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Too often, our needs are perceived—by ourselves and others—as either burdens to shamefully hide, or idols before which everything else must bow. This book provides a biblical framework for readers to see their needs as opportunities for deeper, truer community and relationships.

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## CHAPTER ONE

# My Family Room

*from Kevan*

**J**ust when you think Carolina clay can't get any more orange, the sun begins to set. A wonderful phenomenon happens in those southern hills at dusk. As soon as the sinking sun meets the earth, streaks of fire race across the surface of the world. Houses and trees, neighbors grilling out and kids playing soccer, all the way down to grass blades and rabbits, everything is run through by those final beams of warm light at the end of each day. The blue sky fades into reds and yellows, its aviation-plowed clouds blushing subtle pinks. People glow like embers as they play fetch with their golden dogs on auburn mountainsides. And the hard, orange dirt bakes into tones deeper and richer than a heart can barely handle.

The sunset struck me and my dad in my parents' backyard as we sat on the edge of what you might have thought was a swimming pool, or at least a swimming pool in the making. My dad had just finished digging the foundation for a new room off the back of our house. An airplane mechanic, he had strong hands and creases at the corners of his eyes from seeing things no one else could. He sat with me on the western corner of his work, our backs to the sun. A neighbor came by to see the progress, and they chatted while I played.

I barreled my matchbox cars mercilessly along the burnt orange foundation, a canyon's rim to my six-year-old imagination. One false move and either Batman or the A-Team would plummet to their doom. They dared the fateful ledge at a hundred miles an hour, at least two wheels hanging off at any given time, of course.

Within a few weeks, framing went up, and the concrete was poured. Soon, we had a sealed room, and just in time too. The year was 1992, and my sister's surprise birthday party was Beauty and the Beast themed. People arrived and snuck through the house to hide in the new space. Pink insulation hung between exposed studs, and the floor was still just concrete. But Mom had decorated, and it was a room full of friends. By the look on Connie's face when she rolled in, it might as well have been Disney World itself.

We called it our "family room," and that's just what it was. A place for our family to be together. It's where I first met Aslan as my sister read to me *The Chronicles of Narnia*. It's where my brother got me hooked on cartoons like *Pinky and the Brain* and *Earth Worm Jim*. My mom introduced me to Winnie-the-Pooh while we curled up on the couch together in that room. My dad taught me how you always start puzzles at the border. And nearly every Christmas morning memory lands me back there.

I also remember laying on the couch in pain after falling out of my wheelchair in the backyard. A few years later, while recovering from a broken right shoulder, I sat in front of paused cartoons on the TV, trying to teach myself how to draw them now with my left hand. In that room is where I first heard bands like Switchfoot and The O.C. Supertones in middle school. And in high school, when my youth pastor gave me an album called *Carried Along*, which spoke to my soul like no music ever had before, guess where I first sat and listened to it?

But the family room was for more than just me and my siblings.

The space—and idea—was much bigger than that. In high school, I hung out with a pretty rowdy crowd, but at my parents' house, many of them tended to fall asleep on the couches. It was the only place they had in their lives where they felt safe enough to let down their guard and rest.

My dad's coworkers and friends also found sanctuary there. He had a commute on third shift, so one morning every week, his vanpool buddies came over for breakfast and Bible study. It was my fourth-grade year when I was homeschooled due to some major surgeries, and I loved those mornings, waking up to a company of giants. I can still hear their roars of laughter and smell the motor oil as a dozen sleep-deprived airplane mechanics filled our family room to study God's Word.

It was our default room for Thanksgiving meals when we (usually me) invited more people than could fit in the dining room. My mom had an old hutch that sat unassumingly against one wall. Behind its old bifold doors, a table was found that could extend across the span of the room, almost all the way to the fireplace. We pushed back the couches countless times to open this table and host an army of friends and family with food, stories, and laughter. We also pushed back the couches countless times to make room, not for the table, but for drum sets and guitars as flocks of troubadours gathered in that family room to express themselves through music.

## Guests

Henri Nouwen has a quote about hospitality that haunts me. In his book *The Wounded Healer*, he says it creates “an empty space where the guest can find his own soul.”<sup>1</sup> It causes me to wonder what the

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1. Henri Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer: Ministry in Contemporary Society* (Doubleday, 1972), 94.

space is and who the guests are. We can easily imagine that space as somewhere like our family room or maybe a kitchen table. But what if the space is more than a place? What if it's deeper?

Jesus didn't have a home on earth, a family room, a kitchen table of His own to offer, and yet throughout His time on earth, His call was, "Come to me, all who are weary . . . and I will give you rest."<sup>2</sup> His presence was the space. He opened His arms wide and invited all to find their souls in His company, or as Paul puts it, to "know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe."<sup>3</sup>

As I look at the gospel accounts, I see Jesus using every opportunity to invite people into His "space." Whatever was going on around Him, He found the hospitality in it. And a theme I've noticed in these opportunities is need. Sometimes, people were in need, and Jesus came to the rescue. Other times, it seemed that Jesus had the need. In either case, He took that need and turned it into a door that opened to the space where the guests could find their souls; they could find healing; they could, by His presence, be made whole.

Maybe I've picked up on this theme because I see it quite a bit in my own life. Born with a neuromuscular disease that puts me in a wheelchair, I've grown pretty familiar with the idea of need. Not a day goes by, maybe not even an hour, that I don't ask for help in some way. Walking is the least of my concerns. I need help with using the restroom, showering, getting dressed, turning over in bed at night, preparing food and eating it, opening doors, blowing my nose, scratching my head when it itches, grabbing a book from the shelf, and positioning my hands just right on a table so I can hold that book open to read it.

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2. Matt. 11:28 NIV.

3. Eph. 1:18b-19.

Being so acquainted with need, I have often struggled, wondering if I am, more than anything else, a burden. There are only so many ways to ask for help before you start to wonder. Then I read about how Jesus asked a Samaritan woman for a drink of water, how another washed His dusty feet, and how His disciples gave Him something to eat after He rose from the dead. And through His needs, the people serving Jesus were served. Maybe need isn't actually a bad thing if we realize the hospitality of it. Maybe it can be a door that opens into spaces where, together, we find our souls.

## **Loss and Connection**

Our family room wasn't actually all that special. The stories and memories I have from that place are because of the people who have been there and the experiences we've shared. And so many of those experiences started with a need—a need for entertainment, rest, food, play, or fellowship. Those needs prompted a coming together, a making of time and space to not just meet, but to give all involved a glimpse into the Kingdom Come.

My most vivid memory in our family room happened just a few years ago in the middle of the night. I was awakened in my bedroom by a phone call, which also woke my dad across the hall. He came in to help me into my wheelchair and answer the call. My friend, on the other end, was crying and hysterical. Because my arms don't work well, I had to use the speakerphone. I didn't know yet what was going on, but I knew I needed to get to the other side of the house before I woke up anyone else. Groggy and lopsided in my chair, I rolled into our family room. My dad brought my phone in for me and set it on the table. I signaled him not to worry about turning on any lights, so he left me to it.

In the dark, my friend explained, sobbing, that a mutual friend of

ours had committed suicide that evening. He gave me the few details he had, continuing to weep into the phone. I couldn't cry, though. I was in shock. I called someone else to confirm the information; then, I sat quietly for what seemed like forever. Darkness and loneliness swallowed me whole.

I don't know if Dad had left the room and just came back to check on me or if he had stayed nearby, listening and watching. Either way, as I sat in that black abyss, I felt his arms wrap around me. He held me as I trembled, as I said goodbye to the life I knew just minutes before, and stepped into a world that didn't make sense. Because of my need for help getting into my wheelchair, my dad knew what was going on. And because of my need to mourn, he and I encountered, more than ever before, what it meant to be father and son.

## **The Room**

I wonder what my six-year-old self would've thought had I known all of this was in store for the place where I sat and played. I imagine the neighbor stopping by to see the progress as Dad and I rested on the western corner of the foundation.

What if he had moseyed over, nodded at the hole in the ground, and told me I would laugh and cry with countless people in that room over the next thirty years? What if he had said I would write my first short story there or have my first kiss with the girl I would later marry?

I'm not sure the weight of it all would have registered with me. I'm not sure I could've grasped the joy, pain, and beauty of it. Then again, I'm not sure I can today. But I'm thankful for every bit of it, including that afternoon before the room was even a room. All that mattered to me as the sun set on our yard was that I was sitting with my dad, and one of those toy cars was going to crash and burn in the orange ravine below.

# A Tightrope Walk

*from Kevan*

**B**eing in a wheelchair, I'm probably the last person who should be using an acrobatics analogy, but here we go. We are looking at need and the attributes of hospitality that can be found in it. This whole concept is a tightrope walk, and on either side are drop-offs we too often fall into. On one side, we can see need as a burden: heavy, shameful, "too much." On the other side, we can see it as an idol: over-prioritized, all-consuming, even blinding.

Let's be clear and call these what they are. Both drop-offs are lies, Satan's twist on God's good work. And our acceptance of either lie as truth is a sin, which leads to death, whether emotional, relational, physical, spiritual, or all of the above. The enemy doesn't care as long as he breaks us and the world around us. It's important to be aware of these drop-offs—these lies—and to not miss, instead, the opportunities to walk together in the abundant life God intended for us.

## **Burden**

A few years ago, I was sharing a house with a couple of buddies, Ben and Matt. They both had day jobs outside the house, and I didn't like being home alone. So, here's what my routine looked like: A friend

would come to the house in the morning to get me out of bed and ready for the day, and then I would “walk” by myself to downtown (about two miles through quiet neighborhoods) and spend most of my day working from there at a coffee shop. A few guys worked downtown who didn’t mind helping me with the restroom, and at the end of the day, I’d “walk” home to spend the evening with roommates and other friends.

But sometimes, it was raining or too cold for me to make that trek to or from downtown by myself. Someone would take me in my van, or I would stay home. Sometimes, after a long day at work, my roommates would get a text from me asking for a ride home. And then there were the times when I was sick and needed extra care and attention, whether it was a cough or an upset stomach. Maybe I didn’t sleep well the night before, or due to the weather, my body was just worn down more than usual, and I couldn’t do as much or be left alone. And then what about when my friends were sick, or worn out, or had other responsibilities or crises of their own?

While Ben and Matt, as well as Evan, Ian, Isaiah, Damon, Steve, Joe, Drew 1, Drew 2, Drew 3, Drew 4, Wes, Nathan, Tyler, and a ton of other guys technically knew what they were signing up for and none of them ever complained, I felt some days like I might be asking too much. It’s one thing to care for your own child, sibling, or parent, or even to be hired as a caregiver for someone with severe need. But these guys and I—we are connected by friendship. I’m a roommate, a coffee shop acquaintance, a fellow church member. It’s one thing to ask for a door to be opened or even help with the restroom. But it’s another thing when I get sick and need Ben to take the day off work to stay home with me, or instead of one restroom break at the coffee shop, my stomach freaks out, and I need Steve to help me with five restroom breaks in a row that are less than pretty to clean up. They

were willing, but no one had really signed up for that depth of care, had they? Not for a buddy.

One morning, the guy who got me up was giving me a ride downtown, and these thoughts rolled around in my head. I was a burden. This way of doing things, this experiment of my friends taking care of me, was fun and maybe even revolutionary, but not sustainable. No wonder no one else in the disability world was doing it. Something had to change. These guys would be better off if they didn't have to care for me like this. Our friendships would be better off. Maybe I would be better off too.

