

During Your Stay...

1 Peter 1:17-21

April 6, 2008

Vacations are great. It is fun to be free of all the responsibilities of work that we left behind. Leaving those things behind allows us to feel free to explore the place we are visiting. As you talk to people on your vacation they may give you advice about what to do during your stay. They offer suggestions about where to visit and how to avoid the local tourist traps. The apostle Peter gives Christians spiritual advice about a lengthy visit that you and I are making. It is a lengthy visit in this world. He tells us to live our lives as strangers. When he calls us strangers he means that we are just visiting for a time but our real home is somewhere else. So let's look at Peter's advice today as he tells us what to do during our stay in this world.

It is very liberating to go on vacation. We are free of so many responsibilities and we are free to visit all kinds of new places. Peter shares with us why we are people who are free while we visit this world. He writes, "For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers." Literally we could translate the word "redeemed" as "freed by paying a ransom." Before we had faith in Christ we were all captives of sin and captives of the devil. There was no way to escape, we had to be rescued and we were rescued when the ransom price was paid to get us back. It was a heavy price. Silver could not do it. Even gold could not do it. It took the blood of our Savior Jesus Christ to do it. The price was high. It took the innocent sufferings and death of the Son of God to buy us back. But it was paid by Jesus on the cross and now we are free from the slavery and bondage of sin.

Peter says that we are free from the empty way of life of our forefathers. In general we might say that the empty way of life is trying to earn favor with God on our own. The empty way of life is trying to convince God that he should take us to heaven. If we try to earn favor with God on our own we can get tangled in the ropes of self-righteousness. We compare ourselves to others and in our own minds feel that we are better than so many other people in this world that we must be the ones to whom God would show favor. It is an empty way of life because it leads to doubt always questioning whether one has done enough. The self-righteous person goes through life with a constant nagging from the question, "Was it enough?"

The person trying to earn their way to heaven can either suffer from self-righteousness or despair. Despair sets in because a person realizes that no matter how hard they try, they cannot satisfy the demands of God's law. The harder a person tries to do better and satisfy God, the more that person fails and falls deeper and deeper into despair. These are empty ways of life that leave people without hope.

It is for these reasons that Peter wants us to remember that we are free because Jesus paid the ransom to set us free. He gave up his precious blood and his precious life to set us free. We are free from falling into the trap of self-righteousness or despair. Our life is not a hollow and empty chasing after of God's favor. Our life is one of hope and joy because Jesus has set us free.

One of the great struggles of a free society is that if everyone is free, what happens when those freedoms collide. For example, you are free to smoke, but what happens when your freedom to smoke clashes against my freedom to breathe fresh air? We can't both exercise our freedoms at the same time and in the same place and still be free. Peter addresses the false idea that if I am free, I can do whatever I want. He writes, "Since you call on a Father who judges each man's work impartially, live your lives as strangers here in reverent fear." Literally Peter is saying, "During your stay here...behave."

The reason we need to behave is that God doesn't play favorites. Many Christians like to treat God as a loving grandfather who shuts his eye to the sins of his children. They use the ransom price that Christ paid as a license to go and live in the same empty way as unbelievers. Just like an earthly Father has expectations of his children, so also our heavenly Father has expectations of us, namely that we live as his children and do not dishonor his name by the way that we live.

Peter tells us to live in "reverent fear". God is our loving Father who has made us his dear children. So on one hand we don't fear him. On the other hand he is the great God over all the universe, who deserves to be feared. The Christian life therefore is one of both fear and love. Martin Luther understood this and began the explanation to each of the commandments, "We should fear and love God."

During our short stay in this world, Peter is urging us not to get caught up in the empty way of living that is all around us in this world. We can see that empty way of life in what the world considers to be important. We can see it in what the world sets as goals for life, which is mostly to live comfortably in retirement, but has no goal for eternity. Enjoy the freedom that you have from this way of life and seek to behave yourself because Christ has made you free by shedding his holy and precious blood for you. Both fear and love God as you live as his child.

A nice long vacation is a refreshing thing. But eventually we are ready to head for home. We think about sleeping in our own comfortable bed again. We think of getting back to the tasks that we left behind. We long to return home. Peter wants us to long to return home to our heavenly Father.

Have you ever feared that you would return from vacation and your home would be gone? There was a fire while you were away or some other natural or unnatural disaster. That is something we never have to fear with our heavenly home.

Our heavenly home will be there because of the spotless and blameless lamb of God. Our heavenly home was purchased for us by the precious blood of Christ, he was like a blameless lamb without spot or defect. God commanded that Israel bring only perfect animals for sacrifices in the Old Testament. That command pointed ahead to what Christ would be.

Peter cuts us to the heart when he tells us to behave earlier in the lesson. Suddenly all of our sins come back at us again and we feel their guilt. We want to cry out like the apostle Paul, "Who will rescue me from this body of death?" The good news is that where we fail, Christ was spotless.

Think of what was at stake during Christ's 33 humbled, temptation-ridden years! If he had sinned once, cursed once, hated once, retaliated once ... but he didn't. He presented himself to the hideous cross without blemish or defect, that his Father might thus declare hideous sinners without blemish or defect. Through Jesus God declares us righteous, people who have behaved perfectly in our lives and whose sin was paid for. We are people who are worthy to be God's children and enter our heavenly home.

This brings us back to our loving heavenly Father who planned all of this for us. Peter writes, "He was chosen before the creation of the world, but was revealed in these last times for your sake.²¹ Through him you believe in God, who raised him from the dead and glorified him, and so your faith and hope are in God." This was God's plan from before the creation of the world. We are fixed in a system of measured time. We move only forward in time and at one set speed. But God roams back and forth in time, seeing individual moments and the big picture all at the same time. As God was planning creation, he saw the need for a Savior. So he chose his Son as our redeemer.

God is faithful. He promised to send a Savior and he did when the time was right. Galatians reminds us, "When the time had fully come, God sent his Son." This is our hope and our faith. God did as he promised. He put his Son to death in our place and the proof that Jesus' work was acceptable to God is that he raised Jesus from the dead. Not only that, he glorified him by bringing him to heaven and giving him a seat at his right hand. This we believe. This gives us hope. This shows us that we have a place to return to, a home that we long for kept in heaven for us.

During your short time in this world, behave and live in reverent fear of your heavenly Father. Don't get too attached to this world, because we have a home in heaven that is waiting for us. We know that home is ours because Jesus was our Lamb of sacrifice and shed his precious blood for us. I can't help but end with Luther's words from the explanation of the second article of the Apostle's Creed. "He has redeemed me, a lost and condemned creature, purchased and won me from all sins, from death and from the power of the devil, not with gold or silver, but with his holy, precious blood and with his innocent suffering and death. All this he did that I should be his own, and live under him in his kingdom, and serve him in everlasting righteousness, innocence and blessedness, just as he has risen from death and lives and rules eternally. This is most certainly true."