



# Strong and Weak

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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## The Summary

### Chapter 1: Beyond the False Choice

Two questions haunt every human life and every human community. The first: *What are we meant to be?* The second: *Why are we so far from what we're meant to be?*

Human beings have an indelible sense that our life has a purpose. Something has gone wrong on the way to becoming what we were meant to be, individually and together. The first question exposes the gap in our own self-understanding, our half-formed sense that we are meant to be more than we know. How can we have such a deep sense of purpose but find ourselves unable to quickly name or grasp that purpose? Yet this is the human condition. The second question exposes the gap between our aspirations and our accomplishments,

between our hopes and our reality, between our reach and our grasp. If the first question gives voice to our greatest hopes, the second brings to the surface our deepest regrets. Having both great hopes and great regrets is also the human condition.

In this book I offer a way of answering both of these questions which I've come to call the *paradox of flourishing*. It holds together two simple truths in a simple relationship, but it generates fruitful tension, complexity and possibility.

"Flourishing" is a way of answering the first great question, *what are we meant to be?* We are meant to flourish—not just to survive, but to thrive; not just to exist, but to explore and expand. To flourish is to be fully alive,

and as we read or hear those words something in us wakes up, sits up a bit straighter, leans ever so slightly forward. To be fully alive would connect us not just to our own proper human purpose but to the very heights and depths of divine glory. To live fully, in these transitory lives on this fragile earth, in such a way that we somehow participate in the glory of God would be flourishing. And that is what we are meant to do.

Every paradox requires that we embrace two things that seem like opposites. Flourishing comes from being both strong and weak. Flourishing requires us to embrace both authority and vulnerability, both capacity and frailty, and both life and death.

The answer to the second great question—*Why are we so far from what we're meant to be?*—is that we have forgotten this basic paradox of flourishing, which is the secret of being fully alive. The truth is that we are afraid of both sides of the paradox of flourishing. We especially fear to combine them in the only way that really leads to real life for ourselves and others.

The world is littered with false choices. Should products be low cost *or* high quality? Is the mission of the church evangelism *or* is it justice? Leadership writers talk about “the tyranny of the OR and the genius of the AND.” This book is about how to embrace the life for which we were made. The life that embraces the paradox of flourishing, which pursues greater authority *and* greater vulnerability *at the same time* is that life.

There really is no other goal higher for us than to become people who are so full of authority and vulnerability that we perfectly reflect what human beings were meant to be and disclose the reality of the Creator in the midst of creation.

## Chapter 2: Flourishing

*Flourishing* captures Jesus’ statement of his own life’s purpose in John 10:10, “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” The most influential human be-

ing in history was a Judean carpenter and rabbi who did not live in a gentrified neighborhood with a Whole Foods. He was never noted for his physical appearance. (See Isaiah 53:2) His circle of followers first expanded then dwindled as his mission reached its culmination from curious crowds of thousands to a few heartbroken women standing by his cross. He lived the most exemplary human life possible, but it was a not a life that looks like our affluence-addled picture of flourishing.

My sister Melinda’s daughter, Angela, was born with a condition called trisomy 13. (The far more common “Down Syndrome” is trisomy 21.) Most children with trisomy 13 die before birth; half of those born alive die within the first week. Trisomy 13 affects almost everything, for the worse, in the human body. She could not meaningfully see or hear; she could not walk; she could not feed or bathe herself. She knew nothing of language. This leads to this question: Is Angela flourishing?

Perhaps this question actually has things backwards. When Jesus asked, “Who is my neighbor?” he told a parable that turned that question on its head. Maybe we should be asking, “Who is helping Angela flourish?” We also might be asking, “Who is flourishing because of Angela?” or even, “How can we become the kind of people among whom Angela flourishes and who flourish with Angela in our midst?”

Flourishing is not actually the property of an individual at all, no matter how able or disabled. It describes a community. The real question of flourishing is for the community that surrounds Angela which includes her parents and siblings, her extended family, and the skilled practitioners of medicine, education and nutrition who care for her. The question is not whether Angela alone is flourishing but whether her presence in our midst leads us to flourishing *together*.

