

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,  
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, September 12, 2021**

**20 YEARS LATER:  
HOLY LIVING IN A POST-9/11 WORLD  
1 Peter 1:13-25**

September 11, 2001, like December 7, 1941, when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, is a day that still lives in infamy. Unless you were very young, or not yet born, I imagine you have vivid memories of that day 20 years ago, and you probably remember where you were and what you were doing when you first heard the news. My daughter Erin had just begun her freshman year at Grove City College. Lindsay was a sophomore at West Springfield High School. Nate was a 9-year-old 4<sup>th</sup> grader at Immanuel Christian School, where Mary Sue worked in the school office. We had just adopted a 3-month-old Sheltie puppy we named Bailey ten days earlier.

I was in my car, on my way to the church office (which, back then, was in an office building on Franconia Road), when I heard about the first plane hitting the World Trade Center. A second plane hit the second tower of the World Trade Center 17 minutes later. I was in the church office and actually heard a powerful boom when the third hijacked plane crashed into the Pentagon. A fourth hijacked airliner, United Flight 93, whose target was either the White House or the US Capitol, was heroically taken down by passengers who fought back against the hijackers, and crashed into a field near Shanksville, PA.

The four airplanes were hijacked by 19 terrorists connected to the Islamic group al-Qaeda. 9/11 was the deadliest terrorist attack not only in American history but in all of human history. Nearly 3,000 people died (the death toll was 2,977), with more than 25,000 people injured, and more than \$10 billion in property damage. In addition, it was the single deadliest incident for first responders, with 343 firefighters and 72 police officers killed that day in the attacks and their aftermath.

It was a day of horrific evil. Unimaginable tragedy. Immense national grief. It was a day of truly remarkable heroism by hundreds, even thousands, of first responders and ordinary citizens who put themselves in harm's way to save others. It was also a day of national unity, a day of coming together in our loss and grief and resolve that the terrorists would not be victorious.

Now, here we are, 20 years later. Much has changed in the last 20 years, not all for the better. After a two decades long effort to defeat (or, at least, to subdue and hold in check) the forces of Islamic terrorism in Afghanistan, we have evacuated all of our nation's military and diplomatic personnel from Afghanistan, allowing the Taliban to take over the country. The world remains a very dangerous place.

Some things, praise God, have not changed. Most importantly, God has not changed. His character has not changed. His love and faithfulness have not changed. His grace has not

changed. His power has not changed. His good and gracious plans for you, for me, for His church, and for the world have not changed. He is still sovereign.

Nations come and go. Leaders come and go. Empires come and go. But God remains God. Jesus remains Lord. In the words of the old hymn: “Though the wrong seems oft so strong, God is the Ruler yet” (Maltbie Babcock, “This Is My Father’s World”). Even in the valley of the shadow of death, as David says in Psalm 23:4, the Lord is with us. That will not change, because God does not and will not change. He is still our refuge and our strength. He is still our help and our hope. He is still our rock and our redeemer. He is still our light and our salvation. He is still the stronghold of our lives. He is still the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort (2 Corinthians 1:3).

David had no inkling of what would happen on 9/11. In Psalm 11:3, though, he ponders a question that seems hauntingly relevant to our experience on 9/11 and its aftermath. It is not actually David’s question. It seems to be a question posed by some of his friends or advisers when David was under attack (or the threat of attack) by his enemies. Their question to David, in verse 3, was this: “When the foundations are begin destroyed, what can the righteous do?”

The natural instinct is to give in to fear, to panic, to despair. But that’s not how David responded in Psalm 11. Nor is it how God wants us to respond when it seems like the foundations of life and godliness are crumbling all around us. David’s response was to turn the eyes of his heart on God. “The LORD is in His holy temple,” David said. “The LORD is on His heavenly throne.... The LORD is righteous; He loves justice. Those who are upright will see His face” (11:4, 7).

When things were going bad, what did David do? He turned to God for help. He remembered who God is. He remembered that God is on the throne. He remembered that God is trustworthy and faithful.

Do you sometimes feel like the foundations of life are crumbling? Do you wonder what in the world God’s people can do? Do you wonder how God wants you – us – to live in such a world as this in such a time as this?

Like David, Peter had no prophetic foresight (that we know of) into what would happen on 9/11, but he does provide us with a biblical answer to the question in Psalm 11. Here in 1 Peter 1, Peter gives us seven imperatives, seven directions, for holy living in a post-9/11 world – a world in which it very much feels like “the wrong seems oft so strong” and the foundations are crumbling all around us.

## **THEREFORE**

Before we look at the first imperative, though, notice the first word in verse 13. Peter begins with the word “therefore.” You know that when you see the word “therefore,” you should always ask: “What’s it there for?” “Therefore” is a connecting word. It connects what is about to be said with what has just been said previously. It tells us that what

comes before is the basis or ground of what is about to be said. Here, in verse 13, it tells us that the instructions for holy living to be given in this passage are rooted in the message of salvation articulated so beautifully by Peter in the opening verses of 1 Peter 1, some of which Pastor Chris read for our Call to Worship this morning. It is all rooted in the gospel. Because God in His great mercy has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, because in Christ we have the living hope of an inheritance in heaven that will never perish, spoil, or fade, because the reality of God's saving love for us in Jesus His Son has transformed the landscape of our lives, this is how God wants us to live.

That is what the word "therefore" is there for.

How, then, are we to live in this post-9/11 world?

### **1 PREPARE YOUR MINDS FOR ACTION (Verse 13)**

Peter begins with this in verse 13: "Prepare your minds for action." The old King James Version (KJV) has a more literal translation of Peter's words. It says: "Gird up the loins of your mind." Do you know what that means?

In the ancient Middle Eastern culture, it was customary for men to wear long, flowing robes with a belt or girdle tied around the waist. Some Middle Eastern men still dress this way. If one had to run or engage in some physically strenuous activity, he would pull up the long folds of his robe and tuck them under the belt, so he could move more quickly and freely without being slowed down or tripped up by his robe.

To put it in terms that are probably more familiar to us, Peter is saying: "Roll up your sleeves mentally. Get your mind in gear. Get your head in the game. Get ready for action. Don't fall asleep at the switch. Stay focused. Be prepared for anything."

Which is to say, your mind matters. Your mind matters to God. *What* you think about – the images, ideas, beliefs, and values you routinely and consistently feed your mind – and *the way* you think will affect your ability to discern the times and the readiness of your mind to act with wisdom and courage.

As one preacher put it: "If God is to have your heart, He must first have your mind" (David R. Helm, *1-2 Peter and Jude: Sharing Christ's Sufferings*, 58). The word for mind (*dianoia*) is used 13 times in the New Testament, including the Great Commandment in which Jesus instructs us to love God with heart, soul, mind (*dianoia*), and strength (Matthew 22:37; Mark 12:30). Though Paul uses a different word for mind (*nous*) in Romans 12:2, he makes a similar point: Spiritual growth or transformation depends on the renewing of our minds. He says: "Do not be conformed any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds."

In times like these, when it may feel like the foundations are crumbling all around us, and not just because of 9/11 or events in Afghanistan, we need to get our minds in gear. We

need to get our minds and hearts in the game, and be ready for action at any moment. How do we do that? By feeding regularly – daily – on the truth of God’s Word. By getting into God’s Word and getting God’s Word into us. By taking every thought captive to make it obedient to Christ (2 Corinthians 10:5). By devoting ourselves to prayer, being both watchful (alert) and thankful (Colossians 4:2). By putting on the whole armor of God, in order to stand firm and strong against the schemes of the devil (Ephesians 6:11-18). By setting aside everything that hinders us and the sins that entangle us, and running the race God has marked out for us. By running with perseverance. No quitting. No giving up or dropping out (Hebrews 12:1). By keeping our eyes and minds on Jesus (Hebrews 12:2). And by remembering in all things and at all times that God is holy. And gracious. And loving. And sovereign over all.

That is the first thing: Get your mind in shape and ready for action. Put away every distraction and stay mentally and spiritually alert. As Paul says in Philippians 4:8: “Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable, whatever is excellent or praiseworthy, think about such things.”

## **2. BE SELF-CONTROLLED (Verse 13)**

Literally, Peter says: “Stay sober.” It is an admonition against getting drunk or being intoxicated. In Ephesians 5:18, Paul says: “Don’t get drunk on wine, which dulls your senses and leads to all kinds of debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Holy Spirit.”

Getting drunk is never a good thing, among other reasons, because it diminishes your self-control or strips it away completely. We all know that people sometimes do things when drunk (or under the influence of drugs) that they would never do if they were in control of their faculties.

Peter’s point here is not confined to the consumption of alcoholic beverages (or the use of illicit drugs). It is way bigger than that. The point is that God wants us to live lives of godly self-control under the direction of the Holy Spirit, and not let our desires control us. Paul includes self-control in his list of the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5, along with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, and gentleness (Galatians 5:22-23).

In his book *Intelligence and How to Get It* (2009), psychologist Richard Nisbett says self-control is more valuable than intelligence, because self-control is key to a well-functioning life. He is not saying that intelligence doesn’t matter. If that were the case, why would he go to the trouble of writing a book about how to get it? But all the intelligence in the world, without the discipline or self-control to use it in appropriate and healthy ways, will be destructive to self and/or society in the end, don’t you think?

Do you remember Dr. James Dobson, the founder of Focus on the Family? Now in his 80s, he is not in the public eye as much as he once was. He has said that strong desire in a person’s life is like a river. As long as your desire flows within the banks of God’s will, it

is all good. It is when our desires overflow the banks and boundaries God has established for them in His Word that we get into trouble. So, it is essential to take a close look at our hearts to make sure that what we desire, whatever it is, does not overflow the banks of God's will.

Some people have trouble with self-control and drink too much. Or eat too much. Or watch too much TV. These may or may not be issues for you. Maybe the issue in your life is your attraction or even addiction to porn, which is alarmingly common among Christian men, and not just a problem for guys. Maybe you spend way too much time on your phone. Maybe you have a problem with anger. The Bible says we should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry, because our anger is usually the unrighteous variety that doesn't bring about the kind of life God desires for us. Quick Slow Slow: Quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to get angry (James 1:19-20).

Maybe you have trouble keeping your tongue under God's control. Read James 3 for a description of the destructive power of the tongue. Maybe you're harboring a spirit of unforgiveness. That puts you in a very dangerous place spiritually, because if you refuse to forgive those who hurt you or wrong you, you cut yourself off from receiving God's forgiveness (Matthew 6:14-15). You don't want that to happen. If you have a critical, judgmental spirit, don't just try to get it under control. Bring it to the cross. Give it to Jesus. Let Him take it from you. And ask Him to replace it with the fullness of the fruit of the Holy Spirit who dwells in our hearts. Do that with anything in your life that flows outside the bounds of God's will.

Stay sober and self-controlled, because you cannot serve God's purposes in such a time as this when you are out of control. You are truly self-controlled only when you are God-controlled.

### **3. SET YOUR HOPE FULLY ON THE GRACE OF GOD (Verse 13)**

Notice that Peter does not simply say: "Set your hope on the grace to be given you when Jesus returns." That would be sound biblical counsel by itself. But Peter goes a step further. He says: "Set your hope *fully*" on this grace. Fully. Totally. Completely. Without hesitation or reservation.

Where is your hope today? Is it in the economy, the financial markets, your retirement portfolio? The Bible says: "Don't put your hope in wealth, which is so uncertain" (1 Timothy 6:17). "Cast but a glance at riches, and they are gone" (Proverbs 23:4).

Is your hope in America's military might? We have the most powerful military in the world. But it did not bring us victory in Afghanistan.

Where is your hope? Is it in our political leaders? In this political party or that? Is it in science? In the frequently changing guidance of medical experts?

Whatever our circumstances or stage of life, Peter urges us to set out hope fully on the grace of God which has already been given to us in Christ, and which will be fully ours when Jesus returns in all His glory.

In Christ alone my hope is found,  
He is my light, my strength, my song;  
This Cornerstone, this solid Ground,  
Firm through the fiercest drought and storm.  
(Keith Getty and Stuart Townend,  
c 2001 Thankyou Music)

This hope, as it says in Hebrews 6:19, is an anchor for our souls, firm and secure. It is a gift of grace, which, as I trust you know, comes free of charge to people who don't deserve it and never will. Like you and me.

I have set my hope fully – completely, totally, absolutely – on the grace of God to be revealed when Jesus returns and makes everything right everywhere in the whole creation.

These first three imperatives for holy living in a post 9/11 world all come from verse 13. These are things God's people can do even when it feels like the foundations are crumbling all around us. We can:

- Prepare our minds for action as followers of Jesus;
- Exercise godly self-control under the influence of the Holy Spirit in every area of our lives; and
- Set our hope fully on the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, not on any earthly thing or any earthly power.

There are four more imperatives for holy living in such a time as this in this passage:

- Verse 14: “As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance” of the truth of the gospel;
- Verses 15-16: “Just as He who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do;”
- Verse 17: “Live your lives as strangers here” on earth “in reverent fear;” and
- Verse 22: “Love one another deeply, from the heart.”

We'll look at them together next Sunday. Until then, think about these things. Let God speak to you about these things. Take seriously your calling – *our* calling – to live holy lives in a post-9/11 world. Let Him change you where change is needed in your life. Let His grace and glory be revealed in your life.

Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.