

Week Four
Reading

POTENTIAL

AN ODD SITE

There was nothing unusual about the traffic. They abhorred it, but they also expected it. For most, it was their daily routine. Most were simply making the trek from work to home or from home to work. The traffic was both stifling and frustrating, but normal.

But all was not normal.

All was not routine.

Nobody knew what to make of it.

Bumper to bumper, car after car, traffic inched along, but something had everyone's attention.

It wasn't a wreck. It wasn't a car pulled to the side. It wasn't even an ambulance loading the wounded, a fire truck dousing a blaze, or a police officer issuing a ticket.

It was an odd sight.

Right there, bouncing along as if it were normal, directly behind a small green car, and directly in front of a large silver truck, was an airplane. Yes, an airplane, driving (or would this be taxiing?) down the highway as if it belonged. The pilot (or would this be a driver?) had a wearied look on his face. Not so for the passenger. Yes, sitting directly behind the pilot was what appeared to be a passenger. He looked like most any business traveler: a newspaper open before him, periodically sipping coffee while glancing out the window. The only evidence of surprise from the passenger was when people would stare or wave. "Why are you waving at me," said the look on his face. "Do I know you?"

There was no attempt to pull over.

There was no attempt to pull up.

Not only would this plane not fly, but the pilot would not even attempt flight. Others looked with wonder. Some commented, "If that were me, I'd find a stretch of road and get up and out of this mess." As if reading their minds, the pilot gave periodic evidence of his willingness to fly. From time to time he would shrug his shoulders, shake his head, and inconspicuously point to the man behind him, as if he were the problem. And yet, nothing was done. They continued to bounce along with the rest of traffic as if they belonged, as if they were doing exactly what they should be doing when traffic is congested. When traffic picked up, they simply sped along with it. When traffic slowed, they slowed as well.

Which gave rise to what may have been the oddest thing of all: Periodically, the passenger would clearly express his frustration with the traffic. He'd grimace. He'd tap the pilot and point to a faster lane. At one point, the passenger tossed his paper on the floor and shook his head. Such actions are expected from the car that can't fly, but this man was in an airplane. All he needed to do was ask the pilot to pull off at any exit. They could then make their way to an airport or an empty road, and they

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could leave the traffic behind. They could soar above at multiplied speeds without the frustration of traffic in their way.

But they didn't.

They stayed in traffic.

They continued to bounce, to weave, to sigh with frustration.

And yet, they could be free.

They could climb above the chaos and soar with the birds, and yet, they inched along like a snail. High above in a helicopter, a radio announcer monitoring traffic may have said it best: "*Talk about untapped potential! That airplane will do more than 200 miles per hour above the clouds, and it's inching along like he has to. What's with that?*"

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Potential.

Capacity.

Prospective.

Promise.

Ability.

Gift.

Aptitude.

Propensity.

Talent.

There's something exciting about potential. The little girl displays an unusually high degree of athleticism. She stands out on her team. She has potential. The young man scores far above average on the entrance exam. He distinguishes himself from his class. He has potential. The new hire meets her goals three weeks before anticipated. She is set apart from her colleagues. She has potential. Potential is invigorating, inspiring, and hopeful.

And it is also deceptive.

Potential, by definition, is the chasm between that which is actual and that which is possible. The athlete may have potential to win five gold medals, but the medals have not been won. If the potential is realized, it is no longer potential; it is reality. To have potential is both good and welcomed, but it is not a point of satisfaction. In truth, those who are satisfied with potential lack potential because the potential will likely be squandered.

Maybe most frustrating is potential in the past tense.

He had such potential. He never seemed to believe it.

She could have really done something. She had potential. It's too bad she did that.

Before he got caught up in that crowd, he was really going places; he had potential.

Why did she have to meet him? She had such potential.

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What once inspired hope later haunts us with what could have been. Untapped past potential follows us to our present reality. We quietly wonder what today would be like had we handled yesterday differently. We can say we have no regrets. It sounds bold and confident and may in fact be genuine. But to one degree or another, we see at least pockets of past potential gone unrealized. What if we'd not quit? What if we'd stayed with it? What if we'd persevered when times got tough? To obsess over these thoughts is unhealthy and unnecessary, but to ignore the lessons of our past will not serve us either. There is a humble confidence that gives honest assessment of past decisions.

Which leads us to the greatest pocket of potential available to humanity.

THE OPPORTUNITY

Consider, if just for a moment, the opportunity available to those who follow Christ.

