

# Does God Love the World Enough to Save It?

**“For God so loved the world He gave His only begotten Son...”—John 3:16, undoubtedly the most quoted verse in the Bible. But if God loves the world so much, why does He seem to be doing so little to save it?**

How many sermons, do you suppose, have been preached on John 3:16? How many times throughout the course of each year is this passage brought to your attention?

It seems that the verse has a way of turning up in conspicuous and sundry places. You may have noticed it on a plaque on the living room wall of a friend’s house. And surely you have been handed little Bible tracts with the passage standing out in bold print.

We even find mention of the verse on bumper stickers and billboards. One bumper sticker, for example, says, “John 3:16 Tells It Like It Is!”

And certainly, John 3:16 *does* tell it like it is. God *does* love the world; He loves it with a love greater than the human mind can fully comprehend.

The Bible tells us God is “gracious and full of compassion” (Psalm 111:4); that His mercy is “great above the heavens” (Psalm 108:4), meaning that His immense compassion, His enduring mercy, cannot be measured.

In Psalm 136, the phrase “for His mercy endureth for ever” is found no fewer than 26 times. To the people of Israel He said, “Yea, I have loved thee with an everlasting love” (Jeremiah 31:3). And in the New Testament, He is called “The God of love and peace” (2 Corinthians 13:11).

So great is His love, He is “not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9). His desire is to “have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth” (1 Timothy 2:4).

Clearly, God’s love is as great as His eternal power. His compassion, His mercy, His graciousness, simply cannot be measured, and cannot be adequately described by the words of mere mortals.

The nature of our Creator is best summed-up in a simple three-word statement made by the apostle John: “*God is love*” (John 4:8, 16).

John did not mean that God is no more than a pleasant thought, or some ethereal concept; he meant that God’s predominant characteristic is love.

But if God is so filled with love and mercy, and is so desirous of bringing men to repentance and a knowledge of the truth, why is the world *not* getting saved?

One must admit, if God is really *trying* to get the world saved, He is not doing a very good job.

When we consider the present condition of the world—soaring crime rates, the drug scourge, terrorism, the aids curse, racial tensions, violent crimes of all sorts—can we logically conclude that God is defeating the forces of evil, that He is getting this world saved?

Every day *thousands* of human beings die *unsaved*. *Millions* have yet to even hear the name of Jesus Christ, which is the only “name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved” (Acts 4:12).

From the time of Adam to the present, *billions* have died without having been saved. In fact, of all the human beings who have ever lived and died, the overwhelming *vast majority* of them were never saved.

Are they now suffering in hell? Are they awaiting a “resurrection of damnation”? Will Almighty God—the God who “is love,” whose mercy endures forever, who is not willing that any should perish but that all come to repentance and a knowledge of the truth—condemn these billions to a *lake of fire*, cutting them off from any hope of salvation?

Most “evangelicals,” including all the big-name television preachers, believe that God *will* convert the world to Christianity during the thousand-year period (Revelation 20) following the Second Coming of Jesus Christ—thus showing that God is fully capable of bringing the world to repentance and conversion. However, the same preachers claim that anyone today who dies without having “received Christ” has no hope of ever being saved.

If God *can* convert the world, why doesn’t He do it *now*, rather than waiting until the return of Christ? Is salvation largely dependent upon the time period into which one is born? And what of the billions who have died unsaved? If God loved them so much that He sent Jesus Christ to die for them, why didn’t He give them the same opportunity for salvation He will give those living during the millennial period?

In other words, will not the compassionate, merciful God who is not desirous that any should perish give everyone a *fair chance* for salvation?

### **Prevailing Concepts**

If you went on television and stated before millions that God is unfair, you would surely draw an indignant response from the professing Christian public. You would likely find yourself the object of many a condemnatory remark, for just about any Bible-believing

fundamentalist with any conviction at all would be outraged at the suggestion that God is anything less than perfectly fair in His dealings with humankind.

But let's face it. The traditional concepts concerning death and the afterlife, as espoused by evangelical fundamentalism, *do not portray an equitable God!*

Apparently, "orthodox" Protestants generally believe that most people are going to miserably writhe in the torturous flames of everlasting hell because they failed to "get saved" during their earthly life—even though God did not grant them the good fortune of being born during the millennial period, when evil will be eschewed and the way of salvation made crystal clear.

Many apparently believe that from the day Adam was expelled from the Garden of Eden until the present, only a comparative few have experienced the bliss of "glory land"; but innumerable multitudes—whole families, tribes, nations—have gone to the "place of the damned," with no hope of ever knowing the joys of the everlasting life for which humankind was created.

Some contend that only those who "accept Christ" during this life will be saved. Others say that all who believe in God and lead morally good lives—whether they adhere to Christianity, Judaism, Islam, or some other religious faith—will be counted among the saved.

Many annihilationists, who reject the doctrine of the "immortality of the soul," believe that only the Christian saints will rise in the "resurrection of life," while everyone else will rise in the post-millennial "resurrection of damnation." Those who come up in the latter resurrection will live long enough to weep, gnash their teeth, scream and beg for mercy, just before being *burned* out of existence.

You are either "saved" or "lost," evangelicals claim. When you die, it's all over—you either receive the reward of the saved or the wages of unrighteousness.

But the questions still remain: What about the teeming billions who lived before the time of Christ? And what about the billions since the time of Christ who have never known the way of salvation? Will they all rise in a future resurrection of *damnation*? Are all the multitudes of Jews, Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists who lived and died without having accepted Jesus Christ as Savior lost for all eternity?

Or, could it be that the love and merciful kindness of the Creator is just great enough that the billions who have lived and died without having been saved will live again, will be given a full knowledge of the truth of God and full opportunity for salvation?

Before answering, let's briefly consider the question of whether immortality is a natural quality of the human soul or a gift God grants to those who turn to Him in repentance and faith.

## Saints to “Put on” Immortality

Most professing Christians believe the Bible teaches the concept of the “immortality of the soul,” and that the “soul” consciously survives the death of the body. The “souls” of the saved go to heaven; the “souls” of the unsaved go to hell—according to most Protestant evangelicals.

But if the saints go immediately to their reward upon death of the body, why does the apostle Paul tell us that if there is no *resurrection* of the dead, there is no hope?

Paul wrote, “If after the manner of men I have fought with beasts at Ephesus, *what advantageth it me, if the dead rise not?* let us eat and drink; for tomorrow we *die*” (1 Corinthians 15:32).

The apostle further stated: “Behold, I shew you a mystery; We [the saints] shall not all *sleep*, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, *at the last trump* [at the Second Coming of Jesus Christ; compare 1 Thessalonians 4:16]: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. For this corruptible must *put on* incorruption, and this mortal must *put on* immortality, so when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and this mortal shall have put on immortality, *then* shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory” (1 Corinthians 15:51-54).

Did you notice that Paul said that the saints, whether living or dead, will “put on” immortality? If immortality has to be “put on,” then we are not already immortal—immortality is not inherent.

Not only are we told that immortality must be “put on,” we are told *when* it will be put on. The saints will put on immortality “at the last trump”—at the return of Jesus Christ. *Then*, not before, shall death be swallowed up in victory.

If the saints consciously go into the presence of God the Father and Jesus Christ as soon as they die—in other words, if the “orthodox” idea of “going to heaven” is true—then death, for deceased saints, is *already* swallowed up in victory.

Paul wrote, “For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be *made alive*. But every man in his own order: Christ the firstfruits; afterward they that are Christ’s *at His coming*” (1 Corinthians 15:23).

If the dead saints have already gone to their heavenly reward, then they have *already* been “made alive.” But Paul leaves no room for the “going to heaven” doctrine, for he states plainly that the saints will be “made alive” *at Christ’s Second Coming*, which has yet to occur.

As shocking as it may sound to the professing Christian public, the apostle Paul *did not believe* in “going to heaven when you die.” He clearly taught that the saints will be rewarded with everlasting life *at the resurrection of the dead*.

It is clear, then, that resurrection from the state of death is promised to the saints. But what about the rest of the dead—the billions who were not Christian saints during their lifetimes? Will they also live again?

If so, when? Will they rise from death at the return of Christ? Or does the Bible teach that the unsaved billions will rise in a separate resurrection?

### **The Resurrection of Judgment**

As we have seen, the Bible teaches plainly that the saints will rise from the state of death at the return of Jesus Christ. In the New Testament, this resurrection is called the “resurrection of life” (John 5:29), the “resurrection of the just” (Acts 24:14, 15), and the “first resurrection” (Revelation 20:5).

But what about the dead who do not awaken to meet the returning Christ? What will happen to them?

In Daniel 12 we read about two categories of resurrection. The prophet writes: “And many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt [abhorrence]. And they that be wise shall shine as the brightness of the firmament; and they that turn many to righteousness as the stars for ever and ever” (verses 2, 3).

Let’s first notice what this passage does not tell us. Though it tells us that “many...shall awake,” it does not tell us *how many*. “Many” could mean a few thousand, or it could mean everyone.

Second, the passage does not tell us whether these two categories of resurrection will occur at the same time or at separate times. Standing alone, verse 2 *seems* to say that both will occur together. However, the text does not demand this interpretation, for Daniel is speaking of the final order of things and is not attempting to present a detailed chronology of eschatological events.

And finally, we are not told whether those who rise in the second category of resurrection will face *immediate* annihilation or whether there will be an intervening period between the time they awaken and the commencement of “everlasting abhorrence.”

We *are* told that there are at least two categories of resurrection. We can conclude little more than this from the passage.

Now, let’s go to the New Testament, and see what Jesus Christ said about the resurrections.

“Marvel not at this,” Jesus said, “for the hour is coming, in the which all that are in the graves shall hear His voice. And shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the *resurrection of life*; and they that have done evil, unto the *resurrection of judgment*” (John 5:28, 29; “judgment” is a more accurate translation than “damnation”).

Notice, Jesus says that all who are in their graves shall come forth. “All” certainly means more than just a few. It undoubtedly includes the billions who have lived and died down through the ages. Jesus says that all of them will live again, that they will rise in one of two categories of resurrection—the resurrection of life or the resurrection of judgment.

Obviously, the resurrection of life is the resurrection of the saints; which will occur at the return of Jesus Christ. But what about the resurrection of judgment; when will it occur?

The wording of the passage seems to suggest that both categories of resurrection will occur at the same time. Jesus said, “[T]he *hour* is coming, in the which all that are in the graves shall hear His voice.” This *seems* to be saying that both resurrections will occur in the same hour. But then, it could just as well mean that an hour is coming for the one, and an hour (a different hour) is coming for the other.

The apostle Paul also mentions two resurrection categories. He says “that there shall be a resurrection of the dead, both of the just and the unjust” (Acts 24:15).

Again, we are not given a great deal of information. It is obvious that the resurrection “of the just” is the same as the “resurrection of life” of which Jesus spoke, and that the resurrection of “the unjust” and the “resurrection of judgment” are the same, but the wording of Paul’s statement is not clear. Is he saying that both the just and unjust will rise in a single resurrection? Or did he believe that the two categories of resurrection were to be separated by an intervening time period?

Thus far we have been told that there will be a resurrection to immortality and a resurrection of judgment. The former will involve “those who have done good”; the latter will involve “those who have done evil.” And *all* who are in their graves, Jesus says, will rise in one or the other.

But none of the passages we have examined have told us very much about the time elements involved in these resurrections.

Turn to Revelation 20, and let’s notice something none of the other passages have told us.

John says: “And I saw thrones, and they sat upon them, and judgment was given unto them: and I saw the souls of them that were beheaded for the witness of Jesus, and for the word of God, and which had not worshipped the beast, neither his image, neither had received his mark upon their foreheads, or in their hands; and *they lived* [were made alive] and reigned with Christ a thousand years” (verse 4).

