

What is Salvation?

“Salvation” is a natural longing of the human heart. *To be saved* is to have life, wholeness, freedom, and rest as one’s eternal possessions. Salvation is *beatitudo*, that is, the happiness or blessedness of being whole and free from fear, pain, death, and all other such hindrances. For many, it is difficult to believe that salvation is possible. Even so, everyone in some sense should strive for salvation.

Wealth, power, honor, and pleasure can never bring salvation to anyone. Neither can self-help programs or motivational speakers bring salvation, however helpful they might be. Nor can any human idea, however lofty, save us. Christians affirm that man’s salvation comes from the One who created man in His own image — the One beyond our imaginings, Who “dwells in unapproachable light, Whom no man has ever seen or can see” (1 Tim 6:16). He is the Great Lover of our souls. He is the One Whom we long for, whenever we long for salvation.

“For God alone my soul waits in silence, for my hope is from him. He only is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall not be shaken” (Psalms 62:5–6).

Salvation comes from God alone. In fact, God *is* salvation; for every man, woman, and child who ever lived, only God makes salvation possible. Communion with the true God, in this life, is our best and only prospect for experiencing salvation (or, good graces with God) in the here and now. Likewise, communion with the true God is our only hope of achieving the fullness of salvation in the afterlife.

“Sing to the LORD, all the earth! Tell of his salvation from day to day” (1 Chronicles 16:23).

The deepest identity of the Catholic Church, and her whole mission, is bound up with the subject of salvation. The constant task of the whole Church, from the Pope to the most simple of believers, is to “tell of [God’s] salvation from day to day.” In all her worship, prayers, preaching, and service, she strives to exalt the saving work of God, and proclaim it to everyone so that the whole world might be saved.

Furthermore, *the saving work of God that the Church proclaims is Jesus Christ*. This is because God, the true God, has made Himself known in Jesus Christ as His only-begotten Son, who took flesh and became a man “for us men and for our salvation” (Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed).

“This is eternal life, that they know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent” (John 17:3).

The name “Jesus” means, literally, “God saves.” In the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and in the gift of His Holy Spirit, God has revealed to us His whole plan of salvation, and, indeed, has given Himself to us in love, wholly and completely. In Jesus Christ, we see the invisible God made visible, the hidden God made manifest. Through Jesus, we can come to have intimate communion with the God Who created us. We must believe in God, entrusting ourselves into His hands, receiving the Holy Spirit, so that we can live a new kind of life and receive by God’s grace the salvation that we long for.

“There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12).

Although God has revealed Himself “in many and various ways,” He has now sent His Son. Who reveals the glory of God and bears the very stamp of His nature” (see Heb 1:1–3). Consequently, “there is salvation in no one else;” “He who believes in Jesus Christ is not condemned; he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God” (John 3:18). Anyone who enters into communion with God by faith in Jesus Christ, freely responding to His gift of grace and persevering in that communion until death, has eternal salvation in him.

Anyone who rejects faith and refuses communion does so for something less than God offers — that is, wealth, power, honor, or pleasure. This is a very costly choice. Such a choice leads only to destruction, to the eternal fire known as hell.

“God shows no partiality, but in every nation any one who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him” (Acts 10:34–35).

This dynamic holds true across the whole world, in every age and time. Indeed, Jesus “gave himself as a ransom for all so that God declares all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Tim 2:6, 2:4). Those, therefore, who “through no fault of their own do not know the gospel of Christ or His Church” can also find salvation. Such people are those who “sincerely seek God and, moved by grace, strive by their deeds to do His will as it is known to them through the dictates of conscience,” or those “who, without blame on their part, have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God, but who strive to live a good life, thanks to His grace” (Vatican II, Lumen Gentium 16 [Abbot translation]).

Such people believe in Christ, at least implicitly, by anticipation. Indeed, truly righteous deeds done in a godly manner are always based on faith: “the righteous shall live by his faith” (Hab 2:4; cf. Rom 1:17; Gal 3:11; Heb 10:38).

“The grace of God has appeared for the salvation of all men, training us to renounce irreligion and worldly passions, and to live sober, upright, and godly lives in this world” (Titus 2:11–12).

It is faith, then, that saves. God’s salvation is ultimately a free gift that can only be received. But righteous deeds are the fruit of faith — they are *faith lived out*. As the Bible continually tells us, we will be judged by our deeds. Salvation, then, comes by faith and works. “What does it profit, my brethren, if a man says he has faith but has not works? Can his faith save him? ... Faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. ... A man justified by works and not by faith alone” (Jas 2:14–17, 24). Faith is the *beginning and inner vital force* of salvation. Good works contribute to salvation’s affirmation and growth. A faith without works of charity is in danger of dying. “For faith without hope and charity, neither unites a man perfectly with Christ nor makes him a living member of His body” (Council of Trent’s Decree on Justification, chapter 7). As St. Paul teaches, the faith that saves is a “faith that works through love” (Gal. 5:6).

“Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate them one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.... And [the evildoers] will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life” (Matthew 25:32, 46).

Without *living* faith, then, there can be no salvation for anyone. The alternative to salvation is damnation: that is, eternal separation from God. “Very often men, deceived by the Evil One, have become caught up in futile reasoning and have exchanged the truth of God for a lie, serving the creature rather than the Creator. Or some there are who, living and dying in a world without God, are subject to utter hopelessness. Consequently, to promote the glory of God and procure the salvation of all such men, and mindful of the command of the Lord, ‘Preach the gospel to every creature,’ the Church painstakingly fosters her missionary work” (Vatican II, Lumen Gentium 16; cf. Rom 1:21, 25; Mk 16:15–16).

What Must I Do to be Saved?

“[The jailer] brought [Paul and Silas] out and said, ‘Men, what must I do to be saved?’ And they said, ‘Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household’” (Acts 16:29–31).

“Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, ‘Brethren, what shall we do?’ And Peter said to them, ‘Repent, and be baptized

