



ANYONE

IN CONTROL

HERE?





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Is Anyone in Control Here?

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IS ANYONE IN CONTROL HERE?

During a recent road trip in Victoria, my wife and I were driving along the picturesque Great Ocean Road. With the windows down, the beautiful ocean view on the right and the rolling green hills on the left, out of the blue we were stopped in our tracks by a traffic controller. Cigarette in his mouth, right hand scrolling on his smartphone, he simply held up his stop sign and kept us at a standstill for the next 20 minutes. Nobody moved. For no apparent reason. Then with a flick of his wrist, the sign turned around and we continued on our way.

For those 20 minutes (which seemed like an hour), I felt the frustration inside me build and build. I wanted to go places and see things, but all I could do was sit there, completely powerless. It was so frustrating!

WE WANT CONTROL

I know that story is trivial, but it does illustrate my natural tendency to want to be in control of situations, and my impatience when I'm not.

It's fair to say that many of us spend a large chunk of our time trying to control things. We carefully curate our social media profiles so that the world sees us the way we want to be seen. We hate being told what we can and can't do with our money, our belongings, our bodies. The cosmetic surgery industry is booming as we try to enhance our physical appearance and slow the effects of ageing. We love the idea of being in control of our future, so we pump money into superannuation funds, property investments and share portfolios. Billions of dollars are dedicated to scientific endeavours to control our world and minimize its dangers. From making snow so we can ski wherever we like, to modifying our crops so we can eat seasonal produce whenever we like, the human race works around the clock to maintain control. Being in control brings with it a feeling of safety and security; of self-assurance and satisfaction. And who doesn't love that feeling?!

Yet time after time, we are reminded of our limits.



WE DON'T HAVE CONTROL

In recent times, Australia has been devastated by events beyond our control: drought, floods, unstoppable bushfires, and a pandemic that stopped the entire world in its tracks. For months on end our screens and social media feeds were filled with story after story of loss, grief and pain.

These experiences very quickly demolished the illusion that we're in control. Despite all the developments in technology, we are still subject to drought, disaster, disease and even death. We can't always travel to the places we want to go, or spend time with all the people we want to see. For a while, we couldn't even buy toilet paper! Millions of people have lost their jobs. And COVID-19 has brought with it a genuine, close-to-home risk to our health. People have died. Even the most powerful world leaders are vulnerable to the virus (just ask Boris Johnson).

These events are sobering examples of the fact that in our day-to-day life, we're surrounded by forces outside of our control. An overbearing boss, a crying child, a life-changing health diagnosis. A bad habit or addiction. Maybe right now you are experiencing anxiety, fear or even despair because your life is currently not how you'd like it to be. Perhaps you're asking questions you never thought about asking until a few months ago, like: What will I do if I lose my job?



How's my business going to survive? What happens if I get sick? The reality is that we simply don't have the control in our lives that we think we have.

I've seen this reality up close.

A member of my extended family was a very successful engineer. He worked on some major road projects in New South Wales. He was married with two children, and had a three-storey house right near the beach. Every year on Boxing Day we'd gather on his balcony to watch the yachts leave Sydney Harbour for the Sydney to Hobart yacht race. In 2010, at the age of 50, he was diagnosed with bowel cancer. The cancer soon spread to his liver, his lungs, his stomach and his brain. His wealth allowed him to travel to Germany to have specialist lung surgery. Later, he paid for his stomach to be removed to prolong his life. Tragically, during that time his relationship with his family deteriorated significantly. After years of struggle, he died in 2017. In a few short years, he went from being on top of the world to no longer being a part of it.

Of course, this story is not unique to my family. It's a story lived by so many who come face to face with the fact that they aren't in control. One day they're on top of the world, filled with optimism; the next it all comes tumbling down.



OUR PROBLEM IS NOT NEW

Humanity's lack of control is not a new problem. There have been pandemics and natural disasters before. And we are not the first people to live as if we're in control more than we actually are. About 2000 years ago, a man called James (the half-brother of Jesus Christ) wrote this:

Now listen, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money." Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes.
(James 4:13-14)

For many of us, these few sentences from the Bible are fairly confronting. We don't think about our lives in this way. We live as if we're immortal, immune from any disaster and able to meet any challenge that comes our way. We think of ourselves as the captain of our own ship and the master of our own destiny.

James reminds us that our lives are a blip in the light of eternity. Life is fleeting, a mist that can vanish suddenly and unexpectedly, or slowly and surely. Either way, none of us can control the fact that one day we will die. This is the ultimate reminder that we are not in control.