Then the question goes one step further. Is Angela helping us flourish? Is she the occasion of our becoming more fully what we were created to be, more en-

gaged with the world in its variety and complexity, more deeply embedded in relationship and mutual dependence, and more truly free?

The surprising answer is that precisely because of Angela's great vulnerabilities, and because of the immense challenges that accompanied her into the world, a kind of flourishing is possible that would not otherwise exist. For ten years and counting, untold people have had the opportunity to serve Angela and her family with authority and with vulnerability. Authority without vulnerability will not suffice. Neither will vulnerability without authority. The two together are what is needed. These two things together, I have come to believe, are the very heart of what it is to be human and to live for God and others.

Think of authority this way: *the capacity for meaningful action*. What I mean by the vulnerability that leads to flourishing is: *exposure to meaningful risk, which includes the possibility of loss*. Vulnerability at root means we can be wounded. When authority and vulnerability are combined, you find true flourishing. Not just the flourishing of the gifted or affluent, but the needy and the limited as well. For my niece Angela to flourish, others will have to act meaningfully and place her own actions in a meaningful story.

In the end, love longs to be capable of meaningful action in the life of the beloved, so committed to the beloved that everything meaningful is at risk. If we want flourishing, this is what we have to learn. What we will have to unlearn, and be saved from, are our failures of authority, vulnerability or both.

### Chapter 3: Suffering

None of us make it very far in life without spending time in this corner. Suffering can be the result of injustice and evil, but it touches even the most sheltered lives. Ultimately suffering, which is vulnerability without authority, is the very last word of every human life, no matter how privileged or powerful. We will end our days, one way or

another, radically vulnerable to others, only able to hope that they will honor our diminishment and departure with care and dignity. The authority we carefully store up for ourselves will evaporate slowly or quickly, over the span of decades or suddenly and unexpectedly.

So how do we help move people from suffering toward the authority for which they were made? The only truly sustainable response *is to help build lasting authority*. When the gospel begins to transform individuals and communities, it does not simply relieve the most immediate needs. Indeed, many of those needs may remain unmet in any material sense. Yet the gospel restores hope and dignity, meaningful action and meaningful risk. At a distance, you might suppose that systematic injustice and multi-generational vulnerability would leave nothing but misery in their wake. But draw closer to even the greatest suffering and you find people of extraordinary resilience and spiritual power. One of them, for me, is named Isabel.

Isabel was born in Chile, trained and credentialed there as a family counselor. After immigrating to Santa Barbara with her American husband, she discovered that her professional credentials from Chile were not recognized in the United States. Eventually she was able to find full-time work cleaning houses.

She views her work in theological terms: "If you look in the book of Genesis, in the beginning, the world is in darkness. There is no order. God is a God of order. He orders every single life, changes every life from darkness to light in Jesus. That is my motivation as I work. Everything I do is from God, not from man. Jesus washed the feet of the disciples, and we are to do the same: be a servant with love. If I am cleaning a toilet, well, that is something that needs to be done to order the world and to wash the feet of others. There is no sadness about that; it's a joy. The greatest example of servanthood in my life is the Holy Spirit, because He guides me. I listen to his voice, and I say, 'Yes, sir.' "

Isabel sees brokenness in the work she does: "The

Santa Barbara hills are full of spacious homes, and nearly every one of them employs a Hispanic woman as a cleaner. It's sad to see people who have everything beautiful, everything perfect. They contract with you so their world can continue perfect and clean. But you realize their life is empty. So I have to be light for them. Every single home I go to, I pray for that family, that they can find him. If he will use me, amen. If not, amen. He will send somebody else."

Isabel has authority, something you discover the moment you meet her. She speaks and acts meaningfully in everything she does. Her story has been transformed by another story. Her life's action has been made meaningful by being caught up in the story of the gospel. She has moved from Suffering to Flourishing and she is bringing others with her.

This can be true for us as well. As we will see in the final chapters of this book, we actually will be called to seek out suffering, go to its depths, if we truly want to bring flourishing to the world. But when we journey to the heart of suffering, whether by circumstance or by choice, we are only going to where Another has gone before us. When we find our place in that story and in that journey, our vulnerability, too, becomes the path to flourishing.

## Chapter 4: Withdrawing

As a father, I discovered what exactly the Gospel of Luke had meant by "swaddling clothes." My newborn son loved nothing so much as to be tightly wrapped in a blanket, arms and legs neatly tucked into a package, and held. Unswaddled, he would fuss and squirm; properly swaddled, he became calm and alert, able to take in the world around him without anxiety. The swaddling clothes bound him but also comforted him.

For the first years of his life, it was my deepest desire as a parent to protect him from too much of either authority or vulnerability. We moved tantalizing but fragile objects out of his reach, we swooped in to pick him up

when he wandered too far on the sidewalk or playground and we scanned every room for sources of risk. A healthy childhood is one where capacity for action and exposure to meaningful risk are meted out in measured doses, gradually increasing as the child matures.

There is no vulnerability deeper, no lack of authority more crushing, than the inability to protect your own child from harm. Millions of parents on this planet know that reality all too well. This very day there are children picking through smoldering heaps of garbage in the ports of Africa where our discarded electronics go for recycling. Other children are being handed lethal weapons and trained in killing. Others are exposed to the degraded passions of desperate men.

Few parents would wish this on their children, but there is another way to fail your children: too much swaddling. What we call "safety" when they're young becomes "withdrawing" as they mature and they grow into an adulthood of risk-adverse entitlement.

The good news for those swaddled in *Withdrawing* is that pretty much any move, toward either authority or vulnerability, is a step in the right direction. Perhaps the two best beginning moves, for those of us swaddled in affluence and intoxicated by our technology, are into the natural world (the world of stars, snow and rain, trees and deserts) and into the relational world (the world of real bodies with heartbeats, hands and faces).

Turn off your devices and go for a walk or a run, not just on days when the weather is pleasant but on days when the wind is fierce, the rain is falling or the humidity is high. Shiver or sweat, feel fatigue in your limbs, hear the sounds of the city or the countryside unfiltered by headphones. Choose to go places such as the ocean, the mountains, or a broad, wide field, where you will feel small rather than grand.

Dare to walk across town without looking at a screen. Introduce yourself to one new person each day just to learn their name and give them yours. Sit with a friend

over coffee or tea and ask them questions just one step riskier than the last time you talked. Try to imagine what it must be like to live their story, suffer their losses, and dream their dreams.

The next time you travel, travel like a pilgrim and encounter people who have been sanctified by suffering. Seek out people who live on the cruel edges of the world. Share what you have with them. Our affluence has left us unready for the tragedy and danger of the world. But what we cannot see when we are caught in Withdrawing is that there is something far better ahead, pleasures which we must be made strong enough to bear. We will only discover them if someone unwraps us and calls us forth. The great glad news of the gospel is that someone has.

## Chapter 5: Exploiting

Tyrants and dictators live at the most extreme edge of Exploiting, with their people living at the most extreme edge of Suffering. Tyranny and suffering, exploiting and poverty, always are found together. Indeed, you know you are encountering a situation of injustice when a few people in a system enjoy authority without vulnerability at the price of most people in that system suffering vulnerability without authority. But Exploiting is found anywhere people seek to maximize power while eliminating risk.

We human beings, as one ingeniously devised experiment after another has demonstrated, are considerably more motivated by the fear of loss than the possibility of gain. But Flourishing, I've been arguing, requires both authority *and* vulnerability in equal measure. The true life for which we were made will require us both to act and to risk. But we do not pursue these two good things with the same wholeheartedness, or even the same half-heartedness.

Most of us are far more willing to move toward Authority than we are Vulnerability. It's loss aversion in action. Authority corresponds to the ability to add something to

the world or the possibility of gain. Vulnerability corresponds to the possibility of loss. In our daily choices, both conscious and unconscious, the possibility of loss counts far more than the possibility of gain. That is why, to many of us, authority without risk sounds like a much better deal.

