

Bob Kramer: David, it's a joy to be with you here this morning, and I think for each of us, our relationship has been used in a special way by the Lord, not only to shape our individual lives, our marriages, our families, our way of thinking, but also to teach us something about friendship.

And I wonder if maybe, you know, we first met 52 years ago in September 1967 when we were both very young, 17, each of us, just newly arrived as freshman at Harvard College, and I wonder if you might just reflect a little bit on that's 52 years of friendship.

David Powlison: Yeah.

Bob Kramer: And friendship that now we have the advantage of time to look back on how God has used that relationship through the years, and that investment that we've made in each other, and, you know, maybe what are some of your thoughts when you think about not only friendship generally, but specifically the friendship that you and I have been blessed with.

Bob Kramer: Yeah. I think that that one of the qualities that I have most valued between us is that we, you know, there's all these years of history and they weren't composed just of fun and games or I mean not that we didn't have some fun, but that we could talk about things that really mattered.

We could talk about the meaning of life, we could talk about our struggles, we could talk about relationships, we could talk about major life decisions.

Another quality is, we actually haven't lived in proximity to each other for 40 of those years, the last 40, and I do think that a friendship that has been able to be sustained at a level of immediate depth, you know, you don't have to pretend, you don't have to dance around, you don't have to try to find a ground for common conversation.

There's been times we've been in different countries and we've always lived at least 150 miles apart and haven't necessarily had reason to track into each other's territory, but that's a rare gift, and the – I know of people who have a vast circle of acquaintances, but there's far, far fewer friends, and both you and I are like that.

We have many people we know, love, care about, interact with, but a truly caring and honest friendship has been a rare and precious gift to me, and I know to you also.

Bob Kramer: Mm-hmm, and to our wives as well.

David Powlison: Yeah, yeah.

Bob Kramer: Well –

David Powlison: And to our children.

Bob Kramer: And to our children.

David Powlison: We even had one of your daughters live with us for a while –

Bob Kramer: Yes.

David Powlison: – while she did her –

Bob Kramer: Yes. **Sonya** lived with you all while she was here at Westminster. She remembers well the hundreds of pages of papers she wrote in your attic. But maybe go back – we didn't know each other well freshman year.

David Powlison: Right.

Bob Kramer: Then sophomore year, we were both living in **C-entry** of Quincy House.

David Powlison: Yeah.

Bob Kramer: And we found ourselves gravitating to each other and spending more and more time together that year, and that was a lot of fun too. We did a lot of fun things, listened to a lot of music, and then did a few other things.

David Powlison: We did a few things that people might not immediately connect with either of us –

Bob Kramer: Today?

David Powlison: – in terms of our public –

Bob Kramer: So I was gonna give you the –

David Powlison: – _____ persona.

Bob Kramer: – opportunity to decide how much you wanted to share of that.

David Powlison: Well, it's, you know, there was a huge – this is 1969, spring, I mean, it was exactly 50 years ago, and the country was in turmoil over the Vietnam War, and it's pretty clear which side of the debate we were on.

And I remember we didn't actually take over the building, but we – the university hall had four stairwells coming up into the main entrance and supportive students stood locked-arm on that, and we were on one of the, I think it was the southwest stairway.

And the state police charged and to take the building back. I kind of, probably a fortuity of God's goodness that police attacked from the northeast and we were in the southwest, and so as everything's chaos and people being clubbed and teargassed, we managed to escape.

So but that locking arms in a building takeover was certainly one of the – it was a defining moment in many ways, and it's one of those things you do not forget.

Bob Kramer: No.

David Powlison: It's that intense.

Bob Kramer: And that may have been in some ways, a certain blend of naivety and self-righteousness –

David Powlison: Sure.

Bob Kramer: – together with a sense of a common cause, –

David Powlison:

So but that locking arms in a building takeover was certainly one of the – it was a defining moment in many ways, and it's one of those things you do not forget.

Bob Kramer: No.

David Powlison: It's that intense.

Bob Kramer: That may have been in some ways, a certain blend of naivety and self-righteousness –

David Powlison: Sure.

Bob Kramer: – together with a sense of a common cause, –

David Powlison: Yeah.

Bob Kramer: – but in some ways, it also, I think, indicated for each of us the sense of the need to sort of step out on something we believed in, even if at times then it was perhaps ill-formed, some of our thinking.

David Powlison: Sure.

Bob Kramer: As you know –

David Powlison: It was very ill-formed.

Bob Kramer: Yeah.

David Powlison: But well-intended, but, yeah, I wouldn't do it again today.

Bob Kramer: Yeah.

David Powlison: So maybe _____

[Crosstalk]

Bob Kramer: As you know, I was so disillusioned through the whole experience that within literally a few weeks of that time, I decided to take a leave of absence from Harvard, and then I came back really did not have much – we didn't have much contact at all then when I was gone for 15 months with the single exception being though you weren't there, I got a chance to visit with your family, and have dinner with your family at the hilltop, in their hilltop house.

David Powlison: Out in Hawaii.

Bob Kramer: At Lanihau.

David Powlison: Yep.

Bob Kramer: Which was a wonderful opportunity. But then I came back as a brand new believer, having just come to Christ through the ministry of L'Abri Fellowship, and I came back, and we were roommates, and maybe you might share some of your impressions of this, you know, Harvard radical come back Jesus person, coming back and suddenly being your roommate, and some of the conversations we began to have.

