

## INTRODUCTION

# We Need Help

*“What is the bravest thing you’ve ever said?”  
asked the boy.*

*“Help,” said the horse.*

— Charlie Mackesy

*The Boy, the Mole, the Fox and the Horse*

She had told me to wait; we would move it together. But I knew I could move it myself. Sure, the dresser was freakishly heavy with irremovable drawers, and I’d have to push it a good thirty feet across a rough concrete floor. But I could do it. I could *definitely* do it. Down one room, through a narrow door, between a skeletal passage of forgotten furniture and bedframes, and into the corner of the basement. It wouldn’t be easy. But I could do it. I didn’t need any help.

This isn’t a tale of how I threw out my back trying to be macho and learned the lesson of humility. That would have been good, and it certainly wouldn’t have been the

first time I'd "learned" a lesson like that. But that's not what happened. Actually, everything went according to plan. It was a true miracle. I only broke one thing (I'm not sure what the thing was, or used to be). And after a lot of shoving and pulling and pivoting, I got that dresser into the corner of the basement. I did it myself. I didn't need any help.

You can see the sentiment of a young boy, can't you? Standing up proudly and saying, "Look what I did—*all by myself*." It's the image of strength and independence that every boy longs to embody, at least in contemporary Western culture.

Except I'm not a boy. I'm thirty-nine. And I've hurt my back trying to lift things too heavy for me. What I did wasn't brave and courageous. It was . . . well, stupid and impatient. So, when my wife came back from the store, she didn't say, "I'm so proud of you—the sheer brawn required to move that thing! Just amazing. You did it!" Instead, she asked a simple question: "Why didn't you wait for me?"

### **The Illusion of Independence**

Her question hung there for a moment, and then the evening moved on. But I couldn't stop thinking about it. Why didn't I wait for her? Why was it so hard for me to ask for and receive help? Why did help feel like an unnecessary and embarrassing crutch?

There's something inside us that truly believes we can "go it alone." It's the illusion of *independence*. We hate to think of that sacred Western concept as an illusion, but it is. We are never fully independent. In a billion ways, we

are dependent and relational, always stretching for and leaning on others. And yet, as David Whyte once wrote,

Help is, strangely, something we want to do without, as if the very idea disturbs and blurs the boundaries of our individual endeavors, as if we cannot face how much we need in order to go on. We are born with an absolute necessity for help, grow well only with a continuous succession of extended hands, and as adults depend upon others for our further successes and possibilities in life even as competent individuals. . . . At every stage we are dependent on our ability to ask for specific forms of help at very specific times and in very specific ways. Even at the end, the dignity of our going depends on others' willingness to help us die well; the sincerity of their help often commensurate to the help we extended to them in our own life. *Every transformation has at its heart the need to ask for the right kind of generosity.*<sup>1</sup>

I love that last line. It's always stuck with me, not because it's true of us, but because it's true of what *God* does in our lives. His transformation of us requires that we ask for the right kind of generosity. (And the Spirit of God is even the one who prompts us to ask!)

I'm a follower of Jesus Christ, and I believe the Bible is God's true and trustworthy Word.<sup>2</sup> Is not the

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1 David Whyte, *Consolations: The Solace, Nourishment and Underlying Meaning of Everyday Words* (Many Rivers, 2018), 107–108; emphasis added.

2 We do not have the space to introduce or defend Christianity here, nor to defend the Bible as God's Word. But interested readers might consult Herman Bavinck, *The Wonderful Works of God: Instruction in the Christian Religion according to the Reformed Confession* (Westminster Seminary Press, 2019); Vern S. Poythress,

transformation I received in Christ as a boy—and have since been living out—a reflection of my dire need to ask for the Spirit’s help, to ask for God to do what only He has the ability and the heart to do? It is. God has so orchestrated the world and our lives that asking for help is as necessary as it is good.

At the center of the Christian life is the sovereign help God offers to creatures who are spinning out in the swirl of sin and pretended independence. Christianity is all about *help*—and here’s the rub: not our asking for help, but God giving it when asking is the last thing we’d ever do. God in Christ gave Himself for sinners not when we finally bowed the knee and asked for it, but when we were still in the wrong. “God shows his love for us,” the apostle Paul says, “in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom. 5:8). God isn’t a spendthrift with help; He’s prodigal. He gives it long before we even think of asking for it.

There are plenty of relational gurus out there who would applaud any human’s decision to ask for help. I’m sure David Whyte would, and Charlie Mackesy. But the Bible goes much deeper than that. It always does. It doesn’t just tell us that we were made to ask for help, though that’s true. It tells us that we received help *even when we didn’t want it*. And that, to me, is far more encouraging. Left to myself, I’ll always try to move that freakishly heavy dresser on my own. In the most beautiful and fatherly sense, God knows His children far better than they know themselves. And so He acts not *because* of them but *in spite*

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*Inerrancy and Worldview: Answering Modern Challenges to the Bible* (Crossway, 2012).

of them. He helps us well before we heed His warnings. In fact, God has been helping His people since before our spinning earth began to circle around the sun. Did you know that? Our heavenly Father chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:4). Before we even existed, God saw we would need help, and He gave it.

But if help is so foundational to Christian faith, and if asking for help is recognized even in secular circles as being a necessity, then why don't we ask for it more often? Why are we so enthralled by the illusion of independence? The short answer: a stubborn ghost still haunts us.

### **Autonomy: The Stubborn Ghost**

This is a book about the beauty and glory of divinely bestowed help. It is a story of constant holy intervention, both in history and in our own lives. But we cannot understand that story unless we understand the villain. And that villain goes by various names. Some call it pride, others independence. Theologians have called it *autonomy*. In the next chapter, we'll get into what that is, but for now you can understand it as *the will to govern ourselves and make our own way in the world*. Autonomy is what keeps us from asking for help. And so, if we want to grow in asking for help, we have to start by taking a long, hard look at what keeps getting in the way.

In the chapters ahead, I want to consider both what autonomy is and how it works based on the teaching of Scripture. The blueprint of what follows is simple. There are three sections. First, there's the *anatomy* of autonomy—what it looks like and what it does inside us. Second, there's *God's response* to our autonomy in Jesus

Christ and the Holy Spirit. Third, there's *our response* of relying on God's Word, guided by His Spirit, to ask for help in the main arenas of daily life: our thoughts, words, and actions.

We'll start by asking the basic question: What is autonomy? In the first section, the anatomy of autonomy moves along a path I'll develop through a discussion of key biblical texts in the Old Testament: Genesis 3, Genesis 12, Numbers 20, and 2 Samuel 11. While we could examine many passages, I have chosen these four because they showcase the main elements of autonomy: blindness, reductionism, control, mastery, and idolatry. I invite readers to consider additional texts that add depth and nuance to these elements. After looking at this anatomy, in the second section, we'll examine God's response to autonomy in Christ and the beauty of asking for help from a loving heavenly Father who is always with us by the Spirit and through His Word. In the final section, we'll apply that response to the main centers of human activity: what we think, what we say, and what we do.

In the end, I hope to make one thing crystal clear: *every human being is made to lean*. But we are not made to lean on ourselves, as we so often tend to. The writer of Proverbs put it plainly:

Trust in the Lord with all your heart,  
and *do not lean on your own understanding*.  
In all your ways acknowledge him,  
and he will make straight your paths.

Be not wise in your own eyes;  
fear the Lord, and turn away from evil.

It will be healing to your flesh  
and refreshment to your bones. (Prov. 3:5–8)

We were made to trust in and lean on the Lord with everything we have. This is what brings healing and refreshment to our souls: *leaning on the Lord*. And to lean on God is to revel in the goodness of His *help*.

While the world around us largely encourages us to think of asking for help as giving up, Scripture has the opposite message. In fact, it's a similar message to that which the horse gives to the boy in Charlie Mackesy's book, *The Boy, the Mole, the Fox and the Horse*: "Asking for help isn't giving up," said the horse. "It's refusing to give up." Yes, but the beauty of the gospel, however, isn't that *we* refuse to give up. It's that *God* has refused to give up on us. It's the Spirit of God Himself—not humans on their own—who refuses to let us give up. *Asking for His help* and *listening to His words in Scripture* form the guardrails that lead to grace and gratitude.

### Prayer

God of giving,  
We are surrounded by gifts.  
Our lives are littered  
With things we depend on—  
Tiny things and great things,  
Molecules and ocean swells,  
Pure air and precious persons.  
Beneath all things,  
Inside all things,  
Beyond all things,