

# CITIZENS AND CHILDREN

## Ephesians 2:19

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Then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God (Eph. 2:19).

In 1962, William Edgar arrived as a 17-year-old freshman at Harvard University. As he tells it, his life was focused around a trinity that consisted of soccer, French existential philosophy, and jazz piano. As he recounts in *Finding God at Harvard*, Edgar's freshman year was humbling: he found others who were better at soccer and piano and few who cared about his philosophy. By his sophomore year he was starting to adjust, when he took a survey course in Western literature. As often happens in universities, this class had one large lecture with the professor and then smaller discussion classes with teaching assistants. Edgar's teaching assistant was an articulate Christian named Harold O.J. Brown, who would go on to be one of the great theology professors of our time. Through Brown's Christian critique of literature and personal discussions outside of class, Edgar was introduced to a new Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. On his teacher's advice, he spent his sophomore summer at the Swiss Christian community, L'Abri, with the renowned apologist, Francis Schaeffer. When Edgar returned to Harvard for his junior year it was as a committed Christian.

Edgar's return to Harvard involved considerable change for him. He mainly remembered that everything seemed new and alive because he was alive to God. He abandoned his unbelieving philosophy. He

regained his love for soccer, no longer needing to be the best but only to do his best. His music was especially impacted, and he sought out the Christian spirituality beneath much of the jazz music he loved. As many college-age converts have found, perhaps the most challenging changes were social. “Some of my friends thought I had become a little strange!” he remembers. “Though they did not exactly abandon me, I felt they were studying me. More challenging still, in my newfound faith I felt obliged to seek out other Christians.”<sup>1</sup>

## ALIENS NO MORE

What Edgar experienced is completely consistent with Paul’s explanation of Christian salvation in Ephesians chapter 2. Ephesians 2:1-10 says we begin as sinners who are saved in a spiritual resurrection by God’s grace, through faith in Christ. The second half of chapter 2 looks at salvation from a more corporate perspective. Starting in verse 12, Paul reminds us that apart from Christ we were aliens to God’s people and covenant, and therefore “without hope and without God in the world.” When we trust in Christ and are saved, we not only become new individuals but enter into new relationships. We become citizens of God’s kingdom together with the saints, we become children together with brothers and sisters in God’s household, and we become part of a building, a living temple, in which God lives in the Spirit. All of these are the results that flow to us in Jesus Christ and which we enjoy with all other believers.

In this study we are going to look at the first two of these new relationships brought about by Christ, starting with *citizenship in God’s kingdom*. Paul writes, “So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints” (Eph. 2:19). God rules over an eternal kingdom, and having come to God through faith in Christ we are no longer aliens to it but we have become citizens of it.

Paul uses two words here to describe our former condition, the first of which is *strangers*, people who belong somewhere else but are

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<sup>1</sup> William Edgar, “Disillusioned” in *Finding God at Harvard*, ed. Kelly Monroe (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 62.

traveling through. The second word, *aliens*, describes resident foreigners. These are people living among us who hold their citizenship elsewhere.

We all know what it is like to be an outsider, not to fit in or understand the place where we are. Often this comes to us when we are traveling in a different country. We don't know the language or the culture. The food is strange and the people act in ways we don't understand. Furthermore, strangers are treated with suspicion; aliens are not made to feel welcome because their loyalties are different. They don't belong and their presence makes people feel uncomfortable. Undoubtedly, this is how many foreign residents feel about living in the United States. Their status is insecure and much that they experience is unfamiliar and threatening. Strangers and aliens long for home, for acceptance and belonging.

Like it or not, this is what Paul says was true about his Gentile readers before they came to faith in Christ. They were not part of God's kingdom. He used these very terms in verse 12, saying that they were "alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise." God was in the world and he had a people, but they weren't part of that. The fellowship of God and his people was strange and unfamiliar and they had no right to claim a place within it. Unsaved people are the same today. Even when Christians try to be friendly, unbelievers often don't feel comfortable. Their hearts cry out to worship God but they don't know how. They long for truth but they find God's Word strange. They need God in their lives but they don't know how to pray.

This is how it was for Paul's Gentile readers before he came to Ephesus with the gospel. Prior to that time, they groped around in pagan idolatry trying in futility to relate to God. So God sent his own Son into the world to make peace with men by dying on the cross. Through Jesus' resurrection, God sent new life into the world and through the apostles Christ preached his peace. The result was a great change for those who heard and believed; through faith in Christ they became "fellow citizens with the saints."

In our day, citizenship means sharing in the cause of your country and being allowed to vote. This is similar to what happens to us when we

join the church; we take up its cause and have a right to participate in ministry. In Paul's time a bit more was involved in citizenship; citizens had a right to protection that non-citizens did not have. Once, when a mob rose against him in Jerusalem and the Roman commander was going to have him beaten, Paul revealed that he was a Roman citizen. Immediately, the whips were put away and the soldiers protected him. His citizenship granted him the right to appeal to Caesar for justice; in fact, it was while he was waiting for this audience in Rome that Paul wrote his letter to the Ephesians.

Likewise, being a citizen allows us to benefit from God's kingdom. The Romans enjoyed provision, protection, fair government and justice. In America, our citizenship secures for us freedom from unlawful seizure, freedom to make a living. What, then, are the benefits of citizenship in God's kingdom? Our main benefits are spelled out in the new covenant promise, found in Jeremiah 31:31-34 and in Hebrews 8:8-12. God says, "I will put my laws into their minds and write them on their hearts, and I will be their God and they shall be my people... I will be merciful toward their iniquities and remember their sins no more." We might think of these in terms of the three tenses of our salvation: the past tense – justification; the present tense – sanctification; and the future tense – glorification. These are rights that believers gain as citizens of God's kingdom.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus spoke of his Father watching over every hair on our heads, so that citizenship in God's kingdom gives us freedom from anxiety. Our citizenship means that we have the Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ, to rule in us by his love. The Westminster Shorter Catechism says that Jesus executes his office of king "in subduing us to himself, in ruling and defending us, and in restraining and conquering all his and our enemies" (A. 26). The Bible often describes God's kingdom in terms of a great city state, so we can rejoice at Psalm 46's description of the gospel flowing through that city, giving life and peace and joy to all who drink from its waters: "There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God... God is in her, she shall not be moved" (Ps. 46:4-5).

With these privileges come obligations. The Shorter Catechism addresses this simply. In answer to the question, "What is the duty

which God requireth of man,” it says, “The duty which God requireth of man, is obedience to his revealed will” (Q.39). We are to trust God, love God, and serve God, all of which find expression through obedience to the Word of God in the Bible.

When Paul writes of our citizenship in God’s kingdom we should remember where he was at that moment. Paul was in Rome, either in prison or in house arrest. All around him were the great buildings that were a monument to empire. Roman citizenship was the most prized possession one could have. If one did not receive it by birth – and only a few did – then it could only be purchased at great cost. Paul was a Roman citizen, having been raised in the Roman city of Tarsus. But that was not his glory. That was not his source of pride, hope, or confidence. “Our citizenship is in heaven,” he boasted (Phil. 3:20). And as he writes from Rome to these Ephesian Christians, he wants that to be their glory as well.

Imagine Paul saying that to the average Roman of his day. To a Roman, immortality was gained through participation in the greatness of Rome. And here was Paul throwing all that away for the kingdom of a Galilean Messiah. To be a Christian always involves a clash of kingdoms, the kingdoms of this world and the kingdom of God and of Christ. This came through most vividly at Jesus’ trial. Pontius Pilate scoffed at the idea of Jesus being a king. Jesus didn’t have any of the accoutrements. He had no army, no treasury, no badge of office. “So you are a king?” he scoffed. Jesus replied, “My kingdom is not of this world” (Jn. 18:36-37).

Jesus’ kingdom is heavenly and not earthly. That does not make it inferior, but superior. Above all the kingdoms of earth is Christ’s heavenly kingdom. While the Caesars rule over the body, Jesus rules over the soul; while worldly kings may rule affairs in this life, Christ rules over eternity. That is why Paul was no longer impressed by the glory of the Roman empire, and why he gloried only in the kingdom of God in which he had citizenship through faith in Christ.

Verse 19 shows one of the differences between worldly kingdoms and the kingdom of Christ. Paul says, “You are fellow citizens with the saints.” This speaks of the character of God’s kingdom in which we are made citizens, in comparison with that of the world. God’s

kingdom is one of peace, love, and harmony. It is a holy kingdom, in which everyone who joins becomes one with the saints. That refers not to a few super-spiritual giants, but to all the people of God, those made holy by the blood of Christ. Ours is a kingdom of holy union, holy love, and holy purpose. James Boice observes the difference between God's kingdom and the Roman Empire that held Paul captive:

When Paul wrote these words the kingdom of Rome was at the height of its territorial expansion and glory. Rome dominated the world. Roman armies kept peace and dispensed justice. Roman roads linked the far-flung reaches of the Empire. Rome had stood for hundreds of years and was thought to be able to stand for thousands of years more. But Paul looked at Rome and saw it, not as one great united Kingdom, but as a force imposed on mutually antagonistic factions: rich and poor, free man and slave, man and woman, Jew and Gentile. And in its place he saw this new humanity, created by God himself, transcending these boundaries. This kingdom was destined to grow and permeate all nations, drawing from all peoples. It is a kingdom that cannot be shaken or destroyed.<sup>2</sup>

Where is the Roman Empire today? Where are the many empires that have risen and fallen since Paul's time? What is the destiny of every worldly kingdom, but to come and go as God desires. As the apostle John wrote, "The world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever" (1 Jn. 2:17).

Paul realized this as he wrote from his prison cell in Rome. If he would only renounce Christ, or even back off of the gospel, just fitting into the world as it was, he could have kept all that his Roman citizenship offered him. But he saw with a keener vision the realities of faith. He wrote in 2 Corinthians 4:17, "This slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison."

## MEMBERS OF GOD'S HOUSEHOLD

Citizenship in God's kingdom is one result of our salvation in Christ. But Paul goes on to speak of another relationship that is more personal. We may be all members of the same country but not be members of the same family, so Paul is bringing us closer in

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<sup>2</sup> James Montgomery Boice, *Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 90.

when he adds, “and members of the household of God” (Eph. 2:19). Here is a relationship, and a unity with others, that is intimate and intense. Here we have gone from the legal relationship to a spiritual relationship. Just as blood unites a family, God’s Spirit unites all believers as fellow members of his household.

One thing this means is that this relationship is only for those who are born again in Christ Jesus. Jesus said, “You must be born again to even see the kingdom of God” (Jn. 3:3). That is because God’s kingdom is also a family, and just as a family is defined by blood relations, God’s household is bound by an inner, spiritual unity. People may talk about God being everyone’s Father, but the Bible says he is only a Father to those who are his children in Jesus Christ. John 1:12-13 says, “To all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.”

That God should make us members of his own household speaks volumes about his amazing love. It would be enough to praise God through all eternity if he simply refrained from condemning us as sinners. We deserve hell, and God forgives us through Jesus Christ. That alone is more than we could have ever imagined. Martyn Lloyd-Jones writes: “It would have been a wonderful thing if God had merely decided not to leave us in that state and not to punish us. But God’s way of salvation does not stop at that. He elevates us to this dignity of children, He adopts us into His own family.”<sup>3</sup>

Imagine appearing before an uncompromising judge for a crime you most certainly did commit. All the evidence condemns you and you have no defense. But just when your sentence is to be read, the judge tells you that he loves you and that his own son has agreed to serve your sentence, and that, furthermore, he wants you to come home with him, to take his name and be his child, that he will teach you to sin no more and that you will enter into fellowship with others who are beneficiaries of that same love. What would you say to that? You would marvel at his grace and give all the love in your heart to such a

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<sup>3</sup> D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *God’s Way of Reconciliation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 328.

man as that. That is what God does in his love, and through the sacrifice of his Son you are now members of the household of God.

This is the love Jesus presented in his parable of the prodigal son. The son had fallen into sin and squandered his father's estate in immoral living. But when he repented and started home in disgrace, his father saw him coming from a long way off. Jesus tells what happened:

While he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his servants, 'Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.' And they began to celebrate (Lk. 15:20-24).

