

Expect the Unexpected

"Everyone who hears these words of Mine and acts upon them is like a wise man who built his house on rock." Matthew 7:24–25 *(Continued from last week.)*

Infirmities and trials come to us unexpectedly. By surprising us, they jar our equilibrium and normal routine. The effects of my slip-and-fall on that beautiful Wednesday morning after Matins hit me like a bolt of lightning; subsequent surgery and a braced leg delivered a shocking jolt that reshaped my normal routine in ways that I could never have expected. Simple, mindless activities like ascending and descending steps, putting on socks and shoes, navigating paths on an incline, and getting up from chairs and soft sofas needed to be relearned. Muscles never used for these purposes had to be employed. Everything took twice as long to accomplish.

Yet, my "trial" is miniscule compared to the trials that many people experience. Daily, people receive news from their physician that they have cancer; that a loved one has been killed in an automobile accident; or that a father or mother has suffered a major heart attack or stroke.

I remember vividly the head-on collision that killed a twenty-four-year old in my former parish. He left behind a mother and father, and a young wife and newborn child. I will never forget accompanying his parents down a long, narrow, and stark hallway to the hospital's morgue to identify his body. The entire scene seemed unreal, and we all were in a daze. Events like this happen daily to people, bringing utter confusion to their lives, and shattering the stability of their routines and rhythms. Their "house"—that is, their sense of security and the constancy of their emotions and rationality—begins to crumble, for even the seemingly steady and stable lives of believers can (and often do) "fall apart."

The question arises: How can we stand firm when trials and tribulations come? And, the answer appears in Jesus' teaching: Hearing and acting upon His words provides the stability necessary to withstand the storms of life. The Gospel teachings provide us with solid ground, and the power of God surges through His commandments.

Let me cite just one example of building our houses upon the rock of Jesus' commandments (Matthew 7). I draw this from a monastic source, although it's easily applicable for seminarians and priests. In his book *The Arena*, the saintly bishop Ignatius Brianchaninov disparages monastics that focus on asceticism or solitude at the expense of living the words of the Gospel. He states:

Easily ruined is the seemingly good life of those who make their foundation an exclusively bodily struggle, or even a series of ascetic exercises, sometimes very difficult and remarkable, but who do not pay attention to the commandments of the Gospel....When such ascetics encounter unexpected trials and temptations or an unforeseen change in their life, not only is their faith soon shaken but they even run the risk of that complete moral collapse, which is called in the Gospel the "great ruin" of the house of the soul.

St. Ignatius concludes: "True monasticism and true Christianity consists in the practice of the commandments of the Gospel. Where this practice is absent, there is neither Christianity nor monasticism, whatever the outward appearance may be."

Few of us have a monastic calling, but all of us have been called to follow Christ. To follow Him and to love Him means to keep his commandments. "If you love Me, keep My commandments" (John 14:15).

Life teaches us to expect the unexpected. Even Jesus tells us that the Kingdom of God will come upon us when we least expect it. He encourages us to be ready.

We know that before the coming of that Day, life will bring surprising storms; providential storms that can either help us build or destroy our "houses of clay" (2 Cor 4:7). According to Jesus, and as attested by His saints, our souls will stand firm by daily and consistently embracing His commandments, helping us to weather whatever storm crosses our path. Therefore, let us read His Word daily and encourage each other in keeping His commandments, thus providing us with the *primary* basis for our spiritual strength.

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