

## Sermon: Look at Jesus and Live

(Preached by Rev. Paul Wu at St Giles Presbyterian Church, Ottawa, on March 14, 2021)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts  
be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Nehushtan — that is what the people of Israel called it. For over a thousand years, the people of God made offerings to it. It had the shape of a serpent, it was made of bronze (or some said it was brass, it's debatable). It had a fiery red colour, and was lifted up on a pole for all the see. It was crafted by Moses, under God's instruction, and it was finally broken down into pieces, a thousand years later, by Hezekiah the King of Judah. It was made to remind the Israelites of their sinfulness during the forty years in wilderness, but for a thousand years and more, it became an object of worship — trapping generations of God's people into committing further sins. It really was a sad story.

The story began, as recorded in Numbers 21, the fourth book of the Hebrew Bible. The Israelites were travelling from Mount Hor to Red Sea, while going around the land of Edom. Let me back up a bit and explain the context. After the Exodus, when the Israelite were brought out of Egypt and liberated from slavery, they made a covenant with God on Mount Sinai. The Israelites were to observe the decrees, rules, laws and commandments of the Lord, and God was to deliver them to the Promised Land, the land of Canaan.

However, when God brought the entire community to the southern edge of the Promised Land, the Israelites refused to enter. They had sent twelve spies to scout out the land, and ten out them came back and reported: that the land was occupied by giants, and it would've been impossible for the Israelites to take the Promised Land. Their lack of faith resulted in a subsequent wondering in the desert wilderness for the next 40 years, where the faith of the Israelites would be tested again and again.

Numbers 21 records one such episode — the Israelites were travelling from Mount Hor to the Red Sea, further away from the Promised Land, and the people grumbled. In verse 5, the people spoke against God and against Moses, *“Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food.”* This is not the first time that God through Moses handled

similar complaints from the Israelites. In previous instances, God provided water from rock to quench their thirst, and God bestowed Manna and quails to satisfy their hunger. However this time, the Israelites seemed to have crossed a line — we detest this miserable food.

When God first provided Manna from heaven, the Israelite were delighted — it had the appearance of ‘fine and flake-like thing’ on the ground. They asked each other ‘What is this?’, which in Hebrew is literally *manna*. In Exodus 16, Manna is described as tasting like wafers that had been made with honey. In Numbers 11, Manna when baked would result in something that taste like cakes backed with oil. I’ve always imagine it to be like toasted croissant, warm, fragrant, yummy!

Manna is the provision of God made concrete and visible. it is both physical and spiritual food. For the Israelites to detest (quote) “this miserable food”, it expressed more than physical distaste, it reflected their spiritual contempt — they simply had enough of this God-none-sense. In response, no longer gracious nor patient as in previous episodes, God gave the Israelites fiery and poisonous serpents, slithering amongst the entire community, biting at random, resulting in agonizing death of many.

Yet, when the people repented and came to Moses, as in verse 7, *“We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you; pray to the lord to take away the serpents from us.”* The solution, the deliverance from God came in an inexplicable, and unjustifiable form. And the Lord said to Moses, in verse 8, *“Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.”* .....What is that?

What kind of solution was that, really? Nehushtan, it was called. A symbol of deliverance that became an object of worship, for over a thousand years. The people of God came across as ungrateful, whiney, and faithless. Yet God came across even worse, as ungracious, unforgiving, and vindictive. Covenants relationship broken from both side.

That entire episode should really have been forgotten, chalked it up as a bad day, kept in a locked box, with other dangerous and un-preachable texts, and throw away the key. Yet Jesus made reference to it in his conversation with Nicodemus, a Jewish rabbi, in John 3. Let me rephrase that, Jesus didn’t just refer to it, he gave it the utmost urgency in verse 14-15, *“And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.”* And Jesus capped it off with this most memorable passage in

verse 16, *“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”* As later on in the Gospel accounts, Jesus was lifted up, most despicably on the cross, and all sinners must look at Jesus nailed to that cross, believe, and thus live.

Why? Why would Jesus compare himself to Nehushtan, a sad and sinful history that most Israelites would soon forget? I think the answer is provided by Apostle Paul in Ephesians 2:1, *“You were dead through the trespasses and sins.”*

Sin and sinfulness is insidious — as proceeding in gradual and subtle way, but with the utmost deadly effect. One metaphor to understand sin is to place a frog in a pot of water, and heating the water up slowly. The frog, due to its ability to thermoregulate, would adjust and adapt, until the water’s temperature reaches boiling point, thus killing the frog.

Another metaphor to describe sinfulness is in a story I have once heard. In the wilderness of northern tundra, wolves roam in large packs. It is a serious safety concern to human settlements. Hunters and trappers have long known an effective method to thin out the pack. Knives would be buried into the ground, with the blade-end sticking out. These frozen blades would be coated with layer upon layer of animal blood, thus fashioning sort of frozen bloody popsicles. When wolves, attracted by the bloody smell, begin to lick these popsicles, their tongues would inevitably become frozen and begin to lose sensation. So when blades cut into the lapping tongues of these wolves, they would bleed but would not have felt pain. Their own blood now adding to the taste as these wolves greedily lap on the bloody popsicles, until one by one they would all succumb due to the loss of their own blood.

Isn’t that what sin really is? It attracts us, takes hold of us, diminishes our guard against it, drains us of all goodness, until it inevitably consumes us, and leaves us for dead.

As Apostle Paul rightly pointed out: You were already dead, through trespasses and sins. Yet God, who is rich in mercy, and out of the great love in which God loves us, provided us with Jesus to look upon. Not Nehushtan but Christ, not that despicable symbol of sinfulness but Jesus on the cross, reminding us the breadth, the depth, the length of which God is willing to go, to demonstrate God love for all sinners.

Charles Spurgeon was a prominent and power preacher of the Christian Gospel in the 19th century. In his early years of struggles with

faith, he saw himself as a sinner not worthy of God's forgiveness. Whenever he looked upon God, he could only see a consuming fire that caused him to tremble in fear. He looked and searched for things that he could do to earn God's forgiveness, but to no avail.

One day, in a snow storm, he came upon a small Methodist chapel where a lay preacher, without much formal training, was expounding on a Scripture passage of Isaiah 45:22, "Look unto me and be saved". The preacher explained that the passage was really inviting hearers to looking upon Jesus. In that moment, Spurgeon was inspired by the Holy Spirit to look upon Jesus and live. His life was thus forever transformed.

Spurgeon preached a number of powerful sermons on this same topic, but the one that I would like to share with you today, is an extract from a devotional he wrote for June 28th, 1869.

"But the Holy Spirit turns our eyes entirely away from self: He tells us that we are nothing, but that "Christ is all in all." Remember, therefore, it is not *thy hold* of Christ that saves thee—it is Christ; it is not *thy joy* in Christ that saves thee—it is Christ; it is not even faith in Christ, though that be the instrument—it is Christ's blood and merits;

Therefore, look not so much to thy hand with which thou art grasping Christ, as to Christ; look not to thy hope, but to Jesus, the source of thy hope; look not to thy faith, but to Jesus, the author and finisher of thy faith. We shall never find happiness by looking at our prayers, our doings, or our feelings; it is what *Jesus* is, not what we are, that gives rest to the soul.

If we would at once overcome Satan and have peace with God, it must be by "looking unto Jesus." Keep thine eye simply on Him; let His death, His sufferings, His merits, His glories, His intercession, be fresh upon thy mind; When thou wakest in the morning look to Him; when thou liest down at night look to Him. Oh! let not thy hopes or fears come between thee and Jesus; follow hard after Him, and He will never fail thee."

"My hope is built on nothing less  
Than Jesus' blood and righteousness:  
I dare not trust the sweetest frame,  
But wholly lean on Jesus' name."

**In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.**