

Not of This World — November 6, 2016

*John 17; Citizens of Heaven; Ambassadors for Christ; Lot and Joseph
Contrasted; and James 1*

**Scripture Reading: John 17:8–23; 2 Corinthians 5:17–20;
Philippians 3:20–21; 2 Timothy 2:1–4; Genesis 13:5–13; 19:1–11;
37:13–28; 39; 41:37–43; 45:7–8; Isaiah 55:6–11; James 1:2–25**

“They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world.” (John 17:16)

*“For our commonwealth is in heaven, from whence also we look for the
Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.” (Philippians 3:20)*

Not of the World: Three Times the Lord Said It

In his high priestly prayer in John 17, the Lord says three times, in one form or another, that his own are not of the world as he himself is not of the world. This is not aspirational language; it is a statement of fact about the believer’s position. We are in the world — First Corinthians 5:9–10 makes clear that to avoid all contact with unbelievers we would have to go out of the world entirely, which is not the Lord’s will. We go to school with them, work with them, live beside them. But we do not have to companion with them; and our citizenship, our character, our deepest identity does not belong to this world.

The Lord allows difficult things in his people’s circumstances sometimes to exercise conscience, sometimes to wake up the worldly-minded believer who has drifted. Nebuchadnezzar, after his restoration, acknowledged that God puts the basest of men on thrones according to his sovereign purposes. God remains in control of everything that happens, including what he permits to governments and nations.

Three Marks of the Believer's Relationship to This World

Three passages give three marks of how believers should relate to the world. First, 2 Corinthians 5:18–20: we have been given the ministry of reconciliation, and we are ambassadors for Christ. An ambassador represents his own country in a foreign land. He does not get involved in the local politics, does not join the local government, does not advocate for the foreign country's causes. His whole purpose is to represent his own nation. We are ambassadors for Christ in a world that is not our country.

Second, Philippians 3:20–21: our commonwealth — our citizenship, our politics — is in heaven, from whence we look for the Savior. Whatever civil citizenship we hold, our primary citizenship is heavenly. I sanctify myself that they also might be sanctified (John 17:19): the Lord set himself apart for the disciples so that they would have an object in heaven. That object sets us apart from all the world's systems and causes.

Third, 2 Timothy 2:3–4: endure hardness as a good soldier of Jesus Christ. No man that warreth entangleth himself with the affairs of this life, that he may please him who hath chosen him to be a soldier. A soldier's whole attention is given to his service. He is not out working a second job, not involved in outside politics. His commission defines his occupation. Three principles: ambassador, citizen of heaven, soldier. None of them sanction involvement in the world's political and social machinery. All of them require a clear eye toward Christ.

Lot: What Happens When the Sojourner Forgets He Is One

Genesis 13 shows Lot lifting up his eyes toward the well-watered plain of the Jordan — attractive, like Egypt, like the garden of Jehovah — and choosing for himself. He pitched his tent toward Sodom, then moved into Sodom, then became a judge sitting in Sodom's gate. When the angels came to the city in Genesis 19, Lot was sitting in the gate — a position of civic authority and

judicial responsibility. He had gone all the way from pilgrim to judge in a condemned city.

The moment Lot tried to speak for righteousness to the men of Sodom, they instantly remembered what he was: this one came to sojourn and he must be a judge? Now we will deal worse with thee than with them. The world will always remember that the believer is a sojourner the moment the believer stands for God. When we blend in and go along with the world's system, they applaud our success and welcome our rise. The moment we speak for the Lord, they say: who are you to speak? You're not one of us. And they turn on us. Lot's compromise with Sodom did not earn him their friendship when it mattered; it had only softened his own conscience, corrupted his household, and cost him his wife. What it did to his heart we see in the awful thing he offered the men of Sodom regarding his daughters.

Joseph: A Sojourner at the Pinnacle of Power

Joseph is the contrast. He begins his journey in obedience to his father — sent to seek the welfare of his brethren, a type of Christ going to find his own. He is sold into slavery in Egypt by his brothers, falsely accused in Potiphar's house, imprisoned for years, forgotten by the cupbearer he helped. At no point in the narrative does Joseph maneuver himself into a better position. At no point does he look around at circumstances and plot his own advance. He serves faithfully wherever he is placed, honors God when tempted, and waits.

Isaiah 55:8–9 applies perfectly: my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways. My ways are as far above your ways as the heavens above the earth. Joseph never could have planned his own story. Sold to Ishmaelites, accused by Potiphar's wife, imprisoned with Pharaoh's officers, forgotten for two years — and then: Pharaoh sends for him and makes him second in command over all Egypt, saying, shall we find one as this, in whom the Spirit of

God is? God's pathway was so far above anything Joseph could have anticipated that no planning or striving on his part would have reached it.

When Joseph reveals himself to his brothers in Genesis 45:7–8, the insight he had reached is remarkable: God sent me before you to preserve you a remnant. It was not you that sent me here but God. He had entered into the mind of God about his own life. Not with bitterness about the pit, the false accusation, or the two years in prison; but with understanding that God had purposes running through all of it. And what he identified as the greatest thing in his life was not the throne of Egypt but the reconciliation with his brothers and the blessing of his family. That is the heart of a sojourner. When Hebrews 11 records Joseph's faith, it is not for his rise to power but for his words at the end: when you leave Egypt, take my bones with you. Even at the pinnacle of earthly power, his heart was toward the land of promise, not the land of his success.

Reuben: The Well-Meaning Compromise

Reuben tried to spare Joseph without confronting his brothers' wickedness. He negotiated. He planned a quiet rescue. He did not say plainly, brethren, this is our brother, what are you thinking? He got along with them, found a way that would satisfy them, and arranged to undo it later. He is the type of what happens when a Christian compromises with the world instead of standing plainly for the Lord: you seek accommodation with the world's thinking, you soften the message to be acceptable, and your well-meaning plans come to nothing because they were never in the Lord's mind.

James 1: The Thought Life of the Sojourner

James 1 speaks directly to the thought life of those who are passing through trial. Count it all joy when ye fall into various temptations — not when pleasant things happen, but when testing comes. Why? Because the proving of your faith works

endurance, and endurance its perfect work, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing. God is doing something good even in the uncomfortable thing, and faith's response is not anxiety about the circumstance but trust in the one who has allowed it.

Wisdom is available to the one who lacks it: ask of God, who gives to all freely and reproaches not, and it will be given. But ask in faith, without doubting; the doubter is like a wave of the sea, tossed by the wind, and will receive nothing from the Lord. The double-minded man — like Lot, torn between Sodom and the way of faith — is unstable in all his ways. The single eye, fixed on God and his word, gives stability and direction.

The chapter closes with the practical consequence: be doers of the word and not hearers only. He that hears and does not do is like a man who looks in a mirror and immediately forgets what he saw. He that fixes his gaze on the perfect law of liberty and abides in it — not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work — shall be blessed in his doing. This is the word addressed to us as we live in a world whose politics and upheavals can claim our attention and anxiety. Joseph's example says: the thoughts are not your thoughts. Be faithful where you are. Do not forget what you see in the mirror of God's word.

They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world.