

Growing in Weakness: A Tribute to David Powlison



by CARLY ROBINSON

For over thirty years, Dr. David Powlison taught CCEF's foundational course, Dynamics of Biblical Change. Self-counseling projects, in which students applied the model David taught to a particular struggle in their own lives, were central to the course. Over the years, David read thousands of self-counseling projects. He once told me that he actually read each one twice—the first time to appreciate the work God had done, and the second time to assign a grade.

David wisely understood the significance of biblical counselors coming to grips with their own frailties and their need of the mercies of Christ. Less than a month before he died, David addressed the 2019 Westminster Theological Seminary graduating class. He said,

“Weakness...is a comprehensive description of our human condition. We are perishable. We are mortal. We face a multitude of afflictions in our lives. And we are sinful, bent from the heart toward pride, self-righteousness, fear of man, and a multitude of desires and fears that beset us. The mercies of God meet us in this comprehensive condition of weakness....My deepest hope for you is that in both your personal life and your ministry to others, you would be

unafraid to be publicly weak as the doorway to the strength of God himself.”

These words were so meaningful coming from a man who was himself experiencing great weakness.

Interestingly, when I took his Dynamics class in back in 2012, my self-counseling project was on this very topic: my fear of being weak. It is published below. God used, and continues to use, the fruit of this assignment to grow me in what David called “the right kind of weakness.” In my work with CCEF’s School of Biblical Counseling, I have had of the privilege of learning about many others whose lives were changed by their time working on this assignment. Through David’s course, God met us, humbled us, and—in our weakness—strengthened us.

* * *

The first Philadelphia snow of 2012 fell weeks before Thanksgiving. From the front desk where I worked, I watched flurries come down and stick to the sidewalk, turning it white. I breathed a deep, exasperated sigh. I was born and raised in the northeast, but I’ve always hated cold weather. I don’t welcome slippery sidewalks, 5:00 p.m. darkness, burning throats, and chattering teeth. I’m also rarely prepared for snow. When work was over, I discovered I had no hat or scarf, and only one glove in my car. Grumbling, I stuffed the lone glove on and began my drive home, death-glaring those unwelcome flakes melting on my windshield. Snow...weeks before Thanksgiving. I didn’t give thanks for it.

It wasn’t just about the snow. The early winter stood in stark contrast to greener and warmer pastures. I had attended college in Atlanta before moving to Philadelphia for seminary. Georgia not only solidified my hatred of cold weather, it was also the first place I felt at home. I felt like I belonged there. People knew and loved me, and I felt like I was somebody. Atlanta was my future. I planned to move back to the city after seminary to serve a church that had hinted at giving me a job. Instead, a few months after I left, Atlanta moved on without me. I stopped getting texts, calls, and emails from the people I had considered my closest friends. The church didn’t make arrangements for my return. My well-ordered plans had unraveled.

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