

Don Green Interviews Astronaut Jeff Williams

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An Evening with Jeff Williams

By Astronaut Jeff Williams

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Pastor Don Green. Well, we are pleased to welcome Colonel Jeffrey Williams to Truth Community Church this evening and I just want to acknowledge upfront that it would be utterly impossible for me to do justice to his background in a brief introduction like this.

He hails from Winter, Wisconsin. He is married to Anna-Marie and we'll probably talk about Anna-Marie just a bit in a moment. She's watching on the live stream. Hello, Anna-Marie, nice to see you, if only it was two-way like that. They have two sons, two daughters-in-law and five grandchildren now, the most recent one born only 10 days ago. Jeff has multiple degrees from military academies in the United States. He was selected to be a NASA astronaut in 1996 and he has logged 534 days in space on four different missions on the International Space Station. He has spent 32 hours on, I believe, five space walks during his career, and you can read many more biographical details on the NASA website about him.

Jeff has been a friend of our family for a couple of decades now. We got to meet each other through Grace to You's ministry. He is the author of this amazing book, this beautiful book called "The Work of His Hands: A View of God's Creation from Space." It is filled with his commentary on photographs that he took during his time in the Space Station, and is a stunning book that I would certainly recommend to you. But transcending all of that and, in some ways, certainly eternally far more important than that, Jeff is a dear brother in Christ. He is a thoughtful theologian in his own right. He's reflected long and deep about the things that he's going to be discussing here this evening, and he glories in giving honor to Christ for all that Christ is worthy of. And I can say this without fear of contradiction, Jeff Williams is one of the warmest-hearted Christians I have ever met and so it's a delight to invite Jeff to the platform here. I'm going to interview him for a little while before he comes and speaks to us.

So welcome Jeff, if you would. [applause]

Well, Jeff, welcome to our church. Tell us just a little bit about your family and especially Anna-Marie. You were able to spend all of this time in space in large part because she supported you, and I know you like to talk about that, you mentioned in the book. Just tell us a little about your family and about Anna-Marie, if you would.

Astronaut Jeff Williams. Yeah, in fact, I dedicated the book to Anna-Marie as my Proverbs 31 bride which she truly has been. We celebrated our 40th anniversary last December. We actually came to faith seven years into our marriage out of a near crisis in our marriage, so the Lord used our circumstances and used her to witness to me actually through that process in a way that eventually we both came to faith and dedicated our life to Christ, rebuilt our marriage, rebuilt the philosophy, how we were raising our kids, and all of life to include even my professional career.

Don. And so the sacrifice, you obviously kind of get the spotlight because you were the one who did it, but her sacrifice really made that possible from a family perspective.

Jeff. Absolutely, and it wasn't just the 500 and whatever you said, 34 days off the planet, as she likes to say, it was the years of training and preparation, traveling literally around the world, especially in the early 2000s. My regular commute every 4-6 weeks was Houston to Moscow and then Moscow back to Houston, and when I got back to Houston, to home, I wouldn't have a break, I'd go right into training and then train for several weeks and then go back to Moscow. So the sacrifice was tremendous for her and she is, as you said, kind of the silent hero behind the scenes.

Don. Now let's rewind way back to Winter, Wisconsin. Just tell us a little bit about your childhood growing up and we'll kind of develop things from there. You're from the upper Midwest. You should feel at home here.

Jeff. Yes, yeah, yeah, guaranteed 40 below every January up there. It was the northwest quadrant of Wisconsin, a little township called Winter. I grew up on a farm, a dairy farm that my grandfather had carved out of the woods after he immigrated from Sweden. After my grandmother died, we moved in with my grandfather a couple of years later, so I grew up with him in the household on a dairy farm that was really heired to my uncle but we all worked the farm together. My father was a schoolteacher. So it was a great place to grow up. You learned a work ethic there. We lived as kind of the classic family, working together with the same trials and struggles that any family has, but I look back and I see so much foundational things occurring in my early years.

Don. And now Winter, Wisconsin to the International Space Station is not the ordinary career path that most people would think. Tell us how that came about in your high school days and what the inflection points were that led you into the career that the Lord gave to you.

