

What you build with matters. Just ask the three little pigs. Most, if not all of gathered here, know the story. The first little pig builds his house with straw. It is a fine house—until the big, bad wolf arrives. He blows the house down with ease. The second little pig puts a little more effort into his house. He builds with sticks. This house too is easy pickings for the wolf, and cannot stand before his huffing and puffing. The third little pig wisely builds his house with bricks. Here is a house that withstands the big wolf. Here is a house that stands when put to the test. Through hard and cruel experience, the three little pigs learn that what you build with matters.

Paul's inspired words from I Corinthians say something very similar to this old fairy tale. Be careful how you build, Paul tells us, for a time of testing is coming. Of course, Paul is not telling a fairy tale. He is not worried about a big, bad wolf knocking at your door and threatening you. Paul has real issues and real concerns in mind; Paul points us ahead to a real day of testing that is coming—the day of the Lord's return. With that day in mind, Paul tells us, be careful how you build: be sure that your endeavors, efforts, and energy here are directed into things that will stand on the Last Day. Paul uses this picture to talk about building the church: how churches go about their ministry and life, but also how each member of the church is to go about their life and work. Let us turn to His words to see how God would have us build our lives.

Every building begins with a foundation: a steady and firm base that will not move, come what may. A weak foundation leads to disaster, no matter how strong the building that rests on top of it. So also with the church. It too needs a sure foundation: a steady and firm base that will not move. In Corinth, Paul writes that He laid that foundation: Jesus Christ. Paul came to Corinth, the first Christian missionary to found a church there. As he began to build the church, he began with this foundation: he laid Jesus Christ before them. Here is a solid rock. Here is an

unmoving place. For Christ does not change or shift. He is always the same. He always love His children, always works for their good, always grants forgiveness to those He calls to faith. He gives life to his own—that is a base on which the church is built.

Look around and consider: what else is as solid as this? What else stands, without moving, ever? Nothing. No other person stays the same: everyone else changes. Attitudes and actions change over time—think of how you lived five, ten, fifteen years ago. Bodies age and deteriorate; weakness and disease rob our bodies and minds of their power. No person provides as solid a foundation as Christ does. Nor do groups of people—nations rise and fall; societies and whole cultures arise, develop, deteriorate, and pass away. Ancient ruins in Rome, in Egypt, in Mexico stand as witnesses to this change over time. The people who built them are gone; even the buildings are being worn away in the passing of time.

Amidst the change and decay that all around we see, Christ stands firm and unshaken. Here is a solid rock on which we stand. Here is our Savior, who gives us life, who sustains our life, who preserves the salvation He won for us on the cross. He does not move; His Word stays the same and keeps its power and authority. That Word brings us forgiveness and life—and this is the foundation on which the church is built.

As Paul writes, the foundation matters, but what is built on the foundation also matters. How do we build on this foundation? What do we do as the church, once we have come to know Jesus? Build carefully, Paul encourages. Some build on Christ with wood and hay and straw. These are cheap building materials. They are quick fixes, easily stacked into buildings. Others build on Christ with gold or silver or stone. These are costly materials. They go on slowly at great expense.

Which are we to build with? Paul tells us that it is not a race—the building that goes up quickest is not necessarily the best. Rather, the building that will stand the coming test is the best.

For all these buildings will be tested on the Last Day by fire. It's obvious which ones will pass the test. The wood, hay, and straw will be consumed instantly. The gold, the silver, the stone will stand and endure, even when tested by fire.

What are these buildings, and the building materials that Paul describes? First and foremost, they are the teachings and practices in the church. Some are solid and enduring—gold, silver, and stone. These are teachings that are true, and practices that flow from them. These are beliefs, customs, and services that point us to the foundation, Christ. They lead us to repentance and faith in Him. They spur us on to a life of Christian love. These are the things that endure, that stand even on the Last Day. On that Day what is needed is righteousness and holiness to enter God's rest. That righteousness is found in Christ alone and given to us through faith. That righteousness comes as we turn away from sin, and through faith receive forgiveness and cleansing from our sin. A church built in this way is prepared for the Last Day; a church based on Jesus and His forgiveness; a church that builds up its members in faith, hope, and love.

The cheaper building materials are beliefs and practices in the church that are poor. Building a church with wood, hay, or straw, is putting a flimsy structure on Christ, the foundation. It is building a church with those things that do not point back to Christ and His life, but point instead to our own efforts. They are teachings that soften the hard truths of Scripture (and some of them are hard!) in order to build a quick and impressive structure. After all, sticks and hay and straw go up incredibly quickly. In December our youth used bales of hay to build a stable in the courtyard for their live nativity. It worked perfectly: within a couple hours the hay was brought in and they had a nice wall built. It was, of course, temporary. It was not built to last; it didn't need to be.

The church, however, is a different type of building. It needs to stand. If it does not stand on the Last Day, it is fooling and deceiving its members. Those who build this way, Paul warns,

will be saved only narrowly—only as one running through the flames to safety. Churches built this way will be incinerated on that day. Churches built this way are those which deny parts of God's Word. For instance, they ignore what our Lord says about marriage, adultery, or homosexuality. They argue that life can be ended if that life is inconvenient for the mother—so abortion becomes a woman's choice rather than snuffing out a God-given life. Church attendance may be a bother, so they make that completely optional. Or, churches built with hay and straw preach something other than the Gospel of forgiveness of sins found in Jesus' blood. After all, that has little appeal to many people. What does appeal to them is promises of help with careers, with raising children, with amassing fame and fortune. These goals take the place of genuine faith in Christ as our Savior; instead of being our Savior, Christ becomes our therapist, or life coach.

Such churches are built, often with astonishing speed. They quickly spring up into enormous sizes and popularity. But it is building with hay and straw—they are not built to last. Many pass away as quickly as they spring up; none of them are prepared for the testing to come on the last day. They enable their members to be comfortable here in their sin; they promise success in business, in marriage, in larger homes and faster cars. But is that preparing their members for the end of all things, when Christ returns in glory to judge the world? Imagine a church that accepts people as members when they have made three financial contributions to the church. Of course, it's easy for them to gain members. No classes required; no memory work for the young. But are those members prepared to face their Maker, their Redeemer, the one who will judge them on the Last Day? How could they be? They may know NOTHING about Jesus' work of redemption; nothing about what he says is sinful and continue on in unchecked sin. Sadly, it is a building made of straw.

Build wisely, Paul tells us: seek out those churches that are building with gold, or silver, or

precious stones—the costly materials that will stand the test of fire on the Last Day. The truths of God's Word, those truths that call us to turn away from our sins in repentance and seek Jesus' life-giving forgiveness—these truths build us up to face all things, even the Judgment on the Last Day.

This is how we are to build our lives as well. We are to live, mindful that one day this world will pass away and our Lord will return to judge us. What will stand on that day is Christ, His righteousness, and His people. What will pass away are all the things of this world. The careers we pursue; the houses we build; the fortunes we gain; the fame we enjoy—these will all come to an end. The wisdom that seeks after these things first is, in the end, foolishness. It gains nothing. It is trying to hold on to things that cannot be held. If our life is devoted only to these things, we are building with hay and straw. They will be wiped out on the Last Day.

Build instead with precious materials: that is, place the Lord first in your life: make His Word the highest priority, and the faith given through that Word. Build with precious materials by ordering your life according to the Lord's Word and commands. The good works of the saints, the Lord tells us, follow them into eternity. While worldly fame and fortune are burned up, the works of love we do for others stand and endure. The mercy shown to the needy; the comfort given to the hurting—such selfless acts of love stand long after this world's achievements are destroyed.

Live then as God's child. Hear His Word faithfully and take it to heart. Place Him first in your life; be concerned primarily with keeping His Word and walking in His ways. This is building wisely; this is true and proper preparation for the testing that will come on the Last Day. Built up and prepared in this manner, you can look forward to Christ's return as the day of your redemption. May God lead you to such wise building, that you may stand before Him on the day of His return.