

AN IN-DEPTH BIBLE STUDY

THE BRONZE SERPENT

The Verse Before the Verse You Know by Heart

Numbers 21 · John 3 · Galatians 3 · 2 Kings 18

A journey through history, biblical languages, and the mechanism behind John 3:16

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Introduction: The Verse Before the Verse You Know by Heart

Most Christians can recite John 3:16 from memory. Far fewer could explain John 3:14, the verse immediately before it, in which Jesus tells Nicodemus: 'And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up.' Jesus does not compare himself to the pole, or to the act of healing, or to Moses. He compares himself to the serpent — the very symbol of the curse and the judgment that had struck the Israelite camp in the wilderness.

This study exists to slow down at that comparison and take it seriously: to walk through the strange, uncomfortable episode of Numbers 21 on its own terms; to trace exactly what Jesus meant by identifying himself with the bronze serpent; to see how Paul's language in Galatians 3:13 and 2 Corinthians 5:21 completes the picture Jesus began; and to follow the object itself — the actual bronze serpent Moses made — through the rest of Israel's history, to its eventual destruction by King Hezekiah in 2 Kings 18.

As with the other studies in this series, careful attention is given to distinguishing what the biblical text states explicitly from what represents a well-supported, reasoned interpretive conclusion.

Did You Know?

The bronze serpent of Numbers 21 is one of only a small number of Old Testament objects or events that Jesus himself explicitly cites as a picture of His own coming death (compare Jonah's three days in the fish, referenced in Matthew 12:39-40). Its selection by Jesus, in a private conversation with a religious leader who would have known the Numbers account intimately, gives this connection unusually strong and direct textual support.

How to Use This Study

Each chapter includes: (1) the central biblical text; (2) historical and linguistic context; (3) explanations of Hebrew and Greek terms; (4) cross references; (5) 'Did You Know?' boxes with historical background; (6) suggestions for maps, diagrams, or illustrations for those teaching this material in a classroom or small group; and (7) questions for personal or group reflection. At the end, you will find a consolidated summary of the main points, a list of further reading organized by theme, and a recommended bibliography for deeper study.

Suggested Illustration

Opening page with a simple visual timeline: Numbers 21 (the bronze serpent, ca. 1400s B.C.) → John 3 (Jesus and Nicodemus) → Galatians 3 and 2 Corinthians 5 (Paul's theology of the curse and substitution) → 2 Kings 18 (Hezekiah destroys the bronze serpent, ca. 715 B.C.). Useful for orienting readers to the shape of the whole study before beginning.

Chapter 1 — Numbers 21: Judgment in the Camp

"And they journeyed from mount Hor by the way of the Red sea, to compass the land of Edom: and the soul of the people was much discouraged because of the way. And the people spake against God, and against Moses... And the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people; and much people of Israel died." — Numbers 21:4-6

A Familiar Pattern of Complaint

By Numbers 21, Israel's pattern of complaint against God and Moses during the wilderness years is well established (compare Exodus 16:2-3; 17:2-3; Numbers 11:4-6; 14:2-4). This particular complaint targets both the journey itself and, specifically, the manna: 'our soul loatheth this light bread' (v. 5) — a striking description of contempt for the very provision God had faithfully supplied.

An Unusually Severe Response

God's response to this complaint is notably more severe than to many earlier instances: 'fiery serpents' (Hebrew נְחָשִׁים שָׂרָפִים, *nehashim seraphim*) are sent among the camp, and the resulting bites prove fatal for 'much people of Israel.' The Hebrew word *saraph*, translated 'fiery,' likely describes the burning sensation of the venomous bite, though the same root is also used elsewhere for the six-winged heavenly beings ('seraphim') in Isaiah's temple vision (Isaiah 6:2), a linguistic overlap some scholars find suggestive, though the two uses describe clearly different beings.

Confession and Intercession

Israel's response is immediate: 'we have sinned, for we have spoken against the LORD, and against thee; pray unto the LORD, that he take away the serpents from us. And Moses prayed for the people' (v. 7). This confession-and-intercession pattern is familiar from earlier wilderness crises, and the reader might reasonably expect the resolution to follow the same pattern as before: God removing the threat entirely.

Did You Know?

Archaeological and zoological evidence suggests that venomous snakes, including species capable of producing the kind of severe, painful bites described here, were and remain present in the desert regions traditionally associated with Israel's wilderness wanderings, lending historical plausibility to the episode's basic natural setting, whatever theological significance is layered on top of it.

