



Broadcast Transcript

Broadcast: Free at Last! – Part 2

Guest(s): Bill and Deb Kennedy

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Dr. James Dobson: Welcome everyone to Family Talk. It's a ministry of the James Dobson Family Institute, supported by listeners just like you. I'm Dr. James Dobson and I'm thrilled that you've joined us.

Roger Marsh: Well, welcome to Family Talk, the broadcast ministry of the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute. I'm Roger Marsh with a question for you. What would you do if you faced 17 years in federal prison for a crime you didn't commit? How would you respond to such an overwhelming injustice? Well, on today's edition of Family Talk, we're continuing a remarkable conversation with a couple who faced that same situation, Bill Kennedy and his wife, Debbie. Now, many, many years ago when Dr. Dobson was still working in the classroom, Bill was one of his eighth grade students. He was a popular athlete, a fine young man who built a successful business helping people invest in precious metals. But aggressive prosecutors accused him of crimes he didn't commit, and that led him to a 17 year prison sentence he didn't fully agree with or understand. But rather than becoming bitter, Bill and his wife, Debbie, have a story now that reveals something extraordinary about faith, forgiveness and finding God's purpose even in our darkest valleys. Their journey reminds us that no matter what trials we face, God can transform our deepest suffering into unexpected blessing. Let's continue reminiscing with part two of this conversation Dr. Dobson recorded with Bill and Debbie Kennedy on today's edition of Family Talk.

Dr. James Dobson: The couple we spoke with last time has an amazing story about hope and perseverance in the midst of some incredibly difficult circumstances. I'm talking about Bill Kennedy and his wife Deb. Bill is a man that I've known for many years. In fact, he was one of my eighth grade students when I taught middle school, and I was only 26 years of age, so we were both young, but he was half my age and I had a particularly good relationship with him because Bill was just well liked by everybody. He was one of the most popular kids in school, probably the best athlete, a good student, but also just a fine young man. Bill had a business which helped people invest their money in metals, gold, silver, platinum, and so on. To put it in a nutshell, a very aggressive prosecutor accused Bill of racketeering and mail fraud.

And Bill, as a result of his arrest, had to serve 17 years out of the next 20 years sentence in federal prison. Now, that was a crime that I can say, at least from my perspective, and I've studied this case, that he did not commit, and I love and appreciate this man and his wife and Bill, when you were my eighth grade

student, I didn't talk to you a lot about your faith because in those days, and it's true today also, it's very hard in a public school situation to get into your spiritual views, but I had every reason to believe that you had a commitment to Christ. Was that true then?

Bill Kennedy: I don't know. I went to church with my neighbor, but we didn't have a Christian home and my mother was divorced, my father, but I went to church. My neighbor took me, so I think God had His hand on me.

Dr. James Dobson: Are you mad at anybody today?

Bill Kennedy: No. Oh, no. And because really I don't regret what happened, Jim.

Dr. James Dobson: Now that's really kind of hard to believe.

Bill Kennedy: No, because how many of us have the opportunity to experience Scripture in the flesh? I mean in these terrible circumstances, when you have absolutely no crutch, you have no family, you don't have any real friends, you don't have any of the necessities alike.

Dr. James Dobson: In a strange kind of way, sorry for interrupting.

Bill Kennedy: That's okay.

Dr. James Dobson: In a strange way, your story reminds me of Joseph because people did such bad things to him. Here his brothers hated him. They lied about him. They threw him in a pit. He stayed there for three days. I wonder what that was like. And then sold him to a caravan that was coming by. I guess they were Egyptians, took him off to Egypt and lied to his father, and there he is in Egypt, away from his family, away from the land that he loved and the people that he loved. And he's lied on by Potiphar's wife and was in prison twice. And I mean one thing after another. Now we read that today as sequentially in 20 minutes, but he lived it day by day by day. And if there was anybody in the Bible that in addition to Christ that would have a right to say, "You know what? I really have gotten a short end of things. This is not fair. This is not right." I don't see any evidence in there that he took that approach and he became a kind of a forerunner or a type of Christ. Where he was pointing toward the Messiah himself without knowing it. Now, I can't take you that far, but it is true.

Bill Kennedy: Not even close to him.

Dr. James Dobson: That you really did get the short end.

Bill Kennedy: Well, but see, that's the thing we have to realize when we go through a tough time that it's not about us. What would you have us do God in this situation? And that sounds all Pollyannish right now, but that's the gut level and hard decision. Here's one of the things that came out of an appreciation of my

amazing wife. I didn't appreciate her. How many men walk away from a gravesite after burying their wife and saying, I never really appreciated. December of 1999 at Christmas, and I never had my family visit me. I wanted them to have a regular Christmas, but I was standing there before the telephones at Taft, all alone and miserable. And the Holy Spirit spoke to me, and He seemed to do this on special occasions. He says, you've got the blessing of nothingness. You have nothing, and when you have something, you really appreciate it. I looked over at Debbie about 10 days before Christmas this last year, and I said, I started crying. It's our first Christmas together with all our kids in 18 years, and Christmas will always be something. To have dinner with my wife. Life becomes very mundane and we forget what we have.

And I was sitting with a man March 3rd, 1993 out of leg monitoring. I was under indictment, bail court monitoring device, and we were getting to know each other. Our kids went to school together. We were same age, about 46, and we were getting to know each other. Everything in his life was great and going great. And I told him my life and he looked at me like you poor guy. I saw his wife three days later in a high school basketball game. She didn't know what to say to me. A day later, Debbie called me and that same man had died of a heart attack an hour before. That could have been me.

- Dr. James Dobson: Well, you had heart trouble in prison. And that's one of the things I wrote while I was trying to get you out is that you've got a disabled son that's having a hard time paying for. He's in this facility.
- Dr. James Dobson: And you've got grandkids and you got a family in need and now you've got heart problems. Did you have a bypass?
- Bill Kennedy: I had triple bypass surgery.
- Dr. James Dobson: In prison.
- Bill Kennedy: Yeah, they took good care of me.
- Dr. James Dobson: For most of us, the years go by very, very rapidly. Shirley and I have been in Colorado Springs for almost 20 years. Boy, that has been the blink of an eye. I cannot believe how fast that went by. Did it go fast for you?
- Bill Kennedy: No.
- Deb Kennedy: It was really a long 17 years.
- Dr. James Dobson: Was it long?
- Bill Kennedy: It is. Prison is pure drudgery. The sad thing is there's really not any work. I had a job that was five minutes a day, but you have to sign a statement that you worked 35 hours a week because a congressman passed a law that said you

have to work 35 hours. So these prison officials got these 2000 inmates that they have to find jobs. Well, there's just not any jobs. One guy had a job that shinning the knob on the dining room hallway. There's just no work.

Dr. James Dobson: What did you do five minutes a day?

Bill Kennedy: I swept the front porch and I was done, and then I used all my time. I kept saying office hours. I got up at six in the morning, got at it and I worked out. But the word always looking to help people and disciple people and used my time wisely.

Dr. James Dobson: Is there a lot of pornography in there?

Bill Kennedy: There used to be. There's not anymore. And they knew I was a Christian and they were always slip in my bunk and I thought, well, thank you very much. So I tore it up and threw it away. We got it off the compound. That was an interesting thing. When I first went in, they tested me and tried me and I decided I was going to... prison has her own culture. You wouldn't take your daughter when she was growing up and say, "I want you to hang out with a bunch of ill repute girls, would you?" So what we do is we take people and we put them in with a bunch of ill repute people and expect them to come out better and they don't.

Dr. James Dobson: Were you ever threatened?

Bill Kennedy: Oh yeah, I got beaten up once.

Dr. James Dobson: Were you ever beaten up?

Bill Kennedy: Oh yeah.

Dr. James Dobson: Did you keep a diary?

Bill Kennedy: I kept a journal for 15 years. I didn't do the last years, but I had 15 years and it served me well because sometimes there were days I just could not handle it. And there was one day in March of, I think it was 2006, I just couldn't handle it. I took my Bible to the visiting room and I'd usually get up real early. It was like five in the morning and I went in there and I turned the law Psalms 11:3 and it said, "When the world crumbles what shall the righteous do?" I had a comment by Charles Spurgeon that changed my whole attitude that day in life and it said suffer joyfully. I thought praise God; I could suffer joyfully.

Dr. James Dobson: Only Christianity.

Bill Kennedy: Only Christianity.

Dr. James Dobson: That didn't make sense anywhere else. How can we pray for people that are in prison there? I mean, that would take you a month or a year to answer, but...

Bill Kennedy: I think just... don't realize that God loves these people. He may not love what they've done or do, but there's a lot of things that He doesn't love that we do either and pray that the Word can get through them. Pray for programs that help them when they get out. Jobs are very hard. The transitioning is very hard and it takes people to help them get along, get a job and things like that. But come to know the Lord and realize God will make all these things and change 'em around.

Dr. James Dobson: Bill, you never know who's listening to a radio like this. You don't know who's out there. There might be a publisher out there listening to us. Are you going to write a book?

Bill Kennedy: Well, a lot of people have asked me about that. I thought about it in prison a lot of time, but I was just too busy.

Dr. James Dobson: Too busy in prison. Working five minutes a day.

Bill Kennedy: I really was. But I used the time for the Lord because sometimes I disciple as many as seven men one-on-one a day. And the idea is take the Word and apply it. How are you going to apply this to your life and what are you going to do about the wife and you fighting? You're on the phone and how are you going to handle that? What would God have you do?

Dr. James Dobson: Are they going to be people in Heaven because you had an influence on them?

Bill Kennedy: Well, God did He used me. Yeah, there are. And that's another thing. I'm going to have a lot more rewards in Heaven. I looked at 20 years compared to eternity and it's nothing. It's nothing. And look what Paul went through and I'm not anything close to him and look the way he suffered and he never griped. And I think it displeases God when we grumble because He gave a son for us. I think we can just, that can become so trite. I know it was for me, but why should anybody grumble when God gave their son for you so you could have eternal life? And Heaven's going to be a joy. It's not just playing a harp. It's going to be a wonderful things to do and it's going to be the most, it's a thousand times more than we could ever imagine. And I'm looking forward to it and seeing my friends in prison up there.

Dr. James Dobson: Every word that comes out of your mouth is an inspiration to me.

Bill Kennedy: Well, thank you. You're an inspiration to me the way you've lived your life and what you did for others because wherever you saw a need. For you to take the time for me, I was just overwhelmed when I got your letters. And so there are people out there that God has used us and yeah, so I'm thankful.

Dr. James Dobson: So the Lord found a way to bless you in the midst of your circumstance.

Bill Kennedy: Even then. I think somebody said, you're the happiest, the least happiest of your children when you're our age. Our kids grew up and they became fine Christian men and women.

Deb Kennedy: Amazing.

Bill Kennedy: And married, phenomenal Christians. Even while in prison, I found a wife for my son.

Dr. James Dobson: Come on. How'd you do that?

Bill Kennedy: She was the bridesmaid to our daughter. And you contributed to her wedding. We had no money. I'm in prison and I called home and this bridesmaid, Angela wanted to talk to me because they were all praying for me at Harding University. And Nick had just started going to school there. He was a freshman and Angela wanted talk to me. I said when I was done, I was very impressed. I said, "Let me talk to my son." And I said, "Nick, how come you're not dating this girl, Angela?" And he says, well dad, she's a junior and I'm a freshman. I said, "And the problem is?" They started dating that next month in January of 1996. And they were married in July of 1998 and they have three children.

Dr. James Dobson: And how is your disabled son doing?

Deb Kennedy: Rob is doing amazingly well.

Bill Kennedy: He's 38 now.

Deb Kennedy: Yeah, he's 38. And it's not an institution or anything like that. It's a Christian ranch for mentally challenged adults in Arizona.

Bill Kennedy: Rainbow Acres.

Deb Kennedy: They have just have helped him so much. He's become his own person since he's been there. And I love it because he talks about his girlfriend and the swimming and the workouts and the basketball and he does Special Olympics and they have a Boy Scout troop and he's just really become his own person, which is really, really nice.

Bill Kennedy: And that's one of the things we want to get involved with helping mentally disabled adults because one of the problems is that when the parents die, these people have no place to go. There's about 50,000 of them and it costs on the average of \$50,000. Rainbow Acres to take care of one of these individuals. Rainbow Acres does it for under 30 per year. Yeah. And they're Christian and they're very, very professional and very good.

Deb Kennedy: Rainbow Acres was an amazing place for him to go, which we learned about when he was about 10 years old in Reader's Digest. It was started by a pastor that was given some property.

Dr. James Dobson: So once again, the Lord blessed you in your circumstances.

Deb Kennedy: Without a doubt.

Bill Kennedy: Because God will take care of you if you just, but I think things we have to deal with, issues in our own life that displease Him and He does amazing things.

Dr. James Dobson: What did you feel when the gates swung open and you stepped out into God's green world and were free?

Bill Kennedy: When I came out of the prison, the gates, I jumped up in the air. I says, "Jesus, thank you for letting me go through this." And we constantly hear from men in prison and just recently got an email, they can email now in federal prison, about a man who says, he wrote me. And he says, I wish I was up at 5:15 doing my devotions. And I said, "I wish I hadn't stopped this 15 years ago." But he said, "I would not have met you."

Dr. James Dobson: Is that right? Did you have some very close friends?

Bill Kennedy: Yeah, you have 'em. You never really know and you have to watch some people and some will just lie to you and things, but there's some pretty good decent people there. And there's some guys that once they got arrested, they were cured and there were other people that made a mistake and there's plain criminals and you don't normally see Christian men in prison because for obvious reasons. The first man I led to Christ was a guy named Kenny and he'd come over my cell. I was only there a month or two, and I thought, what would this character have to do? He was obviously, we came from different lives and he was 32. And I said, "Kenny, what is it about me that I'm 15 years older than you?" And he says, "Bill, when I was 13 years old, I shot my best friend in the head just to see how it'd feel. And I had been in prison every day since then except for about 18 months." And he says, "You're the first free will Christian I've ever met." So there weren't many Christians, but he got out. He went and went on to serve the Lord.

Dr. James Dobson: Now Bill, I knew you in the morning of your life. I knew you when you were new. I knew what you were made out of. I knew there was something good inside of you.

Bill Kennedy: Well, I appreciate that. Well, one of the things, I just had a great wife and she always let me be, do the things I wanted. I wish some things she had put her foot down on, but she sure does.

Deb Kennedy: I tried.

Bill Kennedy: That's been interesting. Coming home after not living together for 17 years ever been.

Deb Kennedy: Things have changed.

Dr. James Dobson: Debbie, what summary will you give to us of this portion of your life? What have you drawn from it and where do you go from here?

Deb Kennedy: Basically that the challenges that are in front of you are surmountable. They may not turn out the way you think they should maybe, but it's all for the betterment. You learn from it and you share with others so that they can learn from your experience too. I learned that, which I knew before, but the family is the utmost of importance. And that even though I may get upset with Bill and...

Bill Kennedy: Me? She said I was almost perfect now.

Deb Kennedy: Yes, I have actually said he's almost perfect. So the experience is not anything that I would wish anyone to go through, but I know that there are some things in our lives that the Lord will use to help others through this type of situation. And I thought about writing a book to when you're visiting somebody in prison, the different places he's been, the rules are always different. I've seen groups of moms and grandmothers and children waiting in the hot sun at a hundred and some degrees in the morning and kids passing out and hitting the concrete floor. I've seen the inhumanity that they treat visitors almost like they're prisoners. I've seen so many things that have happened that just grate on me that I want individuals to know about beforehand so they can prepare for it because it's not a fun situation. On the other hand, when you go through that, you gain strength. But I want them to look at me and say, if she can do it, I can do it. And that's where it all comes from.

Dr. James Dobson: Well, you are conveying that message right now and you have lived it.

Bill Kennedy: But if I could say this, be faithful with God and He will take whatever you're going through and He will make a gem out of it. I promise you who's ever listening to this, whatever you're going through, be faithful, trust in God and be thankful for what you do have. And God will take this trial that you're going through and really, you'll be able to rejoice that you went through it.

Dr. James Dobson: I wrote an email this morning to somebody who has gotten the short end, somebody who has humanly speaking, plenty of reason to feel like they have not gotten their fair share. And I told them in my reply about you being here today.

Bill Kennedy: Praise God.

Dr. James Dobson: And I said, there is no bitterness in this family. And when that occurs to you, you just keep going and God will somehow make something good out of it.

Bill Kennedy: If you focus on Him and others, He will.

Dr. James Dobson: Bill Kennedy. I love

Bill Kennedy: You. I love you Dr. Dobson, teacher.

Dr. James Dobson: I appreciate you and Debbie, what a great lady you are.

Bill Kennedy: I don't know if we're going to bring out that foul you called on me. Did we talk about that?

Dr. James Dobson: No. Come on now.

Bill Kennedy: You're a lousy ref but a great doctor.

Dr. James Dobson: I made a mistake. Come on. Anybody can make a mistake. All people.

Bill Kennedy: I do have some bitters about that one.

Dr. James Dobson: That was a long time ago. I have admitted it. I knew that I blew it. I knew I blew it. I blew the whistle on you because I thought you climbed the back of a guy you were trying to rebound from. And it was, you got to forgive me, man. You forgive all these guards and all these people. How come you can't forgive me?

Bill Kennedy: Well, I can forgive you because we still won the game. Time was over and he missed a free throw or something.

Dr. James Dobson: Blessings to you all, and please stay in touch with us.

Bill Kennedy: Bless you and Shirley. We will.

Deb Kennedy: Thank you.

Roger Marsh: Well, what a truly incredible couple. What an amazing testimony. They share the hardship they faced for 17 years, and yet, they chose to see it as a testament of God's faithfulness. You've been listening to a special classic edition of Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk and a conversation Dr. Dobson recorded with a man called Bill Kennedy. Bill met Dr. Dobson when Bill was only an eighth grader and Dr. Dobson was one of his teachers. Bill and Debbie went on to be married and then faced the unimaginable grief facing a 17 year prison sentence, which Bill served. And if you missed any part of today's broadcast or you want to share this inspiring testimony with someone who needs hope, go to drjamesdobson.org/familytalk. An interesting footnote to this story, it wasn't long before Dr. Dobson went home to be with the Lord that Bill got in the car in Texas and made a 10 hour drive to Colorado Springs just to spend some time with him.

It was a beautiful way for them to reconnect once again for a story that has just truly blessed so many people, even though it was so difficult for Bill and Debbie Kennedy to go through. And we were grateful to welcome Bill here to the Family Talk offices and studios shortly before Dr. Dobson went home to be with the Lord on August the 21st. Now though Dr. Dobson is in glory, his mission continues here. Through the work that we're doing here at the James Dobson Family Institute, we are promoting and preserving the institution of the family and the biblical principles upon which it is based now. We are a defending sanctity of human life. We are defending religious freedom. And when you pray for us and partner with us financially, you help us to carry forward Dr. Dobson's legacy and advance these foundational truths that build strong families and a godly society.

Now you can make a secure donation to help us in this work. When you go to drjamesdobson.org. That's drjamesdobson.org. You can also call us at 877-732-6825. And for more of Dr. Dobson's insight and wisdom, we invite you to sign up for our new free email series. It's called "Raising Kids with Love and Limits." Now this is based on the timeless principles Dr. Dobson has written about in the *Complete Marriage and Family Reference* guide. And this series offers balanced insights on everything from setting healthy boundaries to growing your relationship. To sign up today, it's absolutely free. Go to drjamesdobson.org and click on the prompt you'll find on our homepage. That's drjamesdobson.org.

I'm Roger Marsh, and from all of us here at the JDFI, thanks so much for listening today. Be sure to tune in again next time for another edition of Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk, the voice you can still trust, for the family you love.

This has been a presentation of the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute.