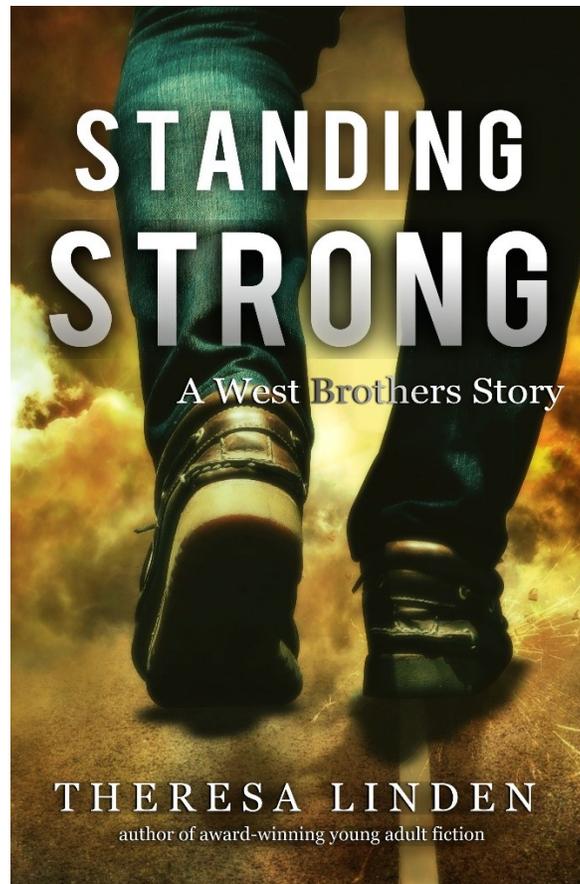


STANDING STRONG

Study Guide

by Theresa Linden



Discussion/Study Guide for
Standing Strong,
Book 4 in the West Brothers series
by Theresa Linden

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Note to Instructor

This study guide is intended to help students analyze the story by providing comprehension questions. These questions are designed to be adaptable and can be answered with one or two sentences or with longer essays. They may also be used as discussion questions, although additional discussion questions are also provided at the end of the book as spring-boards to more in-depth analysis. Select the questions appropriate for your student(s). Suggested answers are provided after the student pages. Discussion questions do not have suggested answers.

Synopsis

Having just confessed his sins to his priest--more sins than a kid his age should have--Jarret jumps in his Chrysler 300 and races to the outskirts of town. Emotion overwhelming him, he pulls off the road and flings himself face down behind an outcropping of rocks. Ever since that life-changing night in the canyon, Jarret has felt the presence of the Lord in his soul. Now that presence is fading. Is it his fault? How will he remain faithful without it when he still struggles against the same temptations?

Meanwhile his twin brother, Keefe, questions whether he has a calling to religious life. He's gone along with Jarret's bad schemes for years. Is he worthy of such a calling? What would he have to give up to pursue a vocation? Keefe reads everything he can about Saint Francis and the Franciscans, but he's afraid to talk to his father about the Franciscans' upcoming discernment retreat because his father seems closed to faith. Is he ready to go all in?

Follow the West brothers in this contemporary teen fiction as they struggle through temptations and trials down paths they can barely see, toward goals they desire in the depths of their hearts.

Note from the Author

A cradle Catholic, I grew up in a two-parent family with an older brother and younger sister. My father was in the Coast Guard, so we moved often, giving me the impression that life was an adventure. We lived in several parts of California, the small island of Guam (it's in the Pacific Ocean near the Philippines and Japan—hard to find on a map), and in Oahu, one of the Hawaiian Islands. We visited many cultural centers and historical sites, enjoyed bananas and coconuts from the trees in our yard, saw wild boars in the woods behind our house on Guam, and we lived through Typhoon Pamela.

My father retired in Ohio, where I currently live with my husband and our three teenage boys. As a teen, the cold weather, flat landscape, difficulty making friends, and knowing that we would not move again dampened my spirit of adventure. God, however, never ceases to care for us, and He soon began to show me an even greater adventure than the ones I previously experienced. Our parish youth group leader's zeal and fiery love for Christ and His Church opened my eyes to the beauty and exciting elements of our Catholic faith. As a young adult, bursting with the desire to share this treasure, I decided I wanted to learn how to write. It has taken years to refine my skills, but I am now pleased to present these books to Catholic teens and adults everywhere. I hope each book sparks in my readers' hearts a greater love for the treasures of our Catholic faith.

Chapters 1-5

1. Name and describe the two main characters of this story. Give each one's strengths and weaknesses and their story goals.
2. Why does Jarret seem so desperate to receive a reply from God?
3. What seems to be the worst temptation for Jarret in the first chapter?
4. What has inspired Keefe to rearrange his bedroom?
5. Why does Keefe hesitate to reply to the Franciscans' email?
6. How does the verse at the beginning of Chapter 2 apply to Keefe? "God enriches the soul which empties itself of everything." ~Saint Pio of Pietrelcina

7. Why does Jarret stop at the bookstore?

8. What character development do you find once Jarret steps inside the bookstore in Chapter 3?

9. When Keefe goes to his father's study, what does he overhear his father say that has him concerned?

10. Explain some of the reasons Keefe thinks his father might not want him becoming a Franciscan.

11. What does Keefe decide to do to get his answer about God's will? Where does the idea come from? How do these plans change?