 **Further Reading:** Numbers 21:1-9; Exodus 16:2-3; Numbers 11:4-6; Numbers 14:1-4; Isaiah 6:1-2 (a separate use of the related Hebrew root).

Reflection Questions

1. Why do you think this particular complaint prompted such a severe response compared to earlier instances of Israel's grumbling?

2. What does Israel's quick confession, 'we have sinned,' suggest about the relationship between suffering and repentance in this narrative?

Chapter 2 — "Make a Fiery Serpent": God's Strange Remedy

"And the LORD said unto Moses, Make thee a fiery serpent, and set it upon a pole: and it shall come to pass, that every one that is bitten, when he looketh upon it, shall live. And Moses made a serpent of brass, and put it upon a pole, and it came to pass, that if a serpent had bitten any man, when he beheld the serpent of brass, he lived." — **Numbers 21:8-9**

Not Removal, But Remedy

Contrary to what the pattern of earlier wilderness crises might suggest, God does not remove the serpents from the camp. The threat remains present; what God provides instead is a means of healing for those already bitten. This is a significant and easily overlooked detail: the danger continues, but a specific, divinely appointed remedy is made available within it.

An Unusual Instruction

The remedy itself is striking in its strangeness: Moses is instructed to fashion an image of the very creature causing the affliction — a bronze serpent — and mount it on a pole where it can be seen throughout the camp. There is no accompanying ritual of purification, no sacrifice, no formula of words required of the afflicted; the instruction is simply that anyone bitten who looks at the bronze serpent will live.

A Remedy That Makes No Natural Sense

It is worth pausing over how little conventional sense this remedy would have made to its original recipients. Nothing in ancient Near Eastern medical practice would have suggested that gazing at a metal image of a snake could counteract venom already in the bloodstream. The efficacy of the remedy depended entirely on it being what it was: a direct, uncomplicated act of obedient faith in God's specific word, not a natural or medical intervention that happened to also carry symbolic meaning.

Did You Know?

Serpent imagery, including bronze serpent figurines and amulets, has been found in archaeological excavations throughout the ancient Near East, sometimes associated with healing deities or protective magic in surrounding cultures (for example, certain Egyptian and Canaanite religious contexts). Numbers 21's account is notable for how sharply it distinguishes God's remedy from any such magical framework: the text gives no indication that the bronze object itself possessed any innate power: healing came through obedient faith directed toward God's specific instruction, not through the object's inherent properties — a distinction Chapter 8 will show later Israelites themselves eventually lost sight of.

Suggested Illustration

A simple illustration of the bronze serpent mounted on a pole in the middle of an ancient desert encampment, with figures looking toward it — useful for visualizing the scene before moving into its New Testament interpretation.

 **Further Reading:** Numbers 21:8-9; Deuteronomy 8:15-16 (Moses later recalling God's provision in the wilderness, including implicit reference to this episode).

Reflection Questions

1. Why do you think God chose not to remove the serpents but instead provided a remedy that required an ongoing act of faith from each afflicted person?
2. What does the lack of any accompanying ritual or formula suggest about the nature of the faith being required here?

Chapter 3 — The Look That Heals: Faith Without Ritual

A Remedy Available to Everyone, Requiring Only a Look

The simplicity of the remedy in Numbers 21:8-9 is worth dwelling on further. Whatever a person's status, age, or condition, the instruction and its promised result are identical: 'every one that is bitten, when he looketh upon it, shall live.' No priest mediates the healing; no offering accompanies it; no distinction is made between more and less deserving recipients. The remedy is, in this sense, radically democratic — available equally and immediately to anyone willing to look.

Why Some Would Not Have Looked

The text does not explicitly narrate individuals refusing to look, but the logic of the passage implies real stakes to the choice: those who looked lived; by clear implication, those who did not look — whether from pride, disbelief that something so simple could actually help, or physical incapacity to see the pole — would have remained in their affliction. The remedy's very simplicity may have made it, for some, harder to accept rather than easier: a proud or skeptical person might have reasoned that so trivial an act could not possibly counteract a fatal venom.

Faith as the Operative Mechanism

What the narrative isolates, by stripping away every other possible variable (ritual, merit, priestly mediation, personal worthiness), is the bare mechanism of faith itself: trusting God's specific word enough to act on it, even when the connection between the prescribed action and the promised result defies ordinary explanation. This stripped-down picture of faith — simple, available to all, and effective regardless of the sufferer's merit — becomes the exact analogy Jesus will draw on in His conversation with Nicodemus.

