

“Connected to many of life’s anxieties, control freakery is a burden we were never meant to bear.

With readable honesty and humour, Jonny Ivey penetrates to the heart of our desire to control: in life’s chaotic seas, will we grip the reins of our efforts or trust the reign of the King? Richly bringing Scripture to life, this book leads us to prayerful stewardship of things that overwhelm us. Fittingly, each chapter ends with a prayer to the One who truly is in control.

For all of us who struggle with things outside of our control, *Control Freak* will help us to slow down, surrender to Christ, and let our restless hearts find true rest in him.”

Andrew Collins, Certificate Programme Director,
Biblical Counselling UK, biblical counsellor, and
former consultant psychiatrist

“We say we believe in God’s sovereignty, but how often do our lives tell a different story?

For closet control freaks, and even overt ones, this book is pure gold. It exposes the fruitlessness of trying to tame an uncontrollable world and the burden of carrying a weight of responsibility we were never designed to bear. Full of hope, it points us to true and lasting rest found only in our Father’s love and care, and in surrendering to him not just for salvation, but every day.”

Elizabeth McQuoid, Commissioning Editor,
Keswick Ministries

“In this short but powerful book, Jonny Ivey describes how our desire for control leads instead to a life that is absolutely out of control. Speaking from Scripture and his lived experience, he explains why personal sovereignty can never offer the security

we really want ... and how only the gospel offers a true solution.

As he says, 'We do not find life by tirelessly working for greater and greater control over the world, but by a deliberate surrender, an intentional letting go, of it.'

This book goes beyond bumper-sticker platitudes to show how the present and future reign of Jesus mean we can deal with all that happens in life, especially when it is beyond our control. True security is found in surrender, and Jonny shows us how God's reign brings rest and refuge in the face of sickness, mortality, suffering, and grief."

Emma Scrivener, blogger and author,
A New Name and *A New Day*

Control Freak

*Let your restless heart meet
the reign of Christ*

Jonny Ivey

Union

*Control Freak: Let your restless heart meet
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For Dr. Paul Fairchild—
thank you.

A (Very) Personal Preface

When others hear that you're a control freak or "a bit OCD," they smile. But in my experience, the desire to control my world has been no laughing matter. On multiple—no, *many*—occasions, it's brought me to places too dark for the opening paragraph of a book. And while, by God's grace, I've come a long way, my craving for control is hardly a thing of the past.

Please picture the scene. Right now, it's midday, and I've come up to my bedroom in the conference centre where I'm staying. I'm in the UK's beautiful Peak District for a five-day study residential. I've just sat through a seminar on Jesus' glory as revealed at his transfiguration. I was listening, but I heard nothing. I was physically present, but I wasn't there. And why? Well, let me put it bluntly: because I was—I *am*—convinced that these symptoms in my legs, in my muscles, in ... well, almost every part of my body, are sure signs of a life-threatening disease. But even that still seems to sanitise what I'm feeling. So let me try again: *I'm convinced I'm going to die. Soon.*

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Over the last two decades, my campaign against chaos and craving for control has taken many forms—financial planning, weight loss, schedule management—and in such cases, I've been able to convince myself that, with a bit of effort, I really can subdue my world. But perhaps this is why health anxiety has had such a crippling impact on my life: because there really is nothing I can do—there's no Excel spreadsheet or week plan I can exercise dominion over—to avoid a freak cell mutation or a malevolent misfire in my brain. I'm at the mercy of an untamable world, a sitting duck flapping its wings to no avail.

Perhaps it's this very fear—or maybe it's the rare cyst sitting at the base of my spine—that has meant that relatively few days have gone by without my experiencing some new pain, ache, or twinge. My restless mind interprets these symptoms as inevitable signs of my impending demise. For some reason, convincing myself that I'm facing the worst-case scenario is better than not knowing one way or the other. If it's got a label, then it can be diagnosed; if it can be diagnosed, then it can be managed, responded to ... *controlled*. Apparently, the worst news is not a world-shattering illness; it is a world that is scarily out of my control.

This time round the label is *motor neurone disease*, due primarily to the near-constant muscle twitches and weakness in my legs. But over the years, stomach pains have been to me sure signs of bowel cancer; headaches have undoubtedly been brain tumours. The doctors send me for tests and scans, but there's never a diagnosis—only the reassurance that it's nothing to worry about. At least, not this time.

But the worry continues, because who knows what tomorrow might bring? In a vain attempt to achieve some kind of dominion over an uncontrollable future, I wake up to an unsolicited

assessment of my survival chances, taking stock of the current symptoms and sensations. *How does it feel this morning? Has the weakness moved to your right side too? Perhaps that's a good thing—weakness in only one side is concerning, right? Why do you feel dizzy? Is it anxiety? Try and relax and see if it's still there ... No, still dizzy ... But were you relaxed?*

If only such attempts to restore order could spit out a definitive answer, I'd be at peace. But to date, they never have. And so restlessness rules the day, weeks ... and years. People may smile at my being a control freak, but I've never found it fun, or funny, in the slightest.

