

**Still Becoming**  
**Graduation Address — Class of 2026**  
*By Derrick Ampofo*

Good morning distinguished faculty, honored guests, proud families, and my fellow graduates of William Jewell College.

A few years ago, I was sitting on a bus leaving Ghana for Côte d'Ivoire. I barely slept that night. Not because the ride was uncomfortable, but because my life felt uncertain. My father had died. And after losing him, something inside me changed.

When someone you love dies, the world becomes quieter in a painful way. You still wake up. People still laugh. Life still moves. But part of you feels left behind. I remember looking out the window during that long ride and thinking about how my father would never see the man I was trying to become. Never see me graduate. Never see me become a doctor. And honestly, there were moments when I wanted to give up on those dreams too. Because grief makes you tired. Not physically. Spiritually.

The reason I was on that bus was because I was trying to get a visa to come study in the United States. And where I come from, many people never get approved. That morning, the embassy waiting room was silent. One by one, names were called. One by one, people were rejected. The first person rejected. Then the second. And with every rejection, my heart started sinking deeper. I remember lowering my head and praying quietly: "God... I don't know why my life has already been this hard. But please... please let this work."

When my name was finally called, my hands were shaking. And somehow, after all the fear, all the loss, all the uncertainty... I was approved.

I walked out of that embassy trying not to cry. Because for the first time in a long time, I felt like maybe God had not forgotten me. And standing here today at William Jewell College, I realize something: Some of us did not get here because life was easy. Some of us got here because we kept praying when life became unbearable. Because we kept believing when nothing around us made sense. When I arrived in America, I thought the hardest part was over. I was wrong. There were days I felt alone. Days I questioned myself. Days I smiled in public and struggled in private.

I know what it feels like to fail and wonder if you are disappointing everyone who sacrificed for you. And I know many people sitting here today understand that feeling too. Because behind every graduation gown is a story people cannot see. Stories of anxiety. Stories of financial struggle. Stories of heartbreak. Stories of nights we cried without telling anyone. And yet somehow, despite all of it, we are still here. That is what makes today beautiful. Not perfection. Survival.

Over these years, I learned something that changed my life: God does not always remove the storm. Sometimes He simply gives you the strength to survive it. And maybe that is why the motto of William Jewell College means so much to me: *Deo Fisis Labora*, "Trust in God, Work."

Because there were moments when faith was the only thing that kept me going. Looking back now, I realize that some of my greatest heartbreaks were actually redirections. Because sometimes God is preparing you in pain for a purpose you cannot yet see. So Class of 2026, as we leave this place, I hope we remember this: Do not be ashamed of the struggles that shaped you. Some of the strongest people are people who kept believing even after life broke them. People who chose faith over bitterness. Hope over fear. And purpose over giving up.

Years ago, I sat on a bus leaving Ghana carrying grief, uncertainty, and a prayer. Today, I stand here carrying something different: proof that God can still create purpose from pain. So to everyone here who is still hurting, still struggling, still becoming: do not give up on your story yet. Because sometimes the people who shine the brightest are the ones who first survived the darkest nights.

Congratulations, Class of 2026.  
And thank you.