David Powlison: Yeah. It was, I mean, I was one of the least likely candidates to ever be a believer in Jesus Christ. I had been raised in that classic '50s-'60's mainline liberal Protestantism which essentially boiled down to "we're the good people and we'll go help the needy people who are less fortunate than us."

So I can remember even as a 17 year old, towards the end of high school, being repelled by what seemed to be a kind of dishonesty and self-righteousness about that liberalism, and I had no idea that there was a kind of Christianity that was deep and rich and thoughtful, and personal, and really touched the heart and came from the heart, and I had even less of an idea that there was something that could be true to the Bible that would actually be living and relevant.

So my idea of Christianity by the time we got to, you know, after your year that you had dropped out would've been then you came back for your junior year of my senior year, and my impression of Christianity would've been, it had these two extremes, both of which were odious.

One was this liberal self-righteousness and it seemed very shallow, and the other was a kind of ranting on the street corner that seemed equally shallow, and histrionic, and nothing one would ever want to be part of.

So you're coming back as someone that I already respected, as someone who thought, and thought deeply. I mean, you had dropped out to look for truth. You had dropped out to look for what really held up, what mattered, what was meaningful, and you had found the Christian faith as this North Star around which everything pivoted.

So I had all my caricatures broken in a most healthy way, and we started a, well really it was about a five-year conversation 'cause I was a tough nut to crack. We argued. We went around and around

the mulberry bush. You got to practice all of your apologetic and evangelistic ideas on me and none of them worked, and so –

Bob Kramer: And realized that ultimately God has to change a person's heart, and that you can't rationally – you can't rationalize somebody's path to Jesus.

David Powlison: Their coming to faith 'cause there's a fundamental stubborn willfulness that wills not to see, and wills not to believe, and wills to suppress. Actually, even being able to hear what the message is saying.

It's an astonishing blindness. I sometimes thought about it as we as Christians will get charged, which is actually a ridiculous charge that we make a leap of faith, and I actually think the leap is the leap of unbelief, that without any evidence, stakes its life that Christ is not who he says he was, that he didn't do what he said he did, that he's not alive, and typically without even examining whether these things could be so, there's this huge leap of unbelief into a vacuum that is really a swan dive into death, and I certainly fought long and hard, you know, there was that irrational self-centeredness at the end of the day that the Holy Spirit himself had to overcome.

Bob Kramer: Maybe talk some – we took a course together that year, your senior year, my junior year since I'd taken the year out, Religious Dimensions of the Modern Novel with Father John Barton, and that led to many discussions, and –

David Powlison: Many hours and hours of conversation.

Bob Kramer: Hours and hours of conversation, providential. God formed the conversations. And in addition to that, you were had done a lot of studying of Jung, and were also spending a lot of time trying to understand your dreams and how that helped you understand who you were.

And maybe you might comment both about some of those – I think of the Quincy House Grill and the great milkshakes and burgers at 11:00 or 11:30, and oftentimes we had been in discussion, not done any, quote, schoolwork, but we had just been discussing these issues all evening.

David Powlison: All evening.

Bob Kramer: So maybe just talk about how the Lord kind of used some of those really rich discussions occasioned by a course that we were taking.

David Powlison: Yeah, the course in combination with conversation did one huge thing. I did not become a Christian for another four or five years, but what it did was it made Christian language map on to the honest existential realities of human life, and so words like good and evil, and sin and redemption, and judgment and mercy, these Christian words, these Bible words, it created touchpoints into the most profound struggles, issues of being a human being, and seeking to be honest to human experience.

And, you know, each of the books in its own way was – I believe it was *The Power and the Glory* by Graham Greene, it was –

Bob Kramer: Was it Graham Greene, Faulkner, Dostoevsky –

David Powlison: Faulkner.

Bob Kramer: – and Kafka. Those were just –

David Powlison: Yeah.

Bob Kramer: – those four novelists.

David Powlison: Those four novelists. And Kafka's sense of a kind of, which for him was – there's some sense of this moral accounting, and he couldn't figure out where it came from or how to locate it, but the idea of a moral accounting.

Graham Greene, this tortured sense of the conflict between the professed faith. I believe a Spanish priest was the kind of hero/anti-hero, and the ravages of life.

And the most significant one was Dostoevsky now, *Brothers Karamazov*, and one of the things that was – it was actually one of the defining moments of my entire educational career was I was so engaged in trying to write the final paper on *Brothers Karamazov* that I didn't hand anything in, and I got my only C in the history of my educational career.

So the one course which I did not succeed in the grade department was the most profoundly impacting at the meaning of life department.

And *Brothers Karamazov* is just such a – it's one of the first and still one of the greatest of what you might call a psychological novel, so you've got these four brothers and they embody different aspects of the human being from the sordid to the conflicted to the rationalistic to the religious, and that – and Dostoevsky had such a sense for the honest notepad answer wrestlings of the human soul, and that just, it changed my world. It let Christianity start to have traction points in my life.

Bob Kramer: Because again, in vivid brushstrokes made very real, the human existential strugglings but put them in the context of religious experience and religious language, again –

David Powlison: That's right.

Bob Kramer: – the themes of good and evil, and I do the things – I don't do the things I desire to do and I do the things I don't desire to do.

David Powlison: That's right.

Bob Kramer: Also during this time a friendship started to form with this young woman who was coming up to see me –

David Powlison: Yes.

Bob Kramer: – on weekends who is now my wife, **Diane**.

David Powlison: Yes.

Bob Kramer: And she began to be part of those conversations as well –

David Powlison: Yeah.

Bob Kramer: – that we had.

David Powlison: That's a side of things that has some unique wrinkles in it because as I remember it, you and Diane were not an item at that point; you were just friends.

Bob Kramer: Mm-hmm.

David Powlison: And I remember, and this is one of those events that you kind of hold a gentle hand say, I liken it a bit to the way Paul was very reticent to speak of his third heavens experience, but there was a

very unusual experience that I had regarding your relationship with Diane, and I think it was spring break when you got engaged.

Bob Kramer: Mm-hmm.

David Powlison: Was that right? And I knew you were going down to Philadelphia, you were gonna visit friends, I knew Diane was one of them, but I had no sense that this was, you know, a serious romantic –

Bob Kramer: No.

David Powlison: – relationship.

And this one evening, I woke up probably around 1 in the morning with perhaps the most vivid dream I'd ever had in my entire life, and it was a dream in which I saw a couple. There was clearly two people, a man and a woman, unidentified. They were holding hands which meant they were together, but they weren't submerged in each other; they were still individuals and yet they were one.

And they were walking – I won't be able to capture it in words how moving the grandeur of this vision was, but they were walking into the heart of a massive oak tree in which there was a rising sun coming up, somehow through it, and I woke up in a kind of, it was just this profoundly moving vision of what a relationship could and should be 'cause in my own relationships, finding that balance point between individuality and commonality, it was never could quite land it, you know.

Bob Kramer: No.

David Powlison: So you're either separated or you're trying to merge, and this was a vision of how it really ought to be. And you came back three or four days later with this surprise announcement that you were engaged, and that it turned out that literally to the minute of when you and Diane had gotten engaged was when I woke up with that dream.

And it's one of those things, you know, you don't – I'm not a Pentecostal, I don't put stock that somehow dreams are where you find out the will of God, but it was one of those experiences that is an inexplicable, extraordinary process of God that just gave me a vision, and that actually protected me in a number of relationships in the years that followed, and protected me from getting

committed to relationships that would've been destructive _____
foundation in the long run.

It was interesting that when Nan and I got engaged in what would've been, I guess it was almost seven years later that we'd gotten engaged. You know, I'd become a Christian and lived as a Christian for a couple of years.

But I remember I had a lot of self-doubt after that, and you and I took a long walk around Westminster, both living here in this building, and I voiced those doubts to you, and I'll never forget that what you said was "Well are they doubts about Nan?" And I said, "No, they're doubts about myself." Because you, until you've actually made a commitment work, then all your relationships have failed in a certain sense, and so how could I be certain given my own –

Bob Kramer: I could almost presume that you would be –

David Powlison: To make a – to be a –

Bob Kramer: – _____

David Powlison: – presume to be able to keep a commitment.

Bob Kramer: Yeah.

David Powlison: I'll never forget what you said because it actually puts it into more propositional terms what that dream communicated in this kind of vivid image, imagistic terms, you said – you actually laughed there and said – it was kind of like an "oh, that's good, like that's no problem." Like, "Yeah, what do you mean that's no problem. Like, this is my life, and so am I gonna marry this lady?"

Bob Kramer: 'Cause I had experienced the exact same feelings.

David Powlison: Oh.

Bob Kramer: Exact same feelings because I had this sense of Diane and I are great in the moment, but how can I look forward to the future and say I will be committed to her 50 years in the future?

David Powlison: Yeah.

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- Bob Kramer:* We were totally in the moment people. I felt no ability, and so I thought I was lying to make this commitment to her.
- David Powlison:* To make a commitment. Sure.
- Bob Kramer:* And it was – and that's where I suddenly understood the reality of the third person in the relationship.
- David Powlison:* Yeah.
- Bob Kramer:* And that I couldn't make this commitment if it weren't for Jesus being the third person in our relationship.
- David Powlison:* And that's what you said was "Well, there's three people in this relationship, and on only one of the three is perfect."
- Bob Kramer:* Mm-hmm.
- David Powlison:* And that was just such a way, you know, so it creates this triangulation where we are two fallible people but we have one infallible, loving, steady, predictable, faithful person that we're both looking to, and that that third person becomes the key to the ability to make a commitment.
- That just – that was a revelation and in an odd way, the dream experience was God's mercy to someone who was completely in the moment experientially oriented person, true child of the '60s living completely in the authenticity of the moment.
- Bob Kramer:* And intensity.
- David Powlison:* And intensity of the moment. And then –
- Bob Kramer:* It was intense and it was authentic in the moment. That's all that mattered.
- David Powlison:* Right. I still have certain of those tendencies, but they've been largely corralled by other more –
- Bob Kramer:* Yeah.
- David Powlison:* – stable _____, so –
- Bob Kramer:* Yeah. Well, maybe we might – you talked about sort of a five-year conversation –
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David Powlison: Yeah.

Bob Kramer: – that you and I, and I Diane _____ into really, and there were many parts to that conversation, and to your observation earlier, it wasn't that we were seeing each other each week.

David Powlison: Right. Sometimes it was a year –

Bob Kramer: Yeah, 'cause we were –

David Powlison: – _____

Bob Kramer: – in – we were in –

David Powlison: Yeah.

Bob Kramer: – Europe when I was at Oxford, then we were at Westminster.

David Powlison: Yeah.

Bob Kramer: You were working at McLean Mental Hospital outside Boston, but it – we continued the conversation –

David Powlison: Yeah.

Bob Kramer: – to your earlier point, we picked it up right where we left off –

David Powlison: Exactly.

Bob Kramer: – every time we saw each other.

David Powlison: And that's something that, you know, as I've seen my friends who are not believers in whom a conversation started and they had no desire to pick it up, I take that as a huge example of the grace of God in the life of someone who didn't even know they were receiving the grace of God.

Bob Kramer: Mm-hmm.

David Powlison: A kind of a grace, a head of grace that God gave that I was consumed with wanting to continue the conversation, and that was really the hound of heaven –

Bob Kramer: Mm-hmm.

David Powlison: – drawing me to God even while I was resisting and kicking and fighting the whole way, so.

Bob Kramer: Well, there was a – the evening of your spiritual birth, we were in Cambridge –

David Powlison: Yep. Actually, let me back up –

Bob Kramer: Okay.

David Powlison: – one step because there was – there was one other day and evening that was very significant.

Bob Kramer: Mm-hmm.

David Powlison: It's when you and Diane were taking care of an elderly lady up in New Hampshire –

Bob Kramer: Yes.

David Powlison: – one summer by – right by Dublin Lake at the foot of Mount Monadnock and she had a beautiful home overlooking the lake, and this deck, and I remember we talked 'til all hours out on the – out on that porch, and at the end you asked if you could pray for me, and you prayed for me in a way that I, you know, since come to understand, this is Christian prayer.

It's personal, it's about real things, it's not just a bunch of pious generalities, and old-fashioned syntax and language. You prayed for, I can't remember what the exact concern was in my life at that point, but I can remember going back to the – my bedroom afterwards and writing in my journal this kind – with a kind of quizzical, like, "huh," the words "I have been prayed for."

And it's one of those things that you probably had no idea the impact; you just thought it was probably a nice that I would've said yes to being prayed for 'cause a yes is more friendly than a no at that point.

Bob Kramer: It's a step, yes.

David Powlison: It's a step, and – but it was one of those, again, one of those it just puts another piece in the puzzle that, you know, kind of a "huh, like that's interesting, I never quite thought about that before."

Bob Kramer: Well, I –

David Powlison: And it was meaningful, and so –

Bob Kramer: Yeah.

David Powlison: – and it was actually, I felt that I was being loved –

Bob Kramer: Mm-hmm.

David Powlison: – by being prayed for thoughtfully because it meant you had listened to me, you had heard me, you had borne on your heart my cares and concerns, and you had brought them to a God that you knew and I didn't –

Bob Kramer: Mm-hmm.

David Powlison: – and that meant something.

Bob Kramer: I remember actually that first year back at – in Quincy House, my first year back after having come to Christ at L'Abri, I remember on a beautiful spring day sitting on the ledge in the courtyard there, and having this, with a lot of bursting out of spring frivolity going on around us, your sharing with almost tears in your eyes this sense that the world that I was describing in one sense was very attractive, and I can't remember the exact phrase –

David Powlison: The world of Christian faith?

Bob Kramer: The Christian world was very attractive, but your sense that it would be a paradise, and I would only spoil the paradise by entering it.

David Powlison: Yeah.

Bob Kramer: That somehow or another, you know, this is so attractive, but I'm so unclean and unworthy. And I remember that discussion because that framed to me that you had a consciousness of your need and a consciousness of your sin.

Now you directly related it to what you saw as Christians 'cause I remember you making the further comment, "seems to me there's this beautiful truth and Christians are always trampling on all the flowers.

And, you know, you call it good news. It seems to me they are just basically –" and I think you used some graphic language to say what they're doing to this good news which is to say, you know, present company excepted, you know, it doesn't seem like good news to me at all."

David Powlison: Or it doesn't work or it doesn't –

Bob Kramer: Yeah, yeah.

David Powlison: – fulfill what it promises.

Bob Kramer: But I remember that discussion 'cause I remember then sharing it with Diane and sort of, you know, sort of sharing this is what's going on and this is what David's kind of thinking about as he's processing this. And then –

David Powlison: Let's touch back into the evening and this –

Bob Kramer: Yes. The evening –

David Powlison: In the apartment in Cambridge.

Bob Kramer: **Tommy Oates**, one of our classmates, and his dad was a Harvard trustee, had an apartment in Cambridge, and Tommy said, "Look, if you're coming up, feel free to use my dad's apartment," and you came over to visit that evening.

David Powlison: Yeah.

Bob Kramer: And we had a most intense of discussions –

David Powlison: Yeah.

Bob Kramer: – but now very specific.

David Powlison: Yeah. Yeah.

Bob Kramer: I could comment further, but maybe you wanna share from your perspective.

David Powlison: I mean, yeah, I mean, it was so specific. It was August 31, 1975, so.

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- Bob Kramer:* And it was Ezekiel 36.
- David Powlison:* Ezekiel 36 –
- Bob Kramer:* Yes.
- David Powlison:* – 25 and following.
- Bob Kramer:* Yes.
- David Powlison:* Yeah. It was – there were a series of steps, but that Ezekiel passage was the clinching transformation of being awakened to a new life.
- Bob Kramer:* Mm-hmm.
- David Powlison:* The – as I remember the conversation, and I had – feel free to bring in as the other – as these parts intersect, but we had – we picked up the conversation again about Christian faith and true and false and good and evil, and you by this time were at Westminster.
- Bob Kramer:* I was.
- David Powlison:* So you had your apologetic, you know, heave artillery all proud and –
- Bob Kramer:* I was taking my three foreign languages, Greek, Hebrew, _____ and apologetic.
- David Powlison:* Right, exactly. And I remember that, you know, so we went around the bush, one – mulberry bush one more time, got to the point where you had decisively argued presuppositionally to the undefeatable logic of Christian faith, –
- Bob Kramer:* Mm-hmm.
- David Powlison:* – and then it's as though what happened is, at that point I didn't fall on my knees and say, you know, "you're right." I just leapt, that leap of unbelief right back to the starting point 'cause I didn't want it.
- Bob Kramer:* Mm-hmm.
- David Powlison:* And the – and I remember you saying sometime later, and I'd be interested to hearing this in your own words, but that that was

actually very significant for you in realizing the limitations of argument.

Bob Kramer: Yeah. Yeah, that was – we were, I think, in the dining room of the apartment –

David Powlison: Yeah.

Bob Kramer: – at the table there.

David Powlison: Yeah, I can remember where we were sitting.

Bob Kramer: And Diane was in the next room praying fervently.

David Powlison: Uh-huh.

Bob Kramer: But it was the conversations just between the two of us, and there was a – because of both my background and my coming to faith, there was a heavy dose of seeking the truth and an intellectual search.

David Powlison: Mm-hmm.

Bob Kramer: But that evening was my most profound personal experience of my life of reasoning with palpable sense of Satan and of his saying "I will not let go." And I've never had such a deep experience of the personal presence of Satan. It was clear to me that rationally you were there as I had been whenever it would've been five, six years ago, but that you wouldn't let go 'cause Satan wasn't gonna let go of you.

And we were wrestling, but I wasn't wrestling with you. I was wrestling the one who would not let you go. And I knew Diane was praying hard in the next room, and that was the time when, as you said, I realized this isn't about getting David to see this or see that, this isn't the time for argument. This is the time to pray and claim promises, and this is the time to say, "Lord, this is it."

David Powlison: Yeah.

Bob Kramer: "You need to step in."

David Powlison: And it was also the time where you, you did something that you had never done before was you spoke very personally and very directly, and the gist of it, and I probably don't have the exact

words down, but I certainly have the gist, and in effect what you said was "Diane and I really love you. We respect you a great deal, but what you believe and how you're living, you're destroying yourself."

And that degree of both love and directness, I would liken it to, you know, an armor piercing cruise missile.

Bob Kramer: Mm-hmm.

David Powlison: You know, just like blasting through all the layers of resistance and concrete and such, and I knew you were right, and it took that degree of personalness, love, being willing to you might say bet all your money on one roll of the dice kind of –

Bob Kramer: Mm-hmm.

David Powlison: – kind of thing.

And I immediately came under intense conviction of sin. It's like a, you know, I was once in a spinout in a car on a slippery road, and it really was, your life flashes between – before your eyes as you're – as we're doing like about a 540 on this highway, and it was one of those your life, you know, my life flashing before my eyes of just understanding my fallenness and the – there was actually then a humorous part.

I don't know if you remember this, but after someone unknown period of time while I'm doing either a 540 or a 720 or how many times I was spinning down the highway, my next words were, "What do I have to do to become a Christian?" And you started to go back into apologetics mode, and I actually stopped you and said, "No, no, I don't wanna – let's not keep talking about it. Like, what do I have to do?"

And that's where you brought the Ezekiel 36: –

Bob Kramer: Mm-hmm.

David Powlison: – 25 and following –

Bob Kramer: Mm-hmm.

David Powlison: – onto the table that I, you know, I will take out of you the heart of stone, put in a heart of flesh that's soft and pliable. I will wash you with pure water.

And then this was the place where I was aware in a way that I've never since been so aware of the spiritual value because it literally was like the good angel and the bad angel talking from two sides, and on the one side was really a voice of inequity and a voice of lies, and a voice of shame, and a voice of condemnation, and it is that same theme that I would somehow pollute Christ to come – to try to come near him.

And on the other side is the voice of just this one scripture and so basically I'm almost 26 years of life and darkness, and one liner from the Bible and those two voices and fighting out, and –

Bob Kramer: It was a fight.

David Powlison: It was a fight, and I was very aware of that, and –

Bob Kramer: I remember you were shaking, you were perspiring.

David Powlison: Yeah.

Bob Kramer: It was intense.

David Powlison: Yeah.

Bob Kramer: And I think –

David Powlison: And the thing that – I think I must've said something like I just can't do it, I don't know what to do, and you – it was the perfect response, and you said, "Well, why don't you ask God for the strength to ask God to enter your life?" It was just like sort of take it back one step, and that I could do. And the initial asking God for help was not making some kind of "I believe."

Bob Kramer: Yeah.

David Powlison: It was more asking God for the strength to ask God to be what he said he was, and he is what he says he is, and he does what he says he does.

Bob Kramer: And the one reason I was able to say that and identify with where you were 'cause I'd been in that exact same place, and had that

exact same sense, and I had shared that with you. I had been with **Edith Schaffer** and one voice was saying, "Boy, if your friends at Harvard could see you now. You are really making a fool out of yourself. You're here with this crazy American lady who's praying over you. You have just totally lost all credibility."

And then another part of me was saying, "If this isn't true and I walk out of this room, then there is absolutely no meaning to life, and there's no such thing as truth and love, and they are all lies 'cause I know if there's truth and love, then it's only because this is true."

David Powlison: Yeah.

Bob Kramer: And I was just – I was in this collision point, and I felt that well, I'm supposed to commit my life to this per – I can't commit my life. I'm torn apart by these competing things, but if God is who he says he is, then God can give me that certainty, and God can give me that strength.

And I saw in bold –

David Powlison: In similar dynamic, yeah.

Bob Kramer: – I saw this going on right in front of me with you.

David Powlison: Yeah.

Bob Kramer: And I knew you well enough, and new sort of your honesty that, you know, if you sensed that you had to have it together in order to do this, then you'd be honest and say "I don't have it together. I can't do this." So that was, yeah, that experience of mine so equipped me for this time with you.

David Powlison: Yeah.

Bob Kramer: And –

David Powlison: And what it meant in terms of even the subsequent trajectory over these what, 44 years, is that my conversion was most – in the Bible it's most like the story that Jesus tells about the Pharisee and the publican, you know, where the Pharisee is making all these affirmations of his faith and his faithfulness, and the publican just says, "God be merciful to me, the sinner."

And that fundamental humbling of need for mercy that has been something that has never left me, and it's been interesting, you know, being kind of a flighty child of the '60s who always lived for the authentic moment, I have – that has grounded my life without wavering. I mean, I count at a huge privilege that I have never doubted in the last 44 years.

I know dear brothers and sisters who do doubt, and they wrestle with doubt, and they wrestle with are they really a Christian, and I feel a deep gratitude to God that I was so dramatically invaded by mercy that – it's like the question got settled and I've sometimes considered it to be one of – in an odd way, it's been one of the greatest gifts that I could ever be given because it's an abiding sense of need and weakness that has – I think it has sheltered me in having then many successes in life subsequently.

They just haven't gone to my head. I've been grateful for things that have – people that have been blessed and things accomplished, but I've never let me ego feed off of that, and I think it's because of that abiding sense of need has been so powerful.

Bob Kramer: You were met at your time of need with his mercy.

David Powlison: Yeah, and that's the –

Bob Kramer: Yeah.

David Powlison: – starting point, you know.

Bob Kramer: Maybe, this is really fast forwarding and there are a number of things, but maybe relate that now to some of your thoughts now. I mean, you're facing something with your cancer that is an ultimate thing that causes fear and panic in many people, and there's the reality of real pain and suffering and grieving, but there's also the fear that can go with that.

David Powlison: Yeah.

Bob Kramer: And maybe just talk about some of your –

David Powlison: Current experience?

Bob Kramer: Current experiences in the light of what you've just shared.

David Powlison: Yeah, I'm in Stage 4 pancreatic cancer, metastasized to the liver, advancing. Doctor, when he looked at the most recent CAT scan a couple weeks ago he said – I asked him, you know, "Give me the straight stuff in terms of the prognosis," and he said, "You probably have just a few months to live," and the – what's been interesting – that was the first time in this nine months since we first knew we had cancer that there were stages of it where it looked like it was gonna be treatable and it had not metastasized.

And so we haven't had any kind of timeframe beyond generalities _____ averages, and this is the first time that we got a specific. So sobering, sobering to be sure. But it has been very interesting because I've not felt fear at all.

The thing that I have felt is grief, and a grief that's deep, that's very immediate, it's about a centimeter below the surface, an awareness of loss, an awareness of Nan, and of the children, and the grandchildren, and my colleagues, an awareness of things that I would love to do. I mean, I've – there's many – who knows? I probably have 20 articles and 5 books in me still, and they won't get –

Bob Kramer: And not to mention that dog mushing trip that we were gonna do north of the Arctic Circle.

David Powlison: We were gonna go dog musing above the Arctic Circle in Sweden –

Bob Kramer: And spend a week together.

David Powlison: – _____. Yeah.

Bob Kramer: Yeah.

David Powlison: Won't be able to do that, and may well not see the birth of a seventh grandchild. But it has been a simply an experience of grief, and what I realized in that is that there's many things that can kind of corrupt and complicate grief – regrets, if onlys, anger, fear, escapism, denial, not wanting to face things, just going high boar on your bucket list.

All those things are either distractions from or complications of just honest grief. And to God's glory, it has just been grief, simple, uncomplicated. And then, and here's the – you know, we've been

teasing ourselves about living in the moment, but there are huge graces just living in the moment.

One could say that Jesus, one of his greatest strengths was he lived in the moment. He was fully, fully engaged with every person that he was talking with, and that kind of 100 percent engagement until the completion of the interaction, is a quality that's just been a huge asset in counseling ministry, in teaching, in writing, you know, it's just ability to be all in, in any moment.

And that has continued. It was interesting when we were out in Hawaii visiting my family in a couple weeks in March, and there were a last couple of weeks in which I just felt – I wasn't feeling the pain and such from the cancer, I was feeling normal, if you will. I'd stopped chemotherapy so I wasn't feeling all the –

Bob Kramer: Side effects?

David Powlison: – messed up side effects.

And one of the things that Nan and I talked about and prayed about as we were flying out to Hawaii is no wanting to, in a way, be grabby for experience, wanting to, like, or to be the kind of morbidity of "well, this is the last time I'll do X or Y" and God really set us free from that. We were just able to enter into each relationship, each moment, each wave bodysurfing.

Bob Kramer: Kayaking.

David Powlison: Kayaking. That's what it was. And –

Bob Kramer: Draw a distinction for a moment if you can between, you sort of alluded to it, we talked about, you know, in our pre-faith days being very much into the moment –

David Powlison: Right.

Bob Kramer: – and the intensity of the moment, the experience of the moment. How is that different from that peace that you feel now enables you to really live in the moment, you know, what's different?

David Powlison: Yeah, you know –

Bob Kramer: What's the –

David Powlison: – I think it's so many things in the way that – I mean, you're asking a profound question 'cause it actually touches on just about everything, but the way that the gospel of the love of God changes us is not – I'll put it technically and try to – it's not metaphysically, it's not like it's changing what a human being is. It's not like it gives us a different set of thoughts and feelings, and – it just alters the shape of what is.

And so every attribute has a strength, and every attribute can go rotten, and that ability to live in the moment and be 100 percent engaged with every person that you're with can be a – can go far, far off the rails, and the ability to make plans can go far, far off the rails, and yet both making plans –

Bob Kramer: You can be – yeah.

David Powlison: – and living in the moment really matter.

Bob Kramer: It can become an obsession with controlling your future or it can become an obsession with ignore it, –

David Powlison: Yeah, and just living –

Bob Kramer: – being practical with –

David Powlison: – and living within the moment –

Bob Kramer: – _____. Yeah.

David Powlison: – for whatever joy, happiness, grab the gusto, you only go around once, so grab the gusto. So I mean I think that is the way that emotions are affected.

All emotions are, by nature, good, but they all go so far off, and our cognitive faculties are good, but they go so far off into lies, and our actions, sexuality, money. You can just go through every sector.

Having children, being alone, being a single person or being a married person, any of them can become – can go rotten, and any of them can be the source of just profound acceptance of the conditions of reality that God has given you, and in that, finding relevant ways to love him and to embrace what we're facing, so, yeah.

Bob Kramer: Well, after that August 31st evening in the apartment in Cambridge, in a similar path, the last place in the world Diane and I ever thought we'd find ourselves was Westminster Seminary, and then you came to this place on the hill.

David Powlison: Right.

Bob Kramer: And in one sense – and literally lived in this building where we're sitting now.

David Powlison: Right. My current office as CCF's director was my bedroom that I had to rehab too, you know.

Bob Kramer: Maybe chat a little bit about that.

David Powlison: Yeah.

Bob Kramer: And just sort of God's sense of humor in our lives as well and continuity.

David Powlison: Well, I didn't receive much encouragement from – I was living in Boston and my pastor was a fine, fine man. I talked to him, and a number of other people in my circles up there, and no one was very encouraging about coming to Westminster, and the universal –

Bob Kramer: Probably more fearful what it would do to you.

David Powlison: Yeah.

Bob Kramer: Yeah.

David Powlison: Yeah, 'cause the rap was, "Oh, they're just stuck in the 17th century, and they're stodgy," and so forth. Well, I came down here and visited, and I – the professors in the classes I sat in on were just honest, honest men alive with deep, joyous humor, you know.

I remember sitting in on a class with **Harvey Khan** who was the missions prof and he would have us literally bellyaching in laughter at a story he was telling, and then a zing, and you're profoundly convicted of your selfishness in the next moment.

And I remember **John Frame** taught the doctrine of scripture and apologetics, and it was, I can remember it was a very specific incident. There was – this was in blackboard days before even overhead projectors, so he had the big blackboard up there, and

someone had put a smiley face on the blackboard, and John Frame comes in, looks at it, shakes his head, "What is this? A Baptist seminary or something?"

Just this dry wit, you're half laughing at yourself as well as, you know, he's not laughing at Baptists, he's making fun of all of us in the common plight at being human beings. And so I came back from those visits, and as well as I was visiting you, so I was hearing what you were learning, and just those –

Bob Kramer: And we were living here at that time.

David Powlison: Yeah. And just the spirit of our friendship. So I came willingly. I was, I don't know, perhaps I was the youngest Christian that ever came to seminary. I was less than a year old when I arrived at campus. And I still remember sitting in a class the first semester, and I think it was on New Testament introduction and the professor said turn to Philippians, and, you know, so you've got this, like, "Philippians. I think that's in the back part of the Bible."

And it's sort of a little bit like cheating in geometry, like looking at your neighbors, like where are they turning, and so I finally found Philippians. So I was starting from a pretty low baseline, but – and this was something Westminster didn't give me, but it's what I brought. I came with life experience.

I'd been working four years at psychiatric hospitals, I had read widely in literature, psychology, history, I'd rubbed shoulders with the most troubled people in the world, and always saw the humanity in them and didn't tag them with a diagnostic label. They earned their label by odd behavior, but they were people more like me than different.

So I just came with a real sense of the humanness of human beings, the complexities of the darkness and the places we get stuck, and what happened is, and I do think, you know, it's not that the critiques of seminary aren't justified in part, but mainly what they come down to is not necessarily seeing – you're not necessarily taught how the dots connect from these wonderful truths, and this wonderful God to the darkness of human life, and –

Bob Kramer: A phrase I've often heard you use, I know you used it in a discussion here this morning, mapping on to the realities of human experience.

David Powlison: Yeah, and mapping directly. And the more dark and difficult life is, the more directly scripture actually maps right onto it, and that has been – back to your previous question, in facing death, boy, life is at every turn. The Bible is looking death straight in the eye, and at every turn is speaking to mortal people who all of us are hanging by a thread at all times.

Every breath we take is dependent on God's generosity and mercy, and so you'll sometimes hear people who'll say, "Well, I used to believe in the Christianity and read the Bible, but then X, Y or Z happened in my life, you know, my child died or I got a cancer diagnosis or my partner cheated me out of all my money and I just gave up on it 'cause it didn't really work."

And I just think, you actually weren't reading the Bible that is there because the Bible is exactly about the very hardest, grittiest, most real things in human life.

Bob Kramer: Well, let's may be talk about that in the context of it's the fall of '76, you're coming here to Westminster.

David Powlison: Yeah, uh-huh.

Bob Kramer: As you said, less than a year old as a believer, living upstairs in the bedroom that Diane convinced **John Bettler** to let you renovate.

David Powlison: That's right.

Bob Kramer: And she later pointed out to him a very good move on his part. But talk about the growing attraction and appreciation to the work of CCF and more specifically the Biblical counseling.

David Powlison: Sure.

Bob Kramer: And let's kind of talk about you're a brand new Christian, you're getting all this theology at Westminster, as you said, terrific, just –

David Powlison: Truth upon truth upon truth.

Bob Kramer: – powerful truths, but talking about how for you the connection to Biblical counseling and truths made real in everyday human experience why that excited you and how that sort of shaped, quite frankly, your career in ministry path.

David Powlison: Yeah, the last 40 years. Yeah, I would actually say that it starts one step earlier in – I think ultimately every person who catches a vision for what Biblical counseling is could be, should be, can become – however short the reality might fall from what it ought to be, yet they get it that this really matters. It always starts with "Well, the Bible made sense of my life." It always starts personal.

And so the fact that Ezekiel 36:25 and following could take me apart and put me back together, and I'd been in two years of psychotherapy and all it could do was probe and peel the onion, and it could never get to the bottom because if at the basis of all human life our core problems are so narcissistic, and even solipsistic where in a sense the whole world we live in tends to be a projection of our own desires, fears, beliefs, and so forth, and the Bible does more in a week than two years of psychotherapy does of just analysts rooting around.

There's this personal conviction, and then I was still working in the psychiatric hospital for the following, I guess about nine months, and I can remember this growing sense that, you know, I had a little pocket New Testament Proverbs and Psalms, and I had this sense that every other message is allowed here. There's all these different psychological theories, all these different medical theories, all these different practices.

Bob Kramer: Schools and approaches, yeah.

David Powlison: Tools, approaches, strategies, and the one thing that is forbidden is the water of life, the fountain of life and light, and it was a growing sense of frustration that I had the living water in my pocket and I could love people, I could be kind to people, you know, there are many common grace strengths in a psychiatric hospital – safe place, caring people, they wanna help you, but there's such an inability to go deep either in understanding or in aid, and most of the, you know, at best .

And I remember, this actually played a role in my – what dug up the ground for becoming a Christian was that in all my years in psych hospital, I'd never seen anybody truly change. I'd seen people cope a little bit better, and that's just such a dismal way to be your ultimate goal.

So I had had a growing frustration with the ability of psychiatry and psychology to deliver on the truth about people, the ability to really love people in the way they needed to be loved, the strength

and power to actually make a true life altering kind of a difference, and I was finding the Bible was doing all those things in rewriting my own life.

And so I came here eager, an amazing divine coincidence that this happened to be where Biblical counseling was getting its start, and so I just took to it – I took it like proverbial duck to water, and that is a way where, you know, there were only a couple of counseling classes back then.

Everything was still very rudimentary. But as I said, I brought the life experience and the awareness of the plight, and the need of people, and I just connected the dots in every class.

Bob Kramer: There's a certain ____ Biblical counseling at that time was a reaction to, but it hadn't developed the maturity of its positive –

David Powlison: Yeah, and it was –

Bob Kramer: – ____ and application.

David Powlison: – first step.

It was a vision that the Bible is about what people are about, and the Bible is about what counseling's about, and the Bible is covering the exact same turf of what personality theory and psychotherapy are trying to understand and do, and it hadn't matured in its foot being full orbbed, but the vision was there. A seed had been sown and a seed had sprouted and there were some first fruits, but still a lot to be done.

Bob Kramer: Well, thank you.

David Powlison: Yeah.

Bob Kramer: It's been really rich to have –

David Powlison: Thank you.

Bob Kramer: – this time to talk, and again –

David Powlison: The same, my friend.

Bob Kramer: – to have the sense of the fruit of our years of walking together, –

David Powlison: Yeah.

Bob Kramer: – and knowing that that walking together again didn't require talking every day or –

David Powlison: Yeah.

Bob Kramer: – being across the street from each other, but that we could always pick up the conversation and God would bear fruit through it. That is a real joy. Thank you.

David Powlison: Thank you, Bob.

[End of Audio]