

Pastor Don Nelson

Sermon: November 19, 2017
Beverly E.C.C., Chicago, IL

“IF IT IS THE LORD’S WILL”

James 4:13-17

☑ **“I am the master of my fate: I am the captain of my soul.”** So said William Henley in his poem “Invictus.”

It’s an enticing thought, isn’t it?! This notion of control, this contention of mastery, this claim that I will inevitably arrive at the destination of my choice.

? But is it true?

We make decisions every day, and many of them are effective. I am wearing clothes that I picked out. I ate the breakfast I selected. I taught the Sunday school lesson that I planned. I am preaching a message that I prepared.

Maybe it is true. Perhaps you are the master of your fates, and I am the captain of my soul.

Then again, Henley wrote “Invictus” from a hospital bed. His leg had just been amputated, due to complications arising from tuberculosis.

? Henley was a man of impressive determination. But was he right?

Surely, catching TB was not in his five-year plan. Losing a limb could not have been on his bucket list. The disease radically changed his life without his consent.

☑ Let me get personal. There are seven risk factors for bladder cancer. The top two are occupation and lifestyle.

As for occupation, painters, fire-fighters, and hairdressers have a dramatically higher incidence than other groups. I have never had a job in any of those fields.

As for lifestyle, cigarette smoking is the biggest contributing factor. I have never used tobacco and I have always tried to avoid second-hand smoke.

I’m positive for two of the five lesser risk factors (gender and race). I am negative for the top two. Yet in August 2016 I was diagnosed with bladder cancer. And not just a “touch” of it; there were several tumors.

This is not only about health.

☑ Set clear career objectives, get the right degree from the right school, develop solid skills, network tirelessly, work hard, and you might achieve your goal. Or you might be passed over for promotions or even get pink slipped when the company restructures.

☑ Design a good financial plan, live within your means, balance your checkbook, pay off your credit cards every month, diversify your portfolio, and you might be set. Or your assets could be drained by a family disaster, or the economy could bottom out.

☑ Compile a checklist of non-negotiable qualities in a mate, find a seemingly ideal man or woman, tie the knot, put in time and effort, and you might get your happily ever after. Or your spouse could turn out to be (or turn into) an abuser or addict or compulsive philanderer.

? Are we the masters of our fate? Are we the captains?

☐ Please turn with me to James 4:13-17.

■ In verses 13-14, James writes, ¹³ **“Now 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.’¹⁴ **Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes.”**

Can you be so confident of success? Even if your plan is sound and well-resourced, can you guarantee that you will last the night to carry it out?

{Lk 12:16-20} I am reminded of Messiah’s Parable of the Rich Fool:

“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 story is primarily a warning against materialism and greed, but there is another admonition here: do not presume that you can dictate your future. **“Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes.”**

We are, to quote the prophet Hosea {13:3},

**... like the morning mist,
like the early dew that disappears,
like chaff swirling from a threshing
floor,
like smoke escaping through a
window.**

★ We will die. Our existence is ephemeral.

No one knows for certain when and how their life will end. The mere fact of mortality exposes Henley’s claim of mastery as a sugar-coated fiction.

‡ This is a hard truth. How shall we respond?

{Eccl 8:15; Is 22:13} Some voices advise us to live it up, to indulge our appetites while we can. **“Eat ... drink and [make] merry,”** they say, **“tomorrow we [may] die.”**

{Eccl 1:2} Others urge us to give in to inexorable fate, to let it toss us back and forth like flotsam. **“Everything is meaningless,”** they say. **“Utterly meaningless!”**

These philosophies make sense, *if* our fleeting nature is the highest truth. They are realistic, *if* James’ description of humans as **“a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes”** is the last word.

■ Thank God, it isn’t! Inspired by his Holy Spirit, James continues: **“Instead,”** (verse 15) **“you ought to say, ‘If it is the Lord’s will, we will live and do this or that.’”**

★ **“If it is the Lord’s will.”** With this phrase, James purposefully declares that God is sovereign. He

asserts the LORD's formal authority over the cosmos and functional dominion over our lives.

Hmmm. But let's face it, divine sovereignty is not always self-evident. We confess that God is perfectly holy and all-powerful, and yet evil often has the upper hand.

{Jer 12:1; Job} Scripture raises some sticky questions about this: **"Why [do] ... the wicked prosper"** (Jeremiah 12:1, for example)? Why do the innocent suffer? (The Book of Job and a lot of Psalms wrestle with this.)

We cannot solve these predicaments in a sermon. They are too big for that.

Besides, the answers cannot be taken in by passively receiving them from a preacher or teacher. They are revealed to us by the Lord as we undergo hardship or injustice in fellowship with him.

We learn by experience. Words are necessary to clarify our understanding, but they are secondary.

🔍 Let us stipulate that Eternal God is sovereign and mortal humans are not. How shall we then live?

I suggest three actions.

🔪 First, let us number our days.

📖 To **"number our days"** is to be mindful of our transience and conduct ourselves accordingly.

★ This is not a matter of fixating on mortality, much less being terrified of death or romanticizing it. It is about **redeeming time as a precious gift** from God.

Ephesians 5:15-17: ¹⁵ **"Be very careful, then, how you live – not as unwise, but as wise,** ¹⁶ **making the**

most of every opportunity, because the days are evil." [The days are always evil!] ¹⁷ **"Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is."**

{Ps 90:12} O Lord, **"Teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom"**!

🔪 Second, let us depend on God.

{Rom 12:1} Spoken sincerely, **"If it is the Lord's will"** is surrender. It is relinquishing control, setting aside the pretense of self-sufficiency. It is the oral equivalent of offering one's body **"as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God."**

★ Prayer is key. As we offer petitions and intercede for others, we assert the Lord's sufficiency and our need, his infinity and our limits, his eternity and our ephemerality.

Prayers of thanksgiving are equally essential. As we credit the Lord as the source of all blessings, we affirm our reliance on him as our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer.

🔪 Third, let us devote our plans and deeds to God.

★ {Mt 6:10} Sunday by Sunday we recite the Lord's Prayer, including the line: **"Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven."** Why do we say this phrase? Is it to remind God, lest he forget? No! Is it that his will cannot be accomplished unless we intone the magic words? By no means!

It is meant to be an act of commitment by which we align our goals and methods with those of God. It is

a means of bringing our plans and actions into agreement with his.

{|| Tim 3:16-17} So is obedience to the Word.

“Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that all God’s people may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”

Eternal God is sovereign. Mortal humans are not. Numbering our days, depending on God, and devoting our plans and deeds to him is the way of life.

■ James’ original readers are not doing that. Hence, he critiques their conduct in verses 16-17: ¹⁶ **“As it is, you boast in your arrogant schemes. All such boasting is evil.** ¹⁷ **So then, if you know the good you ought to do and don’t do it, you sin.”**

This warning has broad application. Sins of omission are as wrong as sins of commission.

However, James is directly addressing the sin of presumption. Do we know that we should say **“If it is the Lord’s will,”** but actually say **“we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money”?** **“All such boasting is evil.”**

Do we agree with the statements that God is eternal and we are ephemeral, that God is sovereign and we are his subjects, but conduct ourselves as though we were in control? If so, **“[we] sin.”**

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

It is an enticing thought, but it is wrong. Dead wrong.

James 4:13-17 is the word of the Lord.