If you have never come to God the Father through faith in Jesus Christ his Son, this is the love you are missing. This is the celebration that awaits every lost sinner who is a stranger and alien to the grace and salvation of God. God's people are a family that celebrates with great joy every sinner who is saved, and who are preparing now for an eternity together in the light of God's love.

If being a citizen of God's kingdom gives many benefits, how much greater are the benefits that flow from this more intimate relationship. A king must provide for his people, but how much more is a father concerned for his children. As children of God, we have the right to come to God in prayer and have him care for our needs. Jesus said, "Your father in heaven knows what you need before you even ask him" (Mt. 7:8). "If you who are evil know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!" (Mt. 7:11).

Wonderful as is God's Fatherly care in this life, it is far surpassed by what awaits all his children in the life to come. In Romans 8:17, Paul writes that we are "if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him."



## A CHILD OF THE KING

If you put these two together, Paul's teaching that in Christ we are citizens of God's kingdom and children in God's family, then we are rightly described by the hymn that says:

I once was an outcast stranger on earth, a sinner by choice,  
and an alien by birth!

But I've been adopted, my name's written down, an heir to a  
mansion, a robe, and a crown

I'm a child of the King, a child of the King!

With Jesus, my Savior, I'm a child of the King.<sup>4</sup>

These lines express the great reality for everyone who trusts in Jesus Christ. We were strangers and aliens. We did not fit in and we had no place in God's kingdom or his family. We had no real answer for the great problems of life, much less of eternity. Man in sin is estranged from God and from God's blessings. So God in his love sent Jesus Christ to be our peace, to reconcile us to God by suffering the punishment in our place and to bring us into a real community with peace and love. If you are not a Christian, that is what God offers you through his Son, Jesus Christ.

If you are a Christian, then God wants you to know these privileges and blessings that are now your calling. The trouble with so many of our lives is that we do not understand the implications of what it means to be a Christian. We do not realize our position. From the perspective of heaven, during the eternity that is to come, we will be baffled by the attitude we so often now take, by our fixation on the things of earth, our doubting of God's faithful affection, and our lack of concern for the well-being of our brothers and sisters.

So often people think about what they have to give up if they become Christians. It certainly is true that following Christ will involve leaving off former habits and relationships and it certainly means turning away from sins we have loved. William Edgar discovered that when he came to Christ as a Harvard student. But he also learned that God was not narrowing his scope but vastly increasing it; God was

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<sup>4</sup> Hattie E. Buell, "A Child of the King," 1743.

making him a member of his glorious kingdom. God was not stripping him away from relationships where he belonged but entering him into his true home, introducing him to those who would truly love him and with whom he had real spiritual unity. Years later, when his class returned to Harvard for their 25<sup>th</sup> reunion, Edgar had the privilege of preaching in the chapel about the blessings that flow from the death and resurrection of Christ, inviting his classmates to enter God's eternal kingdom for the salvation of their souls. In one of his books, he said of the gospel, "To believe this message is to come home. Like the prodigal in Jesus' parable, we are homeless, lost in an alien land, until we come back home to the Father."<sup>5</sup>

Man was made by God and for God. We each have a God-shaped hole in our hearts that can only be filled by returning to him, by entering God's his kingdom and joining his household as children. Until we do, we are restless, hungry and thirsty for meaning and a place to belong. Through faith in Christ, God offers us nothing less than the fulfillment of these, our greatest and deepest needs. God sent his Son to save us from our sin. But forgiveness is just the beginning, not the end. Jesus Christ saves us to heavenly citizenship and to membership in a family where we belong. Edgar observed, "Much of our contemporary culture is alienated from God. The gospel calls it to come home."<sup>6</sup>

Only God, through Jesus Christ, can make life sacred, can give eternal meaning to our labor, and can offer us a home where we belong forever. When Christians realize that this is what we have, that this is what we are – royal children, princes and princesses in the kingdom and household of God – we won't have to be taught how to live. God simply calls us to be what he has made us in Christ, to serve faithfully in his kingdom and to love one another as brothers and sisters who share in his love.

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<sup>5</sup> William Edgar, *Reasons of the Heart* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 59.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*