The church once enumerated seven deadly sins. Most of them are ways of pursuing authority without vulnerability. Sex without commitment (lust), food without moderation (gluttony), goods without limit (greed), anger without compassion (wrath), and above all, the pursuit of autonomous, godlike power (pride). All these are forms of what Scripture calls, most comprehensively, idolatry, the use of created things to pursue godlike power without risk or limit. (Sloth, of course, is the deadly sin that corresponds to Withdrawing, the safety of risking nothing in the world. Envy may be the besetting sin of Suffering, the jealousy and bitterness of those who can see only their own vulnerability and other's authority.)

All these are just variations on the promises that accompanied the very first idol, the fruit proffered by the serpent in the Garden: "You will be like God" (unlimited authority) and, "You will not die" (none of that vulnerable creaturely dependence). Not one of us does not have some habit, some recurring pattern of thought, substance or device that we turn to when we are feeling vulnerable. That something assuages our vulnerability and elevates our sense of capacity to act. It offers us, in a word, *control*, for the very essence of control is authority without vulnerability, the ability to act without the possibility of loss. Control is the dream of the risk and loss averse, the promise of every idol and the quest of every person who has tasted vulnerability and vowed never to be exposed in that way again.

But control is an illusion. There is, in the long run, no such thing as true authority without true vulnerability. Our idols inevitably fail us, generally sooner than later. As they begin to fail, we begin to grasp ever more vio-

lently for the control we thought they promised and we deserved. This drives us to exploitation, ripping from those too weak to resist the good things our idols promised but are failing to deliver.

One way to understand the pervasive theme of judgment and hell in the New Testament is that those who would have authority without vulnerability ultimately cannot be trusted with authority at all. In the end, the justice of God will abolish the authority of those who have purchased their power at the price of others flourishing, those who refuse to enter into relationship with the God who is authority and vulnerability together. If there is no hell for those who cling to tyranny and refuse mercy, there is no such thing as justice.

## Interlude: The Path to Flourishing

We have seen the real root of the problem: the quest for authority without vulnerability. This quest, which began with our very first parents, haunts the human story. We live in a world where sin has been, in the fullest sense, institutionalized; where for generation after generation, the privileged and powerful rule without risk, exposing others to the deepest vulnerability while excluding them from true authority. Exploiting and Suffering sum up the tragedy of our whole human history.

This is not the way it was supposed to be. We are meant to experience more and more of the full authority intended for human beings, which can never be separated from the full vulnerability, the ultimate meaningful risk, of entrusting ourselves to one another and to our Creator.

How do we move from the story of Exploiting and Suffering to the story of Safety and Flourishing? How do we make space for the safety of childhood without retreating into the apathy of affluence? How do we elevate every member of our communities to the dignity and responsibility of image bearing without succumbing to the temptations of idolatry?

If you have started to ask these questions, you have already begun to be a leader. Leadership does not begin with a title or a position. It begins the moment you are concerned more about others' flourishing than you are about your own. It begins when you start to ask how you might help create and sustain the conditions for others to increase their authority and vulnerability together.

Leaders, you could say, lose interest in self-help books. They are no longer looking primarily to help themselves but to spend themselves on others. Personal growth becomes more and more important as we realize how easily we get stuck in Suffering, Withdrawing or Exploiting. Our goal is to see others act meaningfully and take meaningful risks. We should want to see both authority and vulnerability flourish in communities as small as a family or as large as a nation.

## Chapter 6: Hidden Vulnerability

The most highly classified document in the United States government is called the President's Daily Brief. Usually delivered to the president in person each morning by the director of national intelligence, the brief summarizes the most critical information that the United States' vast network of intelligence agencies has learned in the previous twenty-four hours.

Every morning, the president hears an unvarnished, detailed account of all the threats facing the country. Then comes the rest of the day's agenda. Ceremonies, meetings, phone calls, the occasional press conference, state dinners, etc., and during them all, the president knows what almost no one else knows to the same degree of detail. Of all that troubling and terrifying knowledge, the president cannot speak a word. The drama of leadership is hidden vulnerability.

