

- Thanks so much for being here tonight as we honor our graduates tonight.
- Luke, Stacey, Kathryn, Rebecca, Nina, Kaci, Elizabeth, Thomas, and Rachel: Congratulations.
- I've never been sure as to what to call it: *Graduation* or *Commencement*?
- The truth is, it's both.
- You're graduating from this thing called High School, but the truth is, you've worked for this for close to 13 years now.
- But it's also the *Commencement* of the rest of your life.
- I've always been interested and very respectful of the martial arts...Karate...
- Karate is interesting because you have belts you have to earn. Different colors mean different ranks. Black Belt is the highest.
- But you may not know that there are 10 degrees of Black Belt, sometimes taking years to achieve.
- Upon earning the rank, Sensei's have been known to remark, "Now you can begin to learn."
- The implication there is that just when you may think you may have reached the pinnacle of your life, you've received high honors and accomplished so much, you still have a long way to go.
- This is a big moment for you. But this is just the beginning of a very long journey that should ultimately culminate in one thing: and it's not a college degree, it's not a loving spouse, a house, and 2.3 kids. It being a faithful servant of God and getting the ultimate prize: the gift of heaven.
- Tonight we're just going to look at one story that illustrates the time of your life that you now find yourselves in.

Let's go to Joshua chapter 1.

- You find yourselves in the same kind of situation Joshua found himself in
- In Joshua 1, the nation of Israel was at a crossroads
- Moses has just died
- Moses left behind an illustrious but turbulent ministry...he led the Israelites out of bondage and through various other trials
- But Moses sinned. He struck the rock instead of speaking to it to make water come out of it, and thus forfeited his right to go into the Promised Land, and every Israelite above the age of 20 had to stay with him...except for Joshua and Caleb
- Joshua, who had been mentored and groomed by Moses, was being raised up to take Moses' place in the leadership of Israel. The first chapter of Joshua was filled with God's wonderful promises to the new leader and to the remaining Israelites. But there was also a stern warning to them if they failed to "be strong and of a good courage".
- I want to submit two ideas to you tonight very quickly.

1. The Past Is Past

- Joshua 1.2: *Moses my servant is dead...*

- The old era had passed. Moses had lived out his days. A new leader was on the scene, and it was the responsibility of the Israelites to transfer their allegiance to Joshua. He was now in the driver's seat.
- Graduates, high school is over. And all the things that went along with it.
- You see, you find yourself at a unique crossroads in your life right now
- Just like Joshua, you can see the road. It goes many ways.
- Joshua could have chosen to do his own will, or the will of God.
- You, likewise, have the same choice.
- You cannot change the past. You cannot change whatever failures or triumphs or lost relationships or missed opportunities you might have had.
- Most of you may go to college, and it can be a rough place. It costs a lot of money, you are constantly busy, and that's combined with all the other stressors of college - being away from the safety and security of home, running into temptation you didn't know you had, and stressing out over just about everything.
- But with all these stressors also comes a new found freedom.
- From this moment, *you* decide which direction *your* life goes. If nothing else, college is an opportunity to start over, to learn from your previous mistakes, and move forward. You can decide to be a child of God and to serve Him, or you can turn your back on Him and do what you want to do. I submit to you tonight that your life will be much better if it is given to God to run. Just look at the various example in the Bible of people going their own way and doing their own will and you'll see that didn't work out so well for them. God's way is the only way. God's way is more challenging, but it is much more rewarding in the long run.

2. The Future is Bright

- Joshua 1:3 - *Every place that the sole of your foot will tread upon I have given to you.*
- The promises that are before you have already been realized by our sovereign God. God did not bring you this far in your life to just leave you. God has a glorious, wonderful plan for you if you will let Him lead your life. In Jeremiah 29:11, Jeremiah's letter to the Jewish exiles declares this from the Lord: "I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope."
- Joshua finds himself in this same position, but over and over here in chapter 1 God reassures and encourages him.

- 1:9 -- God says, "I will be with you". He told Joshua over and over, "I will not fail you, nor forsake you". The writer of Hebrews gives us that very same promise in the New Testament. "I will never leave you nor forsake you". Hebrews 13:5.
- God will never leave you. He will be silent at various times, and He may permit you to hurt some, but that does not mean that he has neglected you or left you.
- 1:7 -- God says, "I will prosper you". Most versions render this as "you may have good success wherever you go." God never led the Israelites anywhere without making provisions for them. But they could never recognize them and be thankful for those times when God met their needs. Since God has chosen a definite path for your life, you may rest assured He will provide for you. Why would a Sovereign God lead someone somewhere and then drop them? That's not how God works.
- 1:13 -- God says, "I will give you rest." As Bonnie tells me over and over again, rest is a vital part of everyday life. We as Christians find our rest in God. When the stresses of college life get to you or the temptations mount upon you, we need to remember this example of the Lord talking to Joshua as well as Jesus' words from Matthew 11:28 - 28 "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. 29 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. 30 For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."
- Your future right now is so bright. You have opportunities now that you will never have at any other time in your life. Be wise enough from this new, fresh start and allow God to guide your paths.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to end with a story. The event happened when most of you were 7 or 8 years old, and you may not remember it that well, but it has forever changed how your generation will live.

On that terrible morning, when American Airlines Flight 11 hit the North Tower of the World Trade Center, Victor Wald, 50, was working in his 84th floor office at the small brokerage firm. Like his colleagues, he raced for the exits, and scrambled down the stairs. But, having suffered from rheumatic fever as a child, he collapsed in exhaustion on the 53rd floor, as frantic workers from the building's upper floors hastily passed him by. Harry Ramos, 46, the head trader at the small investment bank, saw him on the stairs, and stopped.

They had never met, had no friends or relatives in common. But Ramos saw Wald and said, "I won't leave you." Ramos managed to get Wald down to the 36th floor, where they sat together as the building collapsed.

As I've said before many times tonight, God will never leave you. You need to take him to college, to the work force, to the military - wherever you go. God will never leave you; just be sure you don't ever leave him.

Graduates, your family here at Church Street loves you. You have an amazing support system here that you can always come back to. When you leave, you will be in our thoughts and prayers that God guide you on His path.

Tonight's lesson has been aimed at our graduating seniors, but the message is for all. If you wandered from God's path and need to be put back on it, we can pray for you tonight. If you haven't yet started your journey with Him, you can become a child of God and be baptized tonight. If you have any spiritual needs, please come while we stand and sing.