Did You Know?

The simplicity of 'looking' as the sole requirement for healing in Numbers 21 has often been noted by commentators as an unusually clear Old Testament picture of salvation by grace through faith, apart from ritual works — a theological point Paul would later develop at length regarding justification (see, for example, Romans 4, discussing Abraham's faith 'counted for righteousness' prior to and apart from circumcision).

 **Further Reading:** *Numbers 21:8-9; Romans 4:1-5; Ephesians 2:8-9.*

Reflection Questions

1. Why might a remedy this simple have been harder for some people to accept than a more elaborate ritual would have been?
2. How does the 'look and live' simplicity of this remedy compare to how you understand the nature of saving faith?

Chapter 4 — John 3:14-15: Jesus and Nicodemus

"And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life." — John 3:14-15

The Setting: A Teacher of Israel by Night

John 3 records a private conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus, described as 'a man of the Pharisees...a ruler of the Jews' who 'came to Jesus by night' (v. 1-2). As 'a master of Israel' (v. 10), Nicodemus would have known the Torah, including Numbers 21, in intimate detail — making him precisely the kind of audience capable of grasping the full theological weight of Jesus's comparison.

What Jesus Actually Says

It is worth being precise about the specific comparison Jesus draws. He does not say 'as Moses lifted up the pole' or 'as Moses provided healing,' but 'as Moses lifted up the serpent' — explicitly identifying the object of comparison as the serpent itself, the very symbol of the curse and affliction, not merely the act of elevation or the general concept of a remedy.

Two Meanings in "Lifted Up"

The Greek verb Jesus uses, ὑψόω (hypsoo), carries a double meaning that becomes significant throughout John's Gospel: it can describe simple physical elevation (being lifted up on a pole, or later, on a cross), and it can also carry the sense of exaltation or glorification. John uses this same verb at several other points to describe Jesus's crucifixion in terms that simultaneously describe His glorification (John 8:28; 12:32-34) — the cross, paradoxically, functioning in John's Gospel as both Jesus's lowest physical humiliation and His highest exaltation, both meanings carried by the single verb hypsoo.

Did You Know?

John 12:32-33 makes the double meaning of hypsoo explicit: 'And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me. This he said, signifying what death he should die.' John's own narrative comment confirms that 'lifted up' language throughout his Gospel consistently points to the manner of Jesus's death by crucifixion — being physically raised up on a cross — while simultaneously carrying overtones of exaltation and glory.

 **Further Reading:** John 3:1-15; John 8:28; John 12:32-34; Numbers 21:8-9.

Reflection Questions

1. Why do you think Jesus specifically chose to compare himself to the serpent, rather than to the pole or to Moses' act of provision?
2. How does understanding the double meaning of 'lifted up' — both physical elevation and exaltation — change the way you read John's account of the crucifixion?

Chapter 5 — Identical in Form, Different in Nature: Galatians 3 and 2 Corinthians 5

A Comparison That Demands Explanation

Jesus's identification of himself with the bronze serpent — the very symbol of the curse — raises an obvious theological question: why would the sinless Son of God compare himself to the image of judgment and affliction? Paul, writing in two separate letters, supplies language that many readers find illuminating for understanding exactly this comparison.

Galatians 3:13: "Made a Curse for Us"

"Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us: for it is written, Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree." — Galatians 3:13

Paul explicitly states that Christ was 'made a curse for us,' citing Deuteronomy 21:23's declaration that anyone hanged on a tree is under God's curse. Just as the bronze serpent bore the visible form of the very thing that had brought judgment upon the camp — while containing no actual venom — Christ, in Paul's language, took on the legal and symbolic position of the curse (crucifixion, judged under the law as a curse-bearing death) while himself remaining entirely without sin.

2 Corinthians 5:21: "Made Sin for Us"

"For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him." — 2 Corinthians 5:21

Paul's language here is even more direct: God made Christ, who 'knew no sin,' to actually 'be sin for us.' However this difficult phrase is precisely parsed theologically (a question addressed with appropriate caution in Chapter 10), its basic shape mirrors the bronze serpent pattern with striking clarity: an identification, in form or legal standing, with the very thing that causes death and judgment, while remaining, in actual nature, entirely free of it.

Element	The Bronze Serpent (Numbers 21)	Christ (Galatians 3 / 2 Corinthians 5)
The form taken on	The visible image of a venomous serpent	The legal/symbolic position of 'a curse' and 'sin'
What it lacked	Actual venom	Actual sin ('who knew no sin')
Where it was displayed	Lifted up on a pole in the camp	Lifted up on a cross ('a tree')
The result for those who look/believe	Physical healing from the venom's effects	Eternal life; becoming 'the righteousness of God'

Did You Know?

The phrase 'identical in form, different in nature' captures a pattern theologians sometimes describe using the Greek term *homoionoma* ('likeness' or 'form') — the same word Paul uses in Romans 8:3 to describe Christ coming 'in the likeness of sinful flesh,' genuinely and fully human, yet without sin. The bronze serpent's bearing the exact form of a serpent while containing no venom offers a vivid, concrete Old Testament picture of this same theological principle.

 **Further Reading:** *Galatians 3:10-14; 2 Corinthians 5:17-21; Deuteronomy 21:22-23; Romans 8:3; 1 Peter 2:22, 24.*

Reflection Questions

1. How does the phrase 'identical in form, different in nature' help you understand what it means for Christ to be 'made sin' while remaining sinless?
2. Why do you think Paul, writing to two different churches, independently reached for such similar language to describe this same reality?

Chapter 6 — A Look, Not a Ladder: The Nature of Saving Faith

The Verb John Chooses

John 3:15 states the intended result of the Son of Man being lifted up: 'that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life.' The parallel to Numbers 21 is not merely thematic; it is structural. Just as the bitten Israelite's healing required nothing more than looking toward the bronze serpent, John presents eternal life as available to 'whosoever believeth' — without additional qualification, ritual requirement, or process of merit.

Believing as a Kind of Looking

Many readers and preachers throughout church history have drawn a direct analogy between the physical 'look' required in Numbers 21:9 and the 'belief' John describes in John 3:15-16: both involve turning one's attention, trust, and dependence toward something outside oneself — an object or person lifted up and made visible — rather than toward one's own effort, merit, or ability to solve the underlying problem. The dying Israelite could not heal themselves through willpower or good behavior; they could only look. Similarly, John's Gospel consistently presents 'believing' in Christ as trust directed outward, not achievement generated from within.

Availability Without Exception

Just as the bronze serpent's healing was available to 'every one' bitten who looked (Numbers 21:8), John 3:16, immediately following the bronze serpent reference, describes God's love extending to 'the world' and salvation being available to 'whosoever believeth.' The universality of the remedy in Numbers 21 anticipates, in miniature, the universal scope Jesus and John will describe for the gospel itself.

Did You Know?

The word 'whosoever' (Greek πᾶς ὁ πιστεύων, *pas ho pisteuon*, literally 'everyone who believes') appears twice in close proximity in John 3:15-16, reinforcing the same unrestricted availability already modeled by the bronze serpent's remedy: no distinction of status, merit, or worthiness limits who may look, or who may believe.

 **Further Reading:** *John 3:14-18; Numbers 21:8-9; Isaiah 45:22 ('Look unto me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth').*

Reflection Questions

1. How does thinking of faith as 'looking' — rather than achieving or earning — change the way you understand your own salvation?
2. Why might the universal availability of the bronze serpent's remedy have been an important detail for Jesus to draw on when explaining the scope of the gospel to Nicodemus?

Chapter 7 — Nehushtan: Hezekiah and the Destruction of the Bronze Serpent

"He removed the high places, and brake the images, and cut down the groves, and brake in pieces the brasen serpent that Moses had made: for unto those days the children of Israel did burn incense to it: and he called it Nehushtan." — 2 Kings 18:4

A Long Afterlife

The bronze serpent Moses made in Numbers 21 was apparently preserved and carried forward through the centuries — through the remainder of the wilderness period, the conquest of Canaan, and the subsequent history of the kingdom, since it is still present, in some capacity, at the time of King Hezekiah's reign in Judah, several centuries later.

Hezekiah's Reforms

2 Kings 18:1-6 describes Hezekiah as an unusually faithful king: 'he trusted in the LORD God of Israel; so that after him was none like him among all the kings of Judah, nor any that were before him' (v. 5). Among his sweeping religious reforms — removing high places, breaking sacred pillars, cutting down Asherah poles — the text specifically notes that he 'brake in pieces the brasen serpent that Moses had made.'

