

“Shannon has a wonderful ability to translate the truths of God’s Word into interactive Bible studies that speak to relevant issues women face today. *Control Girl* is a penetrating look at how selfishness and self-protectiveness wreck lives—and why surrender and trust are God’s life-giving pathways to true freedom and joy.”

Nancy DeMoss Wolgemuth, author and Revive Our Hearts teacher and host

“Authentic, relevant, and truth-filled, *Control Girl* is written especially for any woman longing for security, peace, and joy. Through her Bible-based teaching and humorous stories, Shannon reminds us God never intends us to carry around the burden of control, and instead offers us the gift of sweet surrender to him. I finished *Control Girl* being reminded afresh that for those who love God, there awaits the happiest Happy Ending imaginable. Hooray! Highly recommended!”

Cindy Bultema, women’s speaker, Bible teacher, and author of *Red Hot Faith*

“In the style of Liz Curtis Higgs, *Control Girl* is an easy and entertaining read, yet Shannon Popkin packs a punch where we so need it if we are to be set free from the stressful habit that robs our joy and ruins our relationships!”

Dee Brestin, author of *Idol Lies*

“No one wants to be enslaved to anger, anxiety, or fear. Yet many battle those emotions without making any headway in their struggle to fix themselves and others. In *Control Girl*, my longtime friend Shannon Popkin offers an alternative strategy. She shows how biblical thinking helps readers understand the conditions of their hearts so that they can find freedom in true spiritual growth through the wisdom of the Word and the power of the Holy Spirit. I highly recommend it.”

Dr. Chris Brauns, pastor of The Red Brick Church and author of *Unpacking Forgiveness* and *Bound Together*

“When you start out reading a book for an endorsement and it becomes your Bible study, that is a good sign. Instead of making notes about how good the book is, I found myself writing down how God was using Shannon’s words to address the heart of my own control issues. . . . *Control*

Girl is helping me solidify my foundation as a Jesus Girl, giving me confidence to practice surrender first and be OK with God not answering all my questions.”

Jen Ferguson, coauthor of *Pure Eyes, Clean Heart: A Couple's Journey to Freedom from Pornography*

“If you’ve ever struggled with control issues, read this book. With personal vulnerability, biblical depth, powerful personal illustrations, and pointed application questions, Shannon Popkin reveals how seven women of the Bible can teach us how to surrender our will to God’s design for our future. . . . It’s ideal for personal use or for small-group studies.”

Carol Kent, speaker and author of *Becoming a Woman of Influence*

“Psst . . . You there . . . the one with the control issues. I know you have a craving to control. We all do. We have since the garden of Eden, but there’s hope! In this funny, tender, and truth-telling book, Shannon Popkin peels back the layers of our control problem. If that sounds a bit like a root canal, wait until you crack the cover. In a tone that feels like coffee with a close friend, Shannon bravely goes first, letting us see the reality of her own need to control while simultaneously pointing us to the hope found in God’s Word. You will find your heart warming, your lips smiling, and your fists unclenching as Shannon leads you away from control and toward sweet surrender. A must-read for every woman east of the garden.”

Erin Davis, author, blogger, and recovering Control Girl

“Shannon gets painfully honest and to the point as she challenges all of us Control Girls to surrender that burden and experience the Happy Ending God has planned! . . . She takes us through the lives of seven women from Scripture to help us discern more readily when we are grabbing for control rather than walking in the rest that Christ provides.”

Kimberly Wagner, author of *Fierce Women: The Power of a Soft Warrior* and coauthor of *Men Who Love Fierce Women*

“Delightful. Insightful. Helpful. Popkin’s sweet blend of storytelling and Scripture helps the medicine go down. If you’re a control freak, this study is just what the doctor ordered.”

Mary A. Kassian, author of *Girls Gone Wise*

control girl

Lessons *on* Surrendering Your
Burden *of* Control *from* Seven
Women *in the* Bible

SHANNON POPKIN

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Control Girl: Lessons on Surrendering Your Burden of Control from Seven Women in the Bible

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*To Ken—
who inspires me to become
a Jesus Girl*

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Introduction

My “Happy” Ending

 MY HUSBAND teased that it was only right to dedicate this book to him. “Without me,” he said, “you’d still be going along in life thinking you were agreeable!”

He’s right. Before I got married, I didn’t realize I was a Control Girl, probably because I could control most everything in my little life. I would come home from teaching second grade every day and take a nap. At about six o’clock, I’d shuffle to the kitchen for a snack-ish dinner, and then get ready to go out. I was a youth leader, I attended Bible studies, I met friends for coffee. I liked being with people, and so I was . . . constantly.

Then I met Ken. When we started dating, I scheduled our weekends from top to bottom with social activities. But after a few months of this, my not-so-social boyfriend said he’d had enough.

Enough? I had never *heard* of enough socializing. I borrowed from sleep, savings, time with God—whatever it took—in order to be social. If there were people gathering, I wanted to be among them. And now I wanted Ken to be among them too. But that’s not what he wanted.

He proposed a one-night-out-per-weekend compromise, which was my first taste of giving up control. But since I was still enamored and starry-eyed, it wasn’t hard to deny myself and cheerfully spend more evenings in than out.

When we got married, it was harder. I could no longer take naps after

school and still have dinner ready. And without my naps, I was too tired to stay out late with friends. Suddenly, I was losing control, and I didn't like it. Ken, who had once filled me with joy, now filled me with anger. I kept telling him, "I was always so carefree and cheerful before I met you."

One Friday night in early marriage, a young couple from down the street invited us over for dinner. I was almost giddy, sure that they were going to be our new best friends. Ken was less than giddy. Not only was he less social than I, he was also exhausted. Ken is a driven, self-motivated kind of guy who gets up at four thirty in the morning, leaving him little leftover energy for Friday nights.

After a lovely dinner with our neighbors, they led us to the living room. Our conversation progressed nicely, but I noticed Ken wasn't saying much. I glanced down to where he was sitting, petting the dog on the floor, and I noticed his hand, limp on the dog's back. His head was drooping at a strange angle. *Oh no*, I thought. *He's asleep!*

From where the neighbors were sitting, they couldn't see Ken's face, so I crossed my fingers and hoped they would think he was just oddly staring at their dog. I tried to hold their attention by talking faster and with more animation. But then someone asked Ken a question.

I nudged him with my foot, and his head yanked upward. He made some unintelligible remark with slightly slurred speech. I was mortified.

The neighbors laughed good-heartedly and said, "You must be exhausted." So this beautiful evening, with these people who were now *not* going to be our new best friends, came to a screeching halt. They showed us to the door, and we walked down the sidewalk toward home.

In that space of about five driveways, I packed a lot in. "Unbelievable! You humiliated me! From now on, mister, you are guzzling coffee before we go anywhere!" I spat the words into the darkness, pumping my arms with disgust. My husband lagged behind, saying nothing.

It's one of those ugly Control Girl moments I wish I could forget.

CAN I CONTROL MY HAPPY ENDING?

It wasn't until years later—after adding kids, dogs, a house, jobs, and responsibilities to our lives—that I realized I have control issues. Rather

than being squelched under the chaos of family life, my control cravings have mushroomed.

Nowadays, I not only feel responsible for things like keeping my husband awake at dinner parties, I also have an urgent desire to keep my daughter's bangs from hanging in her eyes. And an absolute need to keep crumbs out of bedsheets. And an intense passion to keep socks from being stuffed under the couch, boots from being tracked on the carpeting, and noses from being picked in church. Not to mention the big things I'd like to control!

Now, I don't mean to be exasperating. I'm actually trying to make everything turn out right. I only control because I care so much. The more invested I am, the more I clamp down, on either the person I love or some outcome I can't live without. The things I'm trying to control in the moment are almost always linked to the Happy Ending I've got all worked out in my head.

While it may seem like I'm obsessing over the superficial, my heart projects much further and deeper. *What if he gets teased for nose-picking?* I worry. *What if she never learns to be responsible?* *Where will this all lead?* When I take control, I'm just trying to clear obstacles and make straight the path to my Happy Ending.

But here's the irony. Though I've lunged for control in hundreds of ways and instances, I've never been able to safeguard my life from heartache. And by taking control, I've actually created anguish for the people I love, rather than protecting them from it. By trying to control everything, I've created strife and misery for everyone—including me. Without meaning to, I've sabotaged my own Happy Ending.

Can you relate? Do you push for your own version of a Happy Ending? Do you project out into the future, then take control because you're convinced that it's up to you to make things turn out right? If so, what has the outcome been? Have you been able to lock down any airtight Happy Endings yet?

Me neither.

Here's what I'm coming to realize: the Happy Ending in my head is an illusion. It's impossible, because in order to pull it off, I would have to live a life of white-knuckled misery, trying to control everything and

keep it all on track. This would make for quite an Unhappy Ending, not to mention all of the unhappy moments in between.

CONTROL GIRLS IN THE BIBLE

My interest in Control Girls in the Bible started with Eve. I was painting the laundry room and listening to John Piper preach a sermon on the curse in Genesis 3 and how Eve's "desire to rule over her husband" was actually a desire for control.¹ With paintbrush in hand, it occurred to me that I, a daughter of Eve, was also cursed with a desire for control.

Later, I combed through Scripture, curious to uncover any control issues in other daughters of Eve. Turns out, it's hard to find women in the Bible who *weren't* Control Girls. As I studied, I found that Eve, Sarah, Hagar, Rebekah, Leah, Rachel, and Miriam each struggled with control the way I do. They took matters into their own hands, tried to make everything turn out right, and made everybody miserable in the process.

Some of the most famous scenes in the Bible hinge on Control Girls who were trying to contend for their own preferences. The Bible, you'll recall, is a story all about God and his people. And yet, these women were making it all about *them*. The nerve, right? But this is my struggle too. I hijack the story God's still writing, ignore his greater purposes, and make the story all about me and my Happy Ending. Is there a way to keep from repeating history?

I invite you to join me on a study of these interesting Control Girls from the past. We'll climb the wall dividing our lives from theirs and lower ourselves into their ancient stories. We'll mine each one, looking for warnings and lessons for ourselves and new insights about God.

I've divided each chapter into lessons with a correlating Bible passage to read first. Please, oh please, don't skip these Bible readings! I wouldn't want you to miss out on the power that God's Word can unleash when you hear from him directly. You'll notice that some chapters have more lessons than others. That's because I want to let the women of the Bible lead our discussion, and some have more to say than others. And you'll find the shorter chapters a nice break. Each lesson has questions at the

end that will help you make the content personal. I hope you'll use a notebook to journal your thoughts, reactions, and plans. If you're studying as a group, leaders are welcome to download a free discussion guide at ShannonPopkin.com.

As we study together, I think you'll find one consistent theme: surrender. The only way any Control Girl of the Bible ever found the security, peace, and joy she was longing for was when she did the opposite of taking control—when she surrendered to God and made her story all about him. It's the same for us today.


God never intended for us to carry around the burden of trying to control everything. He designed us to live in sweet surrender to him, trusting him with all that seems to threaten our future happiness. For those who love God, there awaits an ultimate Happy Ending. And if the end of the story is secure, we can flip back to any unsettling circumstance of the present and forfeit the burden of having to take control.

Surrender to God is what guards us against lives of white-knuckled misery. Rather than lunging after control, Jesus invites us to say as he did, "Not my will, but yours, be done" (Luke 22:42). Jesus invites us to follow him on a path of surrender to a place where God is in control and we are free. That's where I want to go. Who's coming with me?



Chapter One

Path of a Control Girl

 WHEN MY daughter was six, we moved into a new house. She insisted on having the small bedroom looking out over the driveway, rather than the larger one facing the pretty, wooded back yard. When I asked why, she said she wanted to be sure to see the garbage trucks when they came to pick up our trash. Years later, she asked why her brother got the “good room” facing the back yard. I chuckled and said, “Don’t you remember, honey? You wanted to see the garbage trucks!”

In life, we make a lot of choices and decisions based on what we’re hoping for. We take one path and not another because of some goal we have in mind. But often we’re like a six-year-old enamored with garbage trucks. Our perspective is skewed, and our goals are underdeveloped.

What if there were Someone who could see up ahead who knew beforehand what was going to make us happy in the long run? What if he could be in charge of what path we took and where it all led?

Actually, there is Someone. His name is God.

If we ignore God and take our own path, we’ll inevitably end up at a trash pile that has lost its appeal. But if we follow God and trust his eternal perspective, he’ll lead us—eventually—to a room with a more fabulous view than our six-year-old minds could even fathom.

Lesson 1: A Rutted-Out Path

Read Proverbs 3:1–12

I HAVE A gray video game controller in my basement that looks just like the other controllers, but it's not. It doesn't work.

I bought it at a garage sale and would have thrown it out, except that it solved a really big problem in our home. Our youngest son was two at the time, and whenever the older kids played video games, he would climb all over them—tugging, biting, scratching—doing whatever he could to pry the controllers from their hands. But the gray controller eliminated the problem. The big kids would settle him into a beanbag chair, place it in his chubby hands, and say, “There you go, buddy. There's *your* controller.”

He was completely satisfied. He would jam his thumbs on the buttons, convinced that he was moving the little men on the screen. He was oblivious to the fact that not only was his controller broken, it wasn't even plugged in.

Even though I don't play video games, I'm a lot like my boy, Cade. My gaze is locked on the scenes playing out on the big screen of life—especially the ones that involve people I love—and it feels like I'm in control. I might not be pushing actual buttons, but I do have a strong sense that I am shaping the future. In fact, I feel *responsible* for making everything turn out right. Our Happy Ending rests in my hands.

This is why I call myself a Control Girl. I *think* I'm in control.

Now I wouldn't *say* I'm in control. I would say that God is. I've read the Bible. I know the stories of the flood, Lot's wife turning to salt, and the parting of the Red Sea. If you pointed to a story in the Bible and said, “See? God is in control,” I would nod my head in agreement. Yes, I believe this. Completely.

But then, what do I do when my teen begins dating someone I disapprove of? Or my coworker is withholding information and making decisions without me? Or my husband shrugs off my concerns about the musty smell in the basement? With an eye on the future and where this all might lead, I suddenly morph into . . . Control Girl. My voice gets louder and more intense. I become manipulative or direct. Like a kid who

just lost a round on his video game, I lean forward with greater intensity and determination, convinced that it's all up to me to set things straight.

In these instances, my demeanor necessarily raises the question: **Do I truly believe that God is in control? Or do I secretly think I am?**

Also, what is God's reaction? Does he shrug off my insistence that it's all up to me? It's one thing to let a toddler carry on with a façade. But what if *I'm* the one clutching my illusion of control with sweaty, frantic hands? Does God just wag his head in disbelief and let me continue in my panicky frustration and angst?

No. Out of kindness, God leans down to dangle the cord of my teenyweeny controller before me. Gently, he says, "See? Honey, you're not plugged in." God wants to free me of this control-burden, which was never mine to carry in the first place. *God* is in control; not me. He invites me to live like I believe this.

That's what these cord-dangling moments are: invitations.

Sometimes God uses something drastic—like a car crash, ongoing infertility, or a tornado—to expose my lack of control. But other times, he tucks his invitation into something smaller. Like a certain towel I encountered on the bathroom floor.

MY HEART'S RUT

One morning, I gave my middle schooler a crash course in bathroom etiquette. He had recently begun showering in our guest bathroom, and I didn't want guests tripping over damp towels and yesterday's jeans.

My training was thorough. After cheerfully giving clear instructions, I also required several walk-throughs that included hanging up a towel and throwing clothes in the hamper. I felt good about my constructive approach and was confident the bathroom would now be guest-ready at any moment.

But that evening, after everyone was in bed, I walked into the bathroom and stopped short. There were my son's sweaty soccer clothes and damp towel in a familiar little heap on the bathroom floor. I couldn't believe it. I stood over the defiant pile with my fists clenched and my jaw tightened, contemplating my next steps.

There is a certain path, deeply rutted in my heart. I've repented of this path many times, yet in that moment it seemed like the right way to go. It beckoned to me with logic, clear and strong, whispering, "He doesn't listen to you. He doesn't follow your instructions. What's going to happen to him if you do nothing? He's going to fail. You've got to do something! You've got to do something right *now*."

And so I set off down the path of the Control Girl.

Filling my lungs with air, I bellowed my son's name. I yelled it again and again until he appeared, blinking groggily, from his bedroom. I jabbed my finger in the direction of the sweaty heap. He hung his head, and I began bludgeoning him with my words. Repeatedly I pounded his dignity with my narrowed eyes and sneering attacks. I didn't touch him, but his expression told me that my words had squeezed his heart.

As I snarled, I dismissed several fleeting thoughts that I might regret this later. It felt *good* to berate him. He needed to learn to follow instructions. What sort of student or employee would he become if he didn't listen?

The sense of power was intoxicating, and I wanted more. I felt myself gaining control. Yes, I was making things right. I was in control. Now the world was a better place because I was ruling over the stinky piles of laundry littering my son's life. I would rule over my family's towels, and all would be good and right and peaceful.

But thirty minutes later nothing felt good. Nothing felt right. And nothing felt peaceful. My heart had deceived me. Once again, I had taken the path of the Control Girl.

I knelt at my son's bedside with tears of agonizing regret. Though he accepted my apology, I couldn't retract what I had said. I couldn't erase the look that had flickered across his face as my critical words cut in. I had followed my craving for control, and oh, what an ugly place it led me to.

GETTING MY HOOKS IN

It's hard for me to replay that for you. I generally like to keep my inner Control Girl well-cloaked. My tactical control moves are usually behind-closed-doors operations.

So why am I ushering you into this ugly scene from my bathroom? I do so because, while the whole world is peacefully sleeping, perhaps I'm not the only Control Girl still up, obsessing about my child's future or erupting over a towel.

Knowing how carefully I hide my own agenda, I figure there might be other secret Control Girl operations going on too. Maybe you and I have more in common than we'd like to admit. But even if you'd prefer to remain a closet Control Girl rather than going public the way I have, there's something you should know. Somebody leaked our secret to the press, quite awhile ago.

Way back in Genesis 3, after the first woman lost the very first battle for control, God made it public. He told Eve that she would be cursed with an insatiable desire to take control—to force the things that look so good and right in *her* eyes (whether fruit from a tree or a wet towel on the floor) into the hands of her loved ones. She would not only crave control, she would be convinced that she *should* take control. Eve and all of her daughters would be Control Girls.

How many times have I lived out Eve's curse, believing that it was good and right to take control? The towel incident is only one of many scars on my memory from times I've gotten my hooks in and hurt the people I love.

What an ugly, diminished version of myself I become when I try to take control into my own hands! But sometimes God's hands seem so far away. His throne seems to sit so far above where I stand, reigning over the little heap on the floor. Can God really be trusted with my Happy Ending? Does he even care about the things that concern me?

He can, and he does. In fact, it's *because* God cares that he leans down to dangle the cord of my teeny-weeny controller before me.

Out of kindness, God exposes my lack of control and personally invites me to trust him—with the towel lying at my feet, with the end of the story, and with everything in between.

Proverbs 3:5–6 says,

Trust in the LORD with all your heart,
and do not lean on your own understanding.

In all your ways acknowledge him,
and he will make straight your paths.

This passage points me in the opposite direction of my Control Girl path. Rather than letting me lunge for control based on my limited perspective, God invites me to look up, surrender to him, and relish the fact that he's in control and I am not.

Friends, let's take a different path, shall we? Let's unclamp our sweaty hands from that illusion of control we've been gripping. Let's lay that broken, unplugged controller in the hands of the one who truly is in control: God.

- ☼ Take inventory of your life. Are you living as though *you're* in control or as though God is? What indications do you see?
- ☼ Read Proverbs 3:5–6 again, and list any contrast you see between these verses and the path of the Control Girl. Pray these verses over a situation you're tempted to control.
- ☼ List any cord-dangling moments God has used to expose your lack of control. Read Proverbs 3:11–12, and write “Proof that God loves me” above your list.

For Meditation: Proverbs 3:5–6

Rather than letting me continue in my illusion of control, God kindly exposes my lack of control and invites me to trust him instead. *God, thank you for reminding me that you are in control so I don't have to be.*