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ISSN: 0799-1711

PROFESSIONAL
THEOLOGICAL
JOURNAL FOR
THE CARIBBEAN
COMMUNITY

VOLUME
12

2013

CJET

Caribbean Journal of Evangelical Theology

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**JTS VALEDICTORIAN
2012****Taneika Wedderburn
BA (Hons) MA (Cand)**

“The Church is looking for better methods; God is looking for better men”. These words of E.M. Bounds sum up the state of the church today as we scamper to find the next big idea that will impact the world. Jamaica, as well, turning fifty, is also seeking for the next great policy or programme to enhance the quality of life of its citizenry. Thankfully, God’s idea is to fashion men and women whom He can use for His glory. The class you see before you is a set of such persons having been shaped by the waves of difficulty that have swept over us these past few years. I stand before you as their representative to deliver the victory speech. Don’t be embarrassed for me just yet, I did mean to say ‘victory’ and not ‘valedictory’ as what you do not know is that the grounds on which we now sit was the scene of an epic battle. While you can’t see the warriors or hear their swords clanging, the Graduating Class of 2012 knows all too well the combat waged on this very plot of ground.

Look with me through the eyes of the shepherd boy that day in the valley of Elah as he stood before the giant. That is how we felt as we journeyed through our years at the Jamaica Theological Seminary. For us, Goliath was not a literal 9-FOOT tall giant, but he came in many forms and was just as fierce. For some, he exhibited his prowess in the area of academics. Philosophy demoralized us, Statistics re-calibrated us, and Substance Abuse abused us.

For others of us, the strapping giant was that of financial lack, having come to JTS by grace alone through faith, hoping, praying and believing that the God of heaven would provide. We remember the stinging disappointment many of us felt, when we were barred from doing exams or had to sit out a semester. We also can recall the

renewed optimism that came when God miraculously shared with us from His bounty or allowed the administration to have mercy on us. We ought to take our statements of accounts with the zero balance at the end of them, frame them, and put them right next to our Degrees. Thankfully, like David, we were not unarmed before our foe as we had our five smooth stones. These gave us a measure of confidence in our ability to be victorious.

We had the stone of our family support. A special thank-YOU goes out to children who perpetually traversed this campus while we were in classes, wives who waited up for us while we had endless group meetings, husbands who ate sandwiches many more times than they would have preferred. Thank you.

Our second smooth stone was that of erudite lecturers who imparted to us of their knowledge and experience. They ensured that we were able to **blossom whitely**, sorry, I mean blossom *brightly* into whom you see before you today--lecturers who challenged us to grow, who were infamously hard markers, who dared us to get that good grade. Some of us did get that A or B; others just had to **C** their way through. Thank you.

Not only did we have our two stones of family support and competent lecturers, but the friendships we built here. Stone number Three indeed served as a strong place in our quest to slay the giant. We remember with fondness the times of endless laughter, as well as the serious theological discussions we had – discourses that went on for hours without any sign of ever breaking the stalemate.

We remember our study groups where one was just as blank as the other and yet small bits of information coalesced to bring some clarity to the subject. We can recall when the faithful words of true

friends soothed our pains in difficult moments. One member of the class remembers during one exam period when her debt was so high she had no hope of doing those examinations. She sat by the undercroft of the driveway literally waiting for an angel, for whom she had prayed, to walk up to her with the funds. Surprisingly, her prayers were answered, but not in the way she thought, as God sent two angels in the persons of David Jones and Paul Forbes who brought, not physical cash, but the currency of side-splitting laughter that encouraged her more than they realized.

Stone number four: perseverance. This was indeed a valuable companion as we continued our journey. We would work assiduously on papers, then, viruses spread, flash drives wouldn't open and the computer, not the dog, ate our homework. But we persevered. Exam periods were the most grueling, especially if we had them in close succession. We remember the wiped-out feeling we had after an especially hard paper, the silly mistakes we made, and just the sheer exhaustion we felt, and yet come 9, 2 or 6 o'clock, it was off to the chapel or JTS2 for another round of battle in another exam.

But friends, it would be remiss of me, if I did not acknowledge that the stone that ultimately toppled the fiend was that of Divine help. We *CANNOT* forget how God, our God, has blessed us, how His steady hand guided us, how His tender grace upheld us, and how His preserving power protected us. We must not forget how He answered our pre-exam prayers for clarity and our post-exam prayers for leniency. Fellow graduands: Do not forget how he preserved your sanity, quickened your ability, and composed your life story. As my time at this microphone marches to an end, I close with words to three remarkable groups of people.

To you, our well-wishers who have come to this victory ceremony to support the champions of an epic battle, you have sat at the ring-side as we tackled the giant, but what about your own battles? Are you equipped with your five smooth stones? Be sure that in these tumultuous times you will be battered beyond measure without the formidable infrastructure of a faithful family, without the meaningful motivation of mentors, without the frequent favours from faithful friends. Do not imagine your life without the stone of perseverance, and certainly there is nothing to be gained from a life pursuing wealth and prestige without the active inclusion of the God of the Universe.

This was reinforced as I reflected on the life of Dr. Zenas Gerig, our late founder. From his memorial service, I clearly saw that his was a life well spent. I recognized that the most important day that will be held in your honour is not the day of your graduation or even the day of your wedding, but the day of your funeral. What will be your legacy? Would your life just have been an accumulation of praises, without the deliberate pursuit of the One who is always pursuing you? What will be said of you and to you on the occasion when you meet Him face to face?

To my now former lecturers, I know how you faithfully attended classes, pouring into us from what you yourselves had received; however, recall how the church at Ephesus was admonished to return to her first love. I invite you to remember the days before your names were followed or preceded by letters and when all you had to commend you was a simple love for Jesus. When times of prayer and communion were sweet and when sermon and lesson preparations were buttressed, not in confidence in human intellect, but in God's ability.

And finally to you, fellow members of the Graduating Class of 2012, *wi dun!*¹ We have killed Goliath! We now wear our victor's robe and crown. And yet, we are not finished. There are still more Philistines to slay, more Sauls to out-run, more Bathshebas to avoid. Remember, "it is not great talents or great learning or great preachers, [teachers, guidance counselors or social workers] that God needs, but men and women great in holiness, great in faith, great in love, great in fidelity". Those who are "Great for God, these can mould a generation" for Him. So, you too, remember your first love, remember the relationship with God that may now be in shambles as you pursued this degree, remember the prayers not prayed, the church meetings neglected, the Bible studies abandoned. Remember and return.
I thank you.

¹ Jamaican for, 'We are through'.