Why the Bronze Serpent Had to Go

The text supplies the specific reason: 'for unto those days the children of Israel did burn incense to it.' What had originally been an instrument of God-ordained healing, requiring nothing more than a look of faith toward God's word, had over the centuries become an object of worship in its own right — the very kind of idolatry the earlier chapters of Israel's history had repeatedly warned against.

A Name That Demystifies

Hezekiah's naming of the object — Nehushtan, understood as a dismissive designation meaning something like 'a mere piece of bronze' (from נְחֹשֶׁת, nechosheth, 'bronze' or 'copper') — is a deliberate act of theological correction. In destroying and renaming the object, Hezekiah publicly declares that whatever power had once operated through the bronze serpent, the power was never inherent to the object itself; it belonged entirely to God, who had used the object as a temporary, specific instrument of His word.

Did You Know?

Hezekiah's destruction of the bronze serpent is a notable example within the Old Testament of a legitimate, divinely instituted religious object being destroyed specifically because it had become an obstacle to true worship, rather than a means of it — a pattern that offers an important caution against allowing any symbol,

ritual, or physical object, however rooted in genuine biblical history, to become a substitute for trust in God himself.

 **Further Reading:** *2 Kings 18:1-8; 2 Kings 18:4-5; Numbers 21:8-9; Exodus 20:4-5 (the prohibition against idolatry).*

Reflection Questions

1. What does Hezekiah's willingness to destroy a genuinely historic, divinely instituted object teach about the difference between reverence for a symbol and worship of the reality it represents?
2. Are there symbols, practices, or objects in your own spiritual life that could, over time, risk becoming a 'Nehushtan' — receiving devotion that belongs to God alone?

Chapter 8 — The Serpent Through Scripture: From Eden to Revelation

A Symbol With a Long History

The bronze serpent of Numbers 21 does not stand alone within Scripture's broader use of serpent imagery. Tracing this imagery across the canon adds further depth to understanding why Jesus's choice of comparison in John 3:14 carried such theological weight.

The Serpent in Eden

Genesis 3 presents the serpent as the tempter in the garden, the origin point of humanity's fall into sin, later judged directly by God: 'upon thy belly shalt thou go, and dust shalt thou eat all the days of thy life' (Genesis 3:14) — the very posture of the creature later fashioned in bronze and lifted up in Numbers 21.

The Serpent in Numbers

As this study has traced at length, the serpent in Numbers 21 functions as both the immediate agent of judgment (the literal venomous snakes) and, once fashioned in bronze and lifted up, an unexpected instrument of healing — the only place in the Old Testament where the very form of the curse becomes, by God's specific instruction, the means of deliverance from it.

The Serpent in Revelation

Revelation 12:9 and 20:2 explicitly identify 'that old serpent' with the dragon, the Devil, and Satan — connecting the imagery back to Genesis 3 and forward to the final, definitive defeat of evil described in Revelation 20:10. This identification is discussed at greater length in a related study on Genesis 3:15, which traces the promise that the serpent's head would ultimately be crushed.

Text	The Serpent's Role
Genesis 3	The tempter, the origin of humanity's fall into sin and judgment
Numbers 21	The agent of judgment, then — in bronze — the unexpected instrument of healing
John 3:14	The Old Testament image Jesus applies to His own coming death
Revelation 12, 20	'That old serpent,' identified as Satan, facing final, permanent defeat

 Did You Know?

Reading this full trajectory together, some interpreters note a striking theological movement: the very symbol most associated with the origin of humanity's curse (Genesis 3) becomes, through God's specific instruction in Numbers 21 and its fulfillment in Christ, the means by which that curse is ultimately broken — a reversal some describe as God taking the very shape of the problem and transforming it, in Christ, into the shape of the solution.

 **Further Reading:** *Genesis 3:1-15; Numbers 21:4-9; John 3:14; Revelation 12:9; Revelation 20:1-3, 10.*

Reflection Questions

1. How does tracing serpent imagery across the whole of Scripture change the weight you give to Jesus's specific choice of comparison in John 3:14?
2. What do you make of the idea that God sometimes redeems the very form of a problem, rather than simply removing it?

Chapter 9 — Common Questions and Interpretive Caution

Given how much theological weight this study places on Jesus's brief comparison in John 3:14, this chapter addresses several fair questions a careful reader might raise.

"Does 2 Corinthians 5:21 really mean Christ became sinful, or is this figurative?"

