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CHAPTER 1

CONTROL

*“We can make our plans, but the LORD
determines our steps.”*
— Proverbs 16:9 (NLT)

I bet you didn’t know I’m afraid of the dark,” a five-year-old Savannah informed me, her manner so matter of fact.

I wanted to whisper back, “Me too,” but I stopped myself. This third-born daughter of mine was too young and too dependent on me to bear the burden of my solidarity.

What I left unspoken was that sometimes my dread of the dark was debilitating. There were times, too many to number, when the mere suggestion of venturing out after the sun set triggered a panic attack. I’d even spent a couple of years turning down girls’ night invitations if they required I be out after dusk.

For as long as I remember, I’ve struggled with fear at some level, but I haven’t always been severely afraid of the dark. It’s an apprehension that surfaced after the miscarriage as I suddenly found myself suffering postpartum, grief-triggered anxiety attacks and irrational fear. The

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attacks happened in situations where I felt a loss of control, places—such as the dark—where I couldn't clearly assess my surroundings to determine whether I and those I loved were safe from harm.

The recent death of our preborn baby through miscarriage had acutely reminded me, more than any other loss I'd personally experienced, that control was not mine. Safety wasn't guaranteed. And beyond that and even more terrifying to me, it highlighted in broad strokes of ugly neon yellow, that God—who *was* in control—had allowed one of my kids to die.

My first panic attack hit nineteen days after our obstetrician informed us there was no heartbeat. One minute, I was fine. The next, my heart began to race, my breath grew scarce, and I flashed back to the ultrasound room. It took at least ten minutes for my body to return to a semi-calm state.

The first attack led to a second, and a third. Before long, I experienced multiple attacks a day as my irrational fears increased. I was even unable to walk into a dark room in my own house without dread.

In a matter of weeks, I went from being a happily pregnant mom to someone who struggled to function physically, emotionally, and mentally. Not only had I been helpless to control whether my preborn baby lived or died, I now failed to govern how my body reacted to the grief.

My obstetrician recommended I take antidepressants. After careful consideration, I filled the prescription, and continued to for the next two and a half years. While the medication didn't erase the anxiety or fear, it lessened the intensity and frequency of both. It kept me balanced and functional as we spent the next two years navigating job loss, financial pressures, and multiple moves.

After we relocated to Atlanta from Colorado Springs, via short stints in both Chicago and Missouri, I determined to try life without the medication. I was deeply grateful for its stabilizing influence on my body, but I was also curious to see if I could now function without it. It had been a couple of years since the miscarriage, Ted had a

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steady job, and we'd settled into what seemed to be a restful season.

I said "goodbye" to the meds, and quickly realized I was saying "hello again" to more frequent panic attacks. They consistently came in those moments when I felt the most out of control. There were the busy playgrounds where I couldn't quickly and easily headcount my kids, or the multiple times our credit-card number was stolen.

With the increase of panic attacks, I also found myself struggling more intensely again with the dark. There were evenings when I pushed myself to bravely go out and meet a friend. Yet there were also days, weeks even, when I vulnerably shared that I couldn't leave my house after the sun set because my anxiety was too great.

It was at this point that Savannah confided in me her fear of the dark, and it was at this juncture that I understood I needed to come to terms with living an out-of-control life.

THE OUT-OF-CONTROL LIFE

A loss of control isn't confined to those of us who suffer miscarriages or anxiety attacks. Every bereavement we'll talk about in this book serves as a keen reminder that you and I aren't ultimately in command of our lives.

Sure, we carry the power to make decisions that direct and impact how our days, months, and years are spent. We conclude what profession we'd like to pursue, which college to attend, whom and when we want to marry, how many children to have, and whether we drink coffee from Starbucks or brew it at home. Yet, aside from where we indulge our caffeine cravings, our decision to accomplish a goal doesn't guarantee that everything goes as planned.

We can't force a particular college to accept us, and once we do earn a degree in a chosen field, that doesn't ensure we successfully work in it. Marriage may not happen on our ideal time line or to the individual we initially hope; and sometimes, even if it does, we might not celebrate a tenth or twentieth or fiftieth wedding anniversary. And, when it comes to kids, sheer will doesn't promise pregnancy, a bureaucratic

red-tape-free adoption, or that those we nurture outlive us.

My friend Denise McDowell understands well what it's like to slowly and painfully realize we aren't in control of our lives, and to surrender to the One who is.

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"The LORD had closed her womb" (1 Samuel 1:5).

Six words that struck fear in my heart and sealed a coffin of grief in my head. It did not say Satan, the environment, the doctors, the misspent youth, the waiting too long, the disbelief, the not eating the right foods, or breathing the wrong air. It said, "The LORD had closed her womb." Argument over, door closed, cigarette out.

There is no arguing when what you hear, and Scripture confirms, is that your God, whom you have turned to for strength, hope, kindness, and most of all, goodness, deliberately does this to one of His children. In giant red letters, it's confirmed. He is in control, and you are not. He determines who will give birth, who will be born, and who will not.

Every one of those realities came crashing down on me in the spring of 1999, after our one and only failed in vitro fertilization (IVF) attempt after five years of trying to conceive. The Lord and I had been on exemplary terms before that season. I believed in Him. He believed in me. We walked hand-in-hand in the garden of youthful faith, and then, He disappeared. He abandoned our agreement.

Before, I did what was right, and He rewarded. Now suddenly, I did what was right, and He punished. He closed my womb for no apparent reason. He left my side to go and bless everyone else with children, even ones who didn't do everything right.

When we used to walk together in the garden of faith, I got to control lots of outcomes. I wanted to be the first in my family to graduate from college, and He made it happen. I wanted to fall in

love with a combo Robin Williams/Cary Grant/Bono man of God. He made it happen. I wanted to be happy. He made it happen. It was the perfect relationship. He asked. I obeyed. I asked. He obeyed. It was the thing of Christian fairy tales.

Then a word more putrid than “putrid” entered my life. Infertility was foreign and excruciating. It meant hundreds of doctor’s visits, a thousand inconclusive tests, and what felt like millions of dollars. All of these produced the same results: barrenness, nothingness, loss, and grief.

I prayed, searched, read, studied, exercised, stood upside down, all in an attempt to right the wrong that was taking place. Where had He gone? Where had my secret formula gone? Where had my control gone? It all evaporated.

My husband was in seminary, and I worked full-time for a church. Time and funds were extraordinarily limited, but we were surrounded by a loving community of people who offered their support. We were gifted with the means to make one last try to create a family through the costly procedure of IVF, and we went for it. It was our last attempt at controlling our own destiny. It was an abysmal failure, and the tantrums and mournful weeks that followed matched any you’d witness at the grocery store checkout line with a toddler.

All the faith, obedience, study, patience, long-suffering, etc., we put into our god-sized slot machine produced nothing but more heartache. We never hit the jackpot in our futile waiting and striving for our dream family.

On one of the more intense tantrum days, my husband held me as I stayed a puddle on the floor trying to understand what else I could do to possibly change the outcome of our situation.

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He lovingly said the words that crushed and infuriated me.

“Baby, God is in control.”

And as if someone poured gasoline on my fire of fury, I quipped back, “I KNOW HE’S IN CONTROL! That’s the problem! I need to know HE’S GOOD!”

I finally surrendered my seat of control. I cried “uncle” along with a myriad of other pleas. Like Hannah who looked drunk to Eli in 1 Samuel, I was inebriated with my own tears of loss. I controlled nothing. The Lord controlled everything. The surrender was nearly more than my soul could bear.

While I wish I could say that I rose up out of those ashes like a phoenix and soared through the next few months confident of His love and grace, it’s not true. I crawled daily to Him. I begged daily for relief. I laid bare all I knew of myself to all I knew of Him, and I buried my invisible biological children. Their coffin was made of hopes and future plans, and their gravesite was the nursery I walked past every day. With them, I buried my sense of control forever.

For months I floated along, carried by nothing more than a scriptural promise that “your grief will turn to joy” [NIV]. My heart couldn’t bear another loss, another affront to my surrender, so I did nothing but exist. I pursued nothing, sought out no solution, unturned no remedy or formula. I watched hope disappear.

And without warning or even real invitation, the Lord grabbed my hand and said, “Let’s walk again, shall we?”

I didn’t know if I wanted to hold His hand again. He was quite controlling, and quite unkind. Why would He want to be with me now? What more did He want?

“Are you willing to let Me write the story now and always?” was all I was asked by my Sovereign.

“Yes,” knowing now that my response could be an invitation for more pain and grief.

“Then walk with Me all the way to China. I have two children

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waiting for you. They've felt nothing but loss as well. You will be perfect for each other."

I'd love to say that from that day forward He only blessed and never closed another place I thought would be forever open. There were quite a few caskets to follow, but this time I had a tight grip on His hand. I let go only of my illusion of control.

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Maybe you can relate to Denise. Perhaps you too have questioned God's goodness as you've painfully faced infertility. Or, like me, you struggle with anxiety and panic attacks. It's possible that your loss of control is related to another area of life such as marriage, a job, your health, or the heartbreaking trauma of past abuse.

Whatever your individual story may be, I don't have any easy answers for you. The truth is, there aren't any. Both my story and Denise's clearly remind us of that. What I can offer you, though, is biblical encouragement that has sustained and gently challenged me in my own grief. One of the places I've discovered this help is in the story of Jesus, a storm, and twelve fearful men.

JESUS, A STORM, AND TWELVE FEARFUL MEN

Both the gospels of Matthew and Mark include an account of Jesus and His disciples crossing the sea in a boat. Prior to boarding, Matthew tells us that Jesus spent the day healing the sick, which included Peter's mother-in-law (Matt. 7:14–16). Mark notes that Jesus also taught both the crowds and His disciples using parables, or simple stories with spiritual lessons.

Between the healing and the teaching, there's no doubt Jesus was physically exhausted by the time He and His friends' voyage began. Because of this, He decides to use the commute as an opportunity to take a nap. Mark tells us, "He was in the stern, asleep on the cushion" (Mark 4:38).

As Jesus sleeps, a storm arises. The wind becomes so powerful that it creates huge waves. These waves furiously break against the boat and begin to fill it with water. If you've ever experienced hurricane-like conditions, as I have, you understand how terrifying this is. Strong currents of water driven by massive gales of wind aren't conditions any of us want to be in when we're on a boat.

His friends panic. All signs point to their vessel sinking, and them drowning. Even the fishermen among them, who are skilled boaters and have likely experienced their share of storms, realize they aren't in control of this one. They can't calm the wind or the waves. They can't even troubleshoot their way out of this one with their sailing expertise.

Frantically, they wake Jesus up. Matthew tells us they exclaim, "Save us, Lord; we are perishing" (Matt. 8:25), while Mark records their words as, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" (Mark 4:38). Either way, it's clear these grown men are dismayed that their friend and teacher sleeps at such a time as this.

At the disciples' prompting, Jesus gets up and responds to them, as well as to the storm. Jesus' reactions here offer me two teachable moments to ponder as I navigate situations where I, like the disciples, grieve a loss of control. Perhaps they're moments you can glean something from too.

Attitude is everything

Jesus' response to His disciples is "Why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith?" (Mark 4:40 NLT). I've often wondered why Jesus doesn't reply to His friends' panic with reassuring words such as, "It's going to be okay. I've got this. Don't be afraid." After all, this was a scary, life-threatening situation. He could've cut them some slack and shown greater compassion. Yet, the more I dig into this story, the more I believe that Jesus' response directly relates to His disciples' attitude.

These twelve men didn't forget that Jesus was in the boat with them. They didn't question His presence in their lives or in the midst

of the storm. They knew He was there and they understood that He had the power to intervene in some manner. It was this knowledge that they allowed to negatively contribute to their demeanor when they woke Him.

Think back to how Mark notes they responded. He quotes them as saying, “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?” (Mark 4:38). From this, it appears that Jesus’ friends were agitated by His seeming lack of interest in their circumstances. His state of sleep communicated to them an absence of concern for their safety and an ignorance of the severity of the situation. We see from their use of the word “perishing”—which both Matthew and Mark include—that they wanted Jesus to feel as alarmed as they did. We aren’t told the tone they employed when waking Jesus, but I wouldn’t be surprised if it contained hints of irritation and accusation. It’s possible that if Jesus’ friends had woken Him up with a different attitude and perhaps a different phrasing, His response may have been, “It’s going to be okay. I’ve got this. Don’t be afraid.” But they didn’t.

The storm also seems to have facilitated short-term memory loss in the disciples, which may have further fueled their approach. While these men did remember that Jesus was in the boat with them, they appear to have forgotten the day’s earlier events: the healing of the sick, the casting out of demons, the parable after parable about the importance of faith. When the opportunity arises for them to exercise trust in Jesus’ ability to be there for them in stressful situations, they instead question whether He even cares at all. They appear to have forgotten all that they’ve witnessed of His character.

Like the disciples in the boat that day, I often find myself in situations I have no control over. It’s frightening to realize that there isn’t anything I can do to fix my circumstances, and it’s frustrating when

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They appear to have forgotten all that they’ve witnessed of His character.

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my skills and expertise afford me nothing. As a result, I sometimes do what the disciples did here. I don't forget that God is present in my life when hard things happen, but I'm inclined to question whether He actively cares. It can feel like God the Father, whom Scripture tells us doesn't "slumber" (Ps. 121:3), is napping and lacks interest in helping me. As Denise needed to know, I too ponder, "God, are You good to me?"

In these instances, I'm faced with a decision. Will I question God's care for me with irritation and accusation, as the disciples seemingly did, or will I hold firmly to my belief that God is lovingly attentive to me even when I feel like He isn't?

As I've battled panic attacks, this choice has loomed before me constantly. Yes, the years have taught me that there are practical actions I can employ to lessen the frequency and intensity of the anxiety. But the years have always shown me that no matter what I do, whether on medication or not, panic attacks are a part of my current story. Regardless of how much I pray, exercise, or actively identify triggers, I still have them regularly.

This biblical story reminds me that I have the power to respond differently than the disciples when faced with my own "storms." With each attack, I'm learning to intentionally choose to respect who He is and believe that He cares about me in the midst of it, even if my emotions seek to persuade me that He's oblivious or unsympathetic.

Don't rush the One in control

In this biblical story, Jesus also speaks directly to the wind and sea. Although there's a difference between Matthew and Mark on whether He addresses His disciples or the storm first, both accounts clearly tell us that Jesus rebukes these forces of nature. Mark says He commands them, "Peace! Be still!" (Mark 4:39).

A "great calm," as Matthew writes in Matthew 8:26, follows. In an instance, this storm that threatened to sink their boat and drown them has been tamed by Jesus' words alone. His friends react by say-

ing to one another, “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?” (Mark 4:41).

Now when the disciples woke Jesus up, they obviously expected Him to do something. After all, Matthew notes that they said, “Save us, Lord” (Matt. 8:25). But from their reaction, it’s clear Jesus shocked and awed them with His solution to the problem. Even after all the miracles they’d witnessed, they weren’t expecting their friend and teacher to exercise authority over nature.

Jesus’ dominance over the wind and sea remind me that there wasn’t one moment during that voyage that He wasn’t in control. He could’ve woken up at any point and stopped the storm. Yet, His disciples didn’t pause to ask, “What would Jesus do?” Instead of patiently waiting for His timing, they frantically pushed Him to intervene in their timing, which, in their defense, I do understand. After all, their boat *was* filling up with water.

While I like to imagine that I would’ve responded with patience if I’d been aboard that boat with Jesus and His disciples, it’s more likely I’d have spearheaded the efforts to wake Him from His nap. In situations where I feel a loss of control, my initial instinct is to act, rather than wait. I’m aware that God *can* control the “wind” and “waves” in my life, yet for some reason He’s allowing them to rage on. He’s not approaching my situation with the urgency that I want.

My desire to chase after control has been especially true when Ted and I have encountered unemployment. As I’ve written about in my book *Team Us*, in our early years of marriage, the company Ted worked for was bought out by a larger organization. In the process, he was laid off. This was the first time we experienced job loss together and it happened prior to the pink slips I’ll talk about later in chapter 4.

Ted’s response was to spend months contemplating what to do next. He wasn’t sure whether to continue in the same field he was in or instead to pursue something entirely different. During this time, he did work as a contractor on a few short-term projects as he wrestled

with the future, but I hated the ambiguity of short-term work. I wanted something permanent and stable, something *right now*. I was a stay-at-home mom at the time and urgently began to think, “If Ted isn’t going to figure this out quickly and God isn’t going to provide a job soon, then I’ll go back to work. I’ll solve this problem for us.”

I didn’t end up returning to a nine-to-five job. Instead, God pushed me to slowly and painfully come to terms with the fact that there were areas I simply couldn’t control, including how long it took Ted to figure out his career path. I had to learn to live with ambiguity. At the same time, I was convicted to focus my attention on areas I could regulate. I *could* monitor my reactions to his indecisiveness, choosing gentleness over annoyance. I *could* pray for self-control not to push, prod, and nag Ted to find a job. And, I *could* choose to trust God—the One who was ultimately in control of Ted’s employment—with our future, rather than attempting to fix it myself.

It wasn’t easy to center my thoughts and my behavior on what I could control and trust God with what I couldn’t. It was a daily, sometimes hourly struggle. After all, what if God didn’t provide for us in what I felt was a timely manner? Would we be okay financially?

Just like the disciples, I wrestled then, and still often do now, with wanting my perfect timing to also be God’s perfect timing. But this story of Jesus’ calming of the wind and waves reminds me that God’s timetable isn’t mine to speed up. He isn’t hoping that I’ll solve the situation on my own and save Him the effort. Rather, His perceived tardiness provides me an opportunity to practice again and again how to relinquish control and trust my well-being to Him.

WHAT TO DO WHEN YOU FEEL OVERWHELMED

As I’ve written on my panic attacks and shared one-on-one about them the last several years, more and more women have responded with, “Me too.” I’d never realized how many others grieved the loss of control that stems from anxiety. Maybe you’re one of them. It

could be that you read the beginning of this chapter and resonated with my story.

I've also talked to other women who've told me they aren't prone to panic attacks. They don't experience them. Yet what they do feel is overwhelmed at times by all the expectations, both the positive and negative, placed on them. In those moments, they too struggle with a loss of control and the frustration it brings. They find themselves in a place where they need help navigating this loss well.

Whichever tribe you resonate with, there are practical actions you can take when you feel overwhelmed. Here are a few things that have been beneficial to me.

Identify triggers

I've learned to identify those situations, environments, and emotions most likely to "trigger" or serve as a stimulus for a panic attack or cause me to feel overwhelmed. Dark, unlit spaces often leave me experiencing anxiety. Other triggers include large crowds in small spaces, situations where I feel overwhelmed by the number of expectations given me, and environments where it's difficult to keep track of my children such as a busy museum, playground, or shopping center. I do my best to avoid these triggers, but sometimes I'm simply not able to. This is when I practice the following measures.

Talk to God

The night Savannah told me she was afraid of the dark, I reminded her that suspicious shadows and unexpected creaks weren't the only thing residing in the darkness. Jesus was there too, and she could talk to Him any time. The wisdom I offered Savannah is also mine for the taking. When the panic invades or I feel overwhelmed, God is ready and willing to help me. I just need to call on Him. Most of the time, my cry is simple. A "help me" goes far. If there's anything fear is afraid of, it's Him.

Talk to myself

Once I've talked to Him, I talk to myself. Not just any words, but words of truth. I've found that memorizing Scripture passages such as Psalm 91 minister faith to me, which is the opposite of fear. In this passage, David reaffirms that God is his refuge and fortress in times of trouble. He speaks of God's protection, deliverance, and help.

Talk to others

When I'm hit with an attack or feel overwhelmed, I often call Ted or a close friend. Just as I offered words of comfort to Savannah, they also speak similar words to me. They remind me I'm not alone. They help turn my attention to God, as they walk beside me and encourage me to rely on Him. This was specifically true in the months that followed our miscarriage. Ted was laid off soon after and I hit perhaps the lowest point in my life as I entertained suicidal thoughts. I pondered what would happen if I took all of my antidepressants at once. Rather than keeping these thoughts to myself out of shame, though, a message at church challenged me to talk about them with Ted. I found freedom and accountability in doing so.

There is one caveat I have in talking to others about these feelings and struggles. I choose carefully who I confide in and pick individuals who won't make it a purely spiritual issue by telling me that I simply need more faith. It's important to trust in friends who will encourage me to view the panic from both a spiritual *and* physical perspective.

BE SOMEONE ELSE'S VILLAGE

You and I most likely have friends and family who are also grieving a loss of control. In what ways can we focus on their needs and best support them? My friend Rhonda Owens's story offers us some practical suggestions.

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Rhonda knows well what it's like to be daily reminded that she's not in control of her life. In 2016, the Owenses traded a decade-long season of comfort and community to follow God on a global sailing adventure, only to discover that maybe sailing wasn't what He wanted them to do after all.

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I must preface this story by telling you that my husband and I are sensible, sane people. We parent two lovely girls, ages fifteen and five. I am a former high school English teacher turned stay-at-home, freelance-writing mom, and my husband is a nonprofit executive who has managed and invested literally millions of dollars before choosing to go into ministry as an executive pastor and found time to coach two high school tennis teams on the side for six months out of the year.

For over a decade, we lived a happy, comfortable life in a small rural town in northwest Ohio. It's in light of this rational, balanced description that the plot thickens: in the last eight months, we have sold 95 percent of our possessions (including our house and cars), purchased a sailboat, taken sailing lessons, moved our family onto said sailboat, plotted a course to travel the world, and started a YouTube channel to document our journey as well as the stories of fellow Christian workers we'd meet along the way.

And then, complicating matters immensely, it became clear that the sailboat, like our home before it, became more like an anchor weighing us down, and that taking on the expense and maintenance of a boat was, in essence, like tethering ourselves to another anchor. Which is why (after much discussion and prayer) we decided to put the boat up for sale after a mere five months of ownership.

Of course, the first question we are asked regularly is *Why? Why would you give up the comfort and community you've worked so hard to build?*

Ultimately, our goal was to position ourselves so that God could work *through* us—we wanted to travel around the world to “shine like stars in the sky as [we] hold firmly to the word of life” (Phil. 2:15–16 NIV), and we wanted to document our journey as well as the journeys of fellow believers along the way. Our hope was to inspire others to “shine like stars” too.

But it has been the weirdest, most harrowing and unsettling thing to have positioned ourselves into a space where we thought God could work *through* us, only to find that God planned all along to use this big life change to work *on* us and *in* us, instead. God has knocked us off of the cutesy little pedestal on which we had (unwittingly and unintentionally) placed ourselves, and He’s giving us a good dose of Him, which is what we’ve needed and longed for all along.

However, selling the boat is a big act of faith . . . because, again, what’s next? The short answer is this: we don’t know what’s next, and what we’re learning is that it’s okay that we don’t know. This “not knowing” isn’t a surprise, now, and we’re settling in to this most unsettling space, embracing the unknown next. Like a couple of kids, we’ve bellyached a bunch about this messy and erratic space of trying to follow the Holy Spirit’s lead, but it’s as if a switch kicked on and suddenly we see this time as an exciting gift where our whole family is growing exponentially beyond measure compared to pretty much any other time in our lives.

As you can imagine, these decisions—to leave a decade-long season of comfort and community, to uproot our girls from all they know, to embark on a spiritual pilgrimage for more of God—have led us into living a story that is disconcertingly valuable, unnervingly beneficial, and perplexingly worthwhile. Never mind that in comparison, this lifestyle change has us feeling like our lives are careening wildly out of control.

Rhonda says that community support has been a constant in all the uncertainty and change. The Owenses' friends and family have made it a priority to support them long-term, which has helped to ease some of the grief they've experienced in their transitions.

What has the community they left behind done to support them, and how can we do the same for people in our lives? Some things stand out.

Commit to keep in mind

The Owenses' community hasn't let the family's physical absence at church, school, dance, or Bible study result in forgetfulness. They've committed to keep the Owenses in mind. Rhonda says, "I've learned from our community that love can and will sustain and support over the miles when friends choose to reject the 'out-of-sight, out-of-mind' mentality. It has been months since we've seen anyone from our community, but their decision to continue reaching out to us has inspired me to do the same for others."

You and I can determine to do the same. Whether those we know who grieve a loss of control live in the same city or an ocean away, we can be inspired by the Owenses' community to keep them and their needs in the forefront of our minds.

Commit to pray

Consistent prayer is another way the Owenses' community has supported them. "My husband receives a text message from one friend each morning, letting him know that he is covered in prayer," Rhonda shares. Every day, they are reminded that their friends and family back home not only think of them, but are asking God to protect and provide for them.

Just like the Owenses' community, we can not only commit to pray, but we can determine to let those we're praying for know that we are. Sometimes a short text or quick phone call that confirms we are indeed interceding for them makes a big difference as someone grieves a loss of control.

Commit to encourage

A third way we can offer support is through active, practical encouragement. The Owensens' community has been intentional to do this. Rhonda says, "One of my friends organized a calendar where she scheduled fifty-two friends—one per week—to not only pray for our family, but also to send Scripture and words of encouragement to us. We've been randomly gifted with inspirational devotionals and books via our Kindle."

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Their support hasn't been confined to Rhonda and her husband. "My oldest daughter has had numerous video chats, text messages, emails, and letters from friends," Rhonda shares. "Her youth pastor, prior to our departure, prepared an entire box of letters for her—one to open on her first day of the boat, her thirtieth day on the boat, her ninetieth day on the boat, etc.—so that she will continue to have over a year of encouraging words from a person who spiritually impacts her in ways my husband and I cannot. Even our five-year-old has been blessed with short video

messages from her friends via texts and hand-drawn pictures sent along in the mail."

While our lives are busy, it doesn't demand a lot of us to share a Scripture verse, write a handwritten note, treat someone to coffee or tea, or send a care package. Sometimes small efforts lift someone's spirits in large, significant ways, reminding them that they aren't alone in what they face.

THE SLOW WEAN OF CONTROL

In 2010, Savannah celebrated her second birthday. With this changing of age came the dreaded season of pacifier weaning. She grieved hard the loss of her precious “Night Night,” as she called it, and fought fiercely for the control to keep it.

I understood. It had only been a few months since our miscarriage. I knew how difficult it was to face an unexpected change that rendered me powerless. While saying goodbye to a pacifier wasn’t the same as the death of a child, I empathized with Savannah. I saw my pain in hers.

One day, as she sat on the couch screaming, “Night Night!” at me, I remained beside her. I offered comfort, but didn’t stop her pain by returning the pacifier. Instead, I allowed her to grieve the loss of the item and the loss of control, helping her process with my presence and my empathy. And, because of the relationship we’ve built, she felt the freedom to run to my arms and cry and yell within my embrace.

In my own loss, God has done for me what I sought to do for Savannah. He hasn’t removed my sorrow. Most of the time, He doesn’t even return what I’ve lost. What He does do is remain beside me. He allows me to grieve, comforting me with His presence and His empathy. And, because of the relationship we’ve built, I feel the freedom to run to His arms and cry and yell within His embrace. I love what author, speaker, and quadriplegic Joni Eareckson Tada writes. She says:

God, like a father, doesn’t just give advice. He gives himself. He becomes the husband to the grieving widow (Isaiah 54:5). He becomes the comforter to the barren woman (Isaiah 54:1). He becomes the father of the orphaned (Psalm 10:14). He becomes the bridegroom to the single person (Isaiah 62:5). He is the healer to the sick (Exodus 15:26). He is the wonderful counselor to the confused and depressed (Isaiah 9:6).

This is what you do when someone you love is in anguish; you respond to the plea of their heart by giving them your

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heart. If you are the One at the center of the universe, holding it together, if everything moves, breathes, and has its being in you, you can do no more than give yourself (Acts 17:28).¹

As you grieve your own seasons of loss of control, may you too feel the freedom to run to His arms and cry and yell within His embrace. I promise He's ready and willing to receive you.

And may you also offer your presence, your empathy, and your embrace to those around you who, like Savannah, grieve their own loss and mourn a sense of control they once had. Because, just as there is nothing greater God can give us than Himself, there's nothing greater we can give others than our willingness to brave their sorrow with them.