

Fire loves straw—1 Corinthians 3:13

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The context is king of interpretation, so I begin with verses 11-15:

11 No one can lay any foundation other than what is laid, which is Jesus Christ.¹ 12 Now if anyone builds on this foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, 13 the work of each will become evident; because the Day will make it clear, because it will be revealed by fire. Yes, the fire will test each one's work, of what sort it is. 14 If the work that anyone built endures, he will receive a reward. 15 If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, albeit so as through fire.

Paul is talking about the Day of Christ wherein those in Christ will be called to account. The Text plainly states that what we have done will be tested by fire. Someone who spent most of his time living for himself rather than for Christ's Kingdom will be surrounded by nice, dry straw (all that any fire could ask for!). So the angel aims the blowtorch at the straw—the fire is high, hot, but short-lived. The person is left standing in a pile of fine ash, somewhat the worse for the wear.

The price you pay for not living for Christ's kingdom is to lose your life. That is all it costs, just your life! Consider the words of Sovereign Jesus recorded in Luke 9:24-25. Let us begin with verse 23. "If anyone desires to come after me let him deny himself, take up his cross each day and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake, he will save it. For what will it profit a man to gain the whole world but waste or forfeit himself?" What does the Lord mean when He speaks of losing one's "life"? One does not lose one's soul for love of Christ. Nor is the reference to being killed. Rather, Jesus has in mind the life we live, the accumulated results of our living. All that I have done up to this moment plus all that I will yet do until overtaken by death or the rapture of the Church, whichever happens first—that is the "life" that is at risk (in my own case).

Let us look at our Lord's words a little more closely. There seems to be a contradiction here—if you lose, you save; if you want to save, you lose. How can it work? The following context helps us out. In verse 26 Jesus explains verses 24-25 in terms of His second coming. The parallel passage, Matthew 16:27, is clearer. "For the Son of Man is going to come in the glory of his Father, with his angels, and then he will repay each according to his deeds." Christ was thinking of the day of reckoning. In other words, "we will all stand before the judgment seat of Christ" (Romans 14:10) and "each of us will give account of himself to God" (Romans 14:12). "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive his due according to what he has done while in the body, whether good or bad" (2 Corinthians 5:10). I understand that 1 Corinthians 3:11-15 is referring to the same occasion, the day of reckoning. After declaring that Jesus Christ is the only foundation, Paul speaks of different materials that one might use in building on it: "gold,

¹ I would say that the primary reference here is to leaders of local congregations, who need to be careful how they 'build' God's 'house'. But I believe it also clearly applies to anyone whose personal life is based on Jesus Christ. Each of us will give an account of how we built our lives on that foundation. Note that we are not offered the option of changing the foundation. Anyone who attempts to do so does not belong to God.

silver, precious stones" or "wood, hay, straw". The point is, our deeds will be tested by fire. If fire has any effect upon gold or silver it is only to purify them, but its effect on hay and straw is devastating! Okay, so what?

Let us go back to the beginning. God created the human being for His glory; to reflect it and contribute to it. I suppose we may understand Psalm 19:1 and Isaiah 43:7 in this way, at least by extension. But Adam lost this capacity when he rebelled against God. For this reason the sentence that weighs against our race is that we "fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). But the Son came into the world to restore our lost potential. Ephesians 1:12 and 14 tell us that the object of the plan of salvation is "the praise of His glory" (see also 2 Corinthians 1:20). And 1 Corinthians 10:31 puts it into a **command**: "Whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God." Now then, the point of all this is not to 'ruin' our lives, to take all the 'fun' out of them (as many seem to think). God is not being arrogant, unreasonable, too demanding. Quite the contrary—He is just trying to save us from throwing away our lives. Surely, because the glory of God is eternal (Psalm 104:31), and when I do something for His glory that something is transformed and acquires eternal value—it becomes "gold, silver, precious stones". Works done for the glory of God will go through the fire without harm. On the other hand, what is done with a view to our own ambitions and ideas is "straw". We all know what fire does to straw!

So there it is. To be a slave of Christ means to live with reference to the Kingdom; it means to do everything for the glory of God. In this way the slave "saves" his life because he will be building it with "gold and silver", which will pass through the fire at the judgment seat of Christ without loss. In contrast, the believer who refuses to be a slave of Jesus builds his life with "hay and straw", which will be consumed by the fire—and so he "loses" his life; he lived in vain; the potential that his life represented was wasted, thrown away. What a tragedy!