Jeff. I often get asked if I wanted to be an astronaut as a child and I have to answer the question, no. I didn't know it was a possibility. My horizon was limited to the environment. But when I went through high school and my father had moved from being a history teacher for many years to the guidance counselor in high school, and in that role he worked a lot with military recruiters, that role he also got the opportunity to take tours to the military academies in all the services over a couple of years, and by way of his experience in that, I became aware of the academies. And I ended up not really in a thoughtful committed way but I, with no other better ideas, I decided to apply to West

Point and I got accepted and it was there I learned about the opportunity to fly. It grew my interest in engineering which had started, by the way, from my grandfather building homes. I thought, I want to be an engineer, probably a civil engineer. When I got to West Point, I got introduced to riding on helicopters and that kind of thing and I thought, no, I want to be an aeronautical engineer. So that shifted my focus a little bit and about the third year of West Point, I started to become more aware of the opportunities to not only become a pilot but an experimental test pilot. I also read the book by Tom Wolfe called "The Right Stuff" at that time, and that really inspired me for both test flight as well as the astronaut program. That same year, the first Army astronaut was selected, Bob Stewart, so I knew that it had the potential for an Army officer. So that's really when it solidified as a goal.

Don. So it kind of unfolded one step at a time without being able to see several steps down the road...

Jeff. Yes.

Don. ...just pursuing desires and open opportunities as they came along.

Jeff. Yes.

Don. And so your first time in the International Space Station, your first mission was when?

Jeff. Well, even backing up a little bit more, I started applying to NASA in 1985. Of course, Challenger happened in '86. The first opportunity for me to interview was '87. I interviewed in '87, got invited down there to work for NASA. Didn't get selected but working there in 1990, there was another round of interviews. I didn't even get called for an interview which was really kind of a blow. In '92, I got called for an interview but I got medically disqualified. When we went to Houston in '87, we had come to faith. We already had changed our perspective of living so we were just both, Anna-Marie and I were committed to whatever the Lord had in store for us providentially. When I got medically disqualified in '92, instead the Army sent me to the experimental test pilot school at Pat's River which was one of my desires but I was bypassing that by going to NASA in '87. So we went there and then went out to Edwards Air Force Base for a couple of years and then went to another school in Rhode Island for a year. And then the medical disqualification basically went away and I interviewed again in '96 and got selected. So then started, we went back to Houston in '96, started training as an astronaut and that led to my first flight assignment and the first flight which was in May, 2000. It was a Space Shuttle flight on Space Shuttle Atlantis. It was one of the early flights to the fledgling Space Station, which at that time was just two modules before the first expeditionary crew was sent there. So that started my flight experience.

Don. You've watched the Space Station grow from its infancy into what it is now.

Jeff. Yes. When I first started, the Space Station hadn't been off the ground yet. It was still, we were still working out primarily our partnership with the Russians, later the Japanese, the Europeans and the Canadians would join with their contributions. But right in the beginning we had, in fact, the first launch was from Kazakhstan of the first element of the Space Station. So I was exposed to that right from day one at NASA and, like I said, the 2000 flight, it was actually the third flight to the Space Station with just two modules there. My next visit at the Space Station was in 2006. We were about halfway done or a little less than halfway done building the station, then back in 2009-10 where we completed the assembly, and then the most recent time was in 2016 where it's in its full operational mode.

Don. Now you mentioned the Russians and earlier today we were talking about the relationship that you have with your Russian counterparts in their space program, which for those of us that are used to international politics, thinking about it, we think about the Russians as not necessarily enemies but adversaries maybe is the word to use. Your whole experience with your Russian counterparts has been in that context but it's been a completely different aspect of experience than what most of us are accustomed to thinking about the Russian government like. Talk about that a little bit and just your friendships that you've developed and comrades over the years.

Jeff. Very interesting aspect of the whole experience and just fascinates me, and I could give another whole talk on that aspect of it. I grew up in the Cold War in the Army stationed in West Germany so my whole focus was on the Soviet Union as an enemy. We partnered with them when the Soviet Union fell back in the very early '90s, and the Space Station, not so much for space exploration but to partner with them, that was an opportunity to partner with them because of the policy of nonproliferation of nuclear and chemical weapons after the fall of the Soviet Union. We wanted to help them recover as a nation and it was very positive in the beginning. One of the proposals was the International Space Station and so I was involved. My first trip to Russia was in 1999, I think it was, and I was over there four times that year because much of the content of our Space Shuttle flight was dedicated to Russian hardware. So that was my exposure. Imagine the irony that I felt, was living out. So in the early 2000s, I spent half my life there. I have accumulated over six years there, a total of more than 60 trips over there for training as well as supporting subsequent launches, other launches and whatnot. But over that time, the partnership has strengthened because of the relationships that we have with individuals. They know me very well. I know them very well at the operational level, at the program level. And even in recent years as the adversarial relationship has grown and the diplomacy has largely been damaged between the US administration and Putin, both governments have largely left us alone and let us operate. Even though we're both constrained politically oftentimes, we have to work through that. We're mutually dependent on each other. Right now we're the only positive engagement that the two countries have with each other. So it's been a fascinating experience. Related to that and overlapping that was getting involved and engaged in the Russian Evangelical community in the Moscow region of Moscow, which eventually led us to getting more engaged in Russian speaking immigrant communities in the US, and I know you'll go

there a little bit later but that's been a fascinating aspect of the whole experience and continues to be looking to the future.

Don. You speak fluent Russian.

Jeff. [speaking Russian] Nobody speaks Russian? Okay.

Don. Nobody speaks Russian here but you speak fluent Russian and you actually attend a church in the southwestern part of Washington state that's a Russian speaking community with an English congregation. Tell us about your pastor. Tell us about the church.

Jeff. The pastor is Alexey Kolomytsev who was a believer his whole life in Russia in a minority Evangelical community, Russian Baptist. Definitely less than 1% of the population.

Don. They suffered... I'm sorry to interrupt you but it's going to be easy to miss this point. This is a community that has suffered severe persecution for the sake of their faith in Christ.

Jeff. Yes.

Don. And so be sure to allude to that so that there's an appreciation for the depth of the people that you're associated with.

Jeff. Yes. In fact, the pastor at the church I worship at in Moscow, his father was imprisoned, his grandfather was executed for his faith. Alexey's father, who was also a good friend who passed away a little over a year ago, also living in Washington, spent three years in the gulag in the '60s for his faith. If you were a believer, you were restricted from many opportunities by the government. Much of the church was underground and that's the way Alexey, my current pastor, grew up. When he came to the US, he came because he was motivated to get formal education in the Bible because he knew he didn't understand theology, and he went to a Bible school in Alabama and there he met John MacArthur, and after that meeting ended up at the Master's Seminary. You taught him Greek. I reminded you this morning, maybe you don't remember him but you taught him Greek. He told me that the other day.

Don. So he was an excellent student from what I remember. [laughter] It's been a long time.

Jeff. Nice recovery. [laughter] And his intention was to go back to Russia and minister to the church there but those doors closed and instead this immigrant congregation in Washington state twisted his arm really hard to come up there. So he came up in 2002 and to pastor the church there. In the meantime, the Lord has used his ministry that parallels John MacArthur's ministry both from the pulpit as well as from the media ministry that goes out through the internet, and right now he's the most listened to Russian speaking preacher in the world. And I used the example this morning with you

that one million downloads per month of his preaching around the world, so it has literally a global impact in a very amazing way. And he, like John, just simply preaches the word from the pulpit week by week. He and I crossed paths in 2013, became instant friends. We share a passion. In fact, if you ask what two priorities are in ministry in our thinking, one is the word of God, the priority of the word of God, and two is the local church. That would be what he would say are his two priorities. So we hit it off right off the bat. Anna-Marie and I have been up there several times in the years since, and two years ago we took our older son and his family, all our grandkids that you had mentioned up there on a family vacation and that led to a subsequent discussion where they brought up the idea of actually moving there and I said, "Hey, if you want to move there, I'll retire and we'll move with you." So now we're all up there in God's providence in a very blessed place personally as a family but also in a very exciting place in terms of the Lord's call for the future.

Don. The intricacy of the providence in your life is really amazing because everything that led up to the Space Station led to your ability to be involved with a Russian speaking congregation and to support Alexey in his ministry. It's really hard to fathom the genius of the providence that the Lord has worked out in your life.

Jeff. I wake up amazed every day. And as you know, two of my passions, I think, of curiosity and that I respond to for years has been the providence of God, which I think we have a duty to look for it and to see it and to acknowledge it and grow in our gratitude for it, and calling in life, and that's all of life, all of life, that all of life is a call for a believer and we live our life for him.

Don. We had a discussion just a little bit earlