

A Conversation with Steve Kreloff
By Don Green

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Pastor Don Green. Steve, welcome. We are so delighted to have you here. This is your third time at Truth Community Church, if memory serves me right, and every time it just gets better to see you. Good to see you.

Pastor Steve Kreloff. Well, thank you. It's good to be seen.

Don. Imagine running into you here. What brings you and Michelle into the area?

Steve. We're actually on vacation. Our granddaughter graduated from Boyce College in Louisville this, is it Thursday? Where is Michelle? I'm looking. Yes, Thursday. And so we're in this area, and we're here. We're on vacation for a few weeks.

Don. Yeah, you're off away from the pulpit for a couple of months now, right?

Steve. It's true, yeah.

Don. And is Joe Trofemuk doing some of the preaching in your absence?

Steve. He is. I just hand it over to Joe, and he does most of it, but also has some other men stand in the pulpit.

Don. It's well known that one of your closest friends is a friend of mine also, Phil Johnson. Tell us a little bit about how far back your friendship with Phil goes. Did you know Phil before you knew Michelle?

Steve. Maybe.

Don. Maybe.

Steve. I don't know.

Don. Okay. That was a long time ago.

Steve. I'm not sure.

Don. Tell us about your friendship with Phil Johnson.

Steve. Phil Johnson and I met at Moody Bible Institute. I think we both did some evangelism. Moody was having evening evangelism, go out on the streets witnessing, and that's where I first met Phil. And I think I've said this here, I didn't hit it off very well with him at first. Phil, it seemed like everything I had to say he contradicted. That shouldn't be surprising to you. If I would say, "You know, it's a beautiful day out," he'd say, "No, I don't think so. I see some threatening clouds," and just things like that. Well, isolated, it means nothing, but after a while, it really bothered me.

Don. It starts to get on your nerves. [laughing]

Steve. It did. So one night, we were not roommates. I went to his dorm room, knocked on the door and said, "I'd like to talk to you." And I just apologized to him for my bad attitude towards him. I told him why I had a bad attitude and how horrible he was and he called me on it and he said, "You didn't come here to apologize. You came here to rebuke me." And I stopped for a moment and I said, "You're right." And we both laughed and at that moment, we became best friends.

Don. And you've been best friends pretty much ever since.

Steve. We have. We're very different in personalities and not in theology, but I usually have to tell people I'm not like Phil Johnson. I'm not as bright as Phil and we have very different personalities. That's probably why we're friends.

Don. You stood in his wedding.

Steve. I was best man.

Don. You were Phil Johnson's best man when he married Darlene White.

Steve. That's correct.

Don. And, you know, I think subsequent events, subsequent history would show that Phil definitely got the better end of that arrangement. Would you agree?

Steve. Yes. Darlene has become a dear friend too, and she and Michelle are very close and sweet.

Don. Phil often speaks on anniversary occasions at Lakeside.

Steve. He does. Every five years, the church puts a big anniversary thing for us, and every five years, Phil Johnson's the one they invite, and every five years, he embarrasses me. He says things, you know, I don't remember this, but he told the whole congregation, "I told Steve not to date," Michelle's maiden name was Hughes, he said, "I told Steve not to date Michelle Hughes because classy ladies like Michelle Hughes, they don't usually go for guys like you." Now I don't remember him saying that, but he must have, and I just dismissed it from my mind. But the key is they don't usually, sometimes they do, and in this case, they did.

Don. Oh, okay. Michelle, classy ladies don't go for guys like you usually, he said, but this time they did.

Steve. That's correct.

Don. Got it.

Steve. There's an exception to every rule.

Don. You know, and I know that there's a lot of good-natured banter that goes back and forth between you, but whenever Phil speaks to me about you privately, it's always in almost reverential terms with the depth of affection that he has, and he never says Steve Kreloff without prefacing it with "my best friend, Steve Kreloff."

Steve. He's very kind, and Phil, he's a very special person, as you know. He's unique, and our friendship has just grown. We've ministered in places together. In Italy, we've ministered. So the Lord has brought us just together, and our wives get along well, and so it's a nice relationship.

Don. When you have a common theology and a common faith in Christ and a common love for ministry, there's so much to build a relationship on.

Steve. Yeah, it is, and we're really tied together in many ways by John MacArthur. I gave Phil his first John MacArthur tapes. Now, he had heard John before, but he had never had these tapes. Somebody gave them to me. That's how old I am. I say tapes, and they were. They were cassette tapes.

Don. Yeah, they were eight-track tapes, right?

Steve. Well, these were around. So I had never heard preaching like this. I had been taught expository preaching, but I had never heard it modeled like this, and I said to Phil, "You know, this is the best preaching I've ever heard. You've got to listen to this guy." So history is we know that he went to work for John, and I even sort of jokingly predicted this. He had a very bad experience. He was actually an assistant pastor in a church in St. Petersburg shortly after marrying Darlene. They moved down, and Phil and Darlene were going to our church, and then this church opened up. He was an assistant to a pastor there. It didn't work out well. The pastor was not an easy man to work for. They dismissed Phil, and he came to our home, and he was so dejected, and I said, y" You know, you probably go back to Moody Press. John MacArthur will discover you there, and he'll ask you to come out and work for him in California." I'm just trying to encourage the guy, but that's exactly what happened.

Don. How long was that before that actually occurred?

Steve. I don't remember. Michelle, do you remember?

Don. A few months or so.

Steve. Well, I knew he was probably going to go back to Moody Press. I had no idea that John MacArthur was going to say that.

Don. I haven't heard that story. I haven't heard that story and I've heard most of them.

Steve. Phil has told people, I spoke like Caiaphas, prophetically unwitting, you know, and I thought, well, it could happen, but, you know, I'm just trying to encourage the guy, and...

Don. That's what happened.

Steve. I remember he called me up one night. He said, "John MacArthur just asked me to come out and head up the whole Grace to You ministry," and I said, "Why? What do you know about radio?"

Don. So you flipped on the encouragement side.

Steve. Well, as I thought more about it, I said, "What do you know about that?" And he said, "Well, that's what I said to John." He said, "We'll train you. I need someone who understands how I think." And then I said, "Oh, that makes sense."

Don. Yeah, there you go. Yeah. There you go.

Steve. Now you mentioned your health briefly a few minutes ago, and talking about walking through the valley of the shadow of death, tell us a little bit about what you've been through over the past couple of months.

Steve. Well, it has been one of the big shocks of my life. I've been a runner, a serious runner, since I was 40. I'm 70 now, and I've run 19 marathons, and, you know, health has never been a big concern, but I was getting some chest pains when I tried running. So, anyway, long story short, I went to the doctor. It turns out I had to have open heart surgery called bypass. They take veins and make them into arteries to get blood flow, and so it was shocking for Michelle and I to hear this, shocking for our church to hear this. I'm kind of known as a fitness guy who exercises, tries to eat well, and so forth. So, everybody was in shock, but so two months ago I had open heart surgery.

Don. And the recovery was easy, right?

Steve. Well, only now can I say that. At first it was very difficult, a long and hard journey. If you would have said a month ago, five weeks ago, six weeks ago that I'd be here doing this, I'd say, "Well, I don't know." It was some very dark times, but a very serious, probably the most invasive surgery there is. I was told by a friend to expect melancholy. It does, it's just really, I've told pastor friends that, and I'll tell you that it's the kind of surgery when you visit someone in the hospital as a pastor and you know that they've had this, as you walk out, you say to the Lord something like, "Lord, I hope I never have that surgery." It's very invasive. They cut you open, they saw you open, pull back the ribs, take your heart, put it on a machine. It's very, very involved. So I'm very,

very weak for a while, but last few weeks strength has come back. I've been cleared. I'm exercising again. I passed the stress test. I'm doing everything that I've done before.

Don. Yeah, that has to be a great relief to your congregation and your fellow elders.

Steve. Well, when you go through this, the first few weeks I had to just say to Michelle, "Will I ever feel normal?" I mean, I could barely walk, let alone think of having normal activities.

Don. Right.

Steve. Yeah. So, it's been...

Don. Now, you mentioned your age, you're 70. It's an age where many people think about retirement. Is that ahead for you here in the near future, or what are your longer term plans?

