

Voices: Letter to college freshmen

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Dear Freshmen:

Congratulations on high school graduation and college acceptance, which are huge milestones and should be celebrated.

At the same time celebration is taking place, I wonder if there is another emotion lurking in the background—the uneasiness that comes with starting something new.

For the last 17 to 18 years, your identity has been wrapped up in being a K-12 student. This has shaped and formed you. Yet, walking across a stage, accepting a diploma and moving a tassel has ripped your identity from you. Now, you are forced to make your own way in the big scary world, and the first step in that journey for you will be found on a college campus.

A new identity

In some ways, going to college is like going into exile, except for the forced migration by a conquering army. Even without the direct correspondence, the biblical image of Babylonian exile is helpful for understanding what is taking place in life as a college freshman.

Every year, high school graduates from around the country willingly exile themselves to a college campus and, as a result, are faced with a myriad of fresh challenges and new decisions.

The freshman year of college, like exile, can be trying and traumatic at times, because for the first time, you repeatedly find yourself in

circumstances where you are not at home.

One of the biggest challenges at the start of a freshman year is the challenge of self-pity, thinking, “I am not good enough,” or, “I do not belong here,” or, “No one cares about me.”

A tendency of this mindset is to shrink back into a place that is or was comfortable, to return home every weekend to a place where identity is secure and relationships already established.

While this may feel safe and good for the soul, it presents a challenge to becoming the most faithful person God would have you become. This attitude ultimately will challenge your ability to produce faithful work in college and will create a shallow and irresponsible view of relationships.

Jeremiah's challenge

The prophet Jeremiah wrote a letter to people who found themselves learning to live in situations where they were not at home.

Jeremiah's letter was written directly in response to a self-pity attitude. The people in exile believed God would not allow them to be in a place they did not want to be much longer.

As Eugene Peterson suggests in *Run with the Horses*, the wisdom of Jeremiah is a question: “Will I focus my attention on what is wrong with the world and feel sorry for myself? Or will I focus my energies on how I can live at my best in the place I now find myself?”

Jeremiah offers college freshmen three challenges: (1) build houses and live in them, (2) plant gardens and eat their produce, (3) and, using Jeremiah's language, take wives and have sons and daughters.

Jeremiah's words to freshmen are, basically, do everything counterintuitive

to what the self-pity mindset would encourage. Instead of shrinking back to “home,” create “home” where you find yourself.

Live where you live

In his challenge to “build houses and live in them,” Jeremiah tells you to focus on life right where you find yourself.

Human tendency is to have an idealized view of the past—the “good old days,” an overly optimistic view of the future, and a less-than-optimal, maybe even pessimistic, view of the present.

Jeremiah’s challenge to you is not to sit around wishing for the “good old days” or your future and career, but rather to find the value and meaning in life right now, right where life is. A key to the freshman journey is discovering your life matters as much right now as it did or will in future days.

Take care of yourself

In discovering the value in your life right now, Jeremiah’s next step in the process is to *plant gardens and eat their produce*.

Planting takes time, patience and faith. All three are key elements to the freshman year—the time to adjust, the patience to own the adjustment and the faith God is there amid the new.

A garden produces fruits and vegetables, things that provide valuable nutrients for life. A college freshman must learn what it takes to produce healthy and nutritious things for their lives in a new environment.

Foster community

The final word Jeremiah offers you is to “take wives and have sons and daughters.”

First, Jeremiah is not saying you need to start a family by the end of freshman year. However, Jeremiah is saying family is deeply important in a new place.

Jeremiah did not have the English word “community,” but he wanted people in exile to understand community matters in times of change. Community matters for you.

Our tendency in times of change is to keep ourselves aloof from people, but the witness of Scripture is we cannot be fully who God wants us to be apart from relating to others.

The challenge I want to leave you with is this: Settle down and discover what it means to be God’s child on a college campus. This just might be the most fruitful, creative and trajectory-setting moment of your life. Trust your identity will not be lost but, rather, truly discovered.

College can be a place where you learn how to pray in deeper more life-changing ways than ever. I am confident you will recognize the incredible value of Scripture, and ultimately, as Eugene Peterson reminds us, God will be found in the midst of the journey.

These next few years you are in college will form you, whether you want them to or not. I challenge you to allow your faith to be formed in the crucible of college.

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