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Beverly E.C.C., Chicago, IL

“CONTROL & HELPLESSNESS”
First Thessalonians 5:16-18

**“I am the master of my fate:
I am the captain of my soul.”**

It's an enticing thought, isn't it?! This idea that I control my destiny, that I rule my life, that I dictate where I go, what I do, maybe even what happens to me.

Well, consider that William Henley wrote his poem “Invictus” from a hospital bed. His leg had just been amputated, due to complications arising from tuberculosis.

The context makes Henley's lines sound even more impressive – yet it also calls into question their validity. He did not decide to catch TB. He didn't choose to lose a limb.

‣ Are we in control? Do we determine what happens to us?

There are several risk factors for bladder cancer. How do they apply to me?

1) Gender: more men than women have bladder cancer. Check.

2) Race: bladder cancer is far more common among Caucasians than any other racial group. Check.

3) Age: the average age at diagnosis is 73 and 90% of patients are over the age of 55. I just turned 50 in June.

4) Genetics: your chances rise if a close relative has already had it. Insofar as I know, none of mine have.

5) Medical History: people with certain rare disorders and chronic bladder infection are prone to it. That's not me.

6) Occupation: this is a big one: painters, fire-fighters, and hairdressers have much a higher incidence than other workers. I've never been one.

7) Lifestyle: cigarette smoking is the biggest single factor. I have never used tobacco and I have always avoided second-hand smoke.

I'm positive for only two of the seven, and I'm negative for the top risk factors -- but I have bladder cancer.

‣ Are we really in control? Do we determine what happens to us?

{Lk 12:16-21, The Message}

“The farm of a ... rich man produced a terrific crop. He [said] to himself: ‘What can I do? My barn isn't big enough....’ Then he said, ‘Here's what I'll do: I'll tear down my barns and build bigger ones. Then I'll gather in all my grain and goods, and I'll say to myself, ‘Self, you've done well! You've got it made and can now retire. Take it easy and have the time of your life!’”

“Just then God showed up and said, ‘You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you.’ [Tonight you will die.] ‘And your barnful of goods – who gets it?’”

This parable is primarily a warning not to be greedy. But there is a second theme here, about the folly of living as though we can guarantee our own future.

{Mt 5:34-36} Messiah insists “do not swear an oath ... by heaven, for it is God’s throne” (not yours!); nor “by the earth, for it is his” (not ours!); nor “by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black.”

{Mt 6:25, 27} He asks, “Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life?” Of course, the answer is no.

James {4:13-14} says “listen, you who say, ‘Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money.’ Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow....”

? Are we really in control? Do we actually determine what happens to us?

It often seems to work out that way. You and I have freely made decisions about relationships, education, and work, and our lives are different as a result.

? But how much credit can we take for our successes, and how much blame for our failures?

I am a White male born in the U.S., in a town with decent schools. My parents were married, as they are to this day. Money was tight, yet we were not dirt poor.

But what if I had been born with a severe mental disability?

What if Dad wasn’t in the picture, and Mom was forced to support me and my three sisters by cleaning houses? (She had that job, for a number of years.)

What if I was a slave in the Deep South in 1800, or a so-called “Untouchable” in India in 1900, or a girl in most times and places?

★ “I am the master of my fate: I am the captain of my soul.” This is the illusion of primary control.

☑ In contrast, Aldous Huxley said, “My fate cannot be mastered ... Nor am I the captain of my soul; I am only its noisiest passenger.”

Lately it’s been easy to think of myself as a “passenger,” and not only because of my suffering.

My kidney stones were what prompted my doctor to order the CT scan that detected the tumors. They were an unexpected gift!

So was the timing of events. I was initially frustrated by the delay between my cancer diagnosis and the first surgery, but it allowed me to officiate Tom Gray’s wedding, and that was a godsend.

Likewise, the timing of that surgery determined the scheduling of the second. It permitted us to attend my nephew’s wedding, and to be with my Minnesota family when my Dad’s condition was touch-and-go.

Best of all, Beth has been incredible! Our daughters have given me such joy! You embody Jesus to us with your encouraging words and kind deeds! Sometimes, my heart all but bursts with gratitude and gladness.

