

Demolishing Soulish Dependence on Obsessive Perfectionism

Many women worry about life spinning out of control and want to be sure of a happy ending. They have a compulsion to make it all turn out just right and are willing to do almost anything to make it happen. When they realize control is slipping from their grasp, they lose control and react in anger or fear. This unbalanced pursuit of control makes those around them anxious and defensive.

Author Shannon Popkin knows this struggle well. In her new book, *Control Girl: Lessons on Surrendering Your Burden of Control from Seven Women in the Bible* (Kregel Publications), she reveals to readers the only way to find the deep security they crave is to surrender to God and entrust the outcome to Him.

Q: The title of your new book is *Control Girl: Lessons on Surrendering Your Burden of Control from Seven Women in the Bible*, but the initial inspiration came from your own life. When did you first realize you had a control issue?

Before I got married, I didn't realize I was a control girl, probably because I could control most everything in my little life. Then I got married and my husband was messing up all of my plans. He wanted to stay in, and I wanted to go out. He wanted to save our money, and I wanted to spend it. He wanted to get up early, and I wanted to stay up late. These were my first tastes of giving up control, and I didn't like it. When we added children, houses, dogs and jobs to our lives, my control issues really began to mushroom. There was so much I couldn't control! God used the chaos of family life to press me to consider my heart's unhealthy craving for control.

Q: Do you think control girls readily recognize their problem with control?

I didn't. Even as I was behaving like a complete control girl, I didn't see control as my problem. I thought my problem was anger. I was reading books about anger and asking my friends to pray for me. Then one day I was driving in the car, and I heard Dee Brestin on the radio talking about the "sin beneath the sin." She said we often recognize our surface-level sins, such as anger, but we fail to connect them to the deeper sin. Then she mentioned the sin of control. In an instant, I knew this was my problem.

I've found my anger, anxiety and perfectionism often stem from this deep, insatiable, unhealthy craving I have for control. When I see these other things (losing my temper, trying to be seen as perfect, anxiety over safety, etc.) rising to the surface, I've found it's helpful to ask, "OK, Shannon. What are you trying to control? What do you fear losing control of?"

Q: What drove you to explore other "control girls" in the Bible?

One day, I was painting the laundry room and listening to John Piper preach a sermon on the curse in Genesis 3. He explained that when God said to Eve, "Your desire will be for your husband" (Gen. 3:16c), her desire would actually be a desire for control. I remember standing there on the ladder with my paintbrush in my hand, completely stunned. I, as a daughter of Eve, had been cursed with this desire for control. In one sense, it was a relief to learn this because for me, it was like being diagnosed with a degenerative disease passed on from generations back. Suddenly, all of my control symptoms made sense!

Then I had another thought. If I was struggling under this curse, thousands of years later, surely the first women in the

Bible also struggled with control. Later, I began combing the Scriptures, looking for any evidences of this desire for control in the stories of Bible women. It turns out I didn't have to look very far. I found these Bible women—Eve, Sarah, Hagar, Rebekah, Leah, Rachel and Miriam—all struggled with control the same way I do. They took matters into their own hands and tried to make everything turn out “right” from their own perspectives. They also made everyone (themselves included) miserable in the process.

Q: Even though the motivation may come from a place of good intentions, how does trying to manipulate every detail often lead to more misery rather than contentment?

I think it's helpful to recognize we often have good intentions when we try to take control. We're not trying to exasperate or frustrate anyone. We're actually trying to make everything turn out right. We have an urgency to do so, feeling as though it's “all up to us.” However, by taking control and trying to create my own personal version of a happy ending, I'm really trying to take over for God.

No one who tries to replace God does a good job of it. First of all, we don't actually have control. Second, when we try to take the control we weren't designed to have, we become frantic, obsessive and more controlling—which isn't fun for anyone.

Q: What about parenting? Doesn't good parenting require us to be in control of our kids?

Yes and no – depending on our child's age. In the book, I talk about the hold and fold principle, which I borrowed from Tim Sanford's book *Losing Control and Liking It*. We should:

1. Hold responsibility for what we can control (ourselves).
2. Fold our hands and surrender to God what we can't control (everything else).

So here's my guideline for parenting using the hold and fold principle: If my child is small enough to hold, then I should hold responsibility. This will mean lots of restrictions, safety reminders and intervention. However, if my child is too big to hold, I should fold and surrender my child to God. So with a newborn, I'm completely holding; with an adult child, I'm completely folding. In between, I'm constantly transferring from holding to folding and asking God for lots of wisdom in the process!

Q: Tell us the story of your son and a broken video game remote. How does that example relate to our own illusions of control?

Years ago, I bought a video game controller at a garage sale. When I got it home, I realized it didn't work. I kept it because at that time, Cade, my youngest son, was about two years old and constantly trying to wrestle the controllers out of the big kids' hands while they played video games. They would put this broken controller in his hands, and he was completely content, jamming his thumbs on the buttons and watching the guys on the screen jump around. He had no idea that not only was it broken, but it wasn't plugged in.

This is such a good picture of me. As I watch life playing out all around me, I feel as though I'm in control, like I'm the one keeping everything from running off the rails. Then there are these moments when it becomes painfully obvious I'm not in control. It's as if God leans low from heaven and dangles the cord of my teeny-weeny controller in front of me, saying, "You know what, honey? You're not plugged in!"

God isn't taunting me; He's inviting me to lay down the burden of trying to control everything. This whole big world, with all of its shifting variables, does not rest in my hands. God is in control, not I. He invites me to live like I believe this is true.

Q: Tell about the epiphany moment you had several years ago, related to this problem with control.

In Bible study, I asked the women in my group to share a prayer request related to a relational struggle they were having. As we went around the circle, I was surprised by the consistency as each woman asked us to pray about a very strained, hurtful relationship with either a very controlling mom or mother-in-law.

As they each described the burdensome, controlling, older women in their lives, I wondered, "Lord, is this what I'm going to become like?" I was already seeing the seeds of my control problem sprouting up and creating tension in my family relationships. After the women finished sharing, I leaned in and asked, "How do we not become them? How do we ensure that in 20 or 30 years it's not our daughters and daughters-in-law asking for prayer about us?" As I searched their faces, I could tell we didn't have answers. No woman sets out to be controlling. No woman wants to be a burden. This problem seems to metastasize slowly throughout time without us realizing.

Q: How can a woman avoid becoming a control girl?

No woman has to be a control girl. Jesus came to set us free from every bent our hearts have toward sin, including our struggle with control. There is so much hope. We might always struggle this side of heaven with an appetite for control, but Jesus invites us to a different path: the path of surrender.

Think of Jesus in that most stressful, trying hour of his life, just before he was arrested. Unlike us, Jesus could have taken control and avoided the cross, but instead we see him saying to God, "Not my will but yours be done." What deep surrender there is in those words! This sort of surrender is what turns us from control girls to Jesus girls. When we abandon ourselves to God and trust Him with the future, we find the peace, hope and security struggling for control can

never provide.

Q: What practical advice do you have for the woman who wants to stop being a control girl?

Think of the Spirit's guidance as arrows placed in your path to give direction in life. In the book, I talk about "Big Arrow" surrender, which is giving Jesus control in big, life-altering ways, such as when you first gave your life to him. Big Arrow surrender is essential, but I don't think we can truly become Jesus girls unless we also practice "Small Arrow" surrender in the seemingly insignificant moments of life. Let me suggest one small arrow to begin with: the tongue.

James 3 compares our words to a rudder or a bridle. Our tongues are powerful and direction-setting. If we want to turn a new way, we can start with our words. As women, talking is one of the primary ways we take control, so it's also one of the best ways to retrain our hearts to surrender control to God. If I will repeatedly, day after day and moment by moment bite my tongue, refusing to say the controlling thing I'd like to say and surrender to God instead, this will be absolutely transformational.

Q: Which of your seven control girls of the Bible surprised you most?

Rachel. She was the favored younger sister of Leah and the beautiful girl whom Jacob worked 14 years to have. She seemed to me to have a charmed life. Yet Rachel's story was ugly from start to finish. In every scene in Scripture, Rachel is portrayed as entitled, demanding and controlling. Rachel spent her entire life fixated on trying to have more babies than her sister, which was clearly something she couldn't control. God did finally give her one baby, but she named him Joseph, which means, "May he add." She wasn't content with just one baby; she wanted God to add more babies to her side of the family tree. Rachel's life was cut short when she died giving birth

to her second son.

As Rachel stressed and fretted over her family's little maternity ward, she was oblivious to the fact God had just birthed the nation of Israel. Rachel was part of a story that was all about God and His people, yet she was making it all about herself. The nerve, right? Yet this is my struggle, too. I hijack God's story, ignore His greater purposes and make the story all about me and my small idea for a happy ending. What surprised me about Rachel's life was the stern warning it delivered. Rather than vying for control, God invites us to get swept up in the thrilling story we get to be part of but is all about Him.

Q: How can we relinquish control in times when God seems distant and quiet?

Sometimes God does seem far away. We wonder if He sees us or if He cares. Leah felt that way. So did Hagar. Both of them faced desperate, horrific situations. It must have seemed as though God hadn't even taken notice of them. But there's a little phrase that punches a hole into the darkness of Leah's story. Gen. 29:31 says God saw Leah was unloved. He saw her. When Hagar was in the wilderness, crying in desperation, powerless to save her son, Gen. 21:17 says God heard Ishmael. He was dying of dehydration, so I can't imagine his cries were loud, yet God was close enough to hear him.

If I'm convinced God doesn't see or hear and if I'm suspicious of God's motives or wonder if He cares, I won't surrender to Him. I'll trust myself instead and resort to my control girl tactics. What if I just open God's Word and remind myself of what's true: God is not only enthroned above the universe, but He also cares about me and is working all things together for my good? Well, then. I've readied my heart to say, "God, I might not see you or hear You in this moment, but I know You see me, you hear me and You are intricately involved in the details of my life. I surrender even the hardships and

struggle to Your good, God hands.”

Q: *Control Girl* has a very intentional structure. How is this book designed to be used?

Each chapter is divided into lessons. I want the woman on a time-budget to be able to read a Bible passage, read a complete train of thought related to the topic of control and then make the content personal, all in one sitting. The chapters will be best digested one lesson at a time, rather than all at once.

The book can be used by individuals or groups. There is a free downloadable leader’s discussion guide on my website, , along with other resources and freebies.

Q: You end each lesson with a meditation. What does the Bible teach us about meditation, and why is it an important aspect of giving up control?

Control girls seem particularly resistant to change. We might readily say, “God is in control,” or, “I know this is out of my hands,” but our behavior suggests we don’t believe these things at all. I’m convinced transformation is only possible through revamping our thoughts about God and ourselves. That’s why I’ve included a meditation for each lesson. (These are also available for free download on my site.)

Meditation builds a bridge between what we say we believe and how we live. Thoughts are powerful. When we review, in a focused way, truth about God and about ourselves, we wear new grooves in our minds (Col. 3:10 and Rom. 12:2). By hitting refresh on what we know is true, we curb our controlling behavior. We ready ourselves to face the many situations we’d like to control but can’t. We posture ourselves to surrender to God, rather than caving in to our old tendency of trying to control.

Q: How do you recommend dealing with a controlling family

member while still maintaining a healthy respect and harmony in the relationship?

The more controlling I am, the more I am bothered by other controlling women. They provoke me because they lunge after control the same way I do. Yet when I try to control another controlling woman, I simply become more like her. I once spoke with a woman who was intensely irritated with her ultra-controlling mom. I could almost see her blood pressure rising as she rehearsed all of her mom's offenses. She told me she was learning to stand up and take back control, and as she talked, I couldn't help but notice her stiff demeanor, entitled attitude and angry tone. She was displaying the very characteristics she was complaining about in her mother.

When I'm faced with another controlling woman, rather than trying to control her, I think God most wants me to deal with my own heart. If I struggle on and on with my own controlling heart, what makes me think I can conquer another woman's controlling heart? What she needs, and what I need, is God. God alone can soften our hearts and show us our sin like no other control girl on earth will ever be able to. God alone can woo us with His grace, compassion and peace and turn us from control girls to Jesus Girls.

Q: What other resources are available to help control girls hand the reigns back to God?

At , you can download my meditation cards, which are arranged by chapter. I also have an adult coloring book available, titled *Reflections on Surrender*. My friend Janyre Tromp did all of the original artwork in this lovely book. We hope that as you fill the pages with color, you'll also fill your heart with each page's message of truth about control, ourselves and God.

Connect with **Shannon Popkin** and learn more about Control Girl by visiting , following her on Facebook (*shanpopkin*) or

following her via Twitter (@ShannonPopkin).