This is a longstanding and carefully debated question among theologians. Most historic Christian interpretation holds that Paul's statement that Christ was 'made...sin for us' describes Christ bearing the legal guilt and penalty of sin — being treated as a sin-offering, or standing in the position sin deserves — rather than Christ himself becoming morally corrupted or sinful in nature. The immediately surrounding context, which affirms Christ 'knew no sin,' supports this reading: whatever 'made sin' means, it operates alongside, not against, Christ's genuine sinlessness. This study follows this majority historic reading while acknowledging that theologians continue to explore the precise mechanics of this exchange.

"Isn't it strange, or even inappropriate, for Jesus to compare himself to a symbol of evil?"

This is worth sitting with rather than rushing past. The comparison is genuinely startling, and this study has tried to preserve rather than soften that shock, since the shock itself is likely part of why Jesus chose this image with Nicodemus. The resolution lies precisely in the 'identical in form, different in nature' pattern developed in Chapter 5: the bronze serpent's power to heal depended on it looking exactly like the source of the affliction while containing none of its actual venom. Jesus's comparison works the same way — He took on the outward form and legal position associated with the curse of sin, without ever partaking of sin's actual nature.

"Does the bronze serpent's later destruction in 2 Kings 18 undermine its status as a positive, God-given picture of Christ?"

No — and this distinction matters. The object itself was never the point; its later misuse as an idol does not retroactively change what it accomplished, by God's specific instruction, at the moment of its original institution in Numbers 21. Hezekiah's destruction of the object, in fact, reinforces this study's central theological point: symbols exist to point beyond themselves, and genuine faithfulness eventually requires refusing to let the symbol replace the reality it was always meant to represent.

Did You Know?

Maintaining a clear distinction between a symbol's original, God-given purpose and its later, human misuse is a recurring interpretive principle throughout Scripture, seen also in the eventual dismantling of various other legitimate but potentially idolatry-prone practices and objects across Israel's history — a pattern worth remembering whenever a genuinely biblical symbol, ritual, or tradition risks becoming an end in itself.

 **Further Reading:** 2 Corinthians 5:21; Hebrews 4:15; 2 Kings 18:1-6; Numbers 21:8-9.

Reflection Questions

1. Which of these questions had you already wondered about before reading this study?
2. How does the 'identical in form, different in nature' framework help resolve the apparent strangeness of Jesus's comparison?

Chapter 10 — Practical Applications for the Christian Life

The bronze serpent narrative, traced from Numbers 21 through John 3, Galatians 3, 2 Corinthians 5, and 2 Kings 18, carries direct implications for how believers understand both their salvation and their ongoing walk with God.

1. Salvation Requires Looking, Not Achieving

The bitten Israelites could not save themselves through effort, merit, or willpower; they could only look toward what God had provided. This remains true of saving faith in Christ: it is fundamentally an act of trust directed outward, toward what God has already accomplished, not an achievement generated by human effort or worthiness.

2. The Danger Does Not Have to Be Removed for the Remedy to Work

God did not remove the serpents from the camp; He provided healing within continued danger. This offers a realistic picture for believers who continue to live in a world where sin, temptation, and hardship remain present even after coming to faith: the remedy for sin's effects does not require the elimination of every difficulty, but the ongoing practice of turning, in faith, toward what God has provided.

3. Symbols Serve Faith Only as Long as They Point Beyond Themselves

Hezekiah's destruction of the Nehushtan is a sober warning against allowing any practice, tradition, translation, worship style, or physical object — however rooted in genuine biblical history — to become an object of devotion in its own right rather than a pointer toward God. Periodic, honest self-examination of one's own spiritual practices, asking whether any of them have quietly become ends in themselves, follows Hezekiah's example of radical faithfulness.

4. Christ's Identification With the Curse Is the Ground of Assurance

Understanding that Christ was 'made a curse' and 'made...sin' while remaining entirely sinless (Galatians 3:13; 2 Corinthians 5:21) grounds deep assurance for believers who struggle with ongoing guilt or shame. The exchange these texts describe was never partial or provisional; it mirrors the totality of the bronze serpent's form, taken on fully so that the remedy would be fully effective for anyone who looks.

5. The Gospel Was Always for "Whosoever"

The universal availability of the bronze serpent's healing — to every bitten Israelite who looked, without exception — anticipates the universal scope of John 3:16's 'whosoever believeth.' Believers sharing the gospel with others can rest in the same unrestricted invitation Numbers 21 first modeled: the remedy is not limited to the deserving, the prepared, or the spiritually mature, but to anyone willing to look.

