



NATASHA SMITH

BLACK

WOMAN

A GUIDE TO HOPE AND WHOLENESS

GRIEF



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# CONTENTS

Foreword by Quantrilla Ard	<i>1</i>
Introduction	<i>5</i>
<b>1</b> Strong Black Woman	<i>11</i>
<b>2</b> Worthy of Love	<i>27</i>
<b>3</b> Representation Matters	<i>40</i>
<b>4</b> Enough Is Enough	<i>50</i>
<b>5</b> Courageous Faith	<i>63</i>
<b>6</b> This Is Freedom	<i>78</i>
<b>7</b> Unhinged Healing	<i>91</i>
<b>8</b> Rest as Resistance	<i>106</i>
<b>9</b> The Softer Life	<i>117</i>
<b>10</b> Hope Matters	<i>127</i>
<b>11</b> Faith Marches On	<i>142</i>
<b>12</b> Healing and Wholeness	<i>153</i>
Acknowledgments	<i>171</i>
Notes	<i>175</i>

## STRONG BLACK WOMAN

*Come to me, all you who are weary and  
burdened, and I will give you rest.*

MATTHEW 11:28

“YOU’RE ONE OF THE STRONGEST PEOPLE I KNOW.”

These words from my friend were like nails screeching on a chalkboard. Though the sentiment was endearing, I knew it to be untrue. Yet I get this often. In these moments, my heart stops for a minute and I think, *You give me too much credit.*

Those words seem equivalent to “If I were you, I would’ve lost my mind.”

But under varying circumstances, we truly don’t know what we’ll do until we do it. We have an innate ability to endure things we never thought we could. Sometimes simply surviving is a feat of its own. Remember Oprah Winfrey’s famed line in *The Color Purple*: “All my life I had to fight.”

At times, that *is* what life feels like as a Black woman: a fight. Wrestling over how to make life better for ourselves and our

loved ones without losing ourselves in the process. Battling for equality in the workplace and in our homes. Fighting for all these things while trying to not look like the angry Black woman. Malcolm X said, “The most disrespected person in America is the black woman. The most unprotected person in America is the black woman. The most neglected person in America is the black woman.”<sup>1</sup>

We must fight stereotypes. Not all of us come from broken homes, and not all Black women are single parents. Yet, for those of us who are single parents, not all of us struggle in the ways some people think.

As Black women, we fight against European beauty standards: our hair, our melanin, and our bodies. We are beautiful, yet when we’re compared to others, we’re told we aren’t enough.

So we find ourselves constantly fighting.

We fight for our relationships, for our well-being, for our loved ones, for our friendships, for our sanity, and simply for ourselves.

We fight.

Then we fight some more.

And as Black women, we are tired.

So when my friend told me, “You’re so strong,” I felt anything but strong. I was beyond tired.

I’d just shared with her how the year so far had been excruciatingly hard as it related to grief. Bandages were ripped off old wounds and sealed places of my heart were opened, exposed to the elements for the sake of attempting to heal. All because healing begins when we name the thing that has hurt us. And

even as I write this, more grief is to come later in the year—my late sister Sharon’s birthday will be on November 13, the anniversary of my sister Angie’s death will fall on November 22, followed by Thanksgiving days later, and then Christmas. It happens every year.

There’s no escaping the grief, it seems.

Yet, it’s the things we leave unsaid that we battle the most. For so many Black women, grief is the unspoken thing—the invisible pain.

But as the saying goes, “Thank God we don’t look like what we’ve been through.” Can I get an amen?

So yes, being strong is a beautiful thing, but it can also be isolating. What is it about appearing strong that makes us feel so empowered? We often hear things like, “Nothing fazes her,” “She never cries,” “She’s not afraid of anything,” “Life never gets her down.”

I think about my mom and her losses: her miscarriage, and the losses of her dad, two adult children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, her husband, and several siblings. I think about how she’s dealt with them all. On the outside looking in, I admit I’ve said countless times, “She’s the strongest woman I know.”

You’ve probably said this about your mom. And it’s probably been said about yourself and other Black women.

Take a moment and pause.

Now, name all the strong women you know.

Chances are that those who come to mind—including Black matriarchs like Harriet Tubman and Rosa Parks—all experienced

a hardship, a devastating loss, or some type of suffering. But we often fail to realize the strong Black woman badge is only earned through sacrifice. You may have seen the meme floating around on social media that says, “Check on your strong friend.”

We might say, “Check on the strong Black woman.”

### **FAMILIAL EXPECTATIONS AND CAREGIVING**

Research suggests that caregiving is a historical and cultural tradition of Black women.<sup>2</sup> And it can easily seem as though Black women are disproportionately caregivers within their homes. There is insurmountable loss because Black women who are caregivers are deemed better at caring for everyone else than themselves. In my own family, the role of caregiver has been predominately taken by women.