The saints who had given their lives in martyrdom are seen *living* and *reigning* with Christ. Obviously, this is a description of the resurrection of life. John says: “This is the *first* resurrection. Blessed and holy is he that hath part in the first resurrection: on such the second death hath no power, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with Him a thousand years” (verse 5, 6).

The first part of verse 5 tells us, “But the *rest of the dead* lived not again until the thousand years were *finished*.” John’s description of this post-millennial resurrection is found beginning in verse 12: “And I saw the dead, small and great, stand before God, and the books were opened, which is the book of life: and the dead were *judged* out of those things which were written in the books, according to their works.”

Notice, those who rise in this post-millennial resurrection will be *judged*. Clearly, this is the *resurrection of judgment*.

And finally, we find that these two resurrections—the resurrection of life and the resurrection of judgment—are separated by a thousand-year interim.

John tells us that the “rest of the dead”—all the dead who did not rise in the first resurrection—lived again at the conclusion of the millennial period. Recall Jesus’ statement “*All* who are in their graves, shall hear His voice.” It seems quite clear that neither Jesus’ nor John’s description leaves anybody out—all the dead who do not rise in the first resurrection will rise in the judgment period following the Millennium.

But what will happen in the “resurrection of judgment”? Will all who rise in this resurrection be cast into a lake of fire? Will they weep, scream, and beg before finally being *burned* out of existence?

### **The Post-Millennial Day of Judgment**

Peter writes: “The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9).

This passage tells us in no uncertain terms that God is not desirous that *any* should be eternally lost. This verse alone destroys the concept that some are born predestined to be lost.

But that’s not all. The verse gives us another vitally important piece of information. It tells us that those who *repent* before God will *not* perish. This is an extremely important point. Please keep it in mind as we consider the examples of people who either *did* repent before God or *would have repented* had they witnessed the miracles and works of Jesus.

The first example is found in the book of Jonah.

Most of us know the story. God had commanded His prophet Jonah to go to the city of Nineveh and “cry against it” (1:2). But Jonah tried to flee “from the presence of the Lord” (1:3); he did not want to accept God’s commission. However, God insisted that Jonah take the job, so He prepared a great fish to swallow him, take him to an area near Nineveh, and vomit him out on dry land.

Take up the account in the third chapter.

“And the word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time, saying, Arise, go unto Nineveh, that great city, and preach unto it the preaching that I bid thee. So Jonah arose, and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord. Now Nineveh was an exceeding great city of three days journey. And Jonah began to enter the city a day’s journey, and he cried, and said, Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown” (verses 1-4).

Jonah preached the message God had given to him. He even dated his prophecy. “In yet *forty days*,” the prophet cried, “and Nineveh shall be overthrown!”

But notice what happened:

“So the people of Nineveh *believed God*, and proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them even to the least of them. For word came unto the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, and he laid his robe from him, and covered him with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. And he caused it to be proclaimed and published through Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles, saying, Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything; let them not feed, nor drink water; But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and *cry mightily unto God*: yea, let them turn everyone from his evil way, and from the violence that is in their hands. Who can tell if God will turn and repent, and turn away from his fierce anger, that we perish not?” (verses 5-9).

“And God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God repented of the evil, that He said that He would do unto them; and He did it not” (verse 10).

Now, recall the passage quoted above. God is “not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance.”

The people of Nineveh *did* repent before God! They repented in sackcloth; they fasted; they cried *mightily* to God; their voices were heard in heaven! And God responded by sparing the city.

The people were saved *physically*, but were they saved *spiritually*? Will they be in the resurrection of life? Will they rise from their graves to meet the returning Christ at the *first* resurrection?

No! They will not! Though they repented of their wickedness, the people of Nineveh will rise in the *resurrection of judgment*.



Let's see the proof.

Jesus said, "The men of Nineveh shall *rise* [shall be resurrection] in *the judgment* with this generation, and shall condemn it; because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and, behold, a greater than Jonah is here" (Matthew 12:41).

Clearly, the ancient Ninevites who repented at the preaching of Jonah will come up in the *resurrection of judgment!* They will *not* rise in the resurrection of life, or first resurrection, for though they repented, *they were not given knowledge unto salvation!*

Had Jonah preached the way of salvation to them, the Ninevites—at least many of them—would have accepted that way; they would have been saved.

Will God condemn these repentant people for not responding to a message they never received? Will the loving, merciful, compassionate God Who is not willing that any perish, but that all come to repentance, throw these people (who *did* repent) into a lake of fire, where they will be destroyed forever?

*Of course not!*

The word "judgment" does not mean "damnation." And the resurrection of *judgment* is not a resurrection of *damnation*. Peter wrote, "For the time is come that *judgment* must begin at the house of God..." (1 Peter 4:17). This simply tells us that God is judging His people; He is *evaluating* them on the basis of what they do with what they know. It certainly does not say that *damnation* must begin at the house of God.

The resurrection of judgment, then, is not a time when the billions from ages past will rise to meet their final doom. Rather, it is a time of *evaluation*. And in order to be evaluated, or judged, on those elements which pertain to salvation, it is necessary that they first be given knowledge of the *way of salvation*.

The Bible does not spell out the details of the postmillennial judgment, but glimpses of that period provide sufficient evidence that salvation will be extended to those who had never received an opportunity to be saved.

Notice Matthew 11:21-24:

"Woe unto thee, Chorazin! Woe unto thee, Bethsaida! for if the mighty works, which were done in you, had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they *would have repented* long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I say unto you, It shall be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon at the day of judgment, than for you."

The peoples of Tyre and Sidon never heard the gospel of salvation, never had an opportunity to be saved. And yet, had they seen the wonderful works of Jesus, *they would have repented!* Is it conceivable that the God of immeasurable compassion and mercy will refuse those people the opportunity to be saved?

No, of course not. Even the perverted Sodomites will be granted a full chance for salvation.

Jesus said: “And thou, Capernaum, which art exalted unto heaven, shalt be brought down to hell [Greek: *hades*]: for if the mighty works, which have been done in thee, had been done in Sodom, it should have remained until this day. But I say unto you, That it shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom, in the day of judgment, than for thee” (Matthew 11:23, 24).

The inhabitants of Sodom met with a horrible fate—they were *burned to death*. Their whole city was utterly destroyed, reduced to ashes, when fire and brimstone streamed down from heaven (Genesis 19). Does God intend to bring these people back to life only to burn them to death *again*? Or, will He restore their lives for another purpose?

Think about it. Had the two angels God sent to Sodom (Genesis 19) done the miracles Jesus did in *His* day, *repentance would have occurred!* Jesus said so! But the Sodomites never saw the healing of the sick, the casting out of demons, and the raising of the dead; they never heard the gospel of Jesus Christ. In the post-millennial day of judgment, they will learn of the way of salvation, and, undoubtedly, they will witness the wonderful works of a loving God who is not desirous that any should perish.

So what will happen in the future time of judgment? While the Bible does not present us with a detailed scenario of what is to occur in that time period, we can come to some definite conclusions based on the information given us.

First, it's important to realize that judgment (particularly where salvation is concerned) necessitates knowledge. Before the process of judgment can fully take place, one must have a knowledge of the way of salvation and of his own personal sins. These two elements must be present before repentance can occur. So, when the peoples of Sodom and Nineveh, along with billions of others, rise in the judgment, they will be given a knowledge of the truth and will be brought face to face with their own sins.

Whether they ultimately enter the Kingdom of God will depend upon the next step. Once the Sodomites (and others) know the truth, and once they see just how sinful they are, if they *refuse* to repent, they will be destroyed in the lake of fire” (Revelation 20:15).

But how many of those who are given the truth of God, and who have an opportunity to inherit eternal life in His Kingdom, will choose rather to perish in a lake of fire?

Saul of Tarsus mercilessly and vehemently persecuted the church, “breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord” (Acts 9:1). He consented to the death of Stephen (Acts 8:1), and committed God's people to prison (Acts 8:3). Yet, this man *repented* when Jesus Christ struck him down on the road to Damascus (Acts 9).

If Saul (who became the apostle Paul) repented and came to lovingly embrace the name he had despised, how many of the billions of ordinary sinners from ages past would refuse repentance if God dealt with them the same way He dealt with Saul?

And if God is as patient, loving, and forgiving as the Bible says He is—and He certainly is—then surely the example of His expression of love toward Saul, which resulted in Saul’s conversion, is an example of the love He will ultimately express toward everyone.

### **God Is Not Losing!**

Evangelicals shout, “God will not fail! He will triumphantly bring the nations of this world into submission to Him!” They tell us that a portion of God’s victory will be seen during the coming “great tribulation,” when multiple thousands of Jews turn to Christ. The victory march will continue, we are told, as Christ brings millions to conversion during the millennial period.

But wait! If multitudes from ages past and millions during the “great tribulation” will have already had their chance for salvation by the time Christ returns, then God has already failed!

Is God a “dispensationalist”? Is He a “respector of persons”? Does He favor one era of human history over another?

The apostle Paul said that only a remnant of the multitudes of Israel had obtained salvation. He wrote, “What then? Israel hath not obtained that which he seeketh for; but the election [the remnant] hath obtained it, and the rest [the vast majority] were blinded (According as it is written, God hath given them the spirit of slumber, eyes that they should not see, and ears that they should not hear.) unto this day” (Romans 11:7, 8).

Paul earnestly desired that his Israelitish kinsmen might be saved. He was even willing to suffer personal loss for the salvation of his brethren. “I say the truth in Christ, I lie not, my conscience also bearing me witness in the Holy Spirit, That I have great heaviness and continual sorrow in my heart. For I could wish that myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh” (Romans 9:1-3).

Does this mean that Paul believed that the millions of Israelites who had failed to obtain salvation, whose eyes God had blinded, were eternally lost?

The apostle said, “For if the casting away of them [the Israelites] be the reconciling of the world [the gentiles], what shall the receiving of them be, but *life from the dead!*” (Romans 11:15).

Later, in the same chapter, Paul writes, “And so all *Israel shall be saved*” (verse 26).

Notice, the unconverted Israelites will be received of God by “life from the dead”—by *resurrection*—and “all Israel shall be saved.”

Of course, the dispensationalists will object. To them, the phrase “life from the dead” refers to conversion to Christianity, and is limited to that meaning; and “all Israel” refers to the 144,000 Israelites of the end-time, as well as to any Israelites converted during the ensuing years.

Again, we must ask, Is God a dispensationalist? Is salvation largely dependent upon the era into which one is born?

Paul goes on to write: “For as ye [gentiles] in times past have not believed God, yet have now obtained mercy through their [Israel's] unbelief: Even so have these also now not believed, that through your mercy they [the Israelites] also may obtain mercy. For God hath concluded them all in unbelief”—why?—“that *He might have mercy upon them all*” (Romans 11:30-32).

God’s plan for humankind excludes no one, regardless of race, of nationality, or of which era of time one may have been born into.

Only the *incorrigibly wicked*—those who adamantly refuse to repent of their wickedness, who willfully *reject* the way of salvation and *choose* the way which leads to eternal death—will be destroyed in the lake of fire. Undoubtedly, these will be in the extreme minority.

No wonder the apostle Paul wrote, “O the depth of the riches both of wisdom and knowledge of God! how unsearchable are His judgments, and His ways past finding out! For who hath known the mind of the Lord? Or who hath been His counselor? Or who hath first given to Him, and it shall be recompensed unto Him again? For of Him, and through Him, and to Him, are all things: to whom be glory for ever” (Romans

11:33-36).

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