But these manifest blessings have something in common with the hardships: I did not bring them about. They have happened *to* me, not *because* of me.

? Do my choices make a practical difference? Does what I do change anything?

★ **“My fate cannot be mastered ... Nor am I the captain of my soul.”** This is the illusion of basic helplessness.

The author of our text was a Type A go-getter, a man who got things done. As Saul, he decided to destroy the Church and drove it to the brink of extinction. As Paul, he resolved to preach the Gospel of Jesus and became the world’s most effective evangelist and church planter. He was tempted to claim primary control.

Paul ached to evangelize his people, with minimal success. Many of his congregations nearly imploded. Non-Christian enemies drove him out of their cities, beat him, and imprisoned him. Competitors within the Church spread rumors and lies and undermined him at every turn. He was tempted to resign himself to basic helplessness.

□ Please turn with me to First Thessalonians 5:16-18: **16 “Rejoice always, 17 pray continually, 18 give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.”**

Three general observations.

☆ A) We are to do this because it **“is God’s will for”** us. **“Rejoice ... pray,”** and **“give thanks,”** for it is what the LORD desires. Paul undermines the illusion of control by exalting God’s sovereign will.

☆ B) The apostle writes the main verbs in imperative form. He counteracts the illusion of helplessness by giving direct commands, which only make sense if we are capable of doing them.

☆ C) These directives are unconditional. There are no *ifs* or *unlesses* attached to **“Rejoice ... pray,”** and **“give**

thanks.” Our situation is not irrelevant, it shapes our interaction with God; but it does not determine *if* we rejoice, pray, give thanks.

Now, a comment about each action.

✈ First, **“Rejoice always.”**

Joyful feelings are wonderful! We should savor them. But this is not about whipping up a happy mood. It is a call to sing and speak words of delight in celebration of God. I have a couple of suggestions that can rejoicing doable even when it feels impossible.

‡ Idea one) worship, alone and together. Sing the songs, or at least listen. Follow along with the Scriptures. Pray the Lord’s Prayer. God is worthy of the effort!

‡ Idea two) rejoice for others. It isn’t too hard to say ‘Lord, hear our praise’ when someone is healed, and I am not. We can say, ‘God is good!’ when a brother or sister is blessed, but we don’t feel we are.

✈ Second, **“Pray unceasingly.”**

Sometimes we can’t put together an eloquent prayer. Sometimes all we can say is “Wow!” or “Thanks!” or “Help!”

That’s OK! Allow me to share a text conversation Beth and I had with a loved one (LO).

LO.: **“... I’ve been praying a lot this week just to get through the day. Always, but right now especially, I really need Jesus.”**

Me: “Same for me! I have been extra aware of my need. Couldn’t pray long, complex prayers. But I could say, ‘God, help me’ or ‘I need you.’”

LO.: “.... I like how you call them arrow prayers. I do that a lot ... it’s just sort of one long prayer that doesn’t end.”

Me: “It becomes volley after volley of petition and thanksgiving and lament and praise, disjointed but so real.”

Beth: “Sounds a lot like praying without ceasing!”

✍ Third, **“Give thanks in all circumstances.”**

Not *for* all circumstances; *in* all circumstances. I don’t thank God *because* of my cancer. I do thank the LORD *despite* my disease.

I thank him that I survived the last minute. That things aren’t worse than this.

I thank him for food, shelter, and clothing. For medical care and insurance.

I thank him for sunrises and sunsets. For trees and birds. For the beauty all around me.

I thank him for human love. For your friendship. For my wife and our daughters.

I thank him for his Word. For his Son and his Spirit. For saving me by his amazing grace.

On the worst days, it might be all I can do to croak out a “Thanks!” once or twice. But it’s never been for a lack of good reasons.

Primary control is an illusion. We suffer hardship and grief despite our best efforts.

Basic helplessness is also an illusion. We are not utterly powerless.

☐ We often cannot control what happens to us. But with God’s help we can **“Rejoice always, pray continually, [and] give thanks in all circumstances; ... this is God’s will for [us] in Christ Jesus.”**