

# **JOHN 3:16**

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Hidden Truths of the Golden Verse



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## Hidden Truths of the Golden Verse

By Gerald E. Weston

*For God so loved the world  
that He gave His only begotten Son,  
that whoever believes in Him  
should not perish but have everlasting life.*

*J316* Edition 1.3 | August 2020  
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# Chapter I

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## God, Who Loved the World

**W**e have all seen the sign. Sometimes it is along a highway. Sometimes we see it painted on a rock surface along the road. Certainly, if you have seen a baseball game, there it is in the stands—right behind home plate. And if you have watched an American football game, there it is, in the background, when a field goal is attempted.

What am I referring to? The verse that is perhaps the most widely displayed verse from the entire Bible—John 3:16. “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.”

Yet, for all the advertisement of this verse, and even though it is perhaps the most memorized verse of the entire Bible, how many people really know what it means?

Many professing Christians **think** they know, but mostly what they understand about this special verse is simply that God loves us and Christ died for us. Of course, that much is true, and should be a great source of inspiration and encouragement. However, there is **much more meaning** behind this “golden verse” than most professing Christians understand. For example, who and what is God? And who is the Son? Why did God give His Son for us? And what does it mean to perish or to have everlasting life? These are all very important questions, but for now, consider just the first two words of that verse: “For God...”

### The Greek Version

It is easy to pass over these opening words without challenging our thinking about who God is. Sadly, most people do not know the true God—not even most professing Christians! Many assume without ever proving it that the God of the Bible is a trinity—three persons (*hypostases*) in one—but where did this concept come from? The highly regarded *Eerdmans' Handbook to the History of Christianity* tells us that “In *Against Praxeas*, Tertullian developed the doctrine of the Trinity” (ed. Tim Dowley, p. 111, 1977).

But who was Tertullian, and from where did he get his ideas about God? Tertullian was born around 160AD and “received the typical education of the late second century... But his well-known question, ‘What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?’ expressed a rejection of philosophy that was not true of his own work, since **he demonstrated how pagan intellectual achievements could be made to serve Christianity**” (p. 111, emphasis added). Read that again and consider the implications.

Clearly, Tertullian and others were products of their educations, which were heavily influenced by the philosophical and pagan ideas of their time and location. In contrasting the thinking of various church scholars of the late second century AD, *Eerdmans' Handbook* compares the two primary North African cities that influenced such men as Tertullian and Origen:

The differences between the orthodoxy of, for instance, Alexandria and Carthage, arose out of the different ways of thinking of their theologians. Tertullian used the language and thought-forms of law, rhetoric and Stoicism—and Montanism; Clement and Origen used the concepts of Platonism and Pythagoreanism—and Christian Gnosticism. Origen, and even Tertullian, may at times have been so heavily influenced by them as to cross the narrow frontier that separates orthodoxy from heresy (p. 109).

These theologians read the Bible through the lenses of their non-biblical biases, and one of the great debates of the day involved the nature of God:

Tertullian gave the Latin West a theological vocabulary that has hardly yet been bettered. He drew upon Stoicism and Roman law for his language, and taught that God was one being (*substantia*) but three concrete individuals (*personae*)....

Origen's teaching dominated the East in the third and fourth centuries.... he insisted that Father, Son and Spirit were three eternally distinct persons (Greek *hypostaseis*—roughly the same as *personae*)....

**Origen's ideas were deeply coloured by Middle Platonism**, which graded existence into different levels (p. 112, emphasis added).

In addition to the problem of pre-conceived perceptions about God based on heathen influences, it is important to understand the arrogance that accompanied these prejudices. For example, the Bible affirms that the apostles were part of the foundation of the Church: "having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone" (Ephesians 2:20). Further, Jude—who was the brother of Christ—admonishes us to return to the faith that the apostles once delivered (Jude 3). There was no sense of a progressive theology with Jude, but not so with Origen who came along much later. Origen felt quite superior to the Apostles Peter, John, James, and the other men Christ had personally chosen: "The speculative Origen not only includes paragraphs on the soul, free will, devils and angels, but also claims that the apostles left much else 'to be investigated by **those who were fit for the higher gifts of the Spirit**'" (p. 115, emphasis added).

How many people realize the questionable sources from which their ideas arise? And how many realize that the concept of the Trinity is just as controversial today as it ever was? Any student of the subject realizes that there are different schools of thought about the nature of the Trinity. Without belaboring the point, notice these headings from the online *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* regarding the Trinity: "One-self Theories," "Three-self Theories," "Selves, gods, and modes," "What is a mode?," "Relative Identity Theories," "20th Century Theologians and 'Social' Theories," "Functional Monotheism," "Perichoretic Monotheism," "Material Monotheism,"



“Concept-relative Monotheism,” “Mysterianism,” “Negative Mysterianism,” “Positive Mysterianism.” You obviously have plenty of company if you do not understand the Trinity!

### **The Biblical Version**

How refreshing are Jude’s words when we turn to the Bible and read what it says about the nature of God. “Beloved, while I was very diligent to write to you concerning our common salvation, I found it necessary to write to you exhorting you to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3).

The first place the term “God” is used in scripture (Genesis 1:1), it comes from the Hebrew *Elohim*, a plural word. The plurality of God is affirmed in verse 26: “Then God [*Elohim*] said, ‘Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness....’” The terms *Us* and *Our* indicate more than one member in the God family, but how can one reconcile humankind being made in the image and likeness of a Trinitarian god? Think about it. If God is a Trinity, with all that this means and implies, how could we human beings truthfully be said to have been made in His image and likeness?

The Apostle John gives us great insight into the nature of God: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God” (John 1:1–2). Setting aside any preconceived notions, the clarity with which John writes is refreshing. We see here two beings: one is called *God* and the other *the Word*. Yet the Word is also called God and He was in the beginning with God. A simple analogy is that of a man and a woman who are married. Both are named Smith. The husband is Smith and the wife is Smith. Interestingly, God tells us that the man and his wife are to be one (Genesis 2:24; Matthew 19:5).

John further reveals that the one known as *the Word* is He who became known as Jesus the Christ (John 1:14), and it was through Jesus that everything was made that was made (John 1:3, Colossians 1:15–18). There is no mention here of the Holy Spirit being a part of this family or of being a separate *personae* or *hypostasis*. In fact, if the Holy Spirit were a person, we would be confronted with several problems.

Matthew 1:20 tells us, “But while he thought about these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, ‘Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take to you Mary your wife, for that

which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit.” Now, consider—if the Holy Spirit is a person, then who would Jesus’ Father be? The Holy Spirit would be Jesus’ Father! But we know this cannot be. Thus, we can see the fallacy of the Trinity teaching. Of course, when Trinity-believers are confronted with this passage, one will often hear the response, “You don’t understand the doctrine of the Trinity.” But that is okay, because **neither does the person who responds this way**. The doctrine of the Trinity is known as a *strict mystery*, which is defined as “A revealed truth that so far exceeds the capacity of a created intellect that its full meaning cannot be comprehended except by God alone. Yet strict mysteries, such as the Trinity and the Incarnation, can be partially understood, with varying degrees of insight, depending on God’s grace or the believer’s own effort and experience” (“Catholic Dictionary,” *CatholicCulture.org*).

Another problem is found in the language Paul and Peter used in Scripture to greet their readers. Near the beginning in twelve of Paul’s epistles—always within the first seven verses—we find something akin to the following: “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (cf. Romans 1:7; Ephesians 1:3). Why is there no mention of the Holy Spirit? Peter writes a similar greeting: “Grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord” (2 Peter 1:2).

### **The Lord Is One!**

Most Jews look to Deuteronomy 6:4 as the most important verse in the Bible: “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one!” Jesus, too, confirms the oneness of God: “I and My Father are one” (John 10:30). So, this brings us to the question “In what **way** is God ‘one’?”

Origen defined God’s oneness through the lens of Greek philosophical concepts. “The issue of the Trinity (a later term) became an unavoidable problem. **It was particularly difficult to resolve because of the influence of the Greek concept of unity, as perfect oneness, excluding any internal distinctions**” (*Eerdmans’*, p. 110, emphasis added). But is this the biblical definition of oneness?

Jesus Christ answers this most important question for us. On the night in which He was betrayed, Jesus was on earth, and He prayed to His Father in heaven. Note these clear words about oneness found in this prayer: “I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; that they all may be one” (John

17:20–21). So we see that He wants us all to be one, but in what way? So “that they all may be one, **as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You**; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me. And the glory which You gave Me I have given them, **that they may be one just as We are one**; I in them, and You in Me; that they may be made perfect in one” (vv. 21–23).

Could anything be more plain? The oneness God is describing is not the Trinitarian concept of a three-in-one closed godhead. We human members of God’s family are to be one, “just as” God the Father and Jesus Christ are one. Now, we all know that true Christians today are not absorbed into a single entity with no internal distinctions. We all have separate physical bodies. We are not in the same space at the same time. In fact, we are not normally all in the same room, city, or country at the same time. Yet, Jesus prayed that we would all be one, just as He and the Father are one! Is it not evident that this biblical oneness is referring to being at one in mind and purpose?

Note also that human beings are to “be one in Us [God the Father and Jesus Christ]” (v. 21). This oneness certainly does not fit with the idea of a closed godhead, an idea the Trinity doctrine requires. On the contrary, we are called to be a part of the very God family. (For further information, if you have not already done so, please request our booklet *Your Ultimate Destiny* by contacting the Regional Office nearest you, or read it online at [TomorrowsWorld.org](http://TomorrowsWorld.org))

### **The Holy Spirit, Our Helper**

Many professing Christians simply **assume** that the Bible shows the Holy Spirit as a person. There are several passages that might on the surface appear that way, so let us take a closer look at one of them. John 14:16–17 tells us, “And I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may abide with you forever—the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him; but you know Him, for He dwells with you and will be in you.” The word translated “Helper” (“Comforter” in the *KJV*) comes from the Greek *parakletos*. As is the case in numerous languages, nouns in Greek are gendered—they are usually either masculine or feminine, but in some cases they can be neuter. The gender of a noun does not impute actual gender to the object—many nouns carry a masculine or feminine gender that has nothing to do with the actual

gender of the object. Is a table male or female simply because of its noun and pronoun? Of course not! In this case, the noun *parakletos* is masculine, so it requires a masculine pronoun. Most English translations therefore translate the pronoun as the masculine “*He*”—but “*It*” would be both grammatically and doctrinally acceptable, as it is rendered in some Bible translations such as the French *Geneva Bible*. However, even if one translates “*He*” as “*It*,” this does not remove the problem entirely. Even with “*It*,” some readers are tempted to construe the passage as if it is talking about a person. The answer is found in understanding a literary term called *personification*. *Oxford University Press* defines *personify* this way: to “Attribute a personal nature or human characteristics to (something non-human)” (*Lexico.com*). Does the Bible ever do this? The answer is an emphatic yes! See Proverbs 8:1–3: “Does not wisdom cry out, and understanding lift up her voice? She takes her stand on the top of the high hill, beside the way, where the paths meet. She cries out by the gates, at the entry of the city, at the entrance of the doors....”

Now, does anyone think *wisdom* is a person? Of course not, unless “Wisdom” is someone’s name. Does *personification* by itself **prove** that the Holy Spirit is not a person? Perhaps not if that were the **only** reason for such belief, but there are **many** other reasons not to ascribe personhood to the Holy Spirit. Additionally, we must note that the Holy Spirit is seen as being *poured out* (Acts 10:45) and as the *power of God* (Luke 1:35; Romans 15:13). It is also described metaphorically as *wind* (Acts 2:2; John 20:22) and *water* (John 7:37–39).

When Jesus said He would send the Helper (John 14:16–17), He finished the thought in the next verse: “I will not leave you orphans; I will come to you.” The Holy Spirit is the power that flows out from God the Father and Jesus Christ. It is the agent through which Christ would come to them, and through which Paul could proclaim, “Christ lives in me” (Galatians 2:20). It is the Spirit of Truth that will guide us into truth (John 16:13–14), just as wisdom instructs us (Proverbs 9:4–6).

Yes indeed, God—the one and only true God of the Bible—did so love the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life! And He gave Christians His Spirit—not a person, but rather the very power of God Himself—through which they could live His way in preparation for that everlasting life to come.



# Chapter 2

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## The Greatest Love

**T**he words of a famous song composed by Burt Bacharach tell us, “What the world needs now is love, sweet love, it’s the only thing that there’s just too little of.” As trite as those words may appear, no truer words could be spoken. The world had far too little love back in 1965 when the song was first sung, and the world has even less today. No matter where we look, there seems to be a lack of this precious commodity—with one extraordinarily important exception.

The Apostle John penned in a very few words the story of the greatest act of love in all the known history of the universe: “For God **so loved** the world that He gave His only begotten Son” (John 3:16).

### **But What Is Love?**

The New Testament primarily uses two different Greek words that are translated into English as *love*. *Agape* or *agapao* (found in John 3:16 and 1 John 4:9) describes the kind of love God has for man, and that is also the kind of love we are commanded to show toward God and our neighbor (Matthew 22:37, 39). *Phileo* refers to *tender affection* or, as it is more popularly rendered, *brotherly love*.

A famous and classic example of the difference between the two types of love is found in Jesus’ question to Peter, “Do you love [*agapao*] Me...?” Peter replies, “Yes, Lord; You know that I love [*phileo*] You” (John 21:15–17).

Though *agape* implies a deeper level of love than *phileo*, both words imply caring for the well-being of another.

John wrote in his first epistle that “God is love”—a statement he made twice in the same chapter (1 John 4:8, 16). And he stated in the most unambiguous terms that we, though human, must grow to love as God does: “He who does not love does not know God, for God is love” (v. 8) and “God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God in him” (v. 16).

Many professing Christians today make the mistake of pitting *love* against obedience to God’s law, as if these were conflicting ideals. No doubt this is partly because people often view love simply as an emotion. Yet, although most people think of love as *how they feel*, the fact is that **godly love requires action**.

Love is very patient and kind, never jealous or envious, never boastful or proud, never haughty or selfish or rude. Love does not demand its own way. It is not irritable or touchy. It does not hold grudges and will hardly even notice when others do it wrong. It is never glad about injustice, but rejoices whenever truth wins out. If you love someone, you will be loyal to him no matter what the cost (1 Corinthians 13:4–7, *The Living Bible*).

Note that the word used for *love* in this passage is *agape*. While emotion may **accompany** some aspects of love, here we see that love is defined by the way we **treat** others and the way we **react to** others. Love requires **action** on the part of the one showing love. Love is not how we feel, but rather **what we do** to serve the other person. Love is never self-centered. **Love is outgoing concern**.

### **Love and the Law**

John is often described as “the apostle of love” because love—especially the love of God—is a key theme in his writings. Considering what he wrote, it may seem odd that so few readers recognize the connection John makes between God’s love and His law. For example, it is John who records Jesus’ explanation of how we show love to Him. On the night He was betrayed, Christ said, “If you love Me, keep My commandments.... He who has My commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves Me” (John 14:15, 21). John also recorded these comments of Jesus: “If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love, just as I have kept My Father’s commandments and abide in His love” (John 15:10).

Some professing Christians sincerely believe that Christ did away with His Father's laws, including the Ten Commandments, and substituted a new set of laws that are sometimes referred to as "the Law of Christ." What does this change amount to? When you boil down all the mental gymnastics, it is basically another way of saying, "Throw out the Ten Commandments, and resurrect nine of them."

Few professing Christians are willing to argue that it is acceptable to have other gods before the true God, that it is fine to bow down to images and idols, and that it does not matter if you take God's name and run it through the gutter, or dishonor your parents, kill, commit adultery, steal, lie, or covet. Only if you insist on treating the Fourth Commandment like the other nine, and assert that we must observe the seventh-day Sabbath as instructed in Scripture, **then** you are accused of "legalism."

Opponents of the seventh-day Sabbath reason that if you try to keep the Sabbath, you are trying to save yourself by your works. But do they honestly use the same logic regarding any of the other commandments? If you honor your parents, are you trying to save yourself by works? What if you do not commit murder? If you refrain from adultery or stealing, are you trying to save yourself apart from God's grace? If one insists that keeping **one** commandment is an attempt at "salvation by works," then how can one avoid applying the same reasoning to the other nine?

Very clearly in his writings, John disagrees with those who would try to reason around God's law. In his first epistle, he writes plainly about the connection between law-keeping and love, and he shows that we cannot separate the two:

Now by this we know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments. He who says, "I know Him," and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But whoever keeps His word, truly the love of God is perfected in him. By this we know that we are in Him. He who says he abides in Him ought himself also to walk just as He walked (1 John 2:3-6).

So, how did Jesus walk? What commandments did He keep? *The New Bible Commentary: Revised* makes these interesting comments about 1 John 2:3-6:



**3** Next comes a test by which men can know whether, in spite of their failures, they are in right relationship with God, and walking in fellowship with Him. The test is whether they *keep his commandments*. It is impossible for men who really know God to be unaffected in their daily living by this knowledge.... For John the knowledge of God is not some mystic vision or intellectual insight. It is shown *if we keep his commandments*. Obedience is not a spectacular virtue, but it is at the basis of all true Christian service. **4** The man who claims to have this knowledge but *disobeys his commandments*, John says forthrightly, *is a liar*. He underlines this with the addition, *the truth is not in him*. **5** By contrast, *love for God is perfected* in the man who *keeps his word*. *Word* signifies God's commandments in general (eds. Donald Guthrie et al., p. 1263, 1979).

In two short verses, the apostle of love defines *the love of God*, explains how we can know that we love the children of God, and refutes the fallacy that the law of God is burdensome. "By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and keep His commandments. For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome" (1 John 5:2-3).

Has someone told you that God's laws are burdensome? If so, which laws are such a burden? The ones against idolatry, murder, and adultery? Or is it that one about remembering the day God sanctified and blessed at creation (Genesis 2:1-3)? If you have not already done so, please read our booklet *Which Day Is the Christian Sabbath?* to learn more about this vital commandment. John makes **no distinctions** between the commandments when he declares, "And His commandments are not burdensome." So, whom should we believe—the Apostle John or some modern cleric?

### **Love, Law, and Sin**

It is only in understanding sin and its relationship to God's law that we can fully understand John 3:16. John wrote, "Whosoever committeth sin transgresseth also the law: for sin is the transgression of the law" (1 John 3:4, *KJV*). Consider a powerful comment on this verse from *The New Bible Commentary: Revised*:

The false teachers seem to have held that knowledge is all-important, and that conduct does not matter. So John insists that sin is evidence of wrong relationship to God. *Sin*, he tells us, *is lawlessness*, the Greek construction implying that the two are interchangeable. The law in question is, of course, the law of God. The essence of sin, then, is disregard for God's law. It is the assertion of oneself against God's revealed way for man (p. 1265).

What do love, law, and sin have to do with John 3:16? Everything! Love is defined by the way we live, and the law defines how we are to live. Sin is the transgression of the law, and its transgression brings about a penalty: death. Christ paid that death penalty on our behalf. Now, consider that if Christ died to pay the death penalty for you—a penalty imposed for transgressing His law—could He apply that sacrifice to you if He knew you would continue disregarding that law? When we understand what sin is, this comment on 1 John 3:5–6 makes perfect sense:

**5** Christ came *to take away sins*, which indicates complete hostility to evil. *In him there is no sin.* **6** This has effects in the Christian, for *no one who abides in him sins*. We must not water down statements like this. The Christian has no business with sin and he must never be complacent about it, even about occasional sin (p, 1265).

Our sins have cut us off from God, who told mankind from the very beginning that death would be the penalty for those who choose to live according to the dictates of the heart (symbolized by partaking of a tree that represented both good and evil), apart from God's holy and righteous law (Genesis 2:17). Romans 6:23 confirms this: "For the wages of sin is death...."

For a law to be effective, there must be a penalty for its violation. The penalty for breaking God's laws is death. Sin also cuts us off from God: "But your iniquities have separated you from your God; and your sins have hidden His face from you, so that He will not hear" (Isaiah 59:2).

Christ's sacrifice resolves both problems. First, He willingly gave His life in exchange for ours. He paid the penalty that we had earned through sin. "For I delivered to you first of all that

which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures” (1 Corinthians 15:3). And “when we were still without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly” (Romans 5:6). Christ paying the penalty for us is what we call justification. Second, through Christ’s sacrifice, the breach between man and God has been repaired. We are reconciled to God through Jesus’ sacrifice. “And you, who once were alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now He has reconciled in the body of His flesh through death, to present you holy, and blameless, and above reproach in His sight” (Colossians 1:21–22; cf. 1 Peter 3:18).

### **Saved by His Life**

The words *justification* and *reconciliation* are widely misunderstood. *Justification* is the forgiveness of our sins, and is the result of our faith in Jesus’ having given His life in exchange for ours. One easy way to understand justification is to see how it is used in word processing. The margins on this page, for example, are lined up on the left side of the page. This is called *left justification*. If they were lined up on both the left and right margins, it would be *full justification*. In the theological sense, justification involves being “lined up” with God. Our sins took us out of line with Him, but we are brought back into line through faith in Christ’s shed blood.

Because our sins are forgiven, we are now reconciled with God. But what does this mean? The blood of Christ is essential for us, yet salvation is not just a past event. Salvation is past, present, and future! You can read it for yourself in your own Bible:

But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we **shall be saved** from wrath through Him. For if when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, **much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life** (Romans 5:8–10).

We are reconciled to God by the death of His Son, by faith in His shed blood. We can **never earn** that reconciliation. It is God’s **free gift**, which we often describe as *grace*. Yet that reconciliation is not

the final matter, as “much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved **by His life**” (Romans 5:10).

So, what does this mean? In what way are we *saved by His life*? Romans 6:1–7 shows us that through baptism we enter into a covenant with God, to put to death the old ways and begin living a new way of life, thinking like Christ (Philippians 2:4–5) and walking as He walked (1 John 2:6). The Apostle Paul explains how we are given help in this, through Christ dwelling in us by the power of the Holy Spirit: “I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me” (Galatians 2:20, *KJV*).