Steve. Not unless the church tells me to. I think about, I heard of a man who was at a church, he pastored for 60 years, and someone asked him, "Why didn't you ever leave?" He said, "Because nobody ever asked me to." And I'm thinking, well, that's true of me. Nobody's ever asked me to leave. So I have no plans to retire. I often tell people that I think, I've heard John MacArthur say, I've heard he said this, "I'm going to preach as long as I make sense." And so I think I'm still making sense. You can determine that tonight.

Don. What do you mean? [laughter]

Steve. Meaning that if I, yeah, so I've told people, our son is one of our elders and I have a feeling when the time comes, if I start losing my mind, the elders will send him to me and say, "Dad, you were fine in your day, but you've just preached the same sermon three weeks in a row and we know you love baseball, so Dad, we're making a call to the bullpen." This is what the manager does when he calls in the righty. So anyway, no plans to retire. And I feel good. All the blood flow. I should be feeling better than ever. The blood is flowing to the heart, which I didn't realize it wasn't. So no plans to retire.

Don. And you told me earlier that you're on the verge of a milestone. When you finish Luke, you will...

Steve. I will have completed all the New Testament. I want to go back and do a few books. Well, the gospel of John I want to do over again. I don't think I did it well in my early days. But yes, I will have done all.

Don. You've gone verse by verse through the entire New Testament. I know one other person who's done that, and that's John MacArthur. So we're very glad for that and just so encouraged that the Lord has given you strength and continuing, it would seem, you know, your ministry for another several years.

Steve. I hope so.

Don. Yeah, yeah, and I'm sure your congregation hopes so also. You're going to preach from Psalm 23 tonight.

Steve. I am.

Don. Focusing on, "I'll dwell in the house of the Lord."

Steve. And God's mercy and goodness following us.

Don. Yeah, the very, you know, hope-filled theme in Scripture, and that has to be one of the most beloved texts in all of Scripture. Can't help but think that it's had special meaning to you over the past several months. Tell us what your family's been dealing with here.

Steve. Well, I'm going to mention in the message, this last year has been a very, very difficult time. Michelle's brother, unsaved brother, passed away a little over a year ago. Then her mom passed away in August. And the hardest thing is our 10-year-old granddaughter, Lila, unexpectedly passed away, suddenly and unexpectedly passed away about eight months ago and that's been very, very hard. So I've been drawn to the Psalms, and especially Psalm 23, and it's been a very, you know, we have certainly hope, we know Lila was a believer. She gave her testimony. She was a sweet, sweet girl. And we miss her very much. But there is a grieving process, and we're still going through that. And I don't think we'll ever get over that. The more longer time goes, the harder it is in some sense. So we know she's with the Lord, and now that brings comfort. Initially, it's just the shock. She was here, and she's gone. And she was, you didn't know Lila, and probably every grandfather says, oh, my grandchildren are the best, but Lila really was quite special. She had a sparkling personality. She had incredible charisma. She was disabled from one year old. One year of age, she couldn't lift her head. Anyway, childhood, some kind of childhood illness that they never did diagnose for nine years. So she was in a wheelchair. Sharpest mind. She was sweet. She was grateful. She was just, her presence was so special that her absence is even that much harder. We love all of our grandchildren, but she was incredibly special to us.

Don. Yeah, you've told me privately, it wasn't just that she was disabled, sometimes she went through excruciating pain.

Steve. She did. She had to get infusions, just like an HIV patient does, and she would get spinal meningitis for like 72 hours after. It was just horrible. It was torturous for her. She suffered more than anybody her age that I know. She really did. And she was a trooper, though. I'm sure there were times she complained, but I never heard her complain.

Don. Yeah, if I remember correctly, you wrote a lovely tribute to her that you sent to your congregation.

Steve. I did.

Don. You said words to the effect of, she wasn't just a special child, she was like the most wonderful human being you've ever known.

Steve. I said she was the most remarkable person I've ever known. She really was. Well, as I said, she was witty and clever. She was 10 years old and going on 18. I mean, you could have an adult conversation with her. And she had a great sense of humor. There was just nothing to dislike about her. She was really the center of our large family. When she wheeled herself in the room, even the cousins were just so thrilled that she was there. She was very, very special.

