

**Introduction:**

- A. Illus.: One of my favorite places to visit in Washington, D.C. is the National Cathedral. It is magnificent. You've seen it used for presidents' funerals, and great national services. I love the architecture, the massive rose window and the vast space. But on Aug. 23 the earthquake that hit Washington did serious damage to the National Cathedral. In fact, it has been closed since then while damage has been assessed and repairs begun. It's a shame: such a beautiful church going to waste. Although I must say, that since the congregation there prides themselves on being a *"ministry for people of all faiths and perspectives,"* and since salvation through Christ alone is not their message, I'm not sure just how beautiful it is to Christ our King.
- B. Churches—the people, I mean—have a kind of spiritual architecture. There are building materials that don't meet the eye; strengths and crucial weaknesses you can't see. It isn't always obvious either how well a church will stand up to, say, an earthquake, or for that matter, a fire.
- C. Turn to **1 Cor 3**. Paul wrote to a church here who had some pretty damaging ideas about just what made a congregation strong. They really knew next to nothing about how churches are built to last. How about you? What do you know about building a church? **You may not know a nave from a narthex, but if you're a Christian you had better know how a church is built because you are one of the builders. Vv.9-10...**

**I. EACH AND EVERY CHRISTIAN IS BUILDING GOD'S TEMPLE**

- A. We left off last week in v.9 where the point is that each church belongs exclusively to God, never to God's servants. Illus.: A friend told me about a woman in his congregation who was upset with the change she was seeing, especially from the newer people. He said she all

but stomped her foot when she exclaimed, “*This is my church!*” Be careful! This church is *God’s field*. “*You are **God’s building,***” and no one else’s. Then look down to **v.16**, “*Don’t you know that you yourselves are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit lives in you.*” We are God’s temple. What makes us a temple and not a shrine is that God is actually here among us when we gather. God is here now. Not hovering over us in the air, but abiding within our hearts by his Spirit.

- B. But each of us is also **building** this temple of God. Paul was particularly speaking to those in the Corinthian church who thought of themselves as the movers and shakers. But the language in this paragraph points to every believer in the congregation. The words *each one, any one, everyone* appear several times, even more obviously in Greek than English. We are all in this together.
- C. In Corinth, the church said nothing about a man who came who everyone knew was guilty of incest. They were suing each other. They winked at immorality but wouldn’t eat with their poor brothers and sisters. They fought over whose spiritual gift was most important, their worship was chaotic sometimes, and they weren’t all agreed that Jesus rose from the dead. And from all that straw they were building a church.

Each of us here have a hand in how we all follow Christ, in what we tolerate and what we don’t, in how we love each other, or pray. When ten people pray and forty don’t, all fifty are building, just not with the same materials. What we each do personally affects us all. Strong Christians are the bricks of strong churches. Selfish, disobedient, proud or grasping Christians make for weak, rickety congregations. **If you are a Christian, you are building God’s temple**

Since each and every Christian is building God’s temple...

## II. EACH ONE OF US HAD BETTER BUILD TO LAST! (3:10b-13)

- A. **V.10b-11...** The National Cathedral says they are built to be a “*ministry for people of all faiths and perspectives.*” Well that isn’t the same as the foundation Paul laid. The only foundation which will bear the weight and glory of the church is Jesus Christ. Think of the great, tightly fit, blocks of the gospel: Jesus is the Son of God, and God’s anointed King, the atoning sacrifice for all who trust in him, raised from the dead to give the dead life. He reigns in glory and will come again to take his church to be with him forever, and to judge the living and the dead. And all this is according to the Scriptures. Each stone straight, strong and true, ready to bear the weight and beauty of the living temple of God.
- B. **V.12...** People build this living temple with some spiritual materials that last, and with some that don’t. We are each responsible for building to last. But what does he mean? **How do we build to last?** I read through what Paul has said about his own building efforts just here in this letter so far. Here is how we build to last:
1. When you’re weak (and we’re always weak) rely on the Lord. Pray, do what he says, and trust his promises.
  2. Let the Holy Spirit teach you through Scripture, fellow believers, and prayer.
  3. Work humbly with other believers. Love one another in everything.
- C. **V.13...** The quality of each believer’s work will be vivid on the Day Christ returns. The quality of a church is not always easy to see now. Weeds grow among the wheat. Wolves are disguised as sheep. Put a coat of gold paint on a straw brick and it’s easy to mistake for the real thing. A church with friendly people and a great band, or with a list of community services, or a preacher who can stir an audience—all that can have the varnish and veneer of the sacred but it might all be flammable. When Christ comes

and makes everything new, there will be no doubt about what is enduring and what isn't. When Paul speaks here of "the Day," he means the Day of the Lord, when Christ returns and the shows all things for what they really are.

**Malachi 3:2** looked forward to Christ's second coming: "*Who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner's fire or a launderer's soap.*" The thin coat of whitewash will be scrubbed off, and the straw walls will go up in flames.

Listen! You and I are each building this church. No one is exempt but those who are not Christians. We are building either with that which can endure the day of Christ's coming, or with spiritual combustibles which cannot. No one gets a pass on this. No Christian is exempt. What are you building in your own life and the life of this church? Will it last when Jesus returns?

#### **Vv.14...**

#### **III. GOD WILL REWARD BELIEVERS WHO BUILD TO LAST (3:14-15)**

Now wait a minute. Isn't our salvation a free gift, "*not of works so no one can boast*"? So what's the deal here then, with talk of rewards? Are we saved by grace alone or not? Is a salvation a free gift or do we have to answer for our spiritual output?

- A. Our salvation is entirely a free gift of God to us through Christ. He offers salvation to us and when we believe that he means it, and ask for this gift, we are saved. We can't add a thing to it, nor take anything from it. God does all the work; we do nothing. Every believer in Christ has a home prepared in heaven. No one will live in a slum or shanty; everyone is with Christ. No one is regarded as guilty or poor. No one is shame-faced or heavy-hearted. No Christian needs fear the passage home, nor the angry judgment of God. "Jesus paid it all."

So what's this about then? Look again at **vv.13-14**:  
*"Each one's **work** will be shown for what it is... the fire will test the quality of each one's **work**."* We are saved by Christ's work for us, but we are rewarded for the work we do for Christ. Randy Alcorn, in his little book, *In Light of Eternity*, put this so clearly. *"Belief determines our eternal destination... where we'll be. Behavior determines our eternal rewards... what we'll have. Works do **not** affect our redemption. Works **do** affect our reward."* [p.117]

Maybe you're inclined to think about this the way a lot of high school students would think about graduating with honors, or earning a letter in sports, or sitting first chair in the orchestra. *"All I want to do is graduate. I don't care about anything else."* *"If I just get to heaven, that's good enough for me. Others can have rewards if they want."* But that is not how we will feel in heaven. When we see Jesus personally, when we realize, as we never can here, all he has done for us, all he sacrificed for us, how dearly and passionately he loves us and that nothing in all our lives counted for anything but what we did to love and serve him—well, we will be grateful for any treasure we can give our Beloved, anything that we might have done to make us, his Bride and temple, more beautiful for him.

**V.15...** Those who lose everything but their souls will surely celebrate the grace of Christ that saved them, but they will have nothing to give him, nothing they can point to in all that shining city of God that they built.

B. Our best motivation for building to last is not the threat of escaping only with our lives, but the promise of immeasurable rewards. There are three rewards:

1. Not only will the *"wood, hay and straw"* of faithless spiritual workmanship be destroyed, but the *"gold, silver and precious stones"* of faithful building will be purified. Illus.: I read that 24k gold has no impurities. It is pure gold. Let's say that at my best I've never built

anything for the Lord in my own heart or anyone else's that was better than, say, 18k gold. **But when Christ returns everything we have built that endures will be made more precious and more beautiful.** What's more, **Christ will credit us with 24k work.**

2. **A second reward is that when we build something beautiful for God we build something that will last forever and ever.** When I was young, I would tell God that I wanted to do something that would matter in 100 years. I set my sights far too low! Jesus gives us the opportunity to do something that will be beautiful through the rest of eternity. Think of it! Something—*someone*—you can look at, and that Jesus will look at always, and know *you* had a hand in building that beautiful work of grace. **Rev. 21:1-3...** You and I have a hand in building that beautiful city, in dressing that stunning Bride.
3. One more thing. Think about this: when we reach our heavenly home we will lack nothing. Not only will our needs be met, but we will live among delights beyond our imagination. **So what reward can you give people who have already been given everything?**

Illus.: About 20 years ago I was going through a time where I really doubted my ability to lead a church. I kept hearing about the importance of vision and I didn't think I had vision, and I feared others thought the same. In the wise providence of God I spent an evening with a remarkable man named Joseph. It is too long a story for now, but he interpreted a dream for me (something I've never had happen before or since), and then he counseled me from Scripture. I was feeling so inadequate. He took me to **1 Cor 4:2** and had me start reading: **vv.2-5a...**

There was a page turn right at that point and he said, "*What do you think comes next?*"

You heard the tone of that passage. I said, “I suppose it says, ‘God will judge you.’”

“OK,” he said, “turn the page and read the rest.”

So I did, and I read this wonderful last line: “At that time each will receive their praise from God.” Think of that! **Each** of us receiving praise from God. He doesn’t give group shout-outs. God won’t wave at all of us standing there with our palm branches and crowns and say, “Nice job everyone! I hope you enjoy the place.” The Bible says, “**Each of us will receive our praise from God.**” **It is right and good that we should praise God, but that he should praise us?!** And what for? What could God possibly praise *us* for? That we built into our own lives and others for the glory of Christ, that we *trusted* him when it was hard to see ahead, that we were hungry and thirsty for righteousness when sin seemed tastier, that we loved and served God’s people, and helped those who had no one else to look out for them.

## Conclusion

We are each and all building God’s temple here, so we had better build to last. Our work will be tested, and the really wonderful thing is, that our faithful work for Jesus—to build our own hearts and the hearts of others to be a temple for God—will be rewarded forever by treasures that never lose their value, and by the personal praise of God himself! **Just think of living forever with the gratitude of God!**