

Live Strong: When You Are Weak

by Neichelle Guidry Jones

Now to him who is able to keep you from falling, and to make you stand without blemish in the presence of his glory with rejoicing... (Jude 24)

In the summer blockbuster film *The Dark Knight Rises*, the third part in the modern Batman trilogy opens and introduces us to a reclusive, infirmed, and weakened Bruce Wayne. Far from the charming, flashy, and dashing Bruce that we've previously met, this Bruce is clearly a weaker version of the Bruce we had come to know. From the limp in his leg and his unshaven face, to the pajamas he never came out of and the darkness under which he veiled himself, I immediately knew that something was going to need to turn around for Bruce if he was to have any hopes of being the Gotham-saving, breathtaking, Batman that I *knew* he could be!

It hurt me to see Bruce—Batman—so weak. For all that I'd come to know about Bruce—how he despised his wealth and deeply desired to do good with it, if he was going to use it at all, and how he *loved* Gotham City to the point of sacrificing his own great personal love, Rachel—I just hated to see him so weak. For all I've come to know and love about *Batman*—the Dark Knight—and how strong I knew he was, it just hurt me to see him so *weak*.

We are all acquainted with the feeling, the reality, and the emotion of weakness. It is an integral part of the human experience. It is that place wherein it seems our defenses are down and dysfunctional.

Bodily defenses. You used to be able to bounce back so quickly from illness; now bouncing back takes a few more calculated steps and calculated prayers.

Mental defenses. You used to embody and exude the “joy of the Lord,” but now there is a weight on the inside that’s too heavy for you to lift.

Emotional defenses. The marriage was once solid, strong, and passionate, and, now you’re struggling to live into your commitments, and that love has simmered into a mere tolerance of your spouse.

And even spiritual defenses. Once, when you thought about Jesus and all he’s done for you, your soul shouted. Now, when you think about Jesus, you’re overwhelmed at what you *haven’t* done for him and how far you’ve gotten away from him.

And weakness is that place in which it seems you can’t fight the feeling or shake the symptoms of any of these weaknesses, and countless others. Indeed, we all know weakness. What do we do about this weakness, and what do we hold fast to in times of weakness? What carries us over into strength, and even indeed, enables us to overcome weakness and live strong? This twenty-fourth verse right at the end of the Epistle of Jude has at least three things to share with us about living strong.

First, there is the issue of timing: *Now*. Obviously, this is Jude’s benediction at the end of his letter, and *now* signifies that he’s reached his conclusion. It could be read that

Jude has *now* made all of his points and he's releasing his audience to go about their business. Or, it could be read that *now* that Jude has imparted some wisdom, the people are *now* ready to move into a stronger place in their faith and in their walk with Christ. However, we see that throughout the letter Jude is alluding to the sneaky and clandestine manner in which certain "intruders have stolen in among you" (v. 4), distorted the gospel, and caused them to forget who they are in Christ. Indeed, Jude's first purpose in writing to this audience is to "appeal to [them] to contend for the faith" (v. 3). Because of these new influences, we find a community that needs to be "reminded" that they are called to a different regimen, a different routine, and a different way of living— because *they* are the "called and the beloved in God the Father, and kept safe for Jesus Christ" (v. 1).

Therefore, Jude's *now* has less to do with the structure and the content of the letter and *more* to do with the urgency of the moment. He's writing to a people who have become weakened by a diminished gospel, and who are about to gorge on that which is not spiritually enriching and is bodily detrimental (cf. vv. 8-16). He's writing to a people whose community has been infiltrated by unfit influences and who are in danger of slipping into an abyss of weakness and "falling" into a state of spiritual slothfulness (or as we might say today, lethargy and unconcern).

Yes, *now* signified an urgent moment in which Jude realized that this people could have gone in one of two directions. They could have either "fallen" prey to the tactics of these infiltrating influences *or* they could have stood strong for what they knew and to *Whom* they belonged. Have you ever been there?

When one decision meant the difference between your failure and your triumph?

When one moment meant the difference between your elevation and your destruction?

When one movement meant the difference between your safety and your demise?

Well then you know what it means to be in an urgent moment. To be in a *now* moment. You know what it means to carefully calculate your next step, lest you end up

Broken

Broke

Humiliated

Estranged

Embarrassed

Fired

Divorced

Kicked-out

Worn out

Left behind

Or even

Dead!

If any of these scenarios sound familiar, then you know what it means to be pressed by an urgent moment. And, as we all know, urgent moments call for urgent faith *and* urgent strength.

Urgent, *now* moments are not the time to shrink back and “go with the flow.”

Now moments are not the time to give up and retire.

Rather,

Now moments are the time to fall down on your knees and stand up in your spirit,

Now moments are the time to make a plan and work it, get defensive, get protective,

Now moments are the time get undignified about protecting your spirit, your purpose, and your integrity

Now moments require you to live strong!

The problem is that we live in an age where strength is highly undervalued. All kinds of strength: spiritual, physical, emotional, mental.

We talk about being spiritually strong, but we relegate our God to two hours on Sunday morning.

We talk about being physically strong, but we feast foolishly and neglect to lift a finger thereafter.

We talk about being mentally strong, but depression and despair are still taboo in a context that prefers to front that we're "too blessed to be stressed!"

See, strength is more than a notion. It's more than an abstract concept to swirl around in our conversations and to climax our sermons with. Strength is an action, a doing, an activity. Jude says it best, which leads to our second point: By talking about strength and rarely embodying it, we often "fall" prey to many of these "weak" activities. Jude writes about "falling."

Again, let's emphasize that this is a community on the brink. They haven't fallen yet, but a fall is in the foreseeable future. However, despite our shared location, all on the brink of a fall, we have to recognize the fallen among us.

We have to recognize those of who have fallen to health-related illness, such as hypertension, congestive heart failure, diabetes, and the like. We must recognize those who have fallen because we've advocated for a spiritual strength that excluded mental healthcare. We must recognize those who have fallen because *we* made them that extra-large plate or didn't take a moment to see if they were okay. We must recognize our own falls when we commit to living stronger and healthier and more spiritually-attuned and yet, simply miss the mark. We have to recognize that falling is a part of our lives as humans and as Christians. It is a part of being in community with one another.

Another part of being in community is accountability. It is calling our brothers and sisters out, when we see a fall in *their* foreseeable future. It is sounding the alarm when we see our neighbors falling down all around us. It is obligating ourselves to the health, wellness, longevity, and *strength* of our neighbors. In fact, in verses 20-21, Jude offers *communal* advice for getting and remaining strong: "But you, beloved, build *yourselves* up on our most holy faith; pray in the Holy Spirit; keep *yourselves* in the love of God . . ."

Have you strengthened your neighbors today?

Have you reached out with a kind, or even a cautionary, word?

Have you offered a comforting embrace today?

Have you sounded an alarm to someone on the brink of falling?

Now moments require *now* communities, because as we see in this letter, it is entire communities that are at risk when unhealthy and weakening influences make their way into the center.

And, speaking of center, we find our third and final point right in the center of this sentence. Just in between the urgency of *now* and the foreseeable fall in their future, there is a “Him who is able to keep you...” Yes, we are all facing *now* moments—individually and collectively—and yes, we are facing the threat of foreseeable falls in our future. However, we have a God who is able to keep us from falling!

It’s good news that our God is able to keep us from falling because we are often lacking the strength that is required to stand.

It is good news that our God has made the strength that we need, available to us, enabling and empowering us to LIVE strong.

It is good news that our God has made promises to hold, strengthen, fortify, and defend us *even* in times of dire weakness.

When your defenses are down and you know you can’t fight for yourself, know that “No weapon formed against you shall prosper, and every tongue which rises against you in judgment, you shall condemn” (Isaiah 54:17).

When you’re too weak to run, but you know you can’t stay in the same place, know that, “they that wait upon the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint” (Isaiah 40:31).

And when you're feeling too weak to help yourself, God urges you on: "Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand" (Isaiah 41:10).

It's good to know that we don't have to live weak, but we can live strong. It's good to know that strong living is our heritage, as servants of the Lord. It's good to know that weakness and defeat are not our final destinations.

Indeed, we can live in courage and strength, today and everyday, because our God is *able* to keep us from falling! Our God gives us all that we need to live strong.