Over the years, my mom’s caregiving responsibilities have involved raising her children and grandchildren, tending to her husband’s health—including his chest problems, stroke, and diabetes—caring for her mother, providing both paid and voluntary caregiving services in the community, volunteering at church, and looking after kids in the neighborhood. My mom would be considered part of the “sandwich generation”: individuals who find themselves caring for their aging parents and their children and/or grandchildren.<sup>3</sup>

At the age of eighty, my mom is still helping to care for her one-hundred-year-old mother, which is commendable. We all love that Grandma can live at home and be cared for by family. Yet, I know the deep challenge this has placed on my mom. There were times when she had to choose between supporting us, my

dad, or my grandma. And with my mom's impending health issues, continuing to be her mom's caregiver is challenging.

My mom lived with us for three months after being newly diagnosed with diabetes. It was challenging navigating the landscape of this new-to-us disease, understanding how it impacted our daily lives and the new limitations it imposed on my mom's life. This experience reminded me of the times I cared for babies while in the throes of fresh grief; I faced the unknowns of navigating new terrain, balancing self-care and my responsibilities of caring for my children.

We don't need to have kids to be deemed part of the sandwich generation. As the youngest girl in the family, I was on babysitter duty for years, especially during the summers. During my tween and teen years, I babysat my nieces and nephews. It was expected of me. I loved it most times (until I felt I deserved to be paid for my labor). Still, babysitting them taught me a lot. And I have great relationships with my nieces and nephews that I may not have had otherwise.

I thought I'd drown from caring for our youngest son, a bouncing baby boy. Since I had my kids later than my older sisters did, my parents were much older at the time. I felt a little salty because I didn't receive the same support my parents gave my sisters—which made it seem as if all the caregiving fell on me. Granted, my dad passed away before really getting to know my youngest kids. And my mom was and is still caring for her mom.

My younger cousin was the primary caregiver to her mom, my aunt, who was diagnosed with stage 4 cancer. Though she has brothers, the caregiving weight was put on her shoulders.

This isn't to say that caring for our loved ones is a burden. However, it takes a toll on our ability to process grief and trauma. We often put self-care on the back burner because we don't even have time to tie our shoes. We constantly do and do and do for others, neglecting ourselves until someone has to do for us.

My grandma had eleven children, and only the women have been part of the caregiving rotation. I'm pretty sure it's not because they're the only ones capable. It's still hard to see my mom in a demanding caregiving role at her age. This confirms to me that Black women remain primary caregivers throughout their lifetimes. How can we rest? How can we balance it all?

Along with our grief, we often carry the losses and the experiences of our family who have gone before us and who are now with us. And this often shapes and informs expectations and coping mechanisms within the family.<sup>4</sup> My mom and so many of us Black women carry so much.

I've seen my mom cry at funerals, and I've heard her crying in the wee hours of the night while praying. I've done the same: tucked the grief away neatly to not make a scene in front of others—even my family. With the immensity of loss experienced, someone on the outside looking in would say, "You're so strong." But we carry these "strong Black woman" labels because no one sees what happens when the mask is lowered in the shower or on the bathroom floor, when we can't see through the tears streaming down our faces. But I understand the importance of letting my kids see me cry. I need to let them know how important it is to process and express emotion. We don't have to hide behind masks, because it's not healthy.

So I pray as you continue to read this book that you feel freedom in expressing your exhaustion, frustrations, hurt, and pain. To help your kids and those around you know it's okay to not be okay.

Now, let it sit for a moment. And just breathe.

Because none of us is ever as strong as we appear to be.

### **DEFINING STRONG**

Being strong is a compliment, right? Strength is valued in our society and culture, particularly in the Black community. It's seen as a badge of honor and respect.

But what does it even mean to be *strong*?

It can mean having the power to lift heavy weights or perform other physically demanding tasks. Or it's being able to withstand great force or pressure. Merriam-Webster defines *strong* as "having or being marked by great physical power, having moral or intellectual power, and having great resources (such as wealth or talent)."<sup>5</sup> Does that sound like you or someone you know? Or does it just sound like a stereotype of Black women?

Research suggests the perception of the physically and psychologically strong Black woman dates to slavery and informs today's perception of Black women as determined, self-controlled, independent individuals. They have a strong work ethic while caregiving and sacrificing their wants and needs to support their family and community.<sup>6</sup> What characteristics come to mind when you think of a Black woman?

I think of resilience. The reality of being strong comes at a cost. Most often, we are strong because we have no other

choice. We appear strong because we keep our true feelings and emotions to ourselves so as not to appear weak or without faith. Research suggests there is a high correlation between anxiety and depression among Black women.<sup>7</sup> Yet, the hardships we experience are chalked up to “Well, it’s just a part of life.” This perspective has been passed down through generations. My teen and young adult years were filled with sayings like, “Don’t depend on a man”—yet now it makes me think of times when I’m challenged to depend on Jesus. Maybe this thinking carries over into my spiritual life. And maybe yours as well.