12. What does Keefe learn about himself as he's sparring with Peter at the Brandts' house?

13. What is Jarret supposed to write in his journal? How can a journal help one on the spiritual journey?

Chapters 6-10

1. What does Jarret's journal entry describe? How important is this moment to him?
2. Describe the way Keefe feels about his relationship with Jarret, and the challenge that brings to his vocation discernment.
3. On the horse ride, what advice do the twins give each other?
4. What does Mr. West announce over dinner, and what do the twins think about it?
5. Describe Keefe's mood as he sets out on his forty hours? What verse inspires him?
6. What does Jarret do when he notices the trouble his friends brought into the house?

7. While his friends form a line to get drinks, Jarret flops onto the couch, frustrated. What image goes through his mind and why?
8. What profound truth does the journal entry after Chapter 9 capture?
9. Share some of the setting details in Chapter 10 and explain how they reveal Keefe's mood.
10. What does Jarret do when faced with Nate's emergency? Does he seem to feel that he acted responsibly?

Chapters 11-15

1. Explain how the river reminds Keefe of the Blessed Mother?
2. When Keefe cracks his leg into something in the dark cave, he thinks about offering up the pain. Why doesn't he? What does it mean to offer up our pains?
3. When Keefe falls in the river, what thoughts go through his mind?
4. How does the story about Brother Bernard from the *Little Flowers of Saint Francis* speak to Keefe in his misery? Define the virtue of humility.
5. When Jarret explains why he came to find Keefe, what advice does Keefe give him? Does Keefe offer good advice? What is Jarret's response?
6. What small victory does Keefe claim at the end of Chapter 12? How important are the little victories in life?

7. While Jarret is driving home what questions does he think of that we all need to think about?

8. Once he returns home, what consequence does Jarret get for his actions and how does he feel about it?

9. How can an author use a dream to develop a story? What internal battle does Keefe's dream show, and how does the verse "Blessed is he who takes no offense at me" apply to him?

10. On the first day of school, as Jarret stands in the middle of the hallway, what does he seem concerned about? What temptation strikes when he sees Roland? How does he handle it?

11. What two other incidents on the first day of school show Jarret's weaknesses?

Chapters 16-20

1. At the beginning of Chapter 16, while Jarret is storming down the hall, intent on revenge, he sees a figure surrounded by golden light. If you've read *Battle for His Soul*, you can probably identify the figure. What other clue is given? Who is this and why is he here?
2. Before Jarret throws the first punch, a warning flashes in his mind. "It was as if he stood before a closed door, with a choice. He could leave the door closed and walk away, or he could open it and obey the heat of his passion." How does a door symbolize temptation?
3. After hearing the news of what Jarret did, what does Keefe think his dream means? Why does he then change his mind?
4. Once Jarret gets home and up to his bedroom, describe how his actions have made him feel. What positive step does Jarret then take? Explain why it's a good step.
5. When Jarret's father speaks with Jarret, how are his words different from what Jarret expected?

6. What is Jarret's next journal entry about?

7. Keefe is finally ready to ask permission to go on the retreat, but he stops in the hallway near the door to his father's study. What does Keefe overhear that gets him worried?

8. Why is Jarret in such a good mood Friday?

9. What does Keefe give Jarret and how does Jarret respond?

10. At the restaurant, Mr. West suggests they all go on the annual camping trip that the Brandts sponsor. Why don't the twins want to go?

11. What is the meaning of the quote "The sun never hides his light for fear of inconveniencing the owls?" What other Franciscan story gives Keefe courage on his way to finally speak with his father?

12. How does Mr. West respond to Keefe's request to go on the discernment retreat?

Chapters 21-25

1. What does the mysterious text message "*If she knew you, she wouldn't like you*" make Jarret think about?
2. While Keefe and Roland are at the Fire Starters meeting, what does Mr. West do that is unexpected?
3. Jarret calls a meeting with his brothers after school. What behaviors have them all worried about their father? What conclusion do they come to? And what do they plan to do about it?
4. Share a few signs from Chapter 23 that show Jarret is trying to follow his conscience.
5. Who is Tyrone and how does Jarret respond to Tyrone's behavior?
6. How does Keefe's experience at the ice cream shop get him thinking more about the vocation to the religious life?

Chapters 26-29

1. Why do the West brothers find it odd that their father is planning the menu with Nanny?
2. The West brothers planned to talk with their father on Saturday. What happens that makes their plans impossible?
3. How does Miss Meadows reply when Jarret tells her they think something is wrong with their father? Does her answer satisfy Jarret?
4. Share Jarret's notes in his journal about the Brown Scapular. What do you know about the Brown Scapular? Define talisman. What does the Catechism of the Catholic Church say about superstition? See no. 2111.
5. Define juxtaposition. How can an author use this in fiction? Describe how the setting details in Chapter 28 and Keefe's mood create a bold juxtaposition.

6. What happens that affects Keefe's plans? Does he respond the way he should?
7. Why does Keefe hesitate to make the Sign of the Cross when he prays before his meal? What does Piper reveal about herself next? Could there be a connection to his expression of faith and Piper's choice to share her story? Do you think showing one's faith in different circumstances is a common challenge?

8. What makes Keefe anxious on the second half of his trip?

Chapters 30-33

1. What keeps Jarret from wanting to help Roland and why does he change his mind?
2. Why do you think Jarret glances in the rearview mirror when Chantelle is flirting with him? Why is Jarret annoyed when Roland asks Chantelle questions on the car ride?
3. On the ride back home, Jarret wavers between wanting to see Chantelle and breaking up with her. Explain the good points and drawbacks he sees in her.
4. At the beginning of Chapter 31, why does Keefe begin to think that he does not have a vocation?
5. What is the Come & See verse, John 1:39-41? Why do you think this verse given to inquirers?
6. When Keefe hears the Morning Prayer, what does he remember?

7. Once home, Jarret feels like he's won a spiritual victory. In what way has he been victorious? How does he try to make sense out of the memories of his conversion fading? Is he being overconfident?

8. What incident happens the next day that shows Jarret still has a lot of work to do?

9. While Keefe feels a bit insecure, especially after learning about the Brothers and other retreatants, how does he feel about being with the Franciscans?

10. What question does Brother Giles ask that makes Keefe surrender completely to Jesus and why?

Chapters 34-38

1. Once Jarret learns the lies Chantelle told about him, how does he feel and what does he do?
2. What is the meaning of the story "Perfect Joy" from the *Little Flowers of Saint Francis*? What meaning does it hold for Keefe?
3. On the way to the campground, Jarret is so mad at Peter that he decides he's done trying to forgive him. He also thinks of himself as a failure and that it's impossible for him to remain on the right path without the special grace he'd received after his conversion. Explain how everything changes once Jarret strides through the parking lot.
4. How has Jarret grown in this story?
5. While Keefe is playing archery with the others, what new meaning does he get from the verse *Blessed is he who takes no offense at me*?

6. When Keefe is about to say that he's not cut out to be a Franciscan, what does Brother Giles say?
7. What verse does Brother Simon have for Keefe this time? Do you have a verse that you turn to often? If not, consider choosing one.
8. How has Keefe grown in the story?
9. In the last chapter, what do the West brothers learn about their father?

Discussion Questions

1. After that night in the canyon in *Battle for His Soul*, Jarret feels the Lord's presence in a powerful way. As the days go by, this gift fades but temptation and weakness remain. When a person turns to Christ after living a life of sin, the temptations might seem to go away for a time. But when they come back, what strategies can a person use to remain faithful to God?
2. Ever since Keefe witnessed a Eucharistic miracle, as shown in *Life-Changing Love*, he's felt God calling him in some way. In *Battle for His Soul*, he meets a group of Franciscan Brothers and his heart is stirred. Thinking God might be calling, he wants to go on a discernment retreat, but he's afraid to tell his father. How important is courage in pursuing a vocation?
3. Jarret and Keefe both feel unworthy at times, when remembering their past mistakes. Jarret convinces himself that he can take charge of his life and stay on the right track, whereas Keefe immerses himself in prayer for discernment. We can't only pray. We must take action. What is the right balance for remaining faithful and knowing God's will? What other virtues are needed?

4. Following the advice of his priest, Jarret began keeping a journal with his personal spiritual reflections and he committed himself to regular spiritual direction. If we truly want to grow in holiness, how important is self-evaluation and seeking the wisdom of a good spiritual director?

5. Jarret goes out with a girl he meets at the bookstore and finds she doesn't share the values he's trying hard to embrace. How important is discernment when deciding whom to date?

6. The Franciscan Brothers in *Standing Strong* are based on the Franciscan Brothers of Peace in Minnesota. Brothers are a lot different from Priests, just as Nuns are different from Sisters. How much do you know about different Orders and types of vocations?

7. One of the Brothers sent Keefe a list of discernment steps. Such lists are often recommended in the spiritual life. Some include such things as: stay close to the Sacraments, get a spiritual director, pray every day, good reading, devotion to the Blessed Mother, and serve your parish. Other lists have things like: know that God created you for a specific mission, say "yes" to His will for you, pray often, be holy, and clear away

obstacles. What steps do you think are important in vocational discernment? Do you think today's trends create challenges for discerning the call of God?

8. Saint Alphonsus tell us: *“Modern heretics make a mockery of wearing the Scapular, they decry it as so much trifling nonsense.”* How does the Brown Scapular teach us to be humble and teachable like “little children” and to not merely rely on our own understanding or abilities?

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