There is the cross of Christ. Through this cross is forgiveness. This forgiveness opens the door to a relationship with our Creator. This Creator offers the Holy Spirit. This Spirit empowers and guides our living. There is prayer. There is Scripture. There are promises that inspire bold living. There are covenants. There are examples of well-lived lives and examples of lives lived not so well. There are commands to protect us. There are proverbs through which we may grow wise. There are angels, spiritual agents, assisting us in the unseen world. There is more, much more, but maybe most of all, there is the Father overseeing all things large and small.

Potential. Tremendous potential. Unparalleled potential.

And all too often, untapped potential.

Why?

Let's go back to the airplane.

THE AIRPLANE

Why might our friend, the passenger, deny the potential of that plane? Why remain stuck in traffic when sitting beneath him is a power that could easily lift him up and out of the congestion? Why do this, when sitting in front of him is a pilot completely capable of flying that plane? Awareness? That's doubtful. Someone sitting in an airplane would certainly know the plane's potential. Mechanical difficulty? It's possible. A reasonable explanation might be that the plane has problems. But let's say it doesn't. Let's say the plane is 100 percent capable of flying, the pilot is 100 percent willing to fly it, but the passenger has zero intention of doing so. Why might this be?

The mystery is solved when, in time, the plane is stopped by a police officer. "It's just too complicated," the passenger explains to the puzzled policeman. "I looked into flying it, but my eyes crossed from reading the manual. Look at all those dials up there. Then there's all the explanation of wind and weather. I got into it but gave it up. It's much easier to simply drive it on the ground."

"But you have a pilot," the policeman responds.

"Yes. And your point is?" the passenger asks.

"Why not let him fly the plane? He knows what he's doing."

"It's just too complicated, too dangerous, too unknown. If I don't understand it, I can't do that."

Odd we say? Definitely. But uncommon? Not exactly.

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Let's leave the airplane on the side of the road and consider matters of faith.

SIMPLE FAITH?

Consider a question: Following Christ – is it simple or complex? Be cautious of quick answers. Quick answers will miss a critical insight. Before answering, consider a few other questions.

A telephone – is it simple or complex?

A microwave – is it simple or complex?

A radio – is it simple or complex?

Telephones are simple, right? It depends on what we mean. Telephones are simple to use. A child can use a telephone. But to say telephones are simple is to miss the centuries of technology that have gone into developing this tool we use without thought. Few can explain how telephones truly work. How is it that we pick up a phone, punch a few numbers, and in a matter of seconds we're talking to a person on the other side of the globe? How does that work? There's a great deal of complexity that goes into the makings of a simple-to-use phone.

And the microwave – is that simple? Of course it is. We grab a bag of popcorn, place it on the tray, shut the door, push the button, and two minutes later it's done. It's that simple. A child can do it. True, but can a child build a microwave? How many of us really know the technology embedded in a microwave? Not only is there the technology that heats the food, but even the development of the casing, the buttons, and the digital clock are mysterious to most. There's a great deal of complexity that goes into the makings of a simple-to-use microwave.

One more, that radio in the car – is that simple? Consider what's really happening. Somewhere, either locally or globally, a few people are sitting in a booth talking into microphones. Their voices carry through those microphones and somehow make it to the speakers in our cars. What happens between the microphone and the car's speakers? Most of us don't know. Most of us are just grateful for the simplicity of the buttons we push and turn to use the radio. It's complicated for somebody; it's simple for us.

Now back to the real question: Following Christ – simple or complex? Honest answer: Yes, following Christ is both simple and complex. Scripture says as much.

There's depth and complexity that goes beyond human knowledge...

Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! (Romans 11:33).

And yet it is designed for a child...

I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it (Luke 18:17).

Hold these thoughts. We'll come back to them in a moment.

THE AMALEKITES

There's a common generalization that can be overstated but is essentially true. It's often and accurately noted that Old Testament stories give a *physical* picture of what happens *spiritually* in the New Testament and today. In the Old Testament, for example, we see *physical* battles. In the New

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Testament we see *spiritual* battles. Which leads us to a critical discovery: Physical battles in the Old Testament offer tremendous insight for the spiritual battles of the New Testament and our daily lives.

One such story is both brief and profound.