Don. I know you're going to preach on this, but this is a profound loss for, it was your daughter Rachel was her mother, a profound loss not only for you and Michelle, for her parents, for her siblings, her three brothers, but this was a profound loss for your entire church because when you've been at the church for four decades plus, people love you, sympathize with you, and they feel your sorrows as well. What's that been like for the whole congregation as you would assess it?

Steve. Well, the church was in shock, too. We were not in church when it was announced. Joe Trofemuk did. He said, "This is a very sobering, solemn day," something like that, for all of us, "Lila Goody has passed away," and everyone just went silent, or you heard [sharp intake of breath] like that. So it's been very hard. It's been very, very difficult for our daughter. People mean well, but when they've come to church, they've come up to her weeping and crying, and that's just, she's just trying to deal with her own pain, not other people's. So that's been hard. Been hard to be in church, and you see her little friends there, too. I know just where she sat. I used to do something like this, you know, I'm looking at her. So it's been hard. We are comforted knowing she's with the Lord, and we wouldn't want her back except for our sake, not for her sake.

Don. Right.

Steve. It's been hard for the church, but I think the church has entered into our sufferings, and it's helped, I think, the people to see our vulnerabilities, because we're not pretending that everything is wonderful. It's not wonderful. So they've seen us weep. You know, her memorial service was, I think, the largest crowd we have ever had at our church. I can't fill the place like that, but Lila Goody could. Doctors came, surgeons, nurses. She was even known in the political field because our daughter is involved in politics, and Lila had been on commercials. She dropped the ceremonial puck for the Tampa Bay Lightning hockey team. She was really well-known, and there were so many people who were there who heard the gospel.

Don. She was a regional celebrity.

Steve. She really was. She really was, yeah.

Don. And so one of the things that you mentioned that I think is good for pastors to talk about to help those that walk through difficult times, you don't get over it. Something like this changes you. I don't mean it in a bad way. It hurts, but, you know, you don't go back, it seems to me, you don't go back to the way that you were. There's a permanent change that takes place.

Steve. There's a scarring.

Don. Yeah. What's your perspective on that, and what would you say to people that are with us tonight that have gone through their own trying times?

Steve. Well, we've learned to be, I think, more compassionate to others. We've learned things like, don't say to somebody who's going through a time like this, "If there's anything I can do for you, let me know." They're not going to let you know. They mean well but what really helped us, there were people who just started doing things for us, bringing meals, running errands. "We know you need this. We know you need that." And I so appreciated that, because we're not the kind of people like, "Well, what can we do for you?" Well, we need meals for the next four weeks. You know, I'm not going to say that, but I think it's given me a new perspective on heaven. Just heaven is much more precious. When I went through my surgery, I said, "Lord, I'm ready to go if you want to take me, and I want to see you, but I really want to see Lila." You know that, I remember waking up in the recovery room in the ICU thinking, "Oh, I made it. I didn't die. I guess I have to wait." So I think it's made heaven more personal, more real. I don't know more, there are so many things, you learn to be more sensitive to people. I say when someone's really hurting, or they've gone through something, "I understand," and now I mean it. It's not just professional.

Don. Right.

Steve. I've been there. And I've also learned sometimes there are no words to say. At her service, people would come up crying, and I know that they're straining, "What do I say?" And I've said to a few, "There's nothing to say. You don't have to say anything." You just weep with those who weep.

Don. Yeah. Sometimes I just say exactly that to people, I say, "I don't know what to say. There are no words to say." And it seems to me that that's more real than trying to come up with something artificial.

Steve. And sometimes people, they mean well, but sometimes they say some awfully ridiculous things that they don't know what they're talking about. They're trying to comfort you, but it's not.

Don. Right. And so tonight you're going to draw upon some of those things personally and bring Psalm 23 to us.

Steve. Well, yes. When Lila passed away, the church said, "You take as much time as you need." This was in September. They said, "You can just take till, if you want to come back in November, that's fine," because we were devastated. But I realized for the sake of the church, I needed to come back and speak and I spoke on two messages from Psalm 23, one was the valley of the shadow of death, and the one that I'm going to bring tonight was the second one on "goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I'll dwell in the house of the Lord forever." And it so ministered to me that I thought it would be a good, good message to be of encouragement, because that's what David meant by it. That was his intent.

Don. Well, we are delighted to have you. We're looking forward to the ministry of the word.

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