With many kinds of flourishing, we see authority and vulnerability together, that is, we actually can see and perceive them. When we watch a great athlete compete, we see the competitor close behind them. Our



admiration comes from our keen awareness not just of the athlete's authority but their vulnerability as well. Sometimes, however, flourishing comes with *invisible* vulnerability, especially in leadership. Almost by definition, leaders have evident authority but they also bear vulnerability that no one else can see. They may have access to more complete information than those they lead, as the president does after his morning briefing. They may simply possess deeper insight and intuition of the challenges they and their organizations face. This is what it is to be a leader: to bear the risks that only you can see, while continuing to exercise authority that everyone can see.

Even for healthy leaders, there is often a gap between public perception and private reality. But the gap between perception and reality can also run the other way. What if leaders are perceived as more vulnerable, more exposed to risk, than they actually are? This is the essence of *manipulation*.

Manipulative leaders have learned to fake vulnerability by seeming to be exposed to risk and thus committed to flourishing. But in fact they use their ostensible vulnerability to shore up unbalanced authority. They can win sympathy and even loyalty with their calculated self-disclosures or complaints about the power of their opponents. Leaders who use the appearance of vulnerability as a strategy to gain more authority are far less trustworthy than leaders who bear it truthfully but privately.

As risky as it is, hidden vulnerability is often necessary for true transformation. *The most important thing we are called to do is help our communities meet their deepest vulnerability with appropriate authority.* We want to help our communities live in the full authority and full vulnerability of Flourishing. It turns out that in order to do that, we often must bear vulnerability that no one sees.

There are two kinds of vulnerability that must remain hidden if we are to lead others toward Flourishing. First, *the leaders' own personal exposure to risk* must often remain unspoken, unseen and indeed unimagined by others. Second, *the leader must bear the shared vulnerabilities that the community does not currently have the authority to address.* Revealing either of these kinds of vulnerability will at best distract, and at worst paralyze, the community we are responsible for, robbing them of the opportunity for real flourishing.

Of every human being who has ever lived, Jesus lived most completely in the fullness of authority and vulnerability. His authority was evident to everyone. At every turn of the gospel narratives we see Jesus exercising unparalleled capacity for meaningful action as well as restoring authority to the marginal and poor. But no one fully grasped Jesus' vulnerability. As his ministry brought him nearer and nearer to the final confrontation with the forces of idolatry and injustice, only Jesus understood what was truly going to be lost.

## Chapter 7: Descending to the Dead

The marriage of authority and vulnerability, which is our glad destiny as image bearers, is only possible if we are willing to bear vulnerability without authority. The most transformative acts of our lives are likely to be the moments when we radically empty ourselves, in the very settings where we would normally be expected to exercise authority.

Our mission in the world is to help individuals, whole communities, and ultimately, all humanity to flourish. But to do so, especially to set free those who have suffered the most from idolatry, addiction, injustice and tyranny, requires us to go where no one wants to go: voluntary exposure to pain and loss. Why is this necessary? It's necessary because of the extraordinary grip of idols over our world.

The idols are all the forces that whisper the promises of control, invulnerable power and independence. Then, having seduced us with those promises, they enslave us to their demands and blind us with their distorted view of the world. We have been so completely conquered by idol's lies and we are so enslaved to their dominion that we cannot truly comprehend, let alone attain, a life that that is as exposed to meaningful risk as it is capable of meaningful action.

In a healthy world, every increase in authority would be matched by an increase in risk. This is the pattern that would keep us dependent on God and one another, empowering others rather than hoarding our power, and discovering new dimensions of flourishing. But in the world as we know it, acts of authority frequently insulate us from risk rather than opening us up to it. Something is warped in the grain of the universe, something that prevents us from turning authority into flourishing. We are bent in the direction of exploitation, privilege and safety. Such is the power of the lies that have insinuated themselves into the human story from the very beginning.

All of us are afflicted by the forces of idolatry and injustice, but when we take responsibility for others' flourishing we become even more exposed to the power of these forces. Even when leaders do bear real vulnerability, it is necessarily hidden from others much of the time. Even when leaders are most vulnerable, the rest of us persist in seeing them as invulnerable. Not only do we want to see them that way, we need to see them that way, lest we face the true reality of our own vulnerability.

No matter how much leaders pursue integrity and flourishing, the forces preventing their true vulnerability from being seen are deep and powerful. Indeed, it is not too strong to say that those forces are demonic. Every leader and every community, whether we like it or not, is implicated in the cosmic rebellion which denies the idea that vulnerability leads to flourishing.

What could truly break the power of that rebellion? If someone were to dramatically empty himself of authority, voluntarily give up the capacity for meaningful action, and allow himself to be handed over to the most exploitative forces in our cosmos. If he would then go into the land of the dead, the realm of those who have lost all capacity for action, and return, rescued, fully alive, indeed with far more authority than we had ever seen or imagined. Such a complete sacrifice, and victory, might conclusively unmask the lie that is at the heart of all exploitation.

In the wake of such a sacrifice and such a triumph, human beings might be set free from their fantasies of authority without vulnerability. They would see with their own eyes, and touch with their hands, the evidence that God's power is greater even than death. They would know that nothing, and no one, can ever be ultimately lost when God acts to rescue and restore.

## Chapter 8: Up and to the Right

Good leaders, and good friends, increase our authority *and* vulnerability, even while they carefully assess how much authority and how much vulnerability we can stand. In the grip of idols, we believe that our problem is not enough authority. Life becomes a quest to acquire enough authority to manage and minimize our vulnerability. The risks are all around us, obvious and endless including the terror of nature, the hostility of others, the inexorable approach of death. To people who see the world in this way, gaining authority without vulnerability is the pearl of great price, something you would sell everything to obtain. So, in the grip of idolatry and injustice, that is exactly what we do.

But from the first page to the last, the story that has turned the world upside down says our situation is actually the reverse. Our problem isn't acquiring enough authority, not if we are truly made in the image of the world's all-powerful Creator, blessed with memory, reason and skill, the rulers of creation. If that was true of our beginning, it is all the more true of our future.



We do not lack for authority. In Christ we have all the authority that we need and more: “all things are yours.” (1 Corinthians 3:21) But what unlocks that authority is the willingness to expose ourselves to meaningful loss, to become vulnerable and woundable in the world. For this, too, is what it means to bear the divine image because the One through whom all things were made spoke into being a world where he himself was betrayed, wounded and killed. What we are missing, to become like him, is not ultimately more authority—it is more vulnerability.

This is why both of the distinctive calls of transformative people involve vulnerability, hidden and chosen. This is why the evidently vulnerable are such crucial parts of all of our flourishing, and it is why my niece Angela is not just the object of our care but a subject in her own right, someone who draws out from us the capacity to be truly and fully human. This is why our hidden and our obvious flaws, failures and limitations are in fact the path to true strength. This is the good news for everyone who feels too vulnerable and powerless to have real authority. In the upside-down economy of the Kingdom, you possess the pearl which everyone must seek. Like Paul, who discovered that his “thorn in the flesh” was in fact the path toward God’s power being made perfect, you have with you, and within you, the secret of a life that unlocks true power.

Pursue authority by itself and you will not only end up without the authority you seek but plunged into the very kind of vulnerability you hoped to avoid. The reverse is not true. God is for us in our vulnerability, because “all things are ours,” because even the ultimate vulnerability of death cannot hold us in its grip. The pursuit of vulnerability actually leads to authority and to the flourishing that comes when authority and vulnerability are combined.

I am reminded of this in my frequent conversations with students and emerging adults about their callings and careers. Understandably, the felt need of nearly every young person is how to acquire authority, to gain the capacity to act in the workplace and in the broader world. My advice to them almost always comes down to this: embrace more risk. Only those who have opened themselves to meaningful risk are likely to be entrusted with the authority that we were all made for and seek. Indeed, to seek out meaningful risk actually is its own kind of act of authority, because in the economy of the world’s true Creator and Redeemer, meaningful risk *is* the most meaningful action, the life that really is life, the flourishing for which we were created.