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LET. IT. GO.

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PART 1



Why We Women Love to Run the Show



As far back as I can recall, I've liked to be in charge. As a girl I loved selecting a certain flavor of ice cream. As a teen I enjoyed choosing classes and pursuing particular activities. Now I love picking paint colors, selecting furniture—why, even custom-ordering a latte! Yes, exerting control and having a say is fun! It even imparts a sense of pride. Since being in charge seems to come naturally to women, isn't it a positive attribute? Or, carried to an extreme, can it instead cause conflict and heartache? Just why do we women love to run the show?



Wired to Control

Control is a hard-edged word; it has — at least it seems to have — no poetry in it.

Judith Viorst

It is better to take refuge in the LORD than to trust in humans.

Psalm 118:8

I glanced once again at the oak mantel clock perched in my living room, hopeful that time had kindly ticked off another sixty minutes. I was anxious for the hours to accumulate, turning into days that would then form weeks. I strained my foggy mind trying to calculate. I hoped that when three or four more weeks passed, I might actually start to feel alive again.

But alas, the chiming heirloom piece was not my time-accruing friend that afternoon. In fact, only eleven meager minutes had elapsed since I'd last peered expectantly at its Roman-numeral-clad face.

It was the early fall of 1997, and I was pregnant with my third child. I had been diagnosed a repeat victim of what my doctor referred to as “severe hyperemesis.”

Hyperemesis? That's a fancy medical expression that translates into layperson's terms as “morning sickness that lasts all day long.” It was my new, intellectually impressive but least-favorite word. This hurricane of hyperemesis was chronic, constant, and downright debilitating. I'd never felt so sick in all my life.

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With my first child, this condition lasted eight months. With baby number two it was seven. This time, however, I hoped the intense nausea would subside by month six, if it stayed true to its gone-a-month-earlier-each-time pattern.

No tricks or home remedies worked. Eating crackers before attempting to get out of bed each day only made me get sick even faster than when I arose with an empty stomach. Ingesting ground ginger didn't help. Or chewing fresh mint. Or downing any other herb or pill well-meaning friends sent my way.

I couldn't keep solid food down morning, noon, or even night, for that matter. Only sips of diluted chicken broth and occasional swigs of colored sports drinks would stay down. Usually, I had to resort to protein drinks and IVs during a few stints in the hospital to try to help me get well.

So I faced life in a tenuous state, feeling I had an awful case of the stomach flu coupled with the sensation of having just stepped off an upside-down, convoluting roller coaster directly onto a ship sailing off on the choppy high seas.

Okay. Maybe I exaggerate a tad. But the truth is this: there was only one thing worse than my ruthless, all-day queasiness. It was a frightening and foreign sensation that left my stomach untouched but invaded my thoughts and emotions every day. The feeling was that of being utterly out of control.

No Longer in Command

Now I wasn't out of control in the sense that I'd completely lost my senses. You know, the "she is completely out of control" way of describing someone who's behaving in an irrational manner. There was no need to call in the psychologist-turned-daytime-host of the latest self-help cable-television show. That wasn't the out-of-control state in which I found my little under-the-weather self.

Rather, I was squarely situated in a different out-of-control state—I was no longer able to be in command.

Of my home.

Of my children.

Of my schedule.

Of my appearance.

Of so many other basic elements over which we women are used to having jurisdiction.

I couldn't ensure that my kids were dressed in matching clothes (or that they were even dressed at all!). I was too infirm to insist they brush their teeth *all* the way to the back just like the dentist had instructed or to oversee them putting their toys away before bedtime. I couldn't pay the bills on time. Or return phone calls promptly. Or carry out any other task that might require me to actually sit up and think straight.

There were bright spots during my dark days, although I failed to see them at the time. So many people in our circle of life stepped up to serve. My family dined for months on meals that loving church members brought in, and dear friends took turns watching our kids (and their ailing mom) each day while my husband, Todd, went off to work.

Looking back, I see how God took care of every last detail, and I readily admit that neither my family nor my home suffered lasting consequences because of this season of sickness.

Instead, it was I who suffered—shaken to the core of who I thought I was. It was foreign soil to me, dwelling temporarily in out-of-control land. And honestly, it was a place I'm not sure I'd ever visited until my pregnancies forced me to dwell there.

Mission Control

We women crave control. Why, we might even appear to emerge from the womb crouched and ready to manage, plan, arrange,

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position, and take charge. We like to craft scenarios and situate people. Even young toddler girls can be observed lining their frilly dolls up or stacking toy dishes or bright building blocks in a way that suits their fancy. And heaven forbid that anyone should interfere with a girl's plan! These miniversions of us women often instinctively order and organize anything within their reach—objects, circumstances, and later on in life, even living, breathing human beings.

Young females not only desire to control their surroundings; they're actually pretty proficient at it. As an elementary student I noticed that the girls on my block liked coming up with the games our neighborhood gang would play. At school we loved to be selected for special duties, such as delivering papers to the principal's office. As we grew older, my girlfriends and I liked to organize, arrange, and get others fired up about planning a banquet or putting on a play. Being in charge energized us.

In defense of my gender, this is often a much-needed skill. A competent woman can run a bang-up PTA bake sale or plan a fabulous family reunion. She can juggle home, school, professional life, and church duties with downright riveting results! Being able to multitask, to craft duties and delegate tasks, is beneficial on many fronts. The problem lies with our failure to know where to draw the line, to differentiate between leading and bossing, to know the difference between simply taking charge and ultimately taking over.

Competency is a sought-after strength. But if carried to an extreme and left unchecked, our strengths can often morph into wretched weaknesses. We may carry these strengths of managing and positioning to such excess that they hinder our relationships both inside and outside the home. And our controlling nature often gives us fits when circumstances don't go as we'd planned.

We fret and worry and waste unnecessary time trying to remedy situations in which we have no business and where our perfectly powdered noses don't belong. Still we fuss and fume and stridently complain; we bark out orders (or subtly pout, depending on our personalities) and grow ourselves not-so-little ulcers over sometimes-diminutive things.

Scads of women carry this attribute of control into adulthood; some carry it into marriage and eventually into mothering, should kiddos come along. It seems to flow naturally. We transition seamlessly. And actually, this mode of operation is of great benefit to our gender. After all, with all that women must juggle in today's world, a little in-charge approach can only help, right?

Think about it. While there are numerous dads who invest time and effort in raising, caring for, and carting around their children, and who certainly shoulder their fair share of the load around the family's physical domain, more often than not, these duties fall on the maternal side of the job ledger.

As I sit at my writing desk now and glance over my day planner at the week marked out ahead, my eyes land on a list of duties I must perform for my family in the next seven days:

- Sign one child up at the district superintendent's office for middle school.
- Order science and English curriculum for another child whom I homeschool.
- Plan the week's menu.
- Grocery shop, as well as stop at the drugstore for prescriptions and at the department store for tennis-shoe laces.
- Prepare the meals and snacks for the week. (Okay, and

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perhaps order a take-out pizza or two on the crazy-busy nights.)

- Make appointments for both boys at the eye doctor.
- Do a few loads of laundry (my kids do their own).
- Clean the house (supervising one child and delegating tasks to another).
- Reorganize the coat closets, getting them ready them for fall.
- Haul one child back and forth to football practice four nights of the week.
- Call three colleges to arrange visits for my high school son.
- Order more checks for the checkbook.
- Deposit money in the bank account from the family garage sale.
- Break down and clean up after the family garage sale, donating leftover items to charity.
- Call to check on three different aging parents, two of whom may be facing surgery.
- Mail a care package to my daughter, who lives in North Carolina.

Whew! I'm tired just typing out that list on my keyboard!

So while women may tend to be take-charge sorts, in our defense we often have a lot on our plates. Some gals possess a stack of plates that are almost ready to topple, the plates are laden so high. When we ladies are responsible for so many people and tasks, it seems natural, and even necessary, to call all the shots.

In fact, we can even attempt to glaze this grab for power with an opaque film of righteousness. After all, maybe we're taking God's directions to us in Colossians 3:23 seriously: "Work willingly at whatever you do, as though you were working for the Lord rather than for people" (NLT). Well, then, aren't we just being good church girls, trying to serve Jesus by being in charge of it all? Yep, that's it. We're simply being careful and conscientious.

Therein, fellow control freak of mine, lies the problem. There exists a minuscule line between being conscientious and being controlling. A marker so fine, we women cross it without even noticing that it's stretched out right there in front of us, waiting to trip us up. What we must do is determine the difference between being conscientious (our part) and being in control (God's job).

Two Stunning Revelations

That crisp Michigan autumn when I was barely able to be in charge of anything found me bordering on depression. I couldn't care for my two kids, cook a minimal meal, run the washer or dryer—not to mention sort the lights, whites, and darks—or carry out any of the other mostly mundane tasks of motherhood.

I recall lying on the sofa, hot tears soaking into a scratchy throw pillow, as two teens from our youth group came over to clean my house from filthy top to grimy bottom. My husband was a youth pastor, and many of the teenagers wanted to help our family out. I wish I could say I graciously accepted the domestic assistance the sweet girls willingly offered. Sadly, I did not. While I said nothing to them but to squeak out a weak "Thank you," inside I was a knotted, emotionally stressed mess.

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I fretted over the dirty floors. I was embarrassed by the sticky soda spills that now acted as a messy magnet for lint and dirt. I was horror-struck that someone else had to deal with my grunge because I was too sick to sit up without fainting, let alone to wield a mop or whisk a broom.

The salty tears stung my face, making me feel more ill than I already was. My only escape was sleep. So I drifted off. As I did I prayed that when I awoke I'd miraculously feel better. Then I could get out of this miserable state and back into the driver's seat again.

I've had over a decade now to analyze what it was that bothered me so when I had to loosen my death grip on life's steering wheel. Was it a feeling of helplessness? Or was I concerned about my reputation, afraid of being labeled incapable on the home front, a place where I thought I had it all together?

Maybe I resented being viewed as lazy. Some women in my life were certain I couldn't be *that* sick, since they had breezed through their pregnancies with nary a trace of morning sickness.

Was it concern for my children, whom God had entrusted to me? Was I worried they wouldn't be cared for properly or that they would be emotionally damaged because they had an unwell mommy who was out of commission for long stretches of their toddler years?

Or was it old-fashioned guilt? Seeing my sweet husband be both mom and dad, as well as chief cook, sock sorter, and chauffeur, made me feel to blame for his increased workload around the house. After all, he was already working more than forty-five hours a week at his marketplace job.

I think all those scenarios came somewhat into play. However, if I'm introspective and honest enough, I know deep down

what bothered me most. It all centered on two new revelations I discovered back then that smacked me in the face for the very first time (but most definitely not for the last).

First, I did not fancy the fresh discovery that I was dispensable. Often, in my reasoning, I'd spun a saga to myself where I headlined as the "martyr mom" heroine. "You know," I'd declare, "things around here would totally fall apart without me. How would these people ever function if I weren't here? I am the glue that holds this family together."

Wrong! Lying there watching my family fare pretty well with me out of the picture was truly humbling. I thought they'd surely perish without martyr mom on the scene. On the contrary, they were doing just fine, thank you very much. For the first time as a parent, I had an inkling that maybe I really wasn't "all that and a whole-wheat baguette" as I'd imagined. (I know, I know. The phrase is "all that and a bag of chips," but I never get chips as the side at Panera Bread. I always get the whole-wheat baguette!)

While priding myself on being able to care for the children, run a home smoothly, and do it all with a big public smile, I was also building a little temple to my own perceived abilities. Yes, others could periodically perform domestic functions at my house or even care for my kids when Todd and I went on a date, but completely replace me? Never! I, my mind concluded, am simply irreplaceable.

Or so I'd thought.

Second, and what in all probability was at the crux of my crisis, was this stunning discovery: when I was unable to function, I was also unable to get my own way. (Cue the Frank Sinatra music, please.)

Much to my husband's shock, I was just too sick to voice an

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opinion. Before, I had distinct views about everything from peanut butter to politics. The baby must be diapered a certain way, the fridge stocked in the manner I deemed most logical. I knew which dress Mackenzie looked best in for the Christmas pageant at church and which one made her look washed-out on stage.

I asserted my views openly and persuasively, and it usually translated into me getting my way. You know that old adage: “If Momma ain’t happy, ain’t nobody happy. If Papa ain’t happy, who cares?” How true that rang at my house. Sadly, I made sure everyone shared in the misery if this momma wasn’t happy. And being happy, I thought, meant getting my own way.

The Many Faces of Control

Why are women compelled to control? The answer is simple: because we have a false notion that it actually works. And when it appears that it isn’t working, we think the remedy is found by exerting even greater control. Never in a million years would it cross our conniving minds that the answer in fact lies in letting go, not in tightening our grip. We’ll explore this seemingly backward truth later.

What does control look like? No cookie cutters here. If you observe closely, you’ll realize that not every woman controls in the same way. If you think only the loud, boisterous, and dominant sisters are the ones who struggle with this issue, you’re misguided. We’ll look more closely at the creative ways we try to control, but for the moment, consider how control dons many clever disguises. Here are just a few of them . . .

First, there is the soft-spoken saint, a sweet, helpful woman who says yes to every request whether it inconveniences her or not. You can count on her to come through in the clutch, and do so with a charming disposition. This woman controls by get-

ting along selflessly. She is so agreeable that when it's her turn to ask for something, others will give in. After all, she is always so nice. She controls by her kindness. Although at times it may be genuine, at other times it's not. It's her means of getting her own meek and mousy way.

Then there is the enabler. If her child forgets his homework or lunch pail, she treks off across town to promptly deliver it. If her husband is a harsh man, always hurling hurtful words at her and others, she overlooks the insults directed at her and either runs interference or does damage control when his actions affect others. She crafts excuses for her loved ones' bad behavior, often absorbing the blame herself, even when it was clearly their fault. This woman controls by covering up. She wants her family to have a good reputation, so she seeks to build one all by herself, despite the lack of cooperation from her kin.

Next we have the victim or martyr. She controls not by yelling or barking out orders but by well-timed pouting and the occasional sigh. If a decision is made or a scenario is played out that she doesn't particularly care for, expect sorrow to appear on her face and dejection to come forth in her actions. Since others don't want to hurt her feelings or add to her sadness, they give in to her wishes instead. She gets her way not by stomping her feet but by dropping her smile. When approached, she most likely will say, "No, I'm fine. Don't worry about me. You just do what you want. I'll be okay." Her pouting is powerful. And it is also a creative form of control.

How about the people pleaser? She showers others with compliments. Lavishes coworkers with gifts. She says what you want to hear and makes it her goal to never ruffle any feathers. Ever the chameleon, she licks her finger and sticks it in the air to

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see which way the wind is blowing before jumping on the bandwagon. She may even change her opinion depending on whom she is with and what she estimates they'll want to hear. Her line of thinking is this: if everyone mentally elects her "Miss Congeniality" of the social circle, surely this will aid in her getting her way. After all, she'll be owed so many unspoken favors by so many people that they will happily give in to her wishes. This sister controls with feigned friendship.

Wired to Control

While our personalities and methods may vary, our goal is often the same. And I'd wager that at the root of our problem are exactly the same two issues I unearthed while confined to my sofa of sickness:

1. We want to feel indispensable.
2. We want to get our own way.

Although these two threads are common to the quests for control, an even stronger similar strand is often woven deep into our "I'll do it my way" souls.

We don't really trust God.

Oh, we believe *in* God. We know all about his wonderful characteristics and mighty acts. We know he is patient, loving, forgiving, powerful, ever near, always faithful. Why, he is perfect!

We may even read on the pages of our Bibles about men and women who trusted him with amazing results. But we doubt he'll really repeat this in our suburban, modern, everyday lives. We intellectually believe he does what is best for the world in general, but practically we behave as if in our individual situations, *we* still know what's best.

Our lips may say we trust him, but our actions say the oppo-

site. “If it is to be, it is up to me” becomes our self-serving mantra. Deep in our hearts, however, we long for more.

Controlling is tiring. So is keeping up a good front. But how in the world will we ever change our well-worn patterns? They now feel so familiar, and to the familiar we are strangely drawn, even if we know the results are sometimes disastrous.

I think it starts with admitting that however it may manifest itself in our own unique personalities, we have a problem: our wiring is screwed up. Because of sin, we’re wired to control everything ourselves. And it will take a Great Electrician to sort through our tangled mess of selfish motives and actions and attitudes and transform them into one smooth, humming connection to our Father.

Take it from a self-confessed control freak. It has been my experience, through the school of hard knocks, that there is vast freedom in pursuing a life lived *out* of our own control. So be encouraged. Once we recognize we have a problem, we can begin to seek and apply a righteous remedy, one not found in the pages of a self-help manual or on the screen of the latest psychologist’s talk show, but one straight from the pages of Scripture.

Yes, the cure for our malady lies not in a pill or an old folklore remedy but in learning to walk lockstep with the Savior down the path of *his* choosing. We must be trained to embrace this dichotomy of a truth: in order to get a grip, we have to let go.

So sit tight, sister. Together we’ll learn to discern a crucial life skill: how to control what we should and trust God with what we can’t.

But first, let’s take a little quiz to test our personal control quotient. (We’ll be using such self-evaluation tools throughout our journey together.)

Finding Your Control Quotient

Answer the following questions on a scale of 1–5, using this key:

1. never
2. seldom
3. sometimes
4. usually
5. always

When it comes to making common, everyday decisions as part of a group, like which restaurant to eat at or what color to paint the office, I like to voice my opinion to ensure the outcome I desire.

1 2 3 4 5

I would honestly say that in my personal relationships, I try to get people to understand, and then agree with, my point of view.

1 2 3 4 5

People who are close to me (and telling the truth) might agree that I try to control people and/or circumstances.

1 2 3 4 5

If a situation doesn't have the outcome I wished for, I might try to revisit it with others in hopes of getting the results changed.

1 2 3 4 5

If the outcome of a decision others have made stacks up in a way that upsets me, I tend to dwell on it rather than move on.

1 2 3 4 5

I enjoy being in charge and making decisions and policies, especially in my family.

1 2 3 4 5

I use words carefully to sway others' opinions and conclusions.

1 2 3 4 5

I attempt to evoke emotions from people to get them to think or feel a certain way so it might get me what I want.

1 2 3 4 5

I'm told I am pushy, bossy, or controlling.

1 2 3 4 5

Let's be truthful. I like to get my own way.

1 2 3 4 5

Now, add up your total. How did you fare?

10–20: You most likely don't have major control issues. Wrap up this book and give it to a bossy friend.

21–30: You vacillate between being agreeable and easygoing at times and, in some situations, wanting to take charge.

31–40: You border on being manipulative. There are certain areas in your life where you pull out the stops to get your way. Better watch it!

41–50: Control-freak alert! Your strength has developed into a weakness and sent others running for cover. Time to stop tweaking and start trusting before all your friends and family scatter for good, and you end up a prisoner of your own pushy self! (Don't feel bad. I scored a 46!)