The Amalekites came and attacked the Israelites at Rephidim. Moses said to Joshua, “Choose some of our men and go out to fight the Amalekites. Tomorrow I will stand on top of the hill with the staff of God in my hands.” So Joshua fought the Amalekites as Moses had ordered, and Moses, Aaron and Hur went to the top of the hill. As long as Moses held up his hands, the Israelites were winning, but whenever he lowered his hands, the Amalekites were winning. When Moses’ hands grew tired, they took a stone and put it under him and he sat on it. Aaron and Hur held his hands up—one on one side, one on the other—so that his hands remained steady till sunset. So Joshua overcame the Amalekite army with the sword (Exodus 17:8-13).

The Israelites are attacked. They defend themselves with the sword, but their sword is empowered by something greater than the strength of their swing. As Moses stands with arms raised and the staff outstretched, the Israelite warriors are winning. As Moses lowers his hands and his staff, the Israelite warriors are losing. Moses quickly discovers this reality and labors to be fully submitted to God. He tires and his friends surround him. He is given a place to sit. His arms are held high with the support of his friends. All the while, the Israelite warriors fight on the field of battle and ultimately defeat their enemy.

How did that work? What really happened? Did angels intervene? Was there an unseen army that attacked on Israel’s behalf? Or maybe it was God’s Spirit. The Spirit moved mysteriously on that battlefield giving the Israelites the needed advantage. Or maybe it was none of that. Maybe it was something God can do that we know nothing about. Maybe he just spoke, and they won. Honestly, we don’t know how it all worked and what really happened in the unseen world. We don’t know, and neither did Moses. That’s the complexity of that battle.

We do know the simplicity, though. We know that when Moses entrusted the battle to his God that the battle went in Israel’s favor. We also know that when the battle was not entrusted to his God that the battle went in the Amalekite’s favor. This was simple. Moses and his friends caught on very quickly. Could they explain it? Partially. Could they experience it? Fully.

THE IMPERATIVES

The first two of seven imperatives...

I must recognize the real me.

I must fight for my life.

And now a third...

I must trust.

It’s so simple we can easily downgrade its necessity. Let’s move on to the complexity. Let’s dig deep into the mysteries of our faith. And yes, gaining depth of insight is incredibly important. Nothing here is intended to minimize the strength that comes from Scripture’s deepest revelations. A gross misapplication of this teaching would be to think that depth of insight is unimportant. That’s not the case.

Very simply, we seek to avoid two errors.

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First, there's the error of untapped potential for fear of the complexity. How foolish it sounds to say, *"I can't use a telephone because I don't understand how it works."* Understanding a telephone's technology is not essential to tapping the power of that technology. Likewise, an infinitely greater opportunity is missed when we say, *"I can't experience God's presence because I don't understand how he works. He's for people who really know what's going on."* Yes, there is complexity and mystery to the workings of God; and yes, a growing depth of insight is both available and important, but to limit our access to God's presence in our lives until greater understanding is achieved is to needlessly miss the greatest opportunity available to humanity.

And second, there's the error of assumed experience by knowledge of the complexity. What does that mean? A person may truly understand the technology of a radio but prefer to drive in silence. Knowledge of that complexity does not necessarily translate into experience of it. Likewise, one of the most surprising aspects of Christ's ministry was how he challenged religious authority at this very point: *"Woe to you experts in the law, because you have taken away the key to knowledge. You yourselves have not entered, and you have hindered those who were entering"* (Luke 11:52). These were the *"experts in the law."* They had insight into the complexity. They could explain things few others could explain. But it was all for nothing. They *"have not entered,"* Christ said. In their passion for the complexity, they missed the simplicity. Because they could explain it, because they could pass a test on it, or write an essay about it, they assumed they lived it, but they didn't. Potential went untapped because it was buried by the experts.

GOD'S ESSENTIAL POWER

To experience transformation, to build godly character, takes a power greater than ourselves. The Israelite's battle was not just a matter of who had the most warriors or the sharpest swords. Key to fighting, central to winning, is finding the greatest source of strength and power available to humanity. Moses turned to God. He raised his arms and entrusted the battle to a power far greater than any human army. Is it any wonder, then, that when we flip to the pages of the New Testament to gain insight into our spiritual battle, that we discover a direct reflection of the physical battles fought in earlier times? When battle tactics are expressly addressed we read, *"Be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power"* (Ephesians 6:10). In another place we read that we are able to overcome *"because the one who is in us is greater than the one who is in the world"* (1 John 4:4). Just like the Israelites fighting the Amalekites, we must raise the arms of our hearts and declare our trust in a power greater than our wit, greater than our intellect, and greater than our knowledge of the truth.