 Did You Know?

The phrase 'look and live,' though not a direct biblical quotation, has become a well-known summary of the bronze serpent narrative in Christian hymnody and preaching, appearing in numerous hymns and sermons across many centuries and traditions as a concise expression of the simple, faith-centered nature of salvation this study has traced from Numbers 21 through John 3.

Reflection Questions

1. Which of these five applications feels most relevant to where you are in your walk with God right now?
2. Is there a symbol, tradition, or practice in your own spiritual life worth examining honestly, as Hezekiah did, to ensure it still points beyond itself?

Chapter 11 — Wisdom of Solomon and Early Jewish Reflection

Jesus and Paul were not the first to reflect theologically on the bronze serpent narrative. Examining how the episode was already being read within Second Temple Jewish tradition, prior to the New Testament, provides useful context for understanding the interpretive world Jesus and His first hearers shared.

The Wisdom of Solomon

The Wisdom of Solomon, a Jewish text likely composed in the last two centuries before Christ (not part of the Hebrew canon, but included in some Old Testament collections such as the Apocrypha, and known to many first-century Jewish readers), reflects directly on the bronze serpent episode: 'he that turned himself toward it was not saved by the thing that he saw, but by thee, that art the Saviour of all' (Wisdom 16:7). This early Jewish reading already draws a sharp distinction between the object itself and the true source of healing — anticipating, in its own way, the same distinction this study has traced through Hezekiah's later destruction of the Nehushtan.

A Shared Interpretive Instinct

This does not mean Jesus was quoting or dependent on the Wisdom of Solomon directly; the Gospels give no indication of this. What it demonstrates is that Jewish readers in the centuries before Christ were already wrestling seriously with the same core question this study has pursued: how could looking at a bronze image heal anyone, and what did that mechanism actually reveal about the nature of the true, saving power at work? Jesus's conversation with Nicodemus, a religious teacher steeped in exactly this kind of reflection, builds on ground his audience had already been cultivating.

Did You Know?

The Wisdom of Solomon's phrase 'the Saviour of all' (Greek ὁ πάντων σωτήρ, ho panton soter), used in its reflection on the bronze serpent, uses precisely the vocabulary of 'salvation' and 'savior' that the New Testament will apply directly to Jesus — another indication of how thoroughly the bronze serpent narrative had already become, well before Christ, a touchstone for Jewish reflection on the nature of divine deliverance.

Why This Background Strengthens, Rather Than Weakens, the Study

Recognizing that Jesus's use of the bronze serpent fits within an existing, active tradition of Jewish theological reflection — rather than representing an isolated or novel Christian invention — actually strengthens confidence in the naturalness and coherence of His comparison. Nicodemus was not being asked to accept an unprecedented or foreign interpretive move; he was being shown the true, ultimate referent of a symbol his own tradition had already recognized as pointing toward something, or someone, beyond itself.

 **Further Reading:** *Wisdom of Solomon 16:5-14 (Apocrypha); Numbers 21:8-9; John 3:14-15.*

Reflection Questions

1. How does knowing that Jewish tradition was already reflecting on the bronze serpent's deeper meaning, prior to Christ, change the way you read Jesus's comparison in John 3:14?
2. What value do you see in understanding the broader Jewish interpretive context behind New Testament passages, even when that context comes from texts outside the biblical canon?

A Closing Reflection: What the Curse Became

Numbers 21 begins with a camp full of dying people, bitten by the very judgment their own complaint had provoked. It ends with a strange, uncomfortable image lifted up on a pole — the shape of the affliction itself, transformed by God's word into the means of healing for anyone who would simply look.

John places that story immediately before the words most Christians know better than any other verse in the Bible. Read on its own, John 3:16 is already a statement of breathtaking love and scope. Read with Numbers 21 standing behind it — with the serpent, the pole, the look, the curse become a cure — it becomes something more precise: not simply a declaration that God loved the world, but an explanation of exactly how that love reached into the venom already coursing through humanity's blood, and gave everyone who would look somewhere real to look.

Hezekiah eventually broke the bronze serpent into pieces. He was right to. The object was never the point. But the pattern the object once displayed — the curse becoming, in God's hands, the cure; the affliction's own shape carrying the remedy for the affliction — did not end when the bronze was broken. It found its permanent form on a Roman cross outside Jerusalem, and it remains, according to John's own Gospel, available still: 'whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life.'

Did You Know?

This study is part of a broader series tracing how single Old Testament images and words — Melchizedek's priesthood, the mercy seat of the Ark, the wilderness rock, Jacob's ladder, and now the bronze serpent — each anticipate, with striking precision, specific dimensions of Christ's person and work. Read together, these studies model the same basic conviction: that the Old Testament was never merely a preparation discarded once the New Testament arrived, but a coherent, Spirit-inspired witness whose full weight only becomes visible once its central Subject is recognized.

 **Further Reading:** *Numbers 21:4-9; John 3:14-16; Galatians 3:13; 2 Kings 18:4.*

Summary of Key Points

- In Numbers 21, after Israel's complaint, God sends venomous serpents into the camp, and in response to the people's confession, instructs Moses to make a bronze serpent and lift it on a pole — anyone bitten who looks at it will live.
- The remedy required no ritual, sacrifice, or accumulated merit — only a look of faith toward what God had specifically provided, available equally to anyone bitten.
- In John 3:14, Jesus tells Nicodemus that 'as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up' — deliberately comparing himself to the serpent itself, not merely the pole or the act of healing.
- The Greek verb 'lifted up' (*hypsōō*) carries a double meaning throughout John's Gospel, referring simultaneously to Christ's physical crucifixion and His exaltation or glorification.
- Paul's language in Galatians 3:13 ('made a curse for us') and 2 Corinthians 5:21 ('made...sin for us') develops the same pattern displayed by the bronze serpent: taking on the exact form or legal position of the affliction while remaining, in actual nature, entirely free of it.
- John 3:15-16 extends the bronze serpent's unrestricted, look-and-live availability to the whole world through the language of 'whosoever believeth.'
- Centuries later, in 2 Kings 18, King Hezekiah destroys the preserved bronze serpent because the people had begun burning incense to it, calling it *Nehushtan* ('a mere piece of bronze') to demystify an object that had wrongly become an idol.
- The serpent motif runs throughout Scripture, from the tempter in Genesis 3 to the bronze serpent of Numbers 21 to the final, definitive defeat of 'that old serpent' in Revelation 12 and 20.
- Practically, this study grounds salvation as an act of trust rather than achievement, offers hope for living faithfully amid ongoing difficulty, warns against symbols becoming substitutes for the God they represent, deepens assurance in Christ's complete identification with the curse of sin, and affirms the universal, unrestricted scope of the gospel invitation.

Further Reading by Theme

On the Bronze Serpent Narrative

Numbers 21:1-9; Deuteronomy 8:11-16; 2 Kings 18:1-8.

On John 3 and the Conversation With Nicodemus

John 3:1-21; John 8:28; John 12:27-36.

On Christ Bearing the Curse and Becoming Sin

Galatians 3:10-14; 2 Corinthians 5:14-21; Deuteronomy 21:22-23; Romans 8:1-4; 1 Peter 2:21-25.

On the Serpent Motif Across Scripture

Genesis 3:1-15; Revelation 12:1-9; Revelation 20:1-3, 7-10.

On Salvation as Trust Rather Than Achievement

Isaiah 45:22; Romans 4:1-8; Ephesians 2:1-10.

Bibliography and Recommended References

The works below are recommended for readers who wish to go further than this introductory study, whether through academic commentaries or accessible reference resources.

Commentaries on Numbers

- ASHLEY, Timothy R. The Book of Numbers. New International Commentary on the Old Testament. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- COLE, R. Dennis. Numbers. New American Commentary. Nashville: B&H Publishing Group.
- WENHAM, Gordon J. Numbers: An Introduction and Commentary. Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press.

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- CARSON, D. A. The Gospel According to John. Pillar New Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
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- MOO, Douglas J. Galatians. Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic.
- GARLAND, David E. 2 Corinthians. New American Commentary. Nashville: B&H Publishing Group.
- STOTT, John R. W. The Cross of Christ. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press.

On 2 Kings and Hezekiah's Reforms

- HOUSE, Paul R. 1, 2 Kings. New American Commentary. Nashville: B&H Publishing Group.
- PROVAN, Iain W. 1 and 2 Kings. New International Biblical Commentary. Peabody: Hendrickson.

Dictionaries and Original-Language Tools

- BROWN, DRIVER, BRIGGS. A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament (BDB).
- KITTEL, Gerhard (ed.). Theological Dictionary of the New Testament (TDNT), entry on hypsoo.
- VINE, W. E. Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words.

— End of Study —