Ask yourself, then, what kind of a life would Christ live in us? Would it be a life rejecting the very life He said He lived (John 15:10)? Or will Christ live in Christians today the way He lived on this earth, developing in them the same character, based on God’s law, which the Apostle Paul calls *spiritual, holy, just, and good* (Romans 7:12, 14, 16)?

God gave His Son on our behalf because He loved us. There is nothing we can do to earn that love or repay God for that precious sacrifice (1 Peter 1:17–19). Yet we should not despise that sacrifice by failing to take seriously the law that brought the penalty upon us in the first place. To do so would be like walking out of the courthouse, after being pardoned, and thinking you were now free to commit the same crime that put you in the courthouse!

John records these words of Jesus on the night in which He was betrayed: “Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one’s life for his friends” (John 15:12–14). John 3:16 reminds us that God the Father loved us so much that He voluntarily gave His Son to be our Friend—to empty Himself of His divine privileges that we might escape death and have eternal life. Could there be any greater love in all the universe than what was expressed on that Passover Day nearly 2,000 years ago?



# Chapter 3

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## Is God Fair?

**I**t used to be common for itinerant preachers to travel from city to city across North America, setting up tent meetings and calling sinners to “accept Jesus.” Emotions would be roused as the preacher ended each gathering by making a passionate appeal for congregants to walk down the sawdust-strewn aisle and “give their heart to the Lord” while there was still time. “Jesus might not return tonight,” the preachers would warn, “but if you die as a sinner tonight, you will writhe forever in hellfire because you didn’t accept Him right now!”

With that threat hanging over people’s heads, it is not hard to understand why so many walked down the proverbial sawdust trail. But did these preachers accurately portray the God of the Bible? Is it true that the billions who have lived and died without accepting Jesus Christ—most of whom never heard His name, and even fewer of whom heard His Truth being preached—are all lost forever? If so, where is the fairness of God?

What about babies who died before they were old enough to understand God’s love, much less choose His way? And will people be lost forever just because they grew up in a family or a whole society devoted to atheism? What about the billions of Muslims who grew up being taught falsehoods about Jesus Christ? Will God treat them differently than the billions of professing Christians who lived and died hearing only a false message about a false “Christ”?

The Apostle John taught plainly that “God so loved *the world*” (John 3:16). Here, “the world” is not a reference to planet Earth, but

rather to the people who dwell here. And, no matter how you count it, by any reckoning there have always been far more “unsaved” than “saved.” So, if God “loved the world,” how can this be? Is He so weak that He cannot save the majority of His creation? This leads to the question “Is God fair? Is He a respecter of persons? Has everyone—or will everyone—have a genuine and fair opportunity for salvation?”

### **Backed into a Corner**

This vital question is one that perplexes even most professing Christians. I once visited a young man in Greenville, Mississippi, who had confronted his minister with the question “What will happen to all those millions of people who never heard of Jesus Christ?” The minister’s dogmatic reply was that these people would all go to hell for eternity. When pressed about the fairness of God, this clergyman then reasoned, “Well, I suppose that God will judge them according to what they do with what they do understand.”

Not convinced, this persistent young man then asked, “Are you saying that there is another way to salvation than through the name of Jesus Christ?” He brought up the verse “Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). The minister was left speechless—he felt he had no choice other than to deny the Bible or to admit that God is unjust and unfair.

Another approach to this question is typified by a discussion I had with a repairman who came to my home. As with so many other professing Christians, this man believed that everyone will either be saved or lost at the end of his current lifetime. When I protested that billions of people have lived and died and never even heard of Jesus Christ, his reply was that if they wanted to know, God would get the word to them by some means. This begs the question. In effect, this man was saying that God knowingly created the vast majority of people to be lost forever.

Consider a man dying in the outback of Australia in 31AD, a week after Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection. No one ever told him about Christ and what He had done. Yet, “For *‘whoever calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved.’* How then shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? **And how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard?** And how shall they hear without a preacher?” (Romans 10:13–14). So, would this man really be lost for-

ever, never be given the opportunity to accept Christ's shed blood on his behalf? Would this man then go to a place of unbelievable torment to writhe in pain forever? This certainly does not seem like the fair and just plan of a loving God.

Ask yourself, "If God truly loves the world, would He deny that man in the Australian outback an opportunity for salvation?" Or is God so weak that His plan requires billions to burn in Hell forever just to save a few? Indeed, if God is in a "soul-winning" contest, Satan appears to be winning. But is that what God is doing? Or does the Bible reveal some other explanation?

The truth is that, as your Bible makes clear, God is working out a plan. It is a loving and just plan, involving His desire to save all of mankind, and it involves far more than the believer saying a few "magical" words at the end of the sawdust trail, even if spoken in all sincerity. It involves more than living out one's life on earth as preparation to spend eternity in some kind of great "candy store in the sky." There is a reason why the Christian life is to be one of godly character development (Ephesians 4:11–16).

### **A Fatal Choice**

When God created the first man and woman, He placed them in a beautiful garden, full of trees that bore nuts of all kinds and fruits of many colors, textures, and tastes. God told these first human beings that they could enjoy the fruit of **all but one** of these trees—and that, if they ate the one forbidden fruit, death would be the result.

As we know, Adam and Eve chose the prohibited fruit. By this act, they declared their rejection of God and their desire to decide for themselves what is right and what is wrong. For doing this, God thrust them out of the Garden of Eden and told them, in effect, "You want to do it your way? Go to it!"

Ever since, whatever mankind puts its hand to build is a mixture of good and evil. The inequity, the suffering, and the heartache that we see all around us are the results of the decisions *we* make—yet we often have the gall to blame God!

The Bible reveals that the vast majority of human beings in this present age have been cut off from God and the tree of life (Genesis 3:22–24). That is the reason so few understand the Bible. Sadly, many have been deceived into thinking Jesus came to save everyone **now**.



### **A Sunday School Lesson**

I remember an incident that occurred one day in my Sunday School class. A student asked, “Why did Jesus speak in parables?” And the teacher explained, “Because people at that time were fishermen, shepherds, and farmers. Jesus spoke to them in language they could understand.”

Now, to a twelve-year-old, that sounded pretty good, but I later came to understand that my teacher’s answer was totally wrong! Scripture describes Christ’s disciples asking this same question and receiving a very different answer. “And the disciples came and said to Him, ‘Why do You speak to them in parables?’ He answered and said to them, ‘Because it has been given to you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given’” (Matthew 13:10–11; cf. Mark 4:11–12). Jesus also taught, “No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up at the last day” (John 6:44, cf. verse 65).

So, we see that Jesus spoke in parables to hide His meaning from the general public. Only those whom God calls can come to Him—and only relatively few are doing so in this present age. But does this mean He is unfair and does not care about the vast majority of people who are now living or who have ever lived? Not at all!

### **An Opportunity for All**

The Apostle Paul tells us that God “desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Timothy 2:3–4). The Apostle Peter explains that God is “not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9). So, we can see that it is God’s long-term purpose to call everyone who has ever lived to come to Him. It is obvious, though, that He has not yet called most people. So, for those who will live and die without having been called, what will God do?

Numerous scriptures reveal there is more than one period of judgment—and more than one resurrection from the dead. Consider the implications of Matthew 11:21–22: “Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, 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 to you, it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon in the day of judgment than for you.” The Gentile in-

habitants of Tyre and Sidon did not know the God of Israel, yet Jesus spoke of a coming day of judgment during which those cities' people will fare better than some of the Jews of Jesus' day. Christ made a similar statement involving the city of Sodom, known for its gross sexual perversions (Matthew 11:23–24).

The Apostle John's writings confirm there is more than one day of judgment: "And I saw thrones, and they sat on them, and judgment was committed to them. Then I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for their witness to Jesus and for the word of God.... And they lived and reigned with Christ for a thousand years" (Revelation 20:4). Now, notice carefully: "But *the rest of the dead* did not live again until the thousand years were finished. This is the first resurrection" (Revelation 20:5).

How clear! Those who are Christ's at His return will be resurrected to life in what is called the "first resurrection," after which they will rule with Christ over the nations of this earth.

But what about those who are not Christ's at His coming? Will they be lost forever? Not at all! They will take part in the next resurrection, called the *general resurrection* or the "Great White Throne Judgment."

Immediately after Jesus Christ's thousand-year millennial rule on the earth, Satan will be loosed from his place of restraint to go out and deceive the nations once again (Revelation 20:7). He, along with those who follow him, will be defeated. But what will happen after that? "Then I saw a great white throne and Him who sat on it.... And I saw the dead, small and great, standing before God, and books were opened. And another book was opened, which is the Book of Life. And the dead were judged according to their works, by the things which were written in the books" (Revelation 20:11–12).

Here, John describes open books. Many professing Christians jump to the conclusion that these books are filled with the salacious details of people's lives, but this is a misunderstanding. We have already seen that the vast majority of human beings, cut off from the tree of life, will have lived and died without hearing God's Truth. God calls only a few in this present age, and Jesus spoke in parables to hide His meanings from the masses (Luke 8:10).

In effect, the "books"—*biblos*, from which we get the word "Bible"—are closed to most people who live and die in this present age, and

will remain closed until this Great White Throne Judgment. Yet it is by the contents of these *biblos*—the Bible—that they will be judged when their minds are opened and God reveals His Truth to them.

Notice also that the “Book of Life” is described as open, not closed. This indicates that the Great White Throne Judgment is a period of time during which those judged by “the books” will have the possibility of having their names written in God’s “Book of Life.” This is the time of judgment for the vast billions of people who lived and died while Satan was the “god of this age” (2 Corinthians 4:3–4). The billions who were deceived by Satan—and remember, deceived people do not know they are deceived—will finally hear God’s Truth preached and have their first opportunity to accept that Truth and obey Jesus Christ as their Savior.

### **The Valley of Dry Bones**

In a remarkable passage of Scripture, the prophet Ezekiel describes this coming resurrection. He describes a valley filled with “very many” dry bones, and the prophet is asked if they can live again (Ezekiel 37:1–3). Then comes a description of the dry bones being resurrected to physical life. Bones come together, then flesh, connecting tissues and skin. Finally, the breath of life enters the bodies as the people are resurrected to mortal, physical life (vv. 4–10).

This is not a resurrection to immortality or to a reward being received. These resurrected people do not think they are saved. On the contrary, they think they are lost! “Then He said to me, ‘Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They indeed say, “Our bones are dry, our hope is lost, and we ourselves are cut off!”’” (v. 11).

This passage describes people who did not know God during their lifetime, but who will come to know Him after they are resurrected and given His Spirit. “**Then** you shall know that I am the LORD, **when** I have opened your graves, O My people, and brought you up from your graves. **I will put My Spirit in you**, and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land. **Then** you shall know that I, the LORD, have spoken it and performed it” (Ezekiel 37:13–14).

How long will these resurrected people have as their period of judgment? The Church of God has traditionally pointed to Isaiah 65:17–20 as a strong suggestion that people will be given as many as a hundred years of physical life during this second resurrection. **Yes,**

**God is fair**, and He will give everyone who has ever lived a genuine opportunity to make an informed decision. It may be sobering to realize that many of our friends and relatives in the world are cut off from the tree of life at this time. They truly do not understand, because God has not yet opened most people's minds to come to Christ (John 6:44, 65). The time *will* come, however, when they will be resurrected from the grave, and will be given a full and fair opportunity to choose God's way.

We need to understand—and this cannot be emphasized enough—that this is not a “second chance” for people. It will be their *first* opportunity to hear God's Truth with an open mind. And, even then, not everyone will accept it. Some who are called to the Truth today deliberately reject it. Similarly, even in the White Throne Judgment, God will not **force** anyone to be in His Kingdom (Deuteronomy 30:19).

What a reassuring truth it is to know that God is fair and that He loves all of the human beings He has created! The Bible explains God's plan for *all* human beings—for the deceived, for infants and little children who died prematurely, and for those who lived and died never hearing of Christ.

This is a truth so few understand about John 3:16, **and what a wonderful truth it is!** God truly is reconciling the world to Himself through Jesus Christ (2 Corinthians 5:19).



# Chapter 4

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## The Way of Give

**T**icks, mosquitos, biting flies, and other parasitic insects suck blood from their victims. These parasites are nearly universally despised because of their troublesome nature: they take from others, and in return give nothing but discomfort, pain and sickness.

Although bees sting, and we may fear them as a result, we do not despise them in that same way. We know they are only acting out of defense when they sting, and they give us sweet honey. Admittedly, if they could think as we do, they might have a different view of our using the word “give”—they might prefer our term *robbing* to describe our gathering honey from their hives. Nevertheless, a good beekeeper cares for his industrious little workers, and leaves plenty of honey behind so they can survive and thrive.

The truth is that we, very understandably, like *givers* and despise *takers*—whether they have eight, six, or two legs. Yes, everyone loves a *giver*, but not a *taker*. We are repelled by selfish and greedy people, who play the angles to get “something for nothing” and are never shy about taking advantage of others when the opportunity arises. We are appalled by continual news of scam artists who take heartlessly from the elderly, the naïve, and the gullible.

One of the most wonderful truths we can know is that God is not a taker. He is a giver! He gives food and water to sustain us, as well as materials we use to build shelters to keep us dry or to make clothing to keep us warm (and handsome or pretty). Foods come in varying

colors, textures, and tastes—and, unlike money, they sometimes do grow on trees. They also pop out of the ground, fly through the air, and can be captured from rivers, lakes, and seas.

As physical beings, we need these gifts from God to survive. For all His generosity, God requires that we pay just ten percent “rent” on the increase He gives us—but even that requirement is a kind of “gift” that He gives, to teach us valuable lessons of giving and generosity and concern for others. As a loving Parent, God wants us always to remember the source of the good gifts we receive. He wants us to develop the virtue of gratitude, to overcome selfishness, and to learn how to budget our money and other resources wisely. Our booklet *God’s People Tithe!* goes into more detail for those who are interested in learning more about tithing.

### **The Greatest Gift of All**

God has given us so many resources that allow us to live comfortably. Yet there is an infinitely greater gift He has offered us—the gift of His very Son as a sacrifice for our sins. John 3:16 tells us: “For God so loved the world that **He gave** His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.” We should thank God that He is a *giver* and not a *taker*, because without this gift of inestimable value we would all perish!

When our first parents Adam and Eve decided to take of the forbidden fruit—symbolizing their choice to decide for themselves right from wrong—they earned the death penalty: “And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, ‘Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it **you shall surely die**’” (Genesis 2:16–17). Ever since, we—the entire human race, individually and collectively—have been rejecting God’s law in favor of our own ignorant and arrogant assessments of right and wrong: “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). Remember how the Bible defines sin: “Whoever commits sin also commits lawlessness, and sin is lawlessness” (1 John 3:4).

The wage we earn when we transgress God’s law is death. But eternal life has been made possible because of God’s free gift to us, given when Jesus gave His life in our stead (John 3:16; Romans 6:23). God purchased us back from death by sacrificing something far more

valuable than silver or gold—the precious blood of Jesus Christ (1 Peter 1:18–19)! And this was not a rash decision; it was all determined from the foundation of the world (Revelation 13:8). There is no more important message in John 3:16 than this. **No greater act of love is known to mankind!**

### **Don't Leave Out the Father**

The “golden verse,” John 3:16, holds great hope for all human beings everywhere. But the full depth of its meaning is often obscured by a general lack of biblical understanding. There are two common misconceptions about this aspect of John 3:16: God the Father’s gifts to us—including His gift of eternal life—and the response He wants to see from us in return.

We often hear professing Christians talk with great feeling about the role Jesus plays in our salvation. Of course, we should have deep feelings of gratitude and indebtedness for His sacrifice—these feelings are very commendable. But what about the role of the Father? How often is He overlooked in considering this—left out of the picture? Yet, in John 3:16, the role of the One who gave His Son is primary: “For God [the Father] so loved the world that He [the Father] gave His [again, the Father] only begotten Son [Jesus Christ], that whoever believes in Him [Christ] should not perish but have everlasting life.”

When some great hurt or harm comes to a child, how many parents have sincerely said that they would gladly exchange places? One has to be a parent to fully appreciate the Father’s role in that great drama of nearly 2,000 years ago. How many **totally** neglect the Father and only consider His Son? Yet, in this verse, and throughout the gospel of John, the Father’s role is primary and Jesus *continually* points us to Him.

Jesus tells us we are to worship the Father in spirit and truth (John 4:23), that He came by His Father’s authority and not His own (John 5:43; 12:49–50), that He came to do the Father’s will (John 8:28–29 18:11), that no one can come to Him unless the Father draws him (John 6:44–45, 65), that He could only do what the Father willed Him to do (John 5:19), that the Father was greater than He was (John 14:28) and that He came to declare the Father (John 1:18).

Time and again, we find that Jesus points us to His Father. In what is often called *the Lord’s Prayer*—an outline Christ gave His disciples when they asked Him how to pray—Jesus told them to direct their prayers



to the Father (Luke 11:2). He also gave us the right to use His [Jesus'] name—His authority—when going to the Father (John 14:13–14; 15:16).

### **Spoiled Children**

Another misconception is more subtle. God the Father and Jesus Christ have done so much on our behalf that we absolutely must be thankful for all they have done for us and continue to do—and will in the future do. Indeed, it is true that most of mankind is not nearly thankful enough, but many professing Christians today put **all** or **nearly all** of their emphasis on **what God has done for us**. Sadly, this common approach can create a selfish attitude in us: God gives, we take. It is true that “you can’t out-give God,” but this does not mean we should not respond to God’s gift by our own acts of giving in return.

We can plainly see, all around us, what happens when parents give and give to their children without also teaching them to develop a giving attitude. They often pay a heavy price by bringing up spoiled, self-centered children. Is that what God wants of us? Of course not! Obviously, our generous Creator wants us to develop the same giving, caring attitude that He has for us. Yes, what God has done for us is wonderful beyond our ability to express. But is that all Christianity is about? A shallow, self-centered understanding of Christianity, focused entirely on what God has done for us, can—without our even realizing it—turn into a very selfish kind of religion based on *taking* rather than *giving*.

Imagine a son who tells everyone he meets what a wonderful father he has—a father who bought him a car and fills the tank with gas every week, who buys pizza for him and his friends to enjoy every Saturday night, who lets him disobey his instructions whenever he pleases and pays for it all out of his own wages, while letting his son sit around doing absolutely nothing to help the family? Would anyone really think this was a wonderful father? And would such a father really be pleased by a son who did not care at all about helping his father, but wanted only to take more and more?

In the real world, we understand that even the most generous father, if he does not teach his children to obey, will not produce thankful children. **Takers** tend not to appreciate the efforts of **givers**. Yes, it is vital that we be thankful to God and praise Him, but if we are not developing in ourselves His attitude of giving and we are not obeying

His guidance, we are not fulfilling His desires for us. “But why do you call Me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and not do the things which I say?” (Luke 6:46; cf. Matthew 7:21–23).

Jesus spoke this famous parable:

A certain man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it and found none. Then he said to the keeper of his vineyard, “Look, for three years I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree and find none. Cut it down; why does it use up the ground?” But he answered and said to him, “Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and fertilize it. And if it bears fruit, well. But if not, after that you can cut it down” (Luke 13:6–9).

Taken together with the Parable of the Talents, it is evident that if we do not bring forth “fruit” in our lives, we too will be cut down and thrown away (Matthew 25:14–30).

The Parable of the Minas also bears witness to this truth (Luke 19:11–24). We must **do something** with the gifts God has given us (see vv. 20–24). To be thankful for what Jesus has done for us is right and good, but to take God’s gift and do nothing with it is a selfish act—and will end in disaster. Bearing the fruits of God’s Spirit (Galatians 5:22–23) is a requirement if we want to be Jesus’ disciples: “By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; so you will be My disciples” (John 15:8).

### **Sheep and Goats**

Jesus explained that, when He returns, He will divide the sheep from the goats. Sheep are described as *givers*—those who have outgoing concern for others—who will inherit the Kingdom of God:

When the Son of Man comes in His glory... He will set the sheep on His right hand, but the goats on the left. Then the King will say to those on His right hand, “Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you... for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me” (Matthew 25:31–36).

People who truly and sincerely care for the well-being of others do not serve to be seen (Matthew 6:1–4). Since their charitable acts are done out of genuine concern for others, it is not surprising that they do not keep score or think highly of themselves for their service. Christ lives in such individuals (Galatians 2:20) and Christ's way of life becomes theirs.

Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, "Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You drink? When did we see You a stranger and take You in, or naked and clothe You? Or when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?" And the King will answer and say to them, "Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me" (Matthew 25:37–40).

On the other hand, this parable describes goats as *takers*—people who care little or nothing for the well-being of those around them. Such people do not put themselves out to serve others, and their ultimate reward is to be thrown into fire and be burned up (Matthew 3:12; Malachi 4:3).

Then He will also say to those on the left hand, "Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels: for I was hungry and you gave Me no food; I was thirsty and you gave Me no drink; I was a stranger and you did not take Me in, naked and you did not clothe Me, sick and in prison and you did not visit Me." Then they also will answer Him, saying, "Lord, when did we see You hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to You?" Then He will answer them, saying, "Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me." And these will go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into eternal life (Matthew 25:41–46).

This parable shows the two broad ways of life. The first is the **way of give**—a life of outgoing concern for the people around us. The

second is the **way of get**—of taking for ourselves without regard for other people. In John 3:16, God declares His way of give as the way He wants us to learn. And we will only receive His gift of eternal life if we, following His example, learn that way of life and practice it ourselves.

When Jesus walked this earth, in spite of the frustrations dealing with the self-righteous and contentious Pharisees, Sadducees, and other Jews of His day, He mourned over the destruction He knew was coming upon Jerusalem: “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem... How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!” (Matthew 23:37).

We are even told in Ezekiel 18:32 and 33:11 that God has no pleasure in the death of the wicked. When we really understand it, the love of God the Father and Jesus Christ is unquestionable. And it is this same attitude of giving, outgoing concern that God is developing in His children. This is the way of peace and harmony that will be in the Kingdom of God for all eternity!



# Chapter 5

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## “You Must Be Born Again”

**J**esus said that “unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God” (John 3:3). But what does that mean? Some believe that being “born again” is a highly emotional experience that suddenly comes upon a person, probably accompanied by tears of joy and a tremendous feeling of peace and well-being. It might occur in the privacy of one’s home after sobering up from a drinking spell. It might take place at an evangelistic meeting, “giving your heart to the Lord” after walking down the aisle and repeating the “sinner’s prayer.”

Others sincerely believe that none of those emotional feelings matter unless you also “speak in tongues”—by which they mean the utterance of mysterious syllables that are not part of any recognizable human language.

So, what is the truth? What does the Bible say about this subject?

The heart and core of this question is found in John 3, but the gospel author set the stage for his subject two chapters earlier. Speaking of Jesus, John wrote, “He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him. But as many as received Him, to them **He gave the right to become children of God**, to those who believe in His name: who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God” (John 1:11–13).

John here expresses a theme common to many parts of the Bible, especially the New Testament: that we can become “children of God.” But what does it mean to become a child of God? And what does John

mean when he describes those who are born “of God” and not “of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man”?

This much we do know: you and I were born because of our flesh-and-blood parents’ choice to come together in the act of procreation. Although we are born as beings separate from our parents, we share their genetic material and thus were made in their image and likeness. Begetting and birth is truly a marvelous and wonderful process!

### **A Secret Visit**

One night, a man named Nicodemus—a Pharisee and ruler of the Jews—came to visit Jesus. This is how Scripture introduces us to Nicodemus, but this is not the last that we hear of him. We later discover that Nicodemus stood up before the chief priests and Pharisees in Jesus’ defense (John 7:50–52). After Jesus was crucified, Nicodemus helped Joseph bury Him (John 19:38–42).

These were both risky acts that set Nicodemus apart from his peers, who knew that Jesus came from God but were more interested in pleasing men than God. To Jesus, Nicodemus said, “Rabbi, we know that You are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him” (John 3:2). Notice that he called Jesus “Rabbi”—meaning “teacher.” Nicodemus came to learn something from Jesus, but was startled by what he heard.

Anticipating the purpose of Nicodemus’ visit, Jesus replied to him with these famous words: “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God” (John 3:3). Many professing Christians mistakenly believe that Nicodemus’ response meant that he did not understand Jesus’ words. In fact, however, Nicodemus **did** understand **what** Jesus was saying; what he **did not** understand was **how** it could take place. That is why he replied, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?” (v. 4).

Why does this matter generate such confusion? In this passage of Scripture, the word translated as “born” is the Greek word *gennao*. Translators, knowing Greek but not understanding the doctrinal implications, variously render this unusual word into English as “born,” “beget,” “begot,” or “conceive.” This seemingly small detail can lead to confusion and result in significant misunderstandings, especially about the concept of being “born again.”

Notice how highly respected scholars explain the meaning of this word. Joseph Thayer’s *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* states that *gennaō* means “properly: of men begetting children... more rarely of women giving birth to children” (p. 113, 1952). *The Interpreter’s Bible* says, “Birth can be considered either from the father’s side, in which the verb is to ‘beget,’ or from the mother’s side, in which the verb is to ‘bear’” (vol. 8, p. 505, 1952).

The late Evangelist John Ogwyn wrote the following explanation:

The English word “beget” refers to the father’s causal action that generates offspring. Synonymous verbs would be “engender,” “sire” or “father.” To “bear” refers to the mother’s role in producing offspring—i.e., carrying to term and bringing forth into the world. In English, “begettal” by the father is limited to conception. In Greek, however, *gennaō* has a broader meaning and can be used to cover the entire range of the process of “bringing forth” a child into the world (“What Do You Mean ‘Born Again?’,” *Tomorrow’s World*, January-February 2003).

Consider two biblical examples that show how the one word *gennaō* covers the full range from conception to birth. “But while he thought about these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, ‘Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take to you Mary your wife, for that which is conceived [*gennaō*] in her is of the Holy Spirit’” (Matthew 1:20). In this case, “conceived” is clearly the proper English translation of *gennaō*. But notice just a few verses later: “Now after Jesus was born [*gennaō*] in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem” (Matthew 2:1). Here, that same *gennaō* is properly translated as “born.”

The context indicates how the word is to be understood in each instance. Hearing the word *gennaō*, a Greek speaker understands the word as inclusive of a whole process, unlike an English speaker, whose vocabulary divides the process into various stages: conception, gestation, and, finally, birth.

Nicodemus understood Jesus’ words in their Greek context. That is why he responded the way he did, but Jesus’ clarification did not solve the mystery for him: “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God” (John 3:5).



Many people who report a “born again” experience totally ignore—or simply do not understand—what Jesus said. If we are to be born of water and the Spirit, why do some totally reject the need for baptism and misunderstand what it means to be born of the Spirit?

### **Born of Water and Spirit**

Baptism is found throughout the Bible. The flood of Noah’s day is likened to baptism (1 Peter 3:20–21). The crossing of the Red Sea by the children of Israel was a type of baptism (1 Corinthians 10:1–2). Jesus was baptized as an example for us (Matthew 3:13–16), and He commanded His disciples to go into all the world, preaching the Gospel of the Kingdom of God and baptizing those who believed (Matthew 28:19–20; Mark 16:15–16). Peter commanded those who heard him on the Day of Pentecost to repent and be baptized (Acts 2:38). The Apostle Paul explained that baptism symbolically pictures the death and burial of the old sinful self to come up a new man, resurrected as it were from a watery grave (Romans 6:1–7). Our booklet *Christian Baptism: Its Real Meaning* covers this in detail.

So, how is it that some who claim to be born again think baptism is unnecessary? And what does it mean to be born of the Spirit? As we saw above, Jesus told Nicodemus, “unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God” (John 3:5).

Scripture uses water as a symbol of God’s word (Ephesians 5:26). Water also pictures the Holy Spirit (John 7:38–39)—and we know that the Holy Spirit is given to those who *obey* God (Acts 5:32). The Holy Spirit and God’s word function together, in that each is necessary to understand the other. The word of God explains to us what the Holy Spirit is, and it is only through the Holy Spirit that we can understand the things of God (1 Corinthians 2:11).

The Apostle John reveals Jesus Christ as “the Word” [Greek: *Logos* meaning “Spokesman”] in the God family, and it is the Word of God who must live in us by the power of the Holy Spirit (Galatians 2:20). Paul clarifies the subject in his letter to Titus: “But... according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior, that having been justified by His grace we should become heirs according to the hope of eternal life” (Titus 3:4–7).

To put it simply, we must put to death the old sinful self and learn to practice a new way of life—and we can only live that new way of life as Jesus Christ lives in us by the power of the Holy Spirit. And make no mistake about it: He will not live a sinful life in us, but will teach us through His word to live as He lived within the law of God. As Paul succinctly stated, “I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me” (Galatians 2:20, *KJV*).

But is this all that “born again” means? Jesus went on to explain to Nicodemus, “That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’ The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit” (John 3:6–8).

Look carefully at these words. We were all born of the flesh and are made of flesh, but Jesus tells us “that which is born of the Spirit **is spirit**.” We may have God’s Spirit in us, but *are* we Spirit? A simple hatpin test should clarify conclusively whether we are flesh or Spirit!

Nicodemus understood what Jesus was saying, but he could not understand **how** this can be accomplished; thus his startled reply, “How can these things be?” (v. 9). While it is evident that Nicodemus was a sincere man who recognized Jesus as coming from God, he lacked understanding and had not yet come to fully embrace His teachings (John 3:10–11).

## The Endgame

Scripture makes it clear that to be “born again” is something far greater than what most people imagine as a one-time emotional experience that confers a guarantee of “once saved, always saved.” But what, then, is the point and purpose of being born again? The word of God tells us that until we are born again, we will not be able to inherit the Kingdom of God (John 3:3; 1 Corinthians 15:50).

Jesus told Nicodemus that he could not “see the kingdom of God” until he had been born again. Further, Christ explained, “That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit” (John 3:6). Paul confirms this as being true in this well-known passage: “Now this I say, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit

the kingdom of God; nor does corruption inherit incorruption... for this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality” (1 Corinthians 15:50, 53).

Scripture reveals that God is a family, into which the faithful Christians of this present age will be born at the resurrection (Ephesians 3:14–15). Consider how often Scripture describes us as sons of God.

For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of bondage again to fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption [sonship] by whom we cry out, “Abba, Father.” The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ.... For the earnest expectation of the creation eagerly waits for the revealing of the sons of God... because the creation itself also will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God (Romans 8:14–17, 19, 21).

Yes, we are children of God—but we are children still in the “embryo” stage, not yet born. This same truth is confirmed in Hebrews 2:6–18.

If you have not read Dr. Roderick C. Meredith’s inspiring booklet *Your Ultimate Destiny*, I encourage you to order your own free copy or read it online at [www.TomorrowsWorld.org](http://www.TomorrowsWorld.org), where this subject is covered in greater detail.

### **Christ Is the Firstborn of Many**

Scripture tells us, “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son” (John 3:16). Truly, God begot Jesus in a special way at that time. No other human being has come into the world in that same way. But does this mean that He is the only one ever to be begotten of God? Hebrews 11:17 gives us a clue. The same Greek word found in John 3:16 is used here to describe Isaac as Abraham’s “only begotten son.” Yet we know that, after Sarah’s death, Abraham later had six other sons by his second wife Keturah (Genesis 25:1–2). So, is it possible for God to have other begotten sons besides Christ? Scripture says yes!

We read, “Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born [*gennao*] of God” (1 John 5:1). The *NKJV* translators have here rendered *gennao* as “born.” However, as we have seen, the word “begotten” is also a correct translation of the Greek. Consider, then, that in the context of this passage the believer is not yet born, but begotten or conceived. Note also, “Whoever has been born [*gennao*] of God does not sin, for [God’s] seed [Greek: *sperma*] remains in him; and he [does not practice] sin, because he has been born [*gennao*] of God” (1 John 3:9). Here again the use of *begotten* or *conceived* would better fit the context. Note also that God’s seed (Greek: *sperma*) remains in the believer. Conception of a new creation takes place when God plants His Spirit in us, following baptism, by the laying on of hands by Christ’s ministry (Acts 8:14–18). This is why Peter could say, “that through these [great and precious promises] **you may be partakers of the divine nature** (2 Peter 1:4). Yes, we are begotten, conceived of God’s very nature, “for His [God’s] seed [*sperma*] remains in him.”

Jesus Christ is “the firstborn from the dead” (Colossians 1:15, 18; Revelation 1:5). He is also “the firstborn among many brethren” (Romans 8:29). We can be among those many brethren who will be “born again.” To be “born again” is far more than the one-time emotional experience that so many today misunderstand it to be. It describes the end result of a process that begins when we accept Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior, repent of our sins, receive water baptism—symbolically putting to death the old, sinful self—and receive the Holy Spirit (Romans 8:9–11). With Christ’s Spirit living within us, our physical lives become a time of “gestation” as we grow in grace and knowledge, overcoming our carnal human nature and replacing it with the holy and righteous character of God, preparing for that time when the trumpet will sound and the faithful firstfruits will be born into the Family of God at the resurrection. At that time, we who today are faithful Christians will find ourselves fully made in the image and likeness of God, just as He declared at the beginning: “Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness” (Genesis 1:26).



# Chapter 6

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## Memory, Faith, and Belief

**T**he ability to remember is a wonderful gift for both man and beast. Some animals are very difficult to trap if they have experienced a close call in the past, and human memory is essential to any kind of success in life. You are reading and understanding these words because God gave you the ability to remember.

But memorization has a downside. Many North American Sunday afternoon “couch potatoes” can tell you that John 3:16 is the verse citation displayed in the stands behind the end zone whenever a field goal is attempted, behind home plate during the World Series, or behind the goal of a televised basketball game. That fellow with the sign seems to be everywhere—but most cannot tell you what the verse says!

Some, however, go beyond remembering the sign. They can actually quote this “golden verse” verbatim, because they have heard it repeated enough times that it has somehow lodged in their brains. But can they explain in detail the meaning of John 3:16? Do they understand it in the context of the rest of the Bible?

The problem with memorization is that, once we learn something, our brains stash it away and concentrate on something new. We can pull up that piece of information and recite it, but our “thinking cap” has generally moved on to the next challenge. Such is the case with John 3:16.

In case your memory fails you, here is what it says: “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.” If you hear

it often enough it will stick, but what does it mean, especially the part that says, “whoever believes in Him”?

Sadly, many people sincerely think that all one has to do is “believe on Jesus” to be saved. Many professing Christians have the mistaken idea that “believing on Jesus” requires no other action on their part—that He has “done it all” for us, and that all we must do is profess Him. But notice Jesus’ own words in His unmistakably clear statement:

Not everyone who says to Me, “Lord, Lord,” shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. Many will say to Me in that day, “Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?” And then I will declare to them, “I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!” (Matthew 7:21–23).

Similarly, how can we account for these words of Jesus Christ: “But why do you call Me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and not do the things which I say?” (Luke 6:46)? After making that statement, Jesus gave the parable contrasting one person who “hears My sayings and does them” with another who “heard and did nothing.” The first is like a man who builds his house by digging down to bedrock to lay the foundation. The latter is like a man who builds his house on the earth without a foundation (Luke 6:47–49). You probably already know what happens to the two houses when the heavy rains come. Only one is left standing—and it is not the one lacking a foundation!

### **The Importance of Belief**

Jesus Himself tells us that we must not only hear His sayings—we must do them (v. 47)! He expects a personal response on our part to His sacrifice. Is that response accomplished by simply believing in Him? The answer is “yes, or no”—depending on how you understand belief. For sure, belief is an absolutely essential foundation if we hope to be given eternal life. “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die. Do you believe this?” (John 11:25–26).

Belief in His name is required to become a child of God. “But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children

of God, to those who believe in His name” (John 1:12). And “He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God” (John 3:18).

The Apostle Paul always seemed to be in some kind of trouble—and it was no different at Philippi. There, Paul and his companion Silas found themselves in jail, but God miraculously freed them. The distraught jailer, fearing his fate after their escape, was ready to take his life when Paul stopped him. We do not know all that occurred that night, or what had occurred previously in the jailer’s life, but the fearful man asked this most important question in Acts 16:30: “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” The reply was simple and direct: “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, you and your household” (Acts 16:31).

So, it is evident that belief is central to salvation. But what kind of belief is being described in these and other similar passages? Is it the simple confession, “I believe”? Is it a matter of saying a pre-written prayer, perhaps what is known as the “sinner’s prayer”?

Acts 13:38–39 tells us that, “through this Man [Jesus Christ] is preached to you the forgiveness of sins; and by Him everyone who believes is justified from all things from which you could not be justified by the law of Moses.” But is belief simply an act of the intellect or the will? Paul seems to say otherwise when he writes, “for not the hearers of the law are just in the sight of God, but the doers of the law will be justified” (Romans 2:13).

Are these verses in Acts and Romans at odds with each other? Jesus tells us that the Scripture cannot be broken (John 10:35), and these two verses are no exception. Notice that Paul does not say that we are justified by being doers of the law, but that “the doers of the law **will be** justified.” The law does not justify us. It teaches us the reason we need justification. It teaches us what sin is (1 John 3:4). Once we have sinned by breaking that law, it is through faith in the sacrifice of Christ that justification—forgiveness of past sins—takes place. The law defines sin (Romans 7:7). Faith in Christ’s sacrifice brings about justification.

This is summarized in Galatians 2:15–18:

We who are Jews by nature, and not sinners of the Gentiles, knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ



Jesus, that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law; for by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified. But if, while we seek to be justified by Christ, we ourselves also are found sinners, is Christ therefore a minister of sin? Certainly not! For if I build again those things which I destroyed, I make myself a transgressor.

### What Kind of Belief?

When Paul says in this passage, “even we have believed in Christ Jesus,” what kind of belief is he describing? Scripture tells us that many believed in Jesus, but they were far from saved. “Now when He was in Jerusalem at the Passover, during the feast, **many believed in His name** when they saw the signs which He did. But Jesus did not commit Himself to them, because He knew all men, and had no need that anyone should testify of man, for He knew what was in man” (John 2:23–25).

The Apostle John informs us that some believed in Him one moment, but wanted to kill Him the next: “As He spoke these words, **many believed in Him**” (John 8:30). But as He began to explain to them that they were in bondage to sin, they became offended.

Then Jesus said to those Jews **who believed Him**, “If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.” They answered Him, “We are Abraham’s descendants, and have never been in bondage to anyone. How can You say, ‘You will be made free?’” Jesus answered them, “Most assuredly, I say to you, whoever commits sin is a slave of sin” (vv. 31–34).

Notice! People who only moments earlier were described as believing in Jesus Christ began to accuse Him of being illegitimate (v. 41), of being possessed by a demon (v. 48), and, finally, “Then they took up stones to throw at Him” (v. 59). Obviously, though they believed, something was missing. Was this an exception, or does the Bible tell us of other believers who came up short? Yes it does!

“Nevertheless even among the rulers **many believed in Him**, but because of the Pharisees they did not confess Him, lest they should be put out of the synagogue; for they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God” (John 12:42–43). Then there is the famous passage

where James says, “You believe that there is one God. You do well. **Even the demons believe—and tremble!**” (James 2:19).

Many today seek to disconnect belief from obedience and faith from works. Continuing with James’ statement above, we read, “But do you want to know, O foolish man, that faith without works is dead?” (v. 20). Then, using the example of Abraham offering up his son Isaac, he says, “Do you see that faith was working together with his works, and by works faith was made perfect?” (v. 22).

The letter to the Hebrews makes an airtight case that belief is connected to obedience and how we respond to various trials. Where faith is lacking, obedience is also lacking—and the results are disastrous. Paul even describes unbelief as coming from an evil heart. “Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God” (Hebrews 3:12). He then explains that we are to “exhort one another daily, while it is called ‘Today,’ lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin” (v. 13).

Yes, sin is deceitful.

### **Belief and Obedience Connected**

The Bible is adamant that belief and obedience are both necessary, and in fact are two sides of the same coin. True belief manifests itself in obedience.

Paul makes another powerful statement on this subject later in the letter to the Hebrews. Belief and faith are synonyms—they are very closely connected. When we believe something, we do so because faith says it is true, and we have faith because we believe something to be true. Hebrews 11 is known as the “faith chapter” because it records example after example of men and women who exercised faith in the face of trials and stress. It reminds us of Noah, of Abraham and Sarah, of Moses and of Rahab—all of whom overcame personal trials because their faith was rooted in the belief that God would bring to pass what He promised. As it says of Sarah, “she judged Him [God] faithful who had promised” (v. 11). And we are told of Moses, “By faith he forsook Egypt, not fearing the wrath of the king; for he endured as seeing Him who is invisible” (v. 27).

Not everyone is spared in this life, and this can pose challenges to our believing faith. “Still others had trial of mockings and scourgings, yes, and of chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, were tempted, were slain with the sword. They wan-

dered about in sheepskins and goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, tormented—of whom the world was not worthy” (vv. 36–38). These men and women stared fear in the face and stood firm. Is it any wonder that faith is essential? “But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him” (v. 6).

How often must we choose between obeying God or trusting in ourselves and the sight of our eyes (2 Corinthians 5:7)? When God tells us, “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy,” do we immediately obey Him, or do we rationalize around His command? Do we pull back for fear of losing a job, of offending family and friends? Or, do we believe God and trust, in faith, that whatever He tells us to do will work out best in the end?

Do we really believe Jesus’ words, “But if you want to enter into life, keep the commandments” (Matthew 19:17)? And do we believe Him when He said, “If anyone comes to Me and does not hate [love to a lesser degree, by comparison] his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple” (Luke 14:26)? Belief must be followed by action!

John 3:16 is truly the “golden verse” of the Bible. It is rich in meaning. It is a verse worth memorizing. But it is so much more than a mere “memory verse.” Millions who repeat its words superficially, without properly comprehending its full meaning, can be lulled into a false sense of security. Yes, the correct response to God the Father offering up Christ as a sacrifice on our behalf is to believe in Jesus of Nazareth as the true Savior and Messiah. But what does that belief entail? Do we want to be like the demons who believe but are lost through disobedience? Or, will we act on our belief, demonstrating by our actions that Christ is living within us? As James affirms, “But do you want to know, O foolish man, that faith without works is dead?” (James 2:20). Do we have the faith to move mountains (Matthew 17:20)? Such faith is remarkable, but moving a mere mountain is nothing compared to the real reward of active, believing faith—eternal life in the Kingdom of God, as a born member of the Family of God. Let us all strive to deepen our faith and act on our belief!

# Chapter 7

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## Perish... the Thought!

A common belief among professing Christians is that when you die, you do not **really** die. According to the widespread teaching, though your body dies, there is an immortal (ever-living) soul in you—which either goes to heaven to be with God or goes to hell to writhe in pain forever. Is this what the Bible teaches?

This idea that human beings will not really die *is* found in the Bible—but it may surprise you to learn who actually introduced this teaching. It is a very ancient notion, going back to the time of our first parents. God placed Adam and Eve in a beautiful garden full of trees bearing fruits and nuts of all kinds. No doubt there were vegetables and other foods available to them, but there was one kind of fruit—found on a special tree in the midst of the garden—that they were *not* to eat.

Satan, in the form of a serpent, cunningly asked Eve, “Has God indeed said, ‘You shall not eat of every tree of the garden?’” (Genesis 3:1). She answered him by explaining that they could eat of every tree, but with one exception. Eve then repeated God’s warning as it was given to Adam. “God has said, ‘You shall not eat it, nor shall you touch it, **lest you die**’” (Genesis 3:3). To this, the serpent replied, “You will not surely die” (v. 4). Here, Satan contradicted God’s clear statement, leaving Eve with a decision: believe God, who said she would die, or believe Satan, who said she would not die. To this day, most people in the world believe Satan’s statement, not God’s.

Many people misunderstand this first encounter between humankind and Satan, in part because it is a very compressed account. The tree from which they were forbidden to eat was called the “tree of the knowledge of good and evil.” We should not think, though, that this means God had not given them knowledge of His standards of conduct—He had indeed done so, and as part of that instruction had forbidden them to eat from that tree. Eve, however, was persuaded by Satan’s temptation that eating from the tree would “make one wise” (v. 6). Yet her choice—rejecting God’s revelation—was in fact *unwise*, the first of human beings’ countless decisions, up to our present day, to decide for themselves what is good and what is evil.

Adam and Eve rejected God and listened to Satan’s advice. When they did so, their view of life and how to live it began to change immediately. They suddenly became ashamed of their bodies and sewed fig leaves together to cover their private parts (v. 7). Why? What caused this change in how they saw each other? The answer is found in God’s question the next time He met them, after they had given in to Satan’s sales pitch. “Who told you that you were naked?” (v. 11). Remember, they were the only two humans in the garden at the time, and God put them there with no clothes. God did not have a problem with their state, and—until they listened to Satan—neither did they. It was Satan who taught them to feel shame and fear regarding their naked bodies.

## Dualism

The idea that the body is a source of shame is indeed an old one, and it occurs in many forms throughout history. It is a common feature of *dualistic* philosophies which teach that a person’s mind is the “real” or eternal person, and that the body is a temporary, lesser—and often shameful—feature of our existence. Plato, Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, Descartes, and a multitude of other philosophers have contributed to this false understanding of the human self. The Neo-Platonist concept of dualism heavily influenced professing-Christian doctrine, but it all began with Satan’s lie, which taught Adam and Eve to feel shame regarding God’s physical creation.

Modern “Christianity” has been unknowingly so deeply influenced by pagan ideas that the average churchgoer is totally deceived about what the Bible really says regarding this and many other subjects. Most of us who grew up with a professing Christian background were taught

that the “soul” is something distinct from the body, and that it goes to heaven or hell (or purgatory for a while) after the body dies.

Yet John’s gospel makes it clear that Jesus totally rejected Satan’s assertion. John tells us that no human being other than Christ—which would include such biblical figures as Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Moses—is in heaven: “No one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man who is in heaven” (John 3:13).

So, what is the human soul? The word “soul” in the Old Testament comes from the Hebrew word *nephesh*, and merely means “a creature.” For example, the first time the word “soul” is used in the *King James Version* is in Genesis 2:7, where we read, “And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.” This alone should cause us to pause. Note that it says “a *living* soul.” Would that not indicate the possibility of a *dead* soul? The *New King James Version* translates it in a way that leads to less confusion, stating that “man became a living being.”

Genesis 1:21 refers to animal life—apart from humankind—as *nephesh* when it tells of “great sea creatures and every living thing [*nephesh*] that moves.” And notice that Leviticus 21:11 speaks of a **dead** *nephesh*! So, if *nephesh* is the Hebrew word translated into English as “soul”—and it is—then a *soul* can die! This is confirmed in Ezekiel 18:4: “Behold, all souls are Mine; the soul of the father as well as the soul of the son is Mine; **the soul who sins shall die.**” This is repeated in verse 20: “The soul who sins shall die.”

### **Man Is Perishable**

When most professing Christians read John 3:16, they fail to notice the importance of a powerful statement it contains. Much attention is paid to the first half of the verse: “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son.” But every part of this “golden verse” is rich with meaning, and should not be “glossed over.”

To gain a better sense of what John is saying, we can pick up his context by reading the passage beginning in verse 14. “And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him **should not perish but have eternal life.** For God so loved the world that He gave His only

begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him **should not perish but have everlasting life**” (vv. 14–16).

*Webster’s Revised Unabridged Dictionary* defines *perish* as “To be destroyed; to pass away; to become nothing... to die” (“Perish,” *Websters1913.com*). We know what it means when food perishes. We speak of people perishing in a plane crash. So, when it comes to the biblical matters, why do people push other, incorrect meanings onto *perish*?

The Bible consistently and unambiguously agrees with the standard dictionary definition of “perish”! It clearly teaches that **life** and **death** are *opposites*! Nowhere does Scripture ever describe human life as being inherently immortal. As we have already seen, even the soul—whatever one may think it is—can die (Ezekiel 18:4, 20). God’s word reveals that immortality is *not* something we already have, but rather that it is something we must *seek* (Romans 2:6–7) and “must put on” (1 Corinthians 15:53–54).

Further, we read that Christ “brought life and immortality to light through the gospel” (2 Timothy 1:10), and among all who have ever lived in the human flesh, only Christ now “alone has immortality” (1 Timothy 6:16). Note this amazing comment from Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown’s mainstream commentary on this verse: “It is mere **heathen philosophy** that attributes to the soul indestructibility in itself, which is to be attributed **solely to God’s gift**” (p. 223, 1884, emphasis added). Paul affirms this very point, that eternal life is a gift from God: “For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 6:23).

Paul wrote to Titus describing eternal life as something that we **do not** yet have, but for which we **hope** (Titus 3:7). And Jesus Himself tells us, “Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but **has passed from death into life**” (John 5:24).

We all know that our bodies will eventually die. That means you, and that means me. But then what? Based on how most people live their lives, this must not be a burning question for them. So, what exactly did Jesus mean in John 3:16 when He said that we might not perish?

### **Smoke and Fire**

Many assume that to perish means to live forever in a place of torment. However, as we have seen above, this is entirely inconsistent

with the verses of Scripture cited above. Even so, there are a few scriptures people commonly cite when trying to establish the idea of the immortal soul.

One such verse is Revelation 14:11, which describes that “the smoke of their torment ascends forever and ever; and they have no rest day or night.” But what is the context of this passage? Is it discussing the final, eternal fate of the wicked? No! It concerns the Day of the Lord—the time of God’s wrath on rebellious mankind—during which suffering human beings will experience one trial following closely on the heels of another.

But what about “the smoke of their torment ascend[ing] forever and ever”? One of the plagues poured out during the Day of the Lord involves the sun giving off much more heat than normal, which will “scorch men with fire” (Revelation 16:8–9). This will no doubt cause fires on the earth, and the smoke of this tormenting plague will ascend up “forever.”

When we hear someone say, “the line went on forever,” we understand the use of figurative language. Smoke is the by-product of combustion, and it is that smoke that is described in this verse as ascending forever. When the source of fuel for a fire is consumed, the fire will cease to exist, but its smoke can disperse upward for a long, long time.

A lake of fire is spoken of in Revelation 19:20. Here we read that the leader of the coming European power—known as “the beast”—and the false prophet will be thrown into it just prior to the thousand-year reign of Christ on this earth. They are physical beings and—as with all human beings—are vulnerable to physical destruction by fire.

John the Baptist said Jesus would come baptizing with the Holy Spirit and fire (Matthew 3:11). John explains the baptism of fire in the next verse: “His winnowing fan is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clean out His threshing floor, and gather His wheat into the barn; but **He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.**”

This will be the fate of the beast and false prophet. They will be burned up with fire—totally consumed and extinguished. Fire by nature is unquenchable (Proverbs 30:15–16). It burns as long as there is combustible material (Proverbs 26:20). Only smoke and ashes are left when the fuel is gone. “For behold, the day is coming, burning like an oven, and all the proud, yes, all who do wickedly will be stubble. And



the day which is coming **shall burn them up,**’ says the LORD of hosts, **‘that will leave them neither root nor branch... for they shall be ashes under the soles of your feet’**” (Malachi 4:1, 3).

One scripture that can be confusing in this regard is Revelation 20:10. Part of the problem is that translators present the Bible in terms of their own preconceived theological perceptions. This may not be deliberate, but is a fact nevertheless. The *King James Version* renders this more accurately than some other translations, but it is not entirely perfect. “And the devil that deceived them was cast into the lake of fire and brimstone, where the beast and the false prophet *are*, and shall be tormented day and night for ever and ever.”

In this passage, John is focusing on the devil’s punishment and where he will be cast. The devil, unlike the beast and false prophet, is a spirit being, yet he will be cast into the same fire, from where he will be tormented and will see all his works and deceptive efforts go up in smoke.

Notice that in both the *King James* and the *New King James* versions, the word “are” is in italics. This means that it is not in the original Greek, but was supplied by the translators. And it can be misleading. For example, before his death, my father arranged to have his dead body cremated. His ashes were put into an urn and placed in a cemetery. That is where he is now. We know that he is dead, but the cemetery is where his ashes are located.

In the same way, the lake of fire is where the beast and false prophet will be cast—and is where their ashes will be! In time sequence, the beast and false prophet “had been thrown” (as the *NIV* translation states in Revelation 20:10) into the lake of fire a thousand years before the devil (Revelation 19:20).

Regrettably, some read this passage and get the mistaken idea that the beast and false prophet will remain conscious and experience eternal torment alongside Satan the devil. Their confusion seems to stem from the statement that “they will be tormented day and night forever and ever” (Revelation 20:10, *NKJV*). However, we must remember that Satan is not thrown into the lake of fire alone—rather, he is joined in his fiery punishment by all the wicked angels who followed him! Jesus tells us that the fire was specifically prepared for these fallen angels (Matthew 25:41), and it is *they* who suffer everlasting torment, including the demons who possessed and motivated the beast and the false prophet (cf. Revelation 16:13).

In contrast, the clear testimony of the rest of the Bible is that wicked human beings are consumed and destroyed forever.

Another passage of scripture that some use to say that there is an ever burning hell fire where people writhe in pain forever, is that of Lazarus and the Rich Man, found in Luke 16. This is clearly a parable, and we have other helpful articles which explain its meaning. If you would like to read more on this subject, contact us at your nearest office listed at the end of this booklet, or go to our website at *TomorrowsWorld.org* and look up “Who Is Burning in Hell?”

The Bible consistently describes the dead as being unconscious. “Put not your trust in princes, nor in the son of man, in whom there is no help. His breath goeth forth, he returneth to his earth; in that very day his thoughts perish” (Psalm 146:3–4, *KJV*). “For the living know that they will die; but the dead know nothing” (Ecclesiastes 9:5). “Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might; for there is no work or device or knowledge or wisdom in the grave where you are going” (Ecclesiastes 9:10).

### **Lazarus Slept**

John relates the account of a real-life Lazarus who was gravely ill. On the way to see him, Jesus told His disciples, “Our friend Lazarus sleeps, but I go that I may wake him up.’ Then His disciples said, ‘Lord, if he sleeps he will get well.’ However, Jesus spoke of his death, but they thought that He was speaking about taking rest in sleep. Then Jesus said to them plainly, ‘Lazarus is dead’” (John 11:11–14). The Apostle Paul also likened death to sleep (1 Thessalonians 4:13, 15).

The Bible is abundantly clear that human beings are mortal and will utterly perish unless they receive God’s grace. As it says in John 3:16, “**whoever believes in Him should not perish** but have everlasting life.”



# Chapter 8

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## God's Eternal Promise

**W**e do not like to think about it, but every one of us is going to die. Then what? What happens after death? Where, if anyplace, will you go? And what will you be? Answers vary depending on where you look and who you ask, but John 3:16 promises the potential of an unending life after death: “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but **have everlasting life.**” We must note that the promise of everlasting life is conditional. Perishing is the natural outcome of a sinful life, but this verse gives us hope beyond the grave.

One common teaching in mainstream Christianity is that human beings each have an immortal soul and that at death the soul goes immediately to the paradise of heaven or to the torments of hell, depending on what kind of person you were. Others believe that death is likened to sleep, and that upon Christ's return, those who are His will awaken in a resurrection from death to live eternally. Some believe that eternal life is in a fleshly body on this earth and others believe in a new spirit body, either on the earth or up in heaven.

One popular idea is that you will be given wings and will float on clouds playing harp music in eternal retirement. Many people look forward to being reunited with their loved ones in some kind of unspecified heavenly paradise. Then there are those who speak more specifically about what to expect in heaven:

**The greatest joy** of heaven is the **Beatific Vision**. This is **the sight of God face to face**. This vision is called *beatific*, because it completely fills with joy those who possess it. They know and love God to their utmost capacity, and are known and loved by God in return. **The Beatific Vision will satisfy completely and supremely all our desires**. Having God, we shall never wish for anything else (Louis Morrow, *My Catholic Faith*, pp. 176-177, 1958, emphasis added).

With so many ideas about the afterlife, who can blame those who simply throw up their hands and give up trying to figure it all out? But when a loved one dies, we want to know. And we often become seriously curious about the afterlife as we see the inevitable closing in on us.

On the *Tomorrow's World* telecast and in the Living Church of God, the sponsor of *Tomorrow's World*, we often say, "Don't believe us because we say it. Believe what your Bible tells you." So, what—if anything—does the Bible teach regarding an afterlife? What **is** the reward of the saved according to this remarkable and inspired book?

The man Job asked and answered an important question: "If a man dies, shall he live again? All the days of my hard service I will wait, till my change comes. You shall call, and I will answer You; You shall desire the work of Your hands" (Job 14:14–15). Job understood that God has a purpose, and a plan that He is working out in the lives of each human being He has created. He understood that this physical life is only a beginning, but to more fully understand what that purpose is we must look to the good news that Jesus brought.

### **The Gospel Message**

The term "gospel" simply means *good news*, and the good news that Jesus brought to mankind was the Kingdom of God. The subject of the Kingdom of God is found throughout the New Testament, especially in the writings of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, including the book of Acts. It is remarkable that anyone could read these books yet misunderstand this important subject.

The book of Mark tells us about the beginning of Christ's ministry and His message: "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.... Now after John was put in prison, Jesus came to Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God, and saying, 'The time is

fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel” (Mark 1:1, 14–15).

We see from these verses that the good news, the Gospel that Jesus preached, is the Kingdom of God—and it is this Gospel that we are to believe. As we shall see, many details about this kingdom are revealed in the Scriptures. How tragic it is that so few professing Christians have any understanding of this coming Kingdom when the New Testament is filled with the knowledge of it!

Between the time Jesus began His ministry (Mark 1) and His last appearance to His apostles (Acts 1), He spoke constantly about the Kingdom of God. He went about all Galilee teaching and “preaching the gospel of the kingdom” (Matthew 4:23; 9:35) and Jesus said, “I must preach the kingdom of God to the other cities also, because for this purpose I have been sent” (Luke 4:43).

We see that the Gospel of the Kingdom of God was at the heart and core of His famous Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:3, 10, 19–20; 6:10, 13; 7:21). In this same sermon He explains that seeking the Kingdom of God is to be the primary focus of our lives (6:33). This alone should tell us that the Kingdom of God is something exciting and something that we should greatly desire. Yet, how many are genuinely excited about going to an eternal retirement with nothing to do except look into the face of God in some sort of unproductive ecstatic trance? This is not at all what the Bible teaches!

Jesus’ parables often started with a question or a declaration about the Kingdom of God (cf. Luke 13:18, 20; Matthew 13:24, 44, 45). It is in these parables that we begin to see that God has called us to an active and productive eternal life. Jesus gave the parable of the minas “because they thought the kingdom of God would appear immediately” (Luke 19:11). He described a certain nobleman who went away on a long journey to receive a kingdom. In the meantime he gave each of ten servants a mina (a unit of money) and instructed them to do business until he returned (vv. 12–13). Upon his return he gave out rewards based on what each servant had gained.

The symbolism is evident. Jesus is the Nobleman who went away to receive the Kingdom. A prophecy in Daniel 7:13–14 briefly describes His coronation ceremony. Later in this prophecy it tells us that the saints (the servants of Christ) will rule under Him (v. 27). Again, in the parable of the minas, Jesus explains that the man who

multiplied his mina tenfold would be rewarded with rulership over ten cities in His Kingdom. The man who gained five minas would rule over five cities, but the man who did nothing with his mina would lose out on the Kingdom altogether.

Other scriptures corroborate this pattern of rulership for Jesus' servants in the Kingdom of God. When His disciples asked what was in it for them, He replied, "Assuredly I say to you, that in the regeneration, when the Son of Man sits on the throne of His glory, you who have followed Me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel" (Matthew 19:28). And several scriptures inform us that King David will be resurrected and given rule over all twelve tribes of Israel. "But they shall serve the LORD their God, and David their king, whom I will raise up for them" (Jeremiah 30:9; cf. Ezekiel 34:23–24; 37:21–25).

But Christ will rule over the entire earth. "Then the seventh angel sounded: and there were loud voices in heaven, saying, "The kingdoms of this world have become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ, and He shall reign forever and ever!" (Revelation 11:15). "And He has on His robe and on His thigh a name written: KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS" (19:16).

### **A Kingdom on the Earth**

Jesus taught the people about the Kingdom of God, and the Bible is consistent about where He and His servants will rule—not up in heaven, but on this earth! We find this remarkable prophecy toward the end of the Old Testament: "And in that day His feet will stand on the Mount of Olives.... And the LORD shall be King over all the earth" (Zechariah 14:4, 9). In the song of the saints found in Revelation 5:10, we read, "and have made us kings and priests to our God; and we shall reign on the earth." And in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus declared, "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth" (Matthew 5:5).

Some are confused by Jesus' statement two verses earlier, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:3). Are we to conclude from verses 3 and 5 that the poor in spirit go to heaven, but the meek stay on the earth? Absolutely not! Note that it says that the meek "shall inherit the earth," but it is the "kingdom of heaven" that belongs to the poor in spirit. The other gos-

pel writers always refer to the *kingdom of God*, but Matthew uses both terms interchangeably (Matthew 19:23–24).

Now, we know that the Kingdom of God is not *in* God. This expression simply means that it is God's kingdom. In the same way, the Kingdom of heaven refers to ownership, not location. It is God who is at this time dwelling *in* heaven, so it is properly referred to as the kingdom of heaven, meaning *heaven's kingdom*.

Those that God is calling during this age will be resurrected at the return of Jesus Christ and given rewards to various levels of rulership (Revelation 11:15, 18). They are to be kings and priests when Christ returns to this earth (Revelation 5:10; 20:4), but they will not be composed of flesh and blood as we are today.

The Apostle Paul explains our future nature in 1 Corinthians 15:

Now this I say, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; nor does corruption inherit incorruption. Behold, I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed—in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality (vv. 50–53).

Satan has deceived us into thinking that flesh and blood is superior to being composed of spirit as God is, but a close examination of the Scriptures gives us a different picture. We see that, after His resurrection, Jesus was able to walk through stone. When the stone was rolled back from His tomb, He was already gone. The stone being rolled back was for the benefit of others to see that He was gone (Matthew 28:1–6), and even with the doors locked and secure He was able to appear in the room with His disciples (John 20:19, 26). He was able to appear as a man and even eat a meal (Luke 24:41–43). He was able to go from earth to heaven and back at incredible speed (compare John 20:17 and Matthew 28:9). Since we do not know the distance between God's throne and the earth it is impossible for us to know *how* fast, but we can understand that anyone who is into speed travel will not be disappointed!

But what about *wings*? Professing Christians often think they “get their wings” at the resurrection. Many non-biblical ideas have



been recorded in writing and art, preached, and spoken in jest by sincere people, but Scripture must be our guide. Nowhere in the Bible are we told that we will have wings in the afterlife, but the Apostle John tells us this: “Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God! Therefore the world does not know us, because it did not know Him. Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is” (1 John 3:1–2).

It should not surprise us that we are called children of God in this passage and that we are told that we will “be like Him.” Numerous other passages affirm our ultimate destiny in the Kingdom of God. How many people think that we will be some kind of angelic beings in the afterlife? Yet, we are told very directly that the “world to come” is not to be ruled by angels. “For He has not put the world to come, of which we speak, in subjection to angels” (Hebrews 2:5). As we have already seen, we are to rule the world to come with Christ upon His return. But if not angels, then what?

Paul quotes King David asking the question, “What is man that you are mindful of him, or the son of man that you take care of him?” (Hebrews 2:6). He goes on to say, prophetically, that God has put “all things in subjection” to mankind, and that there is “nothing that is not put under him” (v. 8). However, he shows that all things have not **yet** been put under mankind’s control. If it were, there truly would be “star wars”—given our current carnal state!

Paul is then very bold in describing mankind as “sons” of God (v. 10). This whole passage, Hebrews 2:5–18, is most instructive concerning this subject, and should be read carefully along with Romans 8:18–23 by anyone desiring to know God’s ultimate plan for mankind.

### **How Long Eternity?**

When we are young, we intellectually understand that we will grow old and die, but getting old and dying seems so far off in the future that this reality is usually of little consequence. As we grow older, however, we begin to recognize that life is not all that long after all. One year comes and another goes. Decades begin to accumulate. One day, we come to the stark realization that there are more years behind us than ahead of us, and the train of life we are on is picking up speed.

Sixty does not seem as old as it once was. After all, we tell ourselves, we are “young at heart.” But 70, 80 or even 100 years no longer seems long enough. “Where did all the years go?” we find ourselves asking, just as our parents and elders did. This life is nothing against the backdrop of eternity.

With all this on our minds, it is natural to wonder, *Is there life after death?* If so, we may wonder what form that life will take, and what we will be doing. Will that life be eternal? Of and by ourselves, we have to admit that we do not know much about our future.

So, we can be grateful for the information God gives us in John 3:16. No, this one verse does not give us all the answers. However, it assures us that the One who created time itself is deeply and personally concerned about every moment of our life. It reveals that there is a future for those who are willing to act on God's word—to do what it says, in obedience to the Savior, Jesus Christ. It gives us the comfort of knowing that, although this present life is temporary and fleeting, our hope of eternal life is real—and is attainable through Jesus Christ.

Life after death is not some kind of unproductive “retirement” from the activity of our present life. It is not a passive ecstatic trance, or a release into a formless “nirvana.” Rather, as we learn in God's word, eternal life will be an opportunity for great accomplishment—and it will be exciting to a degree that we in our present human lives can scarcely imagine. Paul understood this hope when he wrote, “For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us” (Romans 8:18). That glory awaits every faithful Christian who accepts—and acts on—the promise God makes in John 3:16!

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