

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, September 18, 2011**

**HOW NOW?
LESSONS FOR LIFE IN A POST 9/11 WORLD**

1 Peter 1:13-25

In the 1970s, theologian Francis Schaeffer wrote a book and narrated a documentary film series entitled *How Should We Then Live?*, which surveyed the rise and decline of Western thought and culture from the time of the Romans to the late 20th century from a Christian world view. Schaeffer's question, really, is appropriate in any and every time and place and culture: In view of God's revelation of Himself, His character, His ways and His will in creation and history, in the Bible, and, in the defining moment of all defining moments in the whole scope of history, in the incarnation and saving work of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, how should we then live?

The question is as relevant as ever today. As the people of God, helpless and undeserving sinners who have been rescued, redeemed, changed and kept by His amazing grace, how does God want us to live here and now in the post 9/11 world of the 21st century?

Chuck Colson and Nancy Pearcey took up Schaeffer's question in their 1999 book *How Now Shall We Live?*, which addressed the challenges of living Christianly in a postmodern, post-Christian world – a world that largely rejects a belief in absolute truth and no longer accepts the validity and/or authority of Christian teachings as the foundation for life in society. How now shall we live?

Then, of course, the world experienced another sea change on September 11, 2001. In the decade since, many, many things have changed. My life has certainly changed. All of us have changed. Our sense of security as a nation and as individuals has changed. We have a greater awareness of what a dangerous place this world is, don't we? Even if we were not vulnerable to a terrorist attack or other tragedies, it would still be true – and is true – that with each passing day, every one of us, without exception, is one day closer to our last day. One day closer to the day of our death or to the return of Christ, whichever comes first.

Life changes. The world changes. The way we look at the world can change. The seasons change. Our circumstances change. Our bodies change. Our health changes. People change. Relationships change. But God does not change. Nothing about God has changed since 9/11. Nothing has changed about the character of God, or the power of God, or the holiness of God, or the grace of God, or the love of God, or the sovereignty of God. Nothing has changed about God. He is still the same. He is still our refuge and our strength, our help and our hope, our rock and our redeemer. Even today, in the extraordinary times in which we live.

There is a sense in which life in every generation is extraordinary in its own way. Every generation faces challenges of its own. It was certainly true for the 1st-century Christians to whom Peter wrote this letter. They faced the challenge of living life for Christ in a culture that was sometimes hostile toward Christians. They had to figure out how to live under the

rule of a government that permitted and sometimes promoted the persecution of Christians. They had to come to terms with not just the possibility, and not just the probability, but the reality of trials and hardships and suffering as a result of their allegiance to Christ. Peter did not try to hide the challenge they faced by covering it with a coat of whitewash. He did not attempt to sugarcoat the truth. He dealt with it head-on.

I think Peter's message in this passage of Scripture (1 Peter 1:13-25) is as relevant to our lives in the post 9/11 world of the 21st century as it was in the 1st century. It is really a message from God to His people in every generation. Which means it is a message from God to us – to this fellowship of believers meeting here at 5725 Castlewellan Drive in Kingstowne, Virginia. It is an answer from God to the question: “How now?” *How in the world* does God want us to live? In *this* time? In *this* place? In *this* generation?

Verses 13-25 contain seven imperatives. If you think in military terms, there are seven orders or seven commands in these verses. These are seven divinely-ordained directives on how to live as God's people in these extraordinary times. We'll look at the first three today, and the rest next Sunday.

THEREFORE

Before we look at the first directive, though, I want you to notice the first word in verse 13. The very first word in this section is “therefore.” There is an old adage – you may be familiar with it – that when you see the word “therefore,” you should always ask: “What's it there for?”

“Therefore” is a connecting word. It ties what is about to be said to what has previously been said. And it tells us that what has previously been said is the basis or underpinning of what is about to be said. Here in verse 13, it tells us that the instructions for living given in these verses are rooted in the message of salvation articulated so masterfully by Peter in the opening verses of 1 Peter 1. 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 in His Son Jesus Christ has transformed the landscape of our lives, this is how God wants us to live.

How?

1. PREPARE YOUR MINDS FOR ACTION (Verse 13)

Peter begins with this: “Prepare your minds for action.” The King James Version (KJV) has a more literal translation of Peter's words. It says: “Gird up the loins of your mind.” In case you're not sure what it means to “gird up your loins,” I'll try to explain. It was the custom in the ancient Middle Eastern culture for men to wear long, flowing robes with a belt or girdle tied around the waist. Some men in the Middle East still dress this way. If they had to run or do anything that was strenuous physically, they would pull up the long folds of their robe and tuck them under the belt, so they could move more quickly and more freely without being

slowed down or tripped up by their robe. To put it in terms we're more likely to understand, 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 and prepared."

You see, your mind matters. Your mind matters to God. What you think about – the images, ideas, beliefs, and values which 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.

