

Valedictorian Speech: 2024 Graduating Class



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Greetings and welcome, friends, family, faculty, staff, alumni and 2024 graduates of Vanguard College, with whom I have had the pleasure of pursuing biblical higher education with for the past 4 years. Congratulations! Today is very special. On behalf of the graduates, I would like to extend thanks to our parents, families, friends, staff, and professors who accompanied and cheered us on in our studies. We are very blessed.

As I reflect on our time at Vanguard, I am met with many emotions and memories, yet the word that comes to mind that describes the class of 2024 is perseverance. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary describes perseverance as the ability or willingness to endure. I think of how different the world was four years ago - we walked through the doors of Vanguard facing the unknown, doubt, fear, rejection... and we were so uncertain about what our time at Vanguard would be like. Would we make friends? Would we find our future spouse? Would we make it?

Looking back, those early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic were a dark and difficult time for many, and my heart goes out to those who experienced tragic losses. My heart also goes out to students who struggled with depression and anxiety, which made every day an uphill battle. When I think of what we have experienced as well as the word "perseverance," a passage that comes to mind is Romans 5:3-5. It describes suffering or adversity as an oddly constructive experience, saying, "But we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us" (ESV).

When we suffer, we are subjected to something unpleasant or bad. So, why does Paul want us to rejoice in our sufferings? Some might say that this makes no sense; life should be easy and full of comfort. However, Paul understands an intrinsic truth about our reality, that first, suffering is unavoidable, and second, it has a purpose. He lists off a chain reaction of benefits that starts when we rejoice in our sufferings. He says that from our suffering, endurance is produced, and endurance is not a characteristic that is achieved by living easily or existing in a static state. We only gain endurance when we have had something hard to work through.



In Fitness terms, endurance training is used to help the body gain muscle, improve vascular and circulatory strength, increase longevity (meaning that after a while, you can run for longer), increase the weight limit the body can lift, and gain better muscle control. In the same way, when we endure, we too can run longer, take on what's heavier, and build character. Endurance, then, produces character.

Imagine Lord of the Rings, except there's no ring, orcs, or flaming-hot eye of Sauron. It's just middle earth... where nothing happens. You see, all the greatest stories need adversity for there to be growth, and for us it's not just a story, it's our very lives.

The original Greek word that is translated as "Character" in Romans 5:4 literally refers to something that is proven or tested. When we endure, we develop a tested character that is proven to be victorious over adversity. And it is this character that produces hope, a character that says, "if God got me through it then, he will get me through it again." Why can we be so certain of this? Well, because hope does not put us to shame; because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

We have hope because God, who is love, resides within our very beings. And we know that God's love never fails. We know that God's love is patient, and kind, it does not envy, it does not boast, and it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, and it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It protects, trusts, hopes, and perseveres.

Do you see the progression? Suffering, endurance, character, hope. So why rejoice in our sufferings? Because there is purpose in perseverance.

We experienced this truth during our time at Vanguard as well. Lectures in the gym during COVID, with desks two meters apart and classes on zoom - it was a strange time. But we made it through. I think of the highs and lows of our full school experience - retreats, after-chapel hangs, the insane competitiveness of "phusioo" (our school wide soccer tournament) and hunting for shekels. I think of the goodbyes to Pastor Mikel and get wells for Pastor Aunge, the late nights of writing and the long days of studying. I think of the exhaustion after a long day of school, the peace as we sat in prayer, and watching the sunrise in the chapel.

As I look back at our time at Vanguard, I see we have persevered and been blessed. And now, we are about to walk the stage tested in character and completing the good work that started four years ago. Yet as we walk off this stage, we walk again into a world that is uncertain. In fact, the only certainty that we will face is uncertainty. And we are presented with the same unknowns as four years ago. But I want to let you, the thing that got us through the uncertainty is the certainty of who God is, the certainty of a loving father who heals, sustains, protects, saves, and strengthens. A Lord that never has and never will let you go - he is with us, and saying, "Thank you for trusting me, my child."

So, I urge you - don't forget what God has done here, because remembering what he has done will get us through what comes next. From our perseverance, we are blessed with a character that

is ready for the test of life. As we anticipate this next chapter, known or not, I would like to leave you with this encouragement.

James 1:12 says, “Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, (*notice here how we are blessed, after we have been tested*) they will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him.”

There is not only a purpose but also a prize for perseverance. There is a reward for us, and not just us Bible college students, but for all of us. Amid adversity, let's run this race of life well. Let's persevere and endure, despite the uncertainty, despite the doubts, despite the insecurities, and despite the rejection. Because we can know for certain that the truth that got us here is the truth that will get us to the next (a well known 'Macknight-ism').

Thank you for your time and thank you for the honor of being your valedictorian. May the Lord keep you and shine his face upon you, class of 2024.