### LEARNING TO LEAN ON GOD’S STRENGTH

Growing up, my three sisters and I were encouraged to be self-sufficient and independent. There’s nothing wrong with holding your own. But for us, this translated into never asking for help, doing everything ourselves, and believing “if I want it done right, I have to do it myself.” It overwhelmed me and, if I’m honest, it continues to do so at times. Have you become overwhelmed by the weight of being strong?

In Black religious culture, talking about our struggles openly is often seen as a sign of weakness, disbelief, or lack of faith. So we put up a front to appear strong. We throw around platitudes when asked “How are you doing?” We know the correct response is, “I’m blessed and highly favored.” All the while, we are broken deep down and don’t know how we’re going to recover. We’re stuck in “fake it until you make it” mode. This also keeps us hesitant to seek professional help and instead

leads us to push our emotions to the side, to disregard how we feel, and to deal with it alone.

To maintain the façade that we are strong, we may avoid things that keep us from grieving or outwardly expressing our grief. I avoided the collection of documents and pictures of my son I placed into adoptive care over twenty years ago. Spring of 2024, I pulled them down from the attic, gathering pictures and items for a grief art class series I participated in for birth moms. And just as I expected, fresh grief ensued. This is why we avoid things that trigger grief. What have you avoided for the sake of appearing strong?

God's take on being strong is different from ours and the world's because God's strength is made perfect in weakness (2 Corinthians 12:9). We find our hope and strength in God. The apostle Paul wrote, "We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure. It enters the inner sanctuary behind the curtain" (Hebrews 6:19). Paul also wrote, "That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Corinthians 12:10).

Simply put, we were not made to be strong. And we were never made to do everything for everybody or be available to everybody at all times. That is God's job. When we think of our very creation, we were made from the rib of Adam, who was made from dust. It is written, "Then the LORD God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being" (Genesis 2:7).

*Dust* is defined as “fine, dry powder consisting of tiny particles of earth or waste matter lying on the ground or surfaces or carried in the air.”<sup>8</sup> Have you ever wondered why God chose dust to form us? Why not stone or wood or iron? I believe this demonstrates how we were never made to be strong without him, “for he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust” (Psalm 103:14). If we can acknowledge our true weaknesses and our need for Jesus, why do we struggle to rely on him when he is the most reliable One? Sometimes it’s because we encounter people who let us down, so we have no choice but to act strong. Sometimes we experience something we are utterly unprepared for, such as the loss of a parent as a child.

You may have heard the saying, “What doesn’t kill you makes you stronger.” This adage from the nineteenth-century German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche is generally used as an affirmation of resilience.<sup>9</sup> But in the experience of Black women, what doesn’t kill us gives us trauma. We are left with things we have to work out and work through. Left unresolved, these things can push us to project our trauma onto others. These aftereffects may negatively impact our loved ones, coworkers, and collaborators for the kingdom, and may even ripple beyond the present to future generations.

Let’s stop right here. This is your time to just *be*.

This is your time to peel off layers and layers of the masks you wear, to be who you are in Christ—his daughter, leaning and depending on him, looking to the hills where your help comes from, and knowing your help comes from the Lord (Psalm 121:1-2). Our confidence and strength lie in the One who

lives in us. When we are strong in our own strength, we have the potential to break. Our mental, spiritual, and physical health suffers. We draw from a finite well of our self-sufficiency instead of the infinite well of living water Jesus wants to provide for us.

The ability to endure grief and suffering seemingly on our own is perceived as a gift by others, but it feels like a curse. I heard this illustration of grief: if we get into a bad traffic accident and have to be in a full body cast as a result, others will recognize the physical pain we are in. But when we have no external indicators of the internal suffering, pain, and grief we are carrying, it appears we are fine.

People see us and wonder, “I don’t know how you’re still smiling despite what you’ve been through.”

And we say, “It’s because of God.”

### **JESUS’ INVITATION TO CARRY OUR BURDENS**

I think about what we’ve been through as Black people from slavery to now and everything in between. We are often counted out, with the odds against us because of our race, but we are resilient people. Some things have changed, but so many haven’t. It all seems like a heavy burden.

Yet Jesus said, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light” (Matthew 11:28-30).

A yoke is a farming tool, a wooden crosspiece fastened over the necks of two animals and attached to the plow or cart they

pull. Jesus uses this terminology in Matthew to illustrate that when we are yoked with him—connected and partnered with him—we find rest in him. When we are yoked with anything other than him, we are prone to burdens.

What are you yoked with? What burdens are you carrying?

We may find ourselves yoked with wrong ideals and expectations due to our culture, tradition, or religion. But we can break free from these yokes through the power of the Holy Spirit and prayer. We can exchange those yokes for the yoke of God. And we can lean on Jesus even when we feel strong. We need him in every season and every circumstance.

There are very real battles you have faced, are facing, or will face. But the good news is God wants to fight your battles.

When the Israelites marched out of Egypt from slavery, Moses assured them, “The LORD will fight for you; you need only to be still” (Exodus 14:14). Yet when they found themselves being pursued by Pharaoh’s army, they immediately blamed Moses: “Didn’t we say to you in Egypt, ‘Leave us alone; let us serve the Egyptians’? It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the desert!” (Exodus 14:12). They gave up on God even before giving him a chance. Let this not be our story, even in grief. God fights for us, and he is our strength.

Just as God told Joshua to “be strong and courageous,” he tells us the same. He also commands us, “Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go” (Joshua 1:9).

We attempt to be strong through our abilities, education, skills, and experience. We allow what has happened to us to “make us

strong.” Yet, this reminds me of how the same boiling water that softens a potato also hardens an egg. What we deem as being strong only hardens our hearts because of what we’ve endured—so we put up walls, not realizing that we shut out both the bad and the good. Of course, we *should* be encouraged to be strong and courageous, but only through the strength of the Lord.

Let this be your permission to stop putting up the front that you’re so strong for the sake of your family, friends, coworkers, boss, and kids. You don’t have to pretend anymore.

What was happening in Joshua’s life that God had to tell him at least three times to be strong and courageous? There was going to be a big change in power and leadership. Joshua was to pick up the mantle from Moses, one of the most significant patriarchs of our Christian faith. The children of Israel, the same ones who complained during Moses’ leadership, were the ones he would be leading.

What’s more, it was up to Joshua to lead the people into the Promised Land. And there were giants there! But can you imagine the people’s doubt was worse than the giants?

However, God telling Joshua to be strong and courageous was not as important as the words that followed: “For the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go” (Joshua 1:9). God is with us. He lives in us. He is our strength. We no longer have to carry the weight of the world on our shoulders because God carries it for us.

### **THE FIRST STRONG WOMAN**

To close out this chapter about being a strong woman, it’s important and necessary to talk about Eve, who was not only

the first woman who ever lived but also the first to ever grieve. Made from the rib of Adam, created by the hand of God, she was perfection. Everything she needed was there with her in the Garden of Eden. She didn't carry what we carry today—no shame, no insecurities, no worries, no sickness, no world systems to dismantle, no politics; no tears, no pain, no grief. But sin entered the world through the hands of Eve and then her husband, Adam.

Why would Eve sin when she had everything? The thing is, she didn't know she had everything. While we get to be onlookers reading Genesis from beginning to end, Eve didn't know what was unfolding as she was deceived and manipulated by the serpent. She often gets a bad rap, but she deserves the same grace that has been extended to us.

So yes, Eve listened to the lies of the enemy: “You will not certainly die” (Genesis 3:4). Eve and Adam's sin led to them getting kicked out of Eden, to women experiencing pain in childbearing, and to husbands ruling over their wives. Most importantly, it opened the door for death and grief to enter the earth. Genesis 4 tells of how Eve's two sons, Cain and Abel, offered sacrifices to the Lord. When the Lord favored Abel's sacrifice and not Cain's, an angry Cain killed Abel. Not only had Eve (and Adam) grieved the traumatic loss of being put out of Eden, along with the other consequences, they were now also grieving the death of their son Abel.

In all these variant losses, Eve is the first woman in the Bible to grieve—and the first woman who felt she had to be strong as she grieved the murder of one son while the other son

wandered off. Still, amid her suffering, she gives us an example of how to hope and trust in God. Genesis 4:25 reads, “She gave birth to a son and named him Seth, saying, ‘God has granted me another child in place of Abel, since Cain killed him.’” Her words affirm the Lord’s care for her—and for us.

God sees all and knows all. He knows the desire of your heart. And when it seems as if your prayers have fallen on deaf ears, the Lord hears them still. He is moving and working on your behalf. “For the eyes of the LORD range throughout the earth to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him” (2 Chronicles 16:9).

*Dear Black woman,*

*You’ve had to be strong for way too long. Now is the time to let the King of glory be your strength—not just sometimes, but all the time. Lay down your strivings, your fighting, your masks, and your feelings of inadequacy at the feet of Jesus.*

*Yes, you are a strong woman, always carrying the weight of the world on your shoulders, putting others’ needs before yours, and tirelessly caring for your loved ones, your neighbors, and your church. Watching over them and praying for them. And maybe even grieving them. I’m lifting you up today.*

*I pray the love, peace, and strength of God will surround you and you will feel his presence. As you go*

*to him, he will pour into you what you need, and he will fill you up to overflowing where you have emptied. I pray you will rest in God's comfort. In Jesus' name. Amen.*

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