship.**

*...according to the working whereby he is able even to subdue all things unto himself.* We think of our present literal body and must come to grips with the monumental conflict between it and everything that Scripture reveals about heaven. We might even question at times with Job, "If a man die, shall he live again?" (Job 14:14) And we need not leave that same verse to learn Job's answer, "*...all the days of my appointed time will I wait, till my change come.*" You see, when we read Scripture, whether in the life of Job or of Paul, we see a common longing for heaven and home, for the Lord's return and our resurrection. Occasionally folks who are inclined to deny that Scripture teaches anything about the Lord's final return and our resurrection will demean Paul and other New Testament writers, suggesting that they mistakenly believed that the Second Coming would occur in their lifetime. Not so, they reveal the common longing of the citizens of heaven who trek their way through this pilgrimage. Like Job and like us, they grew tired in their pilgrimage and longed for their homeland. Paul confronts every hindrance, every problem, everything that we might view as an insurmountable obstacle to our body's resurrection and enjoyment of heaven, and he reminds us that our loving God is quite capable, "able" to subdue any and all obstacles that stand between eternity in glorious fellowship in His presence and our present pilgrim distance from that glory world. Yes, we join those first century saints, "Come quickly, Lord Jesus." Truly, today we are "Homeward Bound"!

Little Zion Primitive Baptist Church  
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Bellflower, California

Worship service each Sunday  
Joseph R. Holder

10:30 A. M.  
Pastor