

“How were people saved before Jesus died for our sins?”

John 3:16 (NASB)

¹⁶“For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.”

Verse 16 is undoubtedly the most familiar and beloved verse in all of Scripture. Yet its very familiarity can cause the profound truth it contains to be overlooked. God’s motive for giving “His indescribable gift” of Jesus Christ ([2 Corinthians 9:15](#)) was that He **loved the** evil, sinful world of fallen humanity. As noted in earlier teachings, all humanity is utterly sinful, completely lost, and unable to save itself by any ceremony or effort. Thus, there was nothing in man that attracted God’s love. Rather He loved because He sovereignly determined to do so. The plan of salvation flowed from “**the kindness of God our Savior and His love for mankind**” ([Titus 3:4](#)). “**God demonstrates His own love toward us,**” wrote Paul to the Christians in Rome, “**in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us**” ([Romans 5:8](#)).

John wrote in his first epistle, “**In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins**”...“**We love, because He first loved us**” ([1 John 4:10, 19](#)). Such love is so vast, wonderful, and incomprehensible that John, shunning all adjectives, could only write that God so loved the world that He gave His own Beloved Son (cf. [1 John 3:1](#)).

World is a nonspecific term for humanity in a general sense. The statement in [verse 17](#), “**that the world might be saved through Him,**” proves that it does not mean everyone who has ever lived, since all will not be saved. [Verse 16](#) clearly cannot be teaching universal salvation, since the context promises that unbelievers will perish in eternal judgment ([vv. 16-18](#)). Our Lord is saying that for all in the world there is only one Savior ([1 John 2:2](#)), but only those who are regenerated by the Spirit and who believe in His gospel will receive salvation and eternal life through Him.

Paul in [2 Corinthians 5:19](#) used the term **world** in a similar way: “**God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and He has committed to us the word of reconciliation.**” God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not in the sense of universal salvation, but in the sense that the world has no other reconciler. That not all will believe and be reconciled is clear from the pleading in [verse 20](#): “**Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making an appeal through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.**”