

Valedictorian Speech: 2023 Graduating Class



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Thank you so much, Pastor Mark, and thank you to all of you here today. As introduced, my name is Graeme Gibson, and I am so grateful to stand here before you all by the tremendous grace of God, and with the honor of being this graduation class's valedictorian.

On behalf of the graduates, I'd like to begin by addressing all of you here today in the room, as well as those joining us online, who have contributed to this moment. Among us are our treasured families; there are dear friends, pastors, and mentors. We have with us the incredible staff and faculty of Vanguard College—and loved ones of all sorts. As a grad class, all of us want you to know just how grateful we are for your support in our lives. Today is not possible without you. *So, from all of us, we say thank you.*

And now to us, friends: we did it. We're here. And I know we've come from different places and had different journeys to get to this moment. But I say to all of us, graduate to graduate... *congratulations.*

Now I imagine that many of us are at different stages of processing where we're at right now. The gamut among us likely runs from "excited-but-chilling"—*Andrew Barbe, Tim Kitumba kind of thing*—to, "ready-to-burst-into-tears-at-any-moment," which I'm not even gonna say who that might be. But what I will say is that these reactions are natural. This is a massive moment in our lives; it makes sense that we'd have lots of different feelings to go along with it.

So, can I offer an analogy to help us process today? We can look at life as a race, right? Paul talks about that in his letters to Timothy, and it remains a common image today. And while all of life is a race, we have now officially reached the end of this leg of our journey. In other words, today we are crossing the finish line. And that's an awesome thing; we've run a long way to get to this point.

First Question: What's Kept Us Going?

So, here's a question for us, grads—and to all our loved ones here, please think along with us. In the race we've just run... *what's kept us going?* Through all the papers, all the hours, all that's come our way—*what's kept us going? What's kept you going?* I imagine we've all got things coming to mind, but I think we'd be remiss to not start with some of the big ones. The non-negotiables.

I'm talking *Skip the Dishes* from McDonald's. I'm talking about the free coffee bar run by Campus Life, from which we have likely consumed three to four times our own body weights in Keurig coffee.

¹ *Graeme is a young man and a recent graduate of Vanguard College (BaTH, 2023). Born and raised in the Edmonton region, Graeme currently ministers as a lay leader in his local church and is passionate about loving and guiding others as Christ does for his people. His valedictory speech resulted from a felt burden from Jesus, rooted in the Letter of Jude, that not one of Vanguard's students or staff would fall away from their journey with the Lord. This prayerful weight is at the centre of the entire address, and it continues to be Graeme's prayer not only for those affiliated with Vanguard, but for all who seek to follow Jesus with their whole lives.*



How about Dr. Ron Powell's meme-riddled slide shows? How about witnessing the chaos of our youth graduates, who adopted and decorated a literal tire from Professor Matt Ball's truck, and bowled with it in the hallways? *How about the arrivals of Phoebe Derksen and Jonathan Vanzandbeek??* All of this has kept us in it.

But there's more, isn't there? *What's kept you going, friends?* Was it the care of a loved one back home? Was it a timely word from a classmate, a gentle "how are you doing?" when you needed it most? Was it a moment in your practicum or internship where what you were doing clicked, and you realized, "*Yep, this is what God has made me to do?*" All these things, and so much more, have kept us going.

Jude 1: Called, Beloved, Kept

Now, as I reflect on this question and on these things, I am drawn to this short letter at the very back of our Bibles, the letter of Jude. Jude was the brother of Jesus and a leader in the early church. He wrote his message to a group of Christians that, like us, followed Jesus; like us, they faced challenges and uncertainty; and, like us, had persevered in the face of it all. So, what did Jude say to those believers about what had kept them going?

Well, we find the answer in the opening line of his letter, and it says this: "Jude, a servant of Jesus Christ and brother of James, to those.... who are *called...*". Let's stop right there; did you catch that? My friends, do you know that you're called? Now, that can mean a lot of things, but what does Jude mean here? He continues in the same verse: "To those who are called, *beloved* in God the Father, and *kept* by Jesus Christ..."

Our road to today has not been an easy one. We have faced heartache, loss, and disappointment. *There was a pandemic somewhere in there, if I'm remembering correctly.* And yet, how many of us can attest that, through it all, having persevered in our calling, we have been *beloved* and *kept*; cherished, forgiven, and delighted in by our Father in heaven; and, guarded and preserved by Jesus Christ. As we have followed *after* him, he has remained *alongside* us.

Ultimately, that is our answer to *what's kept us going*. In everything that we've mentioned today (the light and the serious), we—just like those in Jude's day—have been beloved of God the Father and kept by Jesus Christ in our calling. That is why we're here at the finish line today.

Second Question: What's Gonna Keep Us Going?

Yet, that's not the end, is it? Because there's another reality here. We've crossed the finish line, we're at the end, and we're celebrating. And yet, there's more ahead for us. This moment is not just a finish line, it's also a starting line.

So, here's a second question for us, grads. We've thought about what's kept us going. As we look ahead to what's next...*What's gonna keep us going? What's gonna keep you going?*

Now this is an important question to ask ourselves for two reasons. One is that unfortunately, we now must leave behind many of the amazing blessings and people from Vanguard. We won't always have unlimited Keurig pods. We won't always have counseling sessions with Dr. Cath in the hallway. We won't always have Addison Martin to hype up our class presentation one moment, school us in basketball the next, then prophesy over our lives immediately after. We're not always gonna have these things.

But the second reason this question is important is a more serious one, and one that's hard to bring up on an occasion like this. In Jude, the reason he's writing is that not everybody makes it. Not everyone finishes the race with Jesus. In his situation, some called it off, either by their *words* or their *behavior*, and said, "I'm done. I'm not walking with Jesus anymore." And these same people influenced

others to do likewise. Here's the hard news, friends: *we face the same risk today*. Jesus wants us to be aware of this. *So, what's gonna keep us going?*

Jude 21: Keep Yourselves in The Love of God

Well, as we turn back to the text for an answer, it first becomes clear that we have a part to play in this, an element to which we must keep ourselves. Jude, after discussing those who have dropped out of the race, turns to the remaining faithful and says this: "But you, beloved, building yourselves up in your most holy faith and praying in the Holy Spirit, *keep yourselves in the love of God*, waiting for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life."

There's a lot there, and all of it is so good. But the central instruction is to *keep ourselves in the love of God*—to abide and remain in it. Now this is not putting all the pressure on us. But it is recognizing that even as we are already loved and kept by God, we have a responsibility to stay there. It's a tension, but it's one to recognize and lean into.

I encourage us, friends, as we cross this finish line and keep going, *to keep ourselves in the love of God*. Let's be quick in this new season to establish rhythms that keep us close to Jesus and in his care. As life brings victories and wins, let's celebrate as those who know that our God delights in the well-being of his servants. And when the pain comes—which it will—let's take it not as a rejection from Jesus, but as an invitation from him, and to him.

And by the way, none of this is a solo assignment. Jude's writing to a community, so this is a group effort; I'd say group project, but then none of us would want to do it, so "effort" it is. As we go on from this day and look to stay connected with those we've grown close with, we're gonna want to keep in touch, right? Well, let's not just keep in touch but keep each other in touch with the love of God. That would be the greatest graduation gift any of us could ever give to each other. Amen?

Conclusion: The Doxology of Jude

As I end today, I want to leave us graduates—and all of us here—a last word of good news. And this good news is found in Jude's ending doxology. Now, if you were in the Pastoral Program as I was, you know that we always ended our retreats by singing the traditional doxology together. We stand in a big circle, hold hands, pray, and sing in beautiful, a cappella harmony: *Praise God from whom all blessings flow!* So, everybody stand up, circle around the room...

Just kidding.

But I want to end today with a doxology. *With a word of worship to God*. Because graduates—my friends—here's the good news. In this next leg of our journey with Jesus, our hope does not lie in ourselves. The answer to "what's gonna keep us going" is ultimately neither inward nor outward, but upwards. As Pastor Mark likes to say, "the best we can do is in response to what God has already done."

We worship the God who has already called us, already loved us, and already kept us. We certainly have the responsibility to keep ourselves within his care. Yet in both our strength and our weakness, our hope is in Jesus, who can absolutely keep us walking with him. Even until the very end of our days, standing in his presence, our God is able. And if he can keep us until that last day—*the ultimate commencement ceremony, the ultimate finish line*—we can certainly trust him now as we continue the journey onward.

So, my friends, I finish with the words of Jude for us today: "Now to him, who is able to keep us from stumbling, and to present us blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy, to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen."