

the
cost
of

CONTROL

WHY WE CRAVE IT,
THE ANXIETY IT GIVES US,
AND THE REAL
POWER GOD PROMISES

SHARON HODDE MILLER

the cost of
CONTROL

WHY WE CRAVE IT,
THE ANXIETY IT GIVES US, AND
THE REAL POWER GOD PROMISES

SHARON HODDE MILLER



BakerBooks

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

© 2022 by Sharon Hodde Miller

Published by Baker Books
a division of Baker Publishing Group
PO Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287
www.bakerbooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—for example, electronic, photocopy, recording—without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Miller, Sharon Hodde, 1981– author.

Title: The cost of control : why we crave it, the anxiety it gives us, and the real power God promises / Sharon Hodde Miller.

Description: Grand Rapids, MI : Baker Books, a division of Baker Publishing Group, [2022]

Identifiers: LCCN 2021056305 | ISBN 9780801094934 (paperback) | ISBN 9781540902221 (casebound) | ISBN 9781493436156 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Control (Psychology)—Religious aspects—Christianity. | Influence (Psychology)—Religious aspects—Christianity.

Classification: LCC BV4597.53.C62 M55 2022 | DDC 155—dc23/eng/20220128

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2021056305>

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the Christian Standard Bible®, copyright © 2017 by Holman Bible Publishers. Used by permission. Christian Standard Bible® and CSB® are federally registered trademarks of Holman Bible Publishers.

Scripture quotations labeled ESV are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® (ESV®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved. ESV Text Edition: 2016

Scripture quotations labeled NIV are from THE HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®, NIV® Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

Author is represented by The Christopher Ferebee Agency, www.christopherferebee.com.

Baker Publishing Group publications use paper produced from sustainable forestry practices and post-consumer waste whenever possible.

22 23 24 25 26 27 28 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To my parents, Rich and Debbie Hodde.

Whenever my life spun out of control,
you modeled God's steadfast love for me.
It has been so much easier to trust my heavenly Father
because you showed me what he is like.

Contents

Preface 11

Introduction 15

PART I: WHY We Control

1. The Illusion of Control 25

2. How We Got Here 36

PART II: HOW We Control

3. Knowledge and Information 49

4. Power 61

5. Money 74

6. Autonomy 84

7. Theology 93

8. Shame 102

PART III: WHAT It Costs Us

9. Broken Relationships: The Toxic Impact of
Controlling Other People 113

10. Burnout: The Never-Ending Work of Controlling
Our Circumstances 123

Contents

- 11. Body Shame: The Impossible Ideal of Controlling Our Bodies 133
- 12. Anxiety: The Balancing Act of Controlling Our Reputations 146
- 13. Exhaustion: The Surprising Striving of Controlling Our Identities 156

PART IV: The REAL Power God Promises

- 14. The Power of Agency 167
- 15. The One Thing We Can Control 180

Acknowledgments 193

Notes 195

About the Author 201

Preface

In the late 1400s, in Heidelberg, Germany, there lived an alchemist, astrologer, and magician named Johann Georg Faust. The details of his life vary depending on the source, but he was well known as a trickster and a fraud. Frequently expelled from cities for performing horoscopes and sham miracles, Faust developed a reputation so widespread and notorious that Martin Luther was said to have speculated Faust had made a deal with the devil.

When he died in 1540, Faust's life quickly became the stuff of legend. Fifty years after his death, the poet and playwright Christopher Marlowe penned *The Tragical History of the Life and Death of Doctor Faustus*, a fictional version of the man's life that sealed his name in history.

In Marlowe's play, Doctor Faustus is a well-respected scholar who pursues knowledge as an obsession. Science, medicine, logic, theology, law—Faustus has mastered them all, but none of it is enough. He craves more knowledge and more power, and he dreams of all he can accomplish if he acquires them. So, Faustus turns to the only remaining option available to him: magic.

Soon he begins practicing the dark arts. One day while experimenting with spells and incantations, he summons a devil into his presence, and Faustus sees this as an opportunity. He dispatches the demon to its master, Lucifer, with specific instructions for

Preface

making a deal. In exchange for his soul, Faustus requests twenty-four years of the demon's service, along with absolute power.

Lucifer happily agrees, and for twenty-four years Faustus is free to do whatever he pleases, though he uses the power to accomplish surprisingly little. As the term of their agreement draws to a close, Faustus wakes up to the reality of his own folly and becomes desperate to escape the consequences of their deal. He briefly considers turning to Jesus for help, but he ponders the option too long. In the final scene of the play, Faustus's soul is dragged off by devils and his body is torn to shreds.

This play is where we get the term "Faustian bargain." It has become the template for countless tales, each delivering the same cautionary message: When you make a deal with the devil, you lose much more than you gain.

Of course, that insight was not original to Marlowe. While Faust was the obvious inspiration for his work, one can't help but wonder if Marlowe was also influenced by a much older story, one that took place thousands of years earlier in a garden in the Middle East. It's a story that has been told again and again, repurposed and repackaged for thousands of years, because it contains a timeless lesson we are still reluctant to accept:

Whenever we reach for control to save us,
it always comes with a cost.



**“No! You will certainly not die,”
the serpent said to the woman.**

Genesis 3:4

Introduction

In March 2020, the world as I knew it ground to a halt. I had spent the weeks prior in ignorant bliss, paying little attention to a new virus called COVID-19. In January of that year, my husband, Ike, and I took our church's college students to a conference with fifty thousand people. In late February, our family traveled to Disney World, where we milled around with thousands of other tourists. I noticed the occasional news story about cases popping up on the West Coast, but I brushed it all off as nothing. Like many others, I assumed it would be fine.

And then, just a couple weeks after we returned home from Florida, our entire school system shut down. We canceled our church's worship services "for two weeks," and we learned a new term called "social distancing." Before we knew it, we were buying masks, stocking up on hand sanitizer, and tumbling headfirst into the chaotic new reality of homeschooling our kids while leading our church remotely.

The whole thing felt like a draconian psychological experiment from the 1950s: *How do people respond when you threaten them with a strange virus and deprive them of human connection?*

As it turns out, not great.

In the immediate aftermath of the lockdown, I found myself combing through website after website trying to understand what was happening. I obsessively checked my temperature. I stalked

our local news sites. I read every chart, every graph, every new piece of information I could get my hands on to try to anticipate what was next.

Meanwhile, our home life had devolved into a suburban *Lord of the Flies*. Ike and I divided our workdays in half so that one of us was teaching the kids while the other was working. This seemed like a clever plan at first, but instead it left us both feeling stretched to the limit and constantly behind. No matter how much I cut back on my responsibilities, I felt like I was leading our church badly and parenting even worse. During one particular stretch of months, I found myself feeling angry all the time. *Why won't my kids listen? Why can't they be quiet for just ten minutes while I send an email? Why haven't their teachers checked in?* I yelled at my children more than I had in their entire lives in this period of the pandemic, which means I also apologized to my children more than I had in their entire lives.

My experience, of course, was not unique. Every single one of us lost the comfort of our daily rhythms, while some lost their livelihoods and others lost family and friends. Our circumstances were different and our pain points diverse, but we all experienced some form of disorientation.

And yet, in spite of the fact that none of us had done this before, in spite of the fact that literally no one knew what was going to happen, none of this stopped people from dispensing advice. Heaps of it! When I scrolled through social media, I saw post after post about what we should or should not do. How we should or should not make use of this time at home. How we should or should not be responsible and safe. Some optimistically viewed the pandemic as a time of transformation. “Make the most of it!” “Emerge from your home like a transformed butterfly!” Others encouraged the exact opposite. “Do NOT make the most of it. Be gentle with yourself. This is a *lot*.”

The flood of conflicting advice gave the world a manic feel. We were, collectively, trying to get a handle on the situation, and we were, collectively, failing at it.

All of this was revealing. The pandemic was exposing everything underneath our carefully curated exteriors. We each had a front-row seat to what was really going on in our souls and others'—mine included—and as challenging as it was in the moment, it also helped me connect the dots of a mental health trend I had been trying to understand for years.

The Mysterious Rise in Anxiety

Years prior to the pandemic, I began to notice a recurring conversation with people in our church, especially our college students. Our church is located in Durham, North Carolina, near three major universities, which means I am constantly meeting with students. For the last several years, I would go out to coffee or go on a walk or invite a few students over to hang out, and without fail the conversation would find its way to the topic of anxiety. Whether it was the anxiety of the student I was talking to or the anxiety of one of their friends, I began to realize that a startling number of our students were anguished about school, about getting a job, about life in general.

The American Psychiatric Association defines *anxiety* simply as “anticipation of a future concern,”¹ but it can take many forms with varying levels of intensity and impact, and I observed this spectrum in our students. The level of their anxiety ranged all over—from a vague gnawing to a constant pulsing stress to paralyzing, life-inhibiting panic attacks—but the trend was undeniable.

Once this pattern was on my radar, I began to notice it in other people too, like the young moms in my neighborhood or at my kids' schools. Women my age, with children the same age as my children, were wracked with anxiety about nursing their newborns, deciding where to put their kids in school, and generally doing what is best for their children. The start of kindergarten was a five-alarm emergency of overwhelm.

And then there were the pastors. I know a lot of pastors throughout the country who struggle with anxiety. I have spoken with some

who had panic attacks before going on stage, and my own husband went through a season of ministry-induced anxiety as well. While serving as a young adult pastor at one church, there was a short period of time in which it was all I could do to show up for church on Sunday mornings.

Everywhere I looked, I saw anxiety. I saw it in the people in our church, I saw it on social media, I saw it in our politics, I saw it on the news. And once I saw it, I couldn't unsee it, so I wanted to understand what was going on and trace the threads back to what it all meant.

In my digging, I discovered a twenty-five-year study of individuals aged sixteen to seventy-one that found that between 1980 and 2005 anxiety levels had increased among men by 4.4 percent, and among women it had increased by roughly 6 percent. In young adults, however, the increase was far more dramatic. The anxiety levels among men aged sixteen to twenty-three had more than doubled, while the levels among women had tripled.²

The most recent research is even more alarming. Between 2011 and 2018 a survey of college students found that “rates of moderate to severe anxiety rose from 17.9 percent in 2013 to 34.4 percent in 2018.”³ In other words, the rate of increase is, itself, increasing.

What makes this trend especially puzzling is that young people are growing up safer than any generation prior. In her book *iGen: Why Today's Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy—and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood—and What That Means for the Rest of Us*, psychologist Jean Twenge notices that, in contrast with boomer and Gen X children, who grew up “free to roam around their neighborhood,” Gen Z kids are “supervised at every moment,”⁴ and this supervision has paid off. Young adults born after 1995 are safer than ever. They are safer drivers and are less likely to get into car accidents.⁵ They are also less likely to binge drink or use marijuana,⁶ less likely to get into physical fights, less likely to be victims of homicide, and are generally more cautious and

risk averse. Parents have succeeded in keeping this generation of young people very physically safe, which is what makes the rise in anxiety even more curious. Why are we more anxious when there is seemingly less to fear?

Because these statistics have been spiking so dramatically, I am not the only one who has noticed the trend. Psychologists and pastors alike have been trying to understand the sudden surge in anxiety. What we want to know is, *What has changed from before?* What new factor is causing this? The trouble is, there isn't just one answer. The problem of anxiety is multifaceted, complex, and cannot be boiled down to one thing. However, the pandemic did shed some light on it, because for so many of us, it brought out our anxiety in full force.

Prior to the pandemic, many of us were paying attention to the link between anxiety and pace of life. The rise in our collective anxiety coincided with the introduction of the smartphone, which led to the conclusion that we are overwhelmed by the speed and accessibility it provides. The flood of information, combined with the hyperconnectivity of the internet, is overstimulating and anxiety-inducing. The answer to this problem, logically, is to slow down and simplify.

I agree. This conclusion is right and helpful and important to understand. Spiritual disciplines, like silence and Sabbath, have anchored Christians for centuries, and they can anchor us now.

However.

The chance to slow down and simplify is, in some sense, what the pandemic gave many of us. While the nationwide shutdown threw our rhythms into disarray, destabilized our work/home balance, and hurled us into the steep learning curve of doing our jobs virtually, it also decreased the items on our daily schedules. It canceled our kids' extracurriculars, evaporated our overstuffed social lives, and all but eliminated our drive times. What it did not do was take our anxiety with it.

Instead, our anxiety spiked.

This response to the pandemic provided me with the missing puzzle piece to the question I had been asking for years. When the pandemic robbed us of certainty and predictability, it laid bare an idol that had been strangling us, invisibly, for years.

Why is our culture chronically anxious? One major factor is our relationship with control.

Naming the Problem

Our craving for control is not new. It dates all the way back to the very first humans, who chose their own sovereignty over God's. At the same time, our relationship with control has shifted and evolved because of our particular cultural moment, and that change has had consequences that *are* new. In the first two chapters of this book, we will look at this shift, and from there we will examine the primary ways we seek to control our lives and what that seeking is costing us. This book is composed of four major sections:

- I. WHY We Control
- II. HOW We Control
- III. WHAT It Costs Us
- IV. The REAL Power God Promises

The first section looks at the psychology and theology of control, the second looks at the primary tools of control, and the third examines the fallout. Only in the fourth section—the final two chapters—do I explain the solution. Based on this layout, you may notice that much of this book is devoted simply to naming and explaining the problem of control. That is an intentional decision, but I want you to understand why.

I am increasingly convinced we aren't giving enough time and attention to naming. By that I mean we aren't giving enough time to naming what is really going on in our culture, in our institutions,

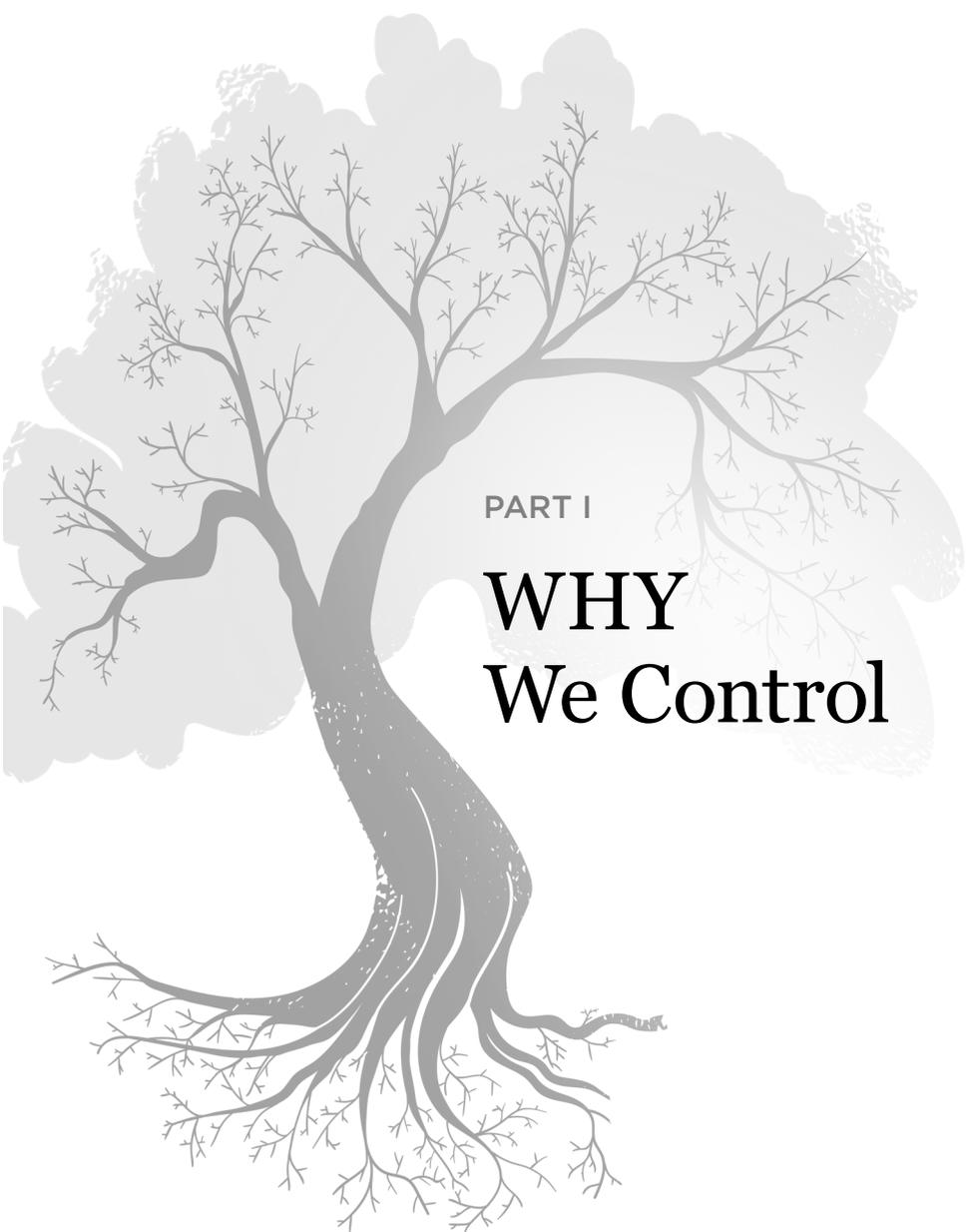
and in our hearts. Naming does not seem like much of an action verb, but there is no clearer example of the power of naming than in medicine.

Years ago I went to the hospital with excruciating pain in my stomach. It was so debilitating that the EMS workers found me groaning on the floor in agony, but once I arrived at the hospital, my doctor chalked it up to “just gas.”

“Gas can be very painful,” he explained to me somewhat patronizingly. “I bet you’ll feel better in the morning!” I can’t remember if he actually patted me on the head while he said this or if I am just remembering it that way, but after I restrained myself from screaming, “I have given birth, DUDE. This is not *gas*!” I got a second opinion and sure enough, it wasn’t gas. It was gallstones. And once I named it correctly, I was able to treat it appropriately.

Our souls are the same. If we settle for superficial assessments (“It’s just sin!”), we will address the problem superficially, and even incorrectly. This is why naming matters. I’ve heard it said that “when you name it, you tame it,” and I have found that to be true. It is, after all, an insight that comes to us straight from Scripture. God’s first act of naming was to name the light “day,” and this action has forever intertwined “naming” with “light.” Whenever we name something correctly, we bring it into the light, and only then can we see it clearly and engage it for what it is.

This naming cannot be rushed. When we jump to the solution without properly understanding the problem, it’s easy to get the solution wrong. I could write a whole other book on all the problems we have misnamed, but for now, I will focus the majority of this book on naming. When we name and explain the problem of control correctly, much of the dysfunction takes care of itself. That is the sheer power of naming. It disarms the influences that are influencing us by bringing them out of the shadows and into the light.



PART I

WHY We Control

The Illusion of Control

In 2009 a Christian talk radio host named Harold Camping predicted that the world was going to end. He based this prediction on a formula derived from Old Testament and New Testament events, which led him to the precise calculation of May 21, 2011.¹ Camping was so certain of his prediction that his network, *Family Radio*, spent millions of dollars canvassing the United States with warnings of a coming judgment. For two years they broadcast their predictions, purchased thousands of billboards, and translated booklets into seventy-five languages to get the message out.

The strategy was effective. Camping's followers prepared for the end by quitting their jobs, rushing into marriages, running up credit card debt, or conversely, giving all their possessions away. Among the most tragic stories was of a woman who attempted to kill her two daughters—aged eleven and fourteen—in order to spare them from witnessing the coming events. Thankfully they survived, but some of Camping's other followers did not. A handful of his disciples ended their lives in anticipation of the date.²

I still remember when all of this happened. It was a major news story that many of us followed with mournful compassion, while others simply mocked. But as the May 21 deadline came and went,

Camping's followers snapped out of their fanaticism and woke up to the reality that his predictions were wrong.

Years later I met a young woman whose family had been taken in by Camping's influence. She had been a college student at the time, and she dropped out of school to prepare for the predicted rapture. She remembers sending hundreds of emails to her friends, warning them to prepare. When the prediction failed, she was devastated. Her story is just one of many. Camping's false prediction resulted in catastrophic life upheaval, spiritual disillusionment, and years of therapy for many of the people who believed him.

To this day, there are still two aspects of Camping's movement that boggle my mind. To begin with, this was not Camping's first failed prediction. He had actually been wrong before! Nearly twenty years earlier, Camping calculated that the world would end on September 4 or 6, 1994.³ When his initial prediction proved incorrect, that should have been the end of Camping's influence. It should have been clear to his colleagues and followers alike that he was a false prophet. Why he was ever given a second chance is beyond me.

But just as puzzling as his unearned credibility was his blatant contradiction of Scripture. In Mark 13:32–33 Jesus warns, “Now concerning that day or hour **no one knows**—neither the angels in heaven nor the Son—but only the Father. Watch! Be alert! For you don't know when the time is coming” (emphasis added).

Jesus is not ambiguous here. No one knows when the last day will come, not even the Son himself. That is the terrible irony of figures like Camping who scrutinize the dates and events in Scripture to crack the code of when the world will end only to overlook such obvious and direct words from Christ.

To those of us standing on the outside looking in, it doesn't make any sense. And yet, Camping was not unique. He belongs to a long line of Christians—some very well known!—who believed they could predict the end of the world. Going all the way back to the early church, here is just a sampling of the false predictions Christians have made about the end of the world:

- Hippolytus of Rome predicted the world would end in 500.
- The French bishop Gregory of Tours predicted the world would end between 799 and 806.
- The famous theologian Martin Luther thought the world would end no later than 1600.
- Christopher Columbus predicted 1658.
- John Wesley, the father of Methodism, thought it would be no later than 1836.
- Pat Robertson, who is best known from his role as host of *The 700 Club*, once predicted that the world would end in 1976.⁴

These are among the most prominent examples, but there are countless more. Despite Jesus’s obvious warning, Christian history is chock-full of hubristic end-times predictions, all of which raise a nagging question: **Why does this keep happening?**

Why have so many Christians confidently predicted the end of the world, in direct contradiction with Jesus? For Pete’s sake, Martin Luther might as well have had his motto, *sola scriptura* (“Scripture alone”), tattooed across his chest, and here he is, attempting to know something that Scripture explicitly tells us cannot be known. Clearly the temptation to predict the future is so strong that Christians have undermined their own ideals to discover it.

But why?

I recently listened to a podcast interview with church historian Sarah Hinlicky Wilson who discussed this exact topic—why so many Christians have made false predictions—and the answer she gave was this: **humans cannot tolerate uncertainty.**⁵ When we look back on the history of the church, as well as the history of the world, we see humanity rebelling against the limitations of our own knowledge and control by claiming insight that God has not given us and asserting control we do not possess. We do

this, Wilson argued, because we find uncertainty and the lack of control simply “intolerable.”

As it turns out, psychologists agree with Wilson. In fact, nearly a century of psychological research has confirmed her exact conclusion, and I want to share with you a very small taste of their findings. What follows is only a flyover summary, but it confirms the deep, human intolerance for uncertainty. When we cannot bear our lack of control any longer, we find ways to *feel* in control, and this coping mechanism is so common and widespread that psychologists have even given it a name.

The Psychology of Control

First, let’s define exactly what we mean by the word *control*, because it is an umbrella term that can refer to many different things, including power, certainty, choice, and self-determination. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines *control* as “the power to influence or direct people’s behavior or the course of events,”⁶ and the American Psychological Association defines it similarly: “authority, power, or influence over events, behaviors, situations, or people.”⁷

These definitions are helpful but still a bit incomplete, because control is also about a feeling. It is the word we use to describe our sense of empowerment, or lack thereof.

In her book *It’s All Under Control: A Journey of Letting Go, Hanging On, and Finding a Peace You Almost Forgot Was Possible*, Jennifer Dukes Lee digs underneath the textbook definition of control to capture the deeper motivation that drives it. She interprets the craving for control as believing “I’m safer and more secure if I’m in charge.”⁸ I like this description because it gets at the intangible quality of control. Control is not just about actual influence, but the *feeling* of power attached to it. So, for the purposes of this book, I am going to define control as “**the power to influence the world around us and the sense of empowerment that gives us.**”

Now that we have a working definition, I want to give you an ever-so-brief look at some of the research into the topic of control, because it explains a lot.

For much of the last century, psychologists have tried to understand why we crave control. One of the most significant, early voices in this research was a psychologist named Abraham Maslow, who famously developed the Hierarchy of Needs. First writing about this in the 1940s, Maslow described the Hierarchy of Needs as a “theory of human motivation,” which was meant to explain why we do the things we do.

According to Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs, individuals are motivated to fulfill their most basic needs first, before they can even think about needs on any other level. As Maslow explained it, our most basic needs are Physiological (food, water, sleep) and Safety (shelter). Once these needs are satisfied, we are then motivated by the Need for Love and Belonging and the Need for Self-Esteem. Our final need, the one at the top of the pyramid, is the Need for Self-Actualization. We ascend to this level only once all our other needs are met.⁹

In this hierarchy, Maslow placed *control* on the level of Safety.¹⁰ He believed that in order for us to feel safe, we require a basic level of control and predictability in our lives. If everything is unstable, chaotic, or dangerous, we will struggle to thrive.

A few decades after Maslow first proposed this theory, another psychologist named Ellen Langer revealed that our relationship with control is a bit more complicated, arguing that the human craving for control goes beyond our basic necessities. The urge to have control is so strong (and, one might argue, idolatrous) that we will *imagine control* even when we have none. Based on this theory, she coined the term the “**illusion of control**,” which explains all sorts of behaviors and practices, like superstitions. When an athlete wears the same socks during the playoffs, for example, he is inventing an *illusion of control* to cope with his lack of control over the games. This term also describes the subconscious behaviors we

may not even realize we are engaging in but still give us a feeling of power. For instance, one study observed that casino players roll the dice harder for large numbers and softer for smaller numbers, as if rolling it harder or softer can control the number they roll.¹¹

Langer wrote about the illusion of control in 1975, and since that time there have been scores of studies examining our desire for control, the ways we seek the feeling of it, and what happens when we fail to acquire it. The conclusion of these studies was that regardless of our actual control over a situation, we experience some benefit from simply believing we have control. Study after study has shown a link between feeling out of control and experiencing anxiety disorders.¹² But on the flip side, people who feel in control experience less anxiety, whether or not that feeling is tied to reality.

Now, if you just glazed over during those last few paragraphs, here is what it all boils down to: The illusion of control is powerful. If we *feel* like we are in control, it doesn't matter if we actually are. That is how influential the illusion of control is for the human imagination. Whether it is the foods we avoid to prevent cancer or the extensive plans we make for an upcoming vacation, these decisions are no guarantee of anything at all, but they make us *feel* better in the meantime.

What we've covered is only the tip of the iceberg. I could include many studies here, but I think it's fair to say that the desire for control is a human pathology. We as individuals and we as a culture crave control so desperately that we will reject reality and live in denial of our limitations for as long as we possibly can.

The Biblical Truth in These Studies

“All truth is God's truth.” This was a favorite saying of my doctoral advisor, who frequently reminded my classmates and me that while we cannot add to the truths contained in Scripture, God has woven his truths into the fabric of creation. The research

on control is a good example of this, because it bears witness to three biblical truths.

Humans Require Some Level of Stability, Security, and Physical Provision to Thrive

We see the importance of this in studies of child development. When a child's basic needs are not met, we call it "neglect." As a positive example, we see these basic needs being met in the garden of Eden. Adam and Eve didn't have *control* over the garden, but they possessed everything necessary to flourish.

The goodness of stability is also affirmed by the creation story in Genesis. God was not the author of chaos, but the organizer of it. When we look at his original design, we see order and stability. Conversely, when we yearn for order in our lives, that yearning is a spiritual nostalgia, an ache for a world that once existed and was ordained by God.

In short, it's okay to crave stability. God put that desire inside of you.

Humans Do Not Have Control, But We Do Have Agency

Agency is an important aspect of our human design. We will get into this concept in the fourth section of the book, but suffice it to say that we were not created to be puppets or prisoners. From day one, God instilled humanity with a power and an influence that he commissioned us to exercise in the world. Prior to the fall, we experienced this God-given capacity freely and perfectly; now we pant after it for a salvation it cannot provide. But we must not overlook the reality that our desire for control is also the distorted echo of something good.

Humans Are Prone to Self-Deceive

Again and again, these studies describe our stubborn refusal to face the truth. We would rather imagine a reality in which we have control—control over our future, our kids, our circumstances,

the end of the world!—than be honest with ourselves, which gives a whole new meaning to the term “my truth.” When it comes to control, we are quite literally willing to invent a personalized version of reality.

This brings us back to Christian prophets and their false predictions. Why did they do it? Why did they continue to issue those prophecies, despite Jesus’s expressed warning not to? Why did so many Christians believe Camping, even after his first prediction failed?

Because our resistance to reality is so strong, and our intolerance for uncertainty so deep, we will imagine control where there is none, and rebrand it as biblical insight.

What Happens When the Illusion Is Shattered

All of this leads us to the big, glaring problem with the illusion of control. While it seems harmless and even helpful (after all, it lowers our anxiety!), we cannot escape the fact that we are seeking refuge in a lie. The illusion of control allows us to retreat from reality, which feels great for a time, until the illusion is shattered.

Recalling Jean Twenge’s research on Gen Z, and why the safest generation is also the most anxious, Twenge suggests the shattered illusion of control might be behind the growing levels of anxiety and emotional fragility in young people. She explains that children and teens today “spend more years fully aware that they are safe and protected in the cocoon of childhood. When they go to college, they suddenly feel unprotected and vulnerable.” Boomers and Gen Xers, on the other hand, are “more likely to have experienced freedom before they went to college” and therefore “had a less jarring adjustment to make.”¹³ All of which leads Twenge to conclude: “We have what might be a trade-off. In keeping [our kids] physically safe, they are less emotionally safe.”¹⁴

That “jarring” transition from illusion to reality is exactly what we experienced in the pandemic. When it first hit, it felt like everything in our lives had spun completely out of control, but the pandemic did not take away our control. It is not as if we had been living in a world where pandemics did not exist. Scientists had been warning of a pandemic for years. No, it was not the world that changed. What changed was our perception of the world. What the pandemic took away was not our power to predict, or our certainty about the future, but our illusion of those things, and this accounts for the surge of anxiety that immediately followed the shutdowns across the country. If the illusion of control lowers anxiety and that illusion was shattered, it is no wonder the entire world spiraled into a panic. We were confronted with a reality we had long worked to deny, and the pandemic exposed our spiritual lack of preparedness for it.

That is why, in the next chapter, we are going to pivot from psychology to theology. I am not, after all, a psychologist, so I want to be very clear that this book is not a sweeping solution to the problem of anxiety. Too often, leaders in the church offer spiritual solutions to psychological problems, but that is not what I am proposing. Human beings are multifaceted, which means we require different types of care. That is why we seek medical care *and* spiritual care. You don’t go to your pastor for a broken back, but you might ask your pastor for spiritual guidance as you heal. Likewise, many of you reading this may need the expertise of a licensed therapist. If your anxiety is disrupting your daily functioning, I hope you will seek help from a trained and qualified counselor. But whether or not that is the appropriate step for you, my hope is to support you spiritually along the way.

On that note, there is one more biblical truth that the earlier research illuminates, and it explains why we struggle with control in the first place. Simply put, **this world is not as it should be**. Behind every struggle for control is a hurting person searching for peace in a chaotic world. That’s all it really is, and God

knows this, which is why he sent his Son to rescue us, once and for all.

In the meantime, as we wait on that rescue mission to be completed, our lack of control can be frightening. Especially whenever the illusion of control begins to crack and the reality of our vulnerability starts breaking in. When this happens—when we lose our jobs, when our plans don't work out, or when someone we love passes away—our human nature scrambles after another illusion to provide us with comfort and control, because this is how humans cope.

I will be the first to admit I know this temptation well. I understand the urge to retreat into an illusion of my own making, because I can feel so much more in control there. I have fought this impulse even while writing this book, which is why, as someone walking this path beside you, I want to commission you with this truth:

When the news of the world is frightening, the diagnosis is discouraging, or the future foreboding, humans seek refuge in illusion. That is, as history tells us, what humans do.

But we are not just humans.

We are disciples.

Not disciples of an illusion, but disciples of Christ.

Which means our hope is not in an illusion.

Our rescue is not in an illusion.

Our peace is not in an illusion.

And our joy is not in an illusion.

To be a disciple of Jesus is to profess that **it is the Truth, not an illusion, that sets us free**, and this conviction is what distinguishes us as the people of God. As Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann once put it, the prophetic task of the church is to tell the truth in a society that lives in illusion.¹⁵

That is our work and our hope. In a world that craves control, seeks refuge in a lie, and lives in utter dread of facing reality, we, the disciples of Truth, do not have to be afraid.

A Prayer for Illumination

Jesus, this world feels out of control. Very often, I feel out of control. I want to fix things, or know what is going to happen, and deep down, I do not believe I can have peace any other way. Open my eyes to the illusion of this thinking. Reveal to me the mirages of control that I breathlessly pant after, and instill in me a craving for the truth, rather than a lie. You say that the Truth will set me free, and I believe, but help my unbelief.

Amen.

Questions for Self-Examination

1. How do you cope with unpredictability or lack of control?
2. Do you think humans have any control at all? If so, what do we have control over?
3. In what area of your life do you most crave control right now?