The identification of strongholds and the development of affirmations are essential, as we just discovered. But if this is all we do, if we simply embrace the conviction that truth beats lies, we run the risk of being like the sword-swinging Israelites engaged in the battle but not entrusting the battle to God. Yes, truth beats lies, but swords also beat attacking enemies, and the Israelites would have lost if their faith had just been in their swords. To fight for our lives is much more than personal pep talks convincing ourselves we can do it, we can live well, we can think right and do good. Such tactics, unsubmitted to God, leave us naked and vulnerable before an enemy hellbent on our destruction.

The imperatives work together. Yes, we fight for our lives; we take captive every thought to bring them into obedience. And as we do this, as we swing the sword of truth, we simply entrust the struggle to the God of all power. It is in this simple act of trust that we engage the depth, the complexity, the mysterious and liberating power of God. We will understand aspects of this power, and there are other aspects we will not understand but do not need to understand. Our role is simple; God's role is complex. When asked, *"What must we do to do the works God requires?"* Christ made it very clear, *"The work of God is this: to trust in the one he has sent"* (John 6:28-29).

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PULLING IT TOGETHER

Let's pull it all together.

Consider the young woman. Decades have passed since she was assaulted as a young girl, but she continues to carry needless shame. Those early memories hover over her every day and continue to deceptively *accuse* her. Even more, this perception fuels her current actions. She lives out of her wounds. *Why protect my purity?* she thinks, *I'm not worth much so why treat myself as if I am?* One shame leads to another and the accusations mount. But what if she took those thoughts captive and recognized the real person that God created and re-created? This would be both significant and profound. It would be a huge step in the right direction. But if left at this point, she may simply have truth without power. Such a condition would bring temporary encouragement but could easily lead to ongoing frustration. But what if she took it a step further? What if she not only recognized the truth and took those thoughts captive, but what if, both individually and together with trusted friends, they called out to God for liberation, for freedom, for victory against the Amalekites? What if like Aaron and Hur to Moses, her friends came alongside her and propped up the arms of her heart so she could be fully entrusted to a power greater and grander than anything they could imagine? Such a step would be simple. There's nothing complex about it. And yet, this simple act of faith would tap into the complexity and mystery of her astounding and liberating God.

Or consider the young man. His is the relentless drive for achievement. No, it's no ordinary desire to succeed; this is success on steroids. Nothing else matters but getting the deal, and he knows it's destroying his life. He simply cannot stop. His relational world is hollow. Escapist behaviors abound. These offer temporary anesthetic to a much deeper pain, but nothing changes down deep. Most of all, he just works, nonstop, all the time, no matter the cost. Attempts at boundaries and time off simply don't work. The problem is not time management. The problem is the recordings in his mind. These are strongholds. Over and over the voices drive him. Dad wasn't intentionally mean, but acceptance was based on performance, and value was measured by production. But what if this young man took a different view? What if he brought himself to Christ and let Christ define who he is rather than let himself be defined by what he may or may not produce. He would "*Recognize the real me*" and "*Fight for my life*" by embracing these truths. But as with our previous example, this swinging of the sword, if left to itself, could be powerless. Like the Israelites against the Amalekites, the young man must not fight in his own strength. But what if he didn't? What if he took a risk? What if he gathered with a couple of trusted friends, his own Aaron and Hur, and came against this stronghold in faith? What if he carried this newfound faith throughout his day, his week, his month, with ongoing prayer and support from his community? Something profound would happen. By taking these truths and entrusting them to a power greater than himself, not only would he be swinging the sword, but the arms of his heart would be stretched out to the God of all power, the God who will raise this man up to live a new life. Here as well, another stronghold of deception would come down, the enemy would be hurled from the presence of the young man, and the accuser would be silenced once again.

Day after day, month after month, year after year, our lives are impacted by grenades lobbed into our lives from strongholds that simply must go. If left unchecked, rather than silencing the shame, we will be defined by our wounds or our failures. The accuser will continue his rampage, and rather than living by faith, we will live by fear and be defined by human limitations. For some, it's enslavement to the opinions of others. For others, it's anxiety over the future. For others still, it's pride over our successes or shame over our failures. Whatever it is, the accuser will continue the accusations until we take captive these thoughts, lean into God's power, and reclaim lost ground.

Tremendous potential is available to us in Christ.

It's time to tap the Pilot.

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We need not know the complexity of flying.

We must simply entrust ourselves to the Pilot and the power of his plane.

Let him find the runway, push the accelerator forward, pull back on the stick, and take us up and out of the congestion of troubled living.

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