The controlling question

To be clear, the primary issue here is not health, and this isn't a book about anxiety. The issue is control, and my own mortality is simply the most effective reminder of how little of it I have. Our inability to tame our world brings with it a whole raft of restlessness that gnaws and chews at our minds: *What if I lose my job? What if my kids are bullied? What will happen if I don't finish this or that on time? What if I fail?* We wrestle daily with financial fears, reputational fears, vocational fears, social fears, and more. Our minds run amok with both real and perceived threats. And behind all the particular evaluations of the day—the risk-assessments and their gloomy conclusions—it all boils down to one controlling question, the answer to which we're desperate to know. In my experience, it's usually the question I arrive at when the overwhelming weight of an uncontrollable world bears down so heavily on me that my sheer powerlessness to do anything at all feels crushing. It's the question I often ask the ceiling in a whisper as I lie on my bed at the end of weeks of self-inquisition and fear. It's the fretful question of a child looking for parental

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consolation. And it's the one I'm asking right now, alone in this room. *Will everything be okay?*

All those issues that my heart wrestles with and my mind chews over—that relationship, the prospect of unemployment, my marriage, my health, my kids, what people think of me, my finances—well ... *will it all be all right in the end? And what can I do to make sure that it is?*

Just writing these questions down helps me grasp how almost every day of my life is an attempt to engineer my circumstances to a time when I can sit down to truly and finally say, “Yes, everything is as it should be. Everything has worked out as it should have. Everything's under control.”

But that's a fantasy. And yet it's a fantasy that my heart seems to believe. I so often behave as though all the effort I expend on emotional wrangling and precise planning will bring about such a time. But it hasn't, and it won't. Never will I have complete control over my life. And without it, if I'm honest, the world feels scary, and I feel unsafe.

Control controls everything

Let's face it: whoever we are, whatever our battle with control looks like, and however much or little we despise chaos, we *all* feel unsafe. We lack security. Perhaps your own control issues make my now two-decade battle with health anxiety look tame. You have experienced the depths of anorexia, or your OCD locks you up daily in your own home. Or perhaps you're reading this simply hoping that it might just help you to chill out a bit about life after exams or go to bed without checking twice that every door's locked. Or you've got the daily pressure of not being able to secure an income, or a relationship, or peace of mind amidst so many unknowns.

A (Very) Personal Preface

Well, one of the core assumptions of this book is that desiring control is not the preserve of one category of human being; rather, it is the unfortunate diagnosis of every human heart. Whether you more routinely experience the craving for control when looking at a budget spreadsheet, rehearsing a difficult conversation in your mind, or running for a train, or whether your pursuit of control is so entrenched that you cannot eat a meal without counting its calories, or whether you lie so often in order to control the narrative that you've forgotten how to tell the truth, or you feel paralysed by fear of the future—from the mundane to the massive, the craving for control controls our lives. No matter who we are or how much of an issue we consider control to be, we are all vulnerable, all scared in this world, so we all want some degree of dominion to shore things up.

This is so important to acknowledge, because as long as we're scared, we cannot experience that precious gift for which God created us: *joy*. Joy and fear are poor bedfellows. In fact, they've never shared a bed at all. So, if we are going to experience the joy that God created us for, each one of us has to face the issue of control head-on.

The way ahead

One of the much-cited reasons for the success of the *Alcoholics Anonymous* programme is its conviction that alcoholics must acknowledge their addiction and admit their absolute powerlessness to change apart from outside intervention. New participants integrate themselves into a graciously welcoming fellowship with the words: "Hi, I'm Jim, and I'm an alcoholic" (if your name's Jim, of course).

For our purposes, I suggest something similar. A way forward requires us to acknowledge both that we are addicted

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to control and that, without outside intervention, we cannot change ourselves.

“Hi, I’m Jonny, and I’m a control freak. I’m scared, and I need help.”

Have a go. Smiles and reassuring pats on the back won’t cut it. We need something better. And the reason I’ve written this book is that I truly believe that the God of the Bible has given us that something better: he has given us *himself* in the person of Jesus Christ. Through *his* outside intervention, he has graciously welcomed us into the church, a welcoming fellowship of recovering addicts. And this changes everything—not only in how it recalibrates our daily desire for dominion, but also in how it holds out the hope of change, not as a possibility but as a promise.

Imagine if your first waking thought in the morning was the peace of mind of knowing that whatever the day had in store, nothing could ultimately harm you. Imagine if flicking through the news on your phone was informative, but it never made you feel insecure, fearful, or restless. Imagine a world where you never felt you had to convince anyone of your way, where you never went to bed with thoughts racing through your mind, and where and where decisions, with all of their possible implications, didn’t frighten you. Imagine a world where you weren’t frantically holding out for someone to give you the decision or outcome you wanted. Imagine having a measured steadfastness as you entered the hospital for your test results, or holding loosely to how the next five years might turn out, or receiving your present circumstances, above anything else, as a gift. Imagine the experience of being totally *secure* in all you do, all you say, all you are.

That’d be a good life, wouldn’t it?

A (Very) Personal Preface

Well, I'm sure that after reaching this point in the preface, you won't be surprised to hear that I'm not known for my optimism, let alone idealism. But what if we have every reason for optimism? What if this kind of life is not an idealistic fantasy but simply *is* the Christian life to which we've been called through the very precious promises of a good-hearted Father and sovereign King who plans for our good and powerfully brings those plans about? What if he doesn't promise to lift us immediately out of the precarious world of cancer, car crashes, and cost-of-living crises but calls us into a kingdom that cannot, like our lives in *this* world, be shaken? (see Heb. 12:28)

Over the next three chapters, we will diagnose the depths of the disease that control has brought into our lives. This will allow the scalpel of God's Word to cut deeply, for it is only by that depth that we will be able to grasp the glories of Jesus Christ, whose love goes deeper still, and by whose gentle care any wounds inflicted on our troubled souls are bound and healed completely.

If our time together reveals only the faintest glimpse of this Jesus, all he has won for us, and all that he is for us, then the painstaking task of writing this book will have been worth it—for myself as much as for you.

Soli Deo Gloria

You boast, “We have entered into a covenant with death,
with the realm of the dead we have made an agreement.
When an overwhelming scourge sweeps by,
it cannot touch us,
for we have made a lie our refuge
and falsehood our hiding place.”

Isaiah 28:15

Restlessness:
Our Angst in an
Uncontrollable World

The Burden of Counterfeit Control

She was a lovely lady, and her words were warm.

“Jonny,” smiled the careers advisor at my sixteen-year-old self. “You can go wherever you want, be whoever you want, and do whatever you want.” This *anywhere-anyone-anything* promise sounded liberating, world-opening, exciting. But somehow the words behind her smile seemed to create within me fear and self-doubt. A certain restlessness crowded out any warm, fuzzy feelings—a symptom more commonly experienced today among the younger generations, among whom I proudly count myself.

I am what sociologists call a “millennial.” And whether you read books or blogs by cultural critics or by Christians, nine times out of ten the fault for this existential restlessness will be laid at the millennials’ door. This is *our* doing. And do you know what? It’s true—we millennials *do* rebel against any authority

telling us who we should be or what we should do, be that our parents, society, God, or even the very body we live in. And fair enough, it's reasonable to critique the *anywhere-anyone-anything* promise and the unchallengeable right to determine our own "good." But whatever we think about this millennial power-grab, let's be honest: it really wasn't *our* idea.

I'm sure a few baby boomers of the Swinging Sixties' sexual revolution must roll their eyes at such pretensions of trail-blazing grandeur. *They* knew a thing or two about liberation and creating their own rules. But even they were largely a cohort of copycats following a long line of "rationalist" thinkers who looked to the individual human mind as the authoritative seat of power, legislating on the good, the bad, and the ugly. It's been four hundred years since René Descartes first penned his pithy one-liner "I think, therefore I am," but the spirit of ol' Rationalist René lives on in the millennial maxims of "You do you" and "Just be yourself."

To be fair, though, like every generation, we moderns *have* achieved something of our own. When previous societies accepted this authority to determine what was good and how they should spend their lives in a godless world, they did so reluctantly. Having to fill in for God was a fearful prospect for our ideological forebears. After all, it's well and good deciding what I want to do with my life, but without any Cosmic Controller in charge of what actually happens, it's down to me to bring it about. And I don't have that kind of control. Therefore, a godless world was once a scary thought. Believing in human *authority* to determine a life well lived was one thing; believing in human sovereignty—or *control*—to bring about that life ... well, for previous generations, this was unthinkable. Humans simply could not control their lives in this world.

The achievement of recent times, however, is that we have managed to convince ourselves, and others, that we enjoy both authority *and* sovereignty over our lives. Not only do we have the clout to define our own personal values, but we have the control to realise those values in our *anywhere-anyone-anything* kind of life. If I want to be someone else, I'll let no one tell me otherwise; if I want to do something, I *can* do it. After choosing who I am and what I want to do, I am the master of my own destiny. I just need to “work hard enough,” “believe in myself,” and “prove the haters wrong.” Go hard or go home.

It's easy to see why this self-appointed sovereignty—this belief in our own control—is now heralded as such good news. If we are sovereign, then we are *secure*. If we are in control, then we don't have to fear our chosen life coming to ruin. We all sense the vulnerability of living exposed to the whims of an impersonal universe that doesn't care two hoots for what we want. And in such an impersonal expanse, where cancer calls, relationships rot, storms steal, finances fail, and people perish, we are all restless for refuge—the refuge that self-sovereignty holds out. Control creates cover. So even if you don't sign up to this modern stroke of genius that has won the weary to its claims, can we please at least admit that we wish it *were* true?

And so, we see that the desire for dominion over life isn't the preserve of the control-freak community or of one particular generation. This craving for control is as old as Adam—and I mean that in its truest sense.

Control and kingdom

It's easy for all this to sound abstract—*sovereignty, authority, control, security*—but the Bible uses a very simple word picture to illustrate what's going on: *kingdom*. Even my four-year-old

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