

# Can a Christian Lose His Salvation?

## According to Saint Paul the Answer is Yes

by Taylor Marshall

Most Evangelical Christians hold that a Christian is “once saved always saved,” by which they mean that once a person has committed his life to Christ, he can never do anything to undo this gift of salvation. The explanation assumes that since the gift of salvation was freely granted, there is nothing that one can do lose it. Contrary to this, we know that gifts can be abandoned, rejected, or destroyed by of the ill will of the recipient. A father may purchase a sports car and freely give it to his son as a gift. It is rightly assumed that a gift cannot be “ungifted” or taken away. I am sure that the son would receive the car gleefully. However, the son may turn around and sell the car for drugs, crash the car, or neglect the car so that it no longer functions. The gift was not “un-gifted”. Rather, the worth of the gift was rejected through negligence.

Catholicism views salvation in a similar way – a gift is given freely, but it may be spurned and squandered. The Father freely gave His Son Jesus Christ to suffer, die, and rise again for our salvation. Through the Holy Spirit, God pours out this love upon us so that we become the children of God. In the words of Saint Paul, we become earthen vessels containing inestimable treasure (1 Cor 4:7). And this salvation is a gift. As Saint Paul wrote:

For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God – not because of works, lest any man should boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them (Eph 2:8-10).

This gift of God is not “earned by works of our own doing” but rather is received “through faith”. However, notice that salvation has a purpose in this life. We are “created in Christ Jesus for good works...that we should walk in them.” Paul is opposed to certain persons trying to earn salvation through works without faith, but he finds no tension between faith and good works once faith has been established in the Christian. In fact, Paul expects that good works will necessarily grow up as the fruits of faith. Remember that Saint Paul, like the Catholic Church, finds salvation through “faith working through love” and not through “faith alone”.

This difference demonstrates that for Saint Paul and the Catholic Church, salvation is understood as progressive and multidimensional. When Evangelicals read Paul, they observe a stress on “faith” and so they focus on this aspect of Paul’s teaching. The Catholic Church reads Paul and discovers in his writings a stress on faith but in the context of various other doctrines: baptism, the church, good works, tradition, liturgy, sanctification, etc. To use an illustration, it is as if two different people look at a written piece of music. The first looks at the piece and after studying concludes, “The note “D” seems to be predominate.” Then he walks over to the piano and strikes a “D” on the piano. The other person studies the same sheet of music and concludes, “This piece of music is in the key of D.” He then walks over to the piano and plays the beautiful piece of music from the sheet in the key of D. The first person tried to distill the music down to one note and as a result, he neglected the rest. However, the second person realized that “D” was the overarching theme and yet he incorporated all the other notes so that something more beautiful resulted.

Evangelicals and other kinds of Protestants in their commendable zeal often distill the writings of Saint Paul to such an extent that they miss the complexities and nuances of the Apostle. This is especially the case when it comes to Saint Paul’s doctrine of salvation. As a result, the Evangelical doctrine of “once saved always saved” misses the nuances of Paul’s doctrine. Paul does in fact teach that “nothing can separate us from the love of God” (Rom 8:39). However, he also clearly states that certain Christians have “fallen from grace” (Gal 5:4). What does the Apostle mean when he says that certain Christians have fallen from grace?

The Apostle explains, “I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize” (1 Cor 9:27). Here the prize is salvation, as is clear from the preceding verses. Saint Paul follows a disciplined life because he knows that there is a possibility that he might forfeit the salvation that he preaches. For this reason, in the very next chapter, Paul encourages the Christians in Corinth to do the same: “So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don’t fall” (1 Cor 10:12). The “fall” here is the “fall from grace” spoken about by Paul in Galatians 5:4. Interestingly enough, the warning about falling from grace in Galatians 5:4 is immediately followed up by Paul’s exhortation to have “faith working through love” in Galatians 5:6.

Since the Apostle believes that one might fall from grace, he elsewhere encourages the Christians in Philippi to “work out your salvation with fear and trembling” (Phil 2:12). Here again we see Paul’s emphasis on a “faith working through love” (Gal 5:6). We are to work out our salvation. While it is a gift, it requires our effort. If you receive the gift of a bicycle, it is worthless until you actually get on the bike and start peddling. If the giver of the gift saw the bicycle leaning against the wall in your garage covered in dust, he would be offended. The giver wanted the recipient to enjoy cycling, but this intention was never realized. The same is true of salvation. The gift of salvation has been given to us so that we can be conformed to the image of His Son (Rom 8:29). This is a profound honor. We are called not only to believe in Christ, but also to become like Christ. We participate in the life of Christ. It is for this reason that we are called Christians. This means that our life is characterized by acts pertaining to faith, hope, and charity (1 Cor 13:13). When we willingly break the bond our bond of charity with Christ, we fall from grace.

We learn from Saint John that some sins are “mortal sins” and some sins are not mortal in this way:

If any one sees his brother committing what is not a mortal sin, he will ask, and God will give him life for those whose sin is not mortal. There is sin which is mortal; I do not say that one is to pray for that. All wrongdoing is sin, but there is sin which is not mortal (1 Jn 5:16-17).

Following John’s classification of these two kinds of sins, the Catholic Church teaches the following about mortal sin:

Mortal sin destroys charity in the heart of man by a grave violation of God’s law; it turns man away from God, who is his ultimate end and his beatitude, by preferring an inferior good to him. Venial sin allows charity to subsist, even though it offends and wounds it” (CCC § 1855).

Mortal sins are called “mortal” because as Saint John explained, they bring death to the soul. The other class is called “venial sin” from the Latin word *venia*, meaning “forgiveness” or “pardon”. Evangelicals understand the difference between mortal and venial sins whether they acknowledge it or not. If you were playing golf with your pastor and he let out a curse word when he hit his golf ball into the forest, you would be disappointed, but not broken-hearted. However, if your pastor were engaged in an adulterous affair with the church’s secretary, you would have cause for alarm. The same is true in marriage. There are certain sins that inhibit the growth of love between a husband and wife, but they do not rupture the loving relationship, as would adultery or physical abuse.

According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, three conditions must be met in order for a sin to be mortal: “Mortal sin is sin whose object is grave matter and which is also committed with full knowledge and deliberate consent” (CCC §1857). Would Paul agree with this? As a matter of fact, the Catholic Church looks to Paul as the foremost delineator of mortal sins. The Catechism cites no less than seven passages from the letters of Paul as examples of mortal sins (CCC §1852), but in particular it cites the Apostle’s Epistle to the Galatians:

Now the works of the flesh are plain: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, selfishness, dissension, party spirit, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and the like. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God (Gal 5:18-21).

Saint Paul lists a set of sins and concludes with, “I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God” (Gal 5:21). Who is Paul warning? He is warning Christians. If they do these things, then they will fall from grace. In other words, they “shall not inherit the kingdom of God”. Paul shows that there are certain sins that are mortal. These sins disqualify a Christian from inheriting the kingdom of God. The Apostle could not explain it any more clearly. In fact, these “mortal sin lists” are a common feature of Paul’s epistles. For more examples of Paul’s lists of mortal sins, see also Rom 1:28-32; 1 Cor 6:9-10; Eph 5:3-5; Col 3:5-8; 1 Tim 1:9-10; 2 Tim 3:2-5.

We find further confirmation of “falling from grace” when we turn to the Epistle to the Hebrews. While the Epistle to the Hebrews does not bear the name of Paul, Catholic tradition has held to be “Pauline” in origin. Some have speculated that its core was by Paul and that it was later composed and polished by Saint Luke on behalf of Paul. Others believe that it lacks the signature of Paul because it is addressed to the Hebrews. This makes sense when we remember that Paul was the Apostle to the Gentiles. Whichever the reason, the epistle certainly incorporates the theology of Paul and resembles Galatians in many ways.

In The Epistle to the Hebrews, we find three passages that echo the exhortations found in the other epistles of Paul about falling from grace. In Hebrews 4:1 we read, "The promise of entering his rest still stands, let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it." Here, the assumption is that a Christian may "fall short" of entering into Heaven. Hebrews 6:4-6 is a difficult passage for Evangelicals and is often admitted to be the one passage that refutes the Evangelical doctrine of "once saved always saved".

For it is impossible to restore again to repentance those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, if they then commit apostasy, since they crucify the Son of God on their own account and hold him up to contempt (Heb 6:4-6).

Here we have persons who have been "enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit," and yet they are able to "commit apostasy" and reject the Son of God. Two verses later, he compares such apostates to thistles worthy only of being burned (Heb 6:8).

The Epistle to the Hebrews later takes up the problem of apostate Christians in its tenth chapter. It is worth quoting in full. The emphases are mine:

For if we sin deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful prospect of judgment, and a fury of fire which will consume the adversaries. A man who has violated the law of Moses dies without mercy at the testimony of two or three witnesses. How much worse punishment do you think will be deserved by the man who has spurned the Son of God, and profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and outraged the Spirit of grace? For we know him who said, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay." And again, "The Lord will judge his people." It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God (Heb 10:26-31).

This passage confirms Paul's doctrine of apostasy and the warning set forth in the sixth chapter of Hebrews. A man will fall into "a fury of fire" (Heb 10:27) who has "spurned the Son of God, and profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and outraged the Spirit of grace" (Heb 10:29). Notice how the person in question has already been "sanctified" by the "blood of the covenant". This person has received the gift of redemption of the New Covenant through the precious blood of Christ. And yet such a man will forfeit all those benefits and fall into the fires of Hell. Clearly, the Epistle to the Hebrews and the epistles of Paul in general teach that the Christian can "fall from grace". This fall occurs through apostasy or through committing mortal sin and this accords perfectly with the Catholic doctrine of salvation as it regards the possibility of falling from grace.

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The previous article is from Taylor Marshall's book *The Catholic Perspective on Paul: Paul and the Origins of Catholic Christianity*. Taylor was an Episcopal priest in Fort Worth, Texas before being received into the Catholic Church by Bishop Kevin Vann of Fort Worth. Taylor was also formerly the Assistant Director of the Catholic Information Center in Washington, D.C., located three blocks north of the White House, where he lectured regularly. He was served under Archbishop John J. Myers and Msgr. William Stetson for the Pastoral Provision of John Paul II, the canonical structure by which Anglican clergy are received into the Catholic Church and then go on to pursue Holy Orders in the Catholic Church. He is a graduate of Westminster Theological Seminary (M.A.R. Theology), Nashotah Theological House (Certificate in Anglican Studies), and University of Dallas (M.A. Philosophy). He is currently a Ph.D. student in Philosophy at the University of Dallas where he studies the Natural Law theory of Saint Thomas Aquinas (*Summa Theologiae* Ia IIae qq. 94-108). Taylor and his wife live in Dallas, Texas with their five children. He is the author of *The Catholic Perspective on Paul* (forthcoming). You can visit Taylors website at: <http://taylormarshall.com>

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