What happened ten years ago was a wake-up call to us as a nation. Peter's message is a wake-up call to us as Christians. It is a wake-up call to the church. It is a call to be prepared and stay focused, because there is a war going on, and it is not just in Afghanistan and Iraq. We are in a different kind of battle that is not against flesh and blood, not just against radical Islamist terrorists and potential suicide – (or homicide –) bombers, but against principalities and powers and the spiritual forces of evil which threaten to undo us and seek to work us woe. Whether we like it or not, there is spiritual warfare going on.

In times like these, we need to get our minds in gear. We need to get our hearts and minds in the game, and be ready for action at every moment. How? By spending time each day with God in His 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 our minds on Jesus (Hebrews 12:2). And by remembering at every moment that God is holy, and gracious, and loving, and sovereign over all.

This is the first thing. Get your mind ready for action. Put away every distraction and stay mentally and spiritually alert.

2. BE SELF-CONTROLLED (Verse 13)

Literally, it means to stay sober. It means to avoid drunkenness or intoxication. 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." Drunkenness is never a good thing, among other reasons, because it diminishes your self-control or strips it away completely. And we all know that people sometimes do things when drunk 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. It is way bigger than that. The point is that God wants us to live lives of self-control under the direction of the Holy Spirit, and not let our desires control us.

One of the world's foremost authorities on intelligence, Richard Nisbett, whose most recent book is entitled *Intelligence and How to Get It* (2009), says he would rather have his child be high in self-control than intelligence, because self-control is key to a well-functioning life (Source: www.scientificamerican.com, 1/12/2011). He is not saying that intelligence doesn't matter. If it didn't matter, I doubt that Nisbett (or anyone) would 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 in the end be destructive to self and/or society, don't you think?

Focus on the Family's founder, Dr. James Dobson, says that strong desire in a person's life is like a river. As long as the 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 that we get into trouble. So it is essential for us to examine our hearts to make sure that what we desire – whether it is the desire for wealth or power or popularity or pleasure or success in school or sports or business or politics – does not overflow the banks of God's will.

Some people fail to exercise self-control and drink too much. Maybe that's not an issue for you. Maybe the issue for you is your attraction or addiction to porn. Maybe you spend way too much time on Facebook. Maybe you've got 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 does not bring about the kind of life God desires for us. Quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to get angry (James 1:19-20). Maybe you have never brought your tongue under God's control. Read James 3 for a description of the destructive power of the tongue. 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 love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control which are the fruit of the Holy Spirit who dwells in our hearts (Galatians 5:22-23). 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 when you are out of control.

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

Peter does not simply say: "Set your hope on the grace you will be given when Christ returns." He says: "Set your hope *fully* on this grace...." Fully. Totally. Completely. Without reservation.

Where is your hope today? I hope it is not in Wall Street, in the financial markets, or in the strength of the economy. 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). We can attest to the truth of this, can't we?

Is your hope in American military might? I am so thankful for a strong national defense, so grateful for the courage, determination and sacrifices of so many men and women in defense of this nation and the values and ideals we hold dear. But it is not where my ultimate hope

lies. Last Sunday I read from Psalm 33, which says: “No king [no leader or nation] is saved by the size of his army.... A horse [here, as a symbol of military strength or firepower] is a vain hope of deliverance” (Psalm 33:16, 17).

If our hope is in our military prowess and expertise, our nation’s leaders, our political system or one of our political parties, if our hope is in the persuasive power of our foreign policy or in the fervor of our patriotic pride, if our hope is in the creativity and resilience of our economy, somewhere, sometime, sooner or later, we will wake up and see the emptiness of our hope.

Peter urges us to set our hope fully on the grace of God which has been given to us in Christ, and which will be fully ours in the day of Christ’s return. My hope is found in Christ alone. I have set my hope fully on His grace, which comes free of charge to people who don’t deserve it, and never will. How about you?

Money and power are fleeting. Nations rise and fall. Intelligence does not guarantee character. There is this, too: Medical science is incredibly remarkable. But this earthly life isn’t forever. People still die. We will all die someday, too – unless Jesus comes back first. There is no way to avoid it. But those who rest in God’s unchanging grace will find in Him an anchor for their souls and a hope that will not fail. For in Him we have been given a living hope and an inheritance in heaven that no one can ever take away from us (1 Peter 1:3-4).

How now are you and I to live as the people of God in these extraordinary times?

- Get your mind in gear and be ready for action at all times.
- Exercise godly self-control under the influence of the Holy Spirit in every area of your life.
- Set your hope on the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, not on any earthly thing.

Next Sunday we’ll look at the rest. For today, though, this is enough. Let God speak to you about these things. Let Him teach you the lessons you need to learn. Let Him change you where you need to change. Let Him glorify Himself in you. And in us. Lord, let it be so. Amen.