Just then, I looked up to see a large building just two blocks from the coffee shop. An elderly man sat by the front door in a housecoat, smoking a cigarette. He greeted a hunchback woman in a wheelchair as she entered the building. A nursing home. I had seen it 100 times before and passed it twice that often. But I'd never really taken much notice. The thoughts rolling around in my head that day, though, placed a big, flashing neon sign over the building: "This is the other option!" The image stuck with me all day. It was a defeated image, the idea of living there, but maybe it was what I needed to do for everyone's sake.

That afternoon, when Ben picked me up, I mentioned the idea to him. I wish I could tell you his response was like a movie scene, with some epic monologue, or even a quip that has stayed with me for years since. I wish I could say that he looked me dead in the eye or slapped me in the face and told me to snap out of it. But he actually just kind of cocked his eyebrow, gave me a sideways look like I was crazy, and told me to stop, that I wasn't a burden. That was it, the whole talk. When we got home, we made a pizza and watched a movie together. And I have never again thought about living in a nursing home.

When we have a need, what is our posture? In the first place, are we willing to invite others into it? And then, if they do come in—whether we've invited them or not—how do we feel about our roles

in the exchange? Do we feel like we owe them? Are we protective, reluctant, apologetic, self-deprecating, resentful? At my lowest, I have seen my need—and thus myself—as a hindrance to others’ happiness and success. The narrative in my head is that I’m holding them back in life, and they would be better off without me. In a weird way, maybe I would be too. My view of the universe spirals, warps, and shrinks into a scared little worm as I bury my head in this destructive falsehood.

Whether we’ve had the label of “burden” placed on us by the words and actions of others or we’ve taken it up of our own accord, the root of that message is shame. And shame is the antithesis of what God intended us to experience as His creations. Jesus told a crowd in John 10:10 that He came to give us life abundantly. I can’t help but picture a group of children running wild through an open field, playing, exploring, laughing—free. Life abundantly. But shame, according to Dr. Curt Thompson in *The Soul of Shame*, “will do everything it can to interfere with the emergence of joy, curiosity and the creativity that inevitably ensues.”<sup>1</sup>

God created us to be communally adventurous, to live not just alongside one another, but *for* one another as well. And while He designed us to find a rich, full life within this kind of focus, Satan uses the tool of shame to disrupt that possibility. Looking through the lens of shame to see ourselves as a burden turns us inward and cuts us off from community, friendship, and fellowship. Dr. Thompson calls it “the inertia of shame,” and he says the way we overcome it is to “turn in a posture of vulnerability toward someone else. . . . The very thing that has the power to heal this emotional nausea is the reunion of those parts of us that have been separated.”<sup>2</sup>

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1. Curt Thompson, *The Soul of Shame: Retelling the Stories We Believe About Ourselves* (InterVarsity Press, 2015), 53.
  2. Thompson, *The Soul of Shame*, 34.

Seeing our need—and subsequently ourselves—as a burden is, unfortunately, an easy drop-off to fall into because if we're not careful, it can seem to prove itself. It doesn't take much to convince myself I'm a burden when I feel the quiver in my friend's arms as he picks up my deadweight. In a matter of seconds, my mind jumps from "I weigh too much" to "I am too much," and it's a pretty arguable point, especially if I leave it in my mind to bounce around for awhile by itself. But if I bring it into the light (in a conversation, for example), I might just find that my friend has a better argument against it than I do.

As Dr. Thompson says, the only way to counter shame is with vulnerability. It's the very thing our shame tells us we absolutely shouldn't pursue, but that's because vulnerability kills shame, so shame screams, "Stay away from that! It's terrible!" We demolish the burden narrative warping our heads and hearts by inviting others into our need. Unfortunately, some who get involved will feed the shame in us instead of fighting it with us. This is the way of the world, and those people will always come around, with or without help. But the right people, if given a chance, will flip on the light and scatter the darkness of shame. It's why I'm so thankful for friends like Ben, who counter my burden crises with a cocked eyebrow and a pizza. Because love, in word and deed, shatters lies if we let it.

## **Idol**

In college I was part of a church that met on Sunday nights, and we were just wrapping up for the evening. A group of us stood out on the sidewalk chatting and having a good time when it hit me that I had class the next day and had not touched base with my friend York, who always gave me a ride to school. I whipped out my phone and shot him a quick text telling him when to pick me up. His reply undid me. York texted back to clarify (strongly) that he wasn't a servant at

my beck and call but a friend who helped out of love.

It may sound like an overreaction on his part. People send quick text messages all the time, and they are often crudely to the point: “Pick me up at 8.” But I actually believe York was wise in his response, catching a spark before it burned down the forest. He saved me from a mindset that would have led me down some very lonely roads had it not been addressed at this point. My needs are numerous and ongoing. I’ve been blessed with a lot of amazing folks willing to meet these needs, and it could be easy to take advantage of this. If not checked, what is a gift could be mistaken for an entitlement. York saw in that little text interaction that I was losing sight of him as a person to love, and instead seeing him more as a tool to use.

Just as we can see need as a burden—either our own or someone else’s—we can also fall into the drop-off of making need an idol. I have seen this far too prevalently in the disability community, under the guise of seemingly justifiable terms like “advocacy.” Some well-meaning parents put up their dukes against teachers, doctors, airplane attendants, and other parents on behalf of their child’s needs and then train these children to “self-advocate” in the same manner. And we see a similar trend in the able-bodied world as well, the Christian and secular mainstream alike, latching onto “self-care” as paramount to all other life choices while the Bible calls us to deny ourselves and take up our cross daily.<sup>3</sup> The needs may be different, but it’s the same attitude that places our needs before anyone else’s. In short, that heart says, “The world revolves around me.”

It’s a slippery slope because needs are meant to be shared. Whether obvious or subtle, need can tether us to one another by means of interdependence. But just like sharing prayer requests can easily slide

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3. Luke 9:23.

into gossip, so can sharing our needs easily slide into selfishness. Our natural leaning is toward self-preservation, so to count others more significant than ourselves takes a conscious effort (via common grace), and to sustain it requires the Holy Spirit.

The first two of the Ten Commandments address idolatry. “You shall have no other gods before me,” and then “You shall not make for yourself a carved image. . . . You shall not bow down to them or serve them.”<sup>4</sup> More often than not, we like to ascribe idolatry to only things outside of ourselves. Ancient history puts stone or gold statues in our minds when we think of idols, while a modern take might be our cellphones, entertainment, celebrities, vices, or even being “in the know” at all times.

Whatever the idol is, we worship it, hold it in a place of esteem where only God should sit and reign, and give it full license to do with us as it pleases. We give it our loyalty. The person or thing we put there (God or idol) will consume us, shape our worldview, and ultimately dictate how we operate within that worldview. So, if we give that seat to God, we will have life, but if we set need in that place of highest honor, here’s what the takeover looks like. Meeting that need will consume us. We will do anything to meet it and, at some point, expect others to do anything to meet it too. It will be the center of our universe, and we will operate as if it should be the center of everyone else’s universe. Those around us or in our path will be no more than players in our game—tools or obstacles. Their needs will fade, and they will either wither or leave, and we will meanwhile waste away.

Instead of the abundant life, love, joy, and peace we find in Jesus, with need as our idol, we would experience frustration, fear, loneliness, and cortisol levels that will more than likely lead to a heart attack.

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4. Ex. 20:3–5.

Satan will break us and the world around us. That is unless we have friends like York, who call it what it is—at a spark or a full-on conflagration—and help us refocus our priorities.

## **The Same**

While the analogy holds that seeing need as a burden or idol are two drop-offs on either side of the tightrope, at the end of the day, they are really the same fall. In both, we are putting need in the spotlight, and consequently barring ourselves and others from the life of fellowship that God created us to enjoy. In a noisy world of lies, we need to rehearse truth, hiding it in our hearts and reminding one another through word and deed. Vulnerability is key to this, and inviting one another into our needs can foster that connection—the kind we are all longing for. Instead of a stumbling block, let us discover need in its proper context and purpose, to bring us together and point us to Jesus.

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