

# Catholic Guide to St. Paul's Writings on Salvation

**Based on Paul's Letter to the Romans**

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## **Let's start at the beginning. What is sin?**

Sin is more than a bad example or a mistake: **sin is a dysfunction deeply rooted in our human nature**, a dysfunction that manifests itself in the personal sins we each commit by individual human beings (see Romans 7:15, 17:19-20; *Catechism* 387, 404). This condition of sin stems from the first human being, Adam, and implicates us all (see Romans 5:12, 5:19). Even though we personally didn't "choose" to place ourselves in opposition to God and his plan, the sin of our first parents still affects us in the same way that a pregnant woman's decision to abuse drugs or alcohol adversely affects her child—even through no fault of the child's own. In fact, **original sin is an absence**—a lack of the grace we originally possessed. In their sin, our first parents forfeited this grace, and they couldn't pass on what they no longer had. Original sin is like the parents of a grand estate who recklessly squander their inheritance, so there's nothing left to pass on.

Because of what we have lost due to original sin, our intellects are darkened, our wills are weakened, and our moral lives are an intense

struggle—a battle in which we very often *know* what the right thing to do is, but still have great difficulty doing it because we *want* to do the wrong thing. This dissolution within ourselves leads to **spiritual and physical distress and death**, alienation from God, and disharmony with one another and even with the created order.

### **What does it mean to be saved?**

In Jesus, God has united himself with us and entered fully the plight of our human condition, even dying our death. God chooses to enter our “mess,” so to speak, seeking to take sin out at its root and transform us from within. By dying as we die, Jesus deals with the full consequences of sin—namely, death itself (see Genesis 3:19; Romans 5:12). But death couldn’t hold Jesus—and indeed, this is what salvation is all about: by entering into Christ, we share in his death *and* his resurrection (see Romans 4:25; 6:5). In salvation, then, **God atones for our sin and gives us a share in the risen life of the Eternal Son** (see *Catechism* 654).

### **How do we enter into Christ?**

In Romans 5, St. Paul teaches clearly that those who are in Christ, the New Adam, now share in his victory over sin and death (see Romans 5:14, 5:19). The question for us is, “*How do I get out of the Old Adam and into the New Adam?*” Paul answers this directly in Romans 6—**through *Baptism***.

Baptism incorporates us into the death of Jesus and enables us to share—even now—in his risen life: “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from death by the glory of the Father, **we too might walk in newness of life**” (Romans 6:3-4). Clearly, for Paul, Baptism *accomplishes* something—it’s the means by which we enter into the victory of the Cross (see Romans 6:5, 6:8, 6:11).

## Am I saved?

Is salvation a past, present, or future event? The answer is it’s all three:

- I **was** saved in Baptism.
- I **am** being saved through the power of the Holy Spirit’s ongoing transformation of my life.
- And I **hope** to be saved by persevering to the very end in charity.

Salvation is about entering into Christ’s life and death and sharing in his Eternal Sonship. Salvation is not merely an acquittal—it’s not just the removal of a guilty verdict. Salvation is about divine adoption, whereby we become sons and daughters in Christ. **Salvation is thus a dynamic process, which begins in new birth and continues in the Spirit’s continual transformation of our lives.** In other words, it is not a static

reality or a one-time event. This is why St. Paul can exhort us to “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling” (Philippians 2:12).

### **What is required for salvation—faith or works?**

Paul says very clearly that **both faith and works are required for salvation**—in other words, “faith working through love” (Galatians 5:6).

For Paul, faith is not simply a matter of “belief,” a positive attitude or disposition toward God. Rather, **faith includes “obedience”** (see Romans 1:5; 16:26)—it’s a matter of *faithfulness*. The evidence of our faith—the evidence of our salvation—is a transformed life marked by good works (see Romans 2:6, 2:13).

To overcome this dichotomy between faith and works, we need to think of salvation not in the context of a courtroom, but in the context of a family—because that’s what a “covenant” is all about. God forges *family* bonds with us and with one another.

In the New Covenant, God has sent us the Holy Spirit and thus has infused us with divine life—the very life of the risen Christ (see Galatians 2:20 and Romans 5:5). He has not merely *acquitted* us, as a judge might; **he has adopted us as a Father does**. Our good works, then, are those of a loving son or daughter—not merely those of an employee or slave. Ultimately, a father demands *more* from a son or daughter than a judge does from a

defendant, but a father's mercy is also far greater and deeper than that of a judge.

Our natural life is a gift we did not earn, and yet **we truly participate in our own natural growth and maturation.** The same is true of our supernatural life: it begins as pure gift, given to us in Baptism. But like our natural life, this gift of divine life is dynamic and grows within us as we become ever more conformed to the image of Jesus Christ (see Romans 12:1). **God is the source of our salvation, but he doesn't save us without us.** We truly participate and cooperate in the Spirit's ongoing transformation of our lives. Salvation is about the gift of divine life and the growth of this life within us as we become mature sons and daughters of the Father, conformed to the image of Christ Jesus.

### **What's it all about?**

In essence, Christianity comes down to this: accepting with love the gift given to us in Baptism, and allowing the Holy Spirit to reproduce the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ in and through each of us personally.

Jesus goes to the Cross as our Head, in solidarity with us, not merely as our substitute. And through the gift of the Spirit, he infuses our fallen humanity with his divinity (see *Catechism* 460). In Baptism, we enter into

his death and resurrection; in the Holy Eucharist, we are offered up “in Him, with Him, and through Him” to the Father; and each day, through the power of the Holy Spirit, our lives become more and more an outpouring of love for others.

In this way, through the life of the Son and the gift of the Spirit, God answers the deepest yearnings of the human heart—**healing our wounded nature and elevating us to share in his blessed life.**

“See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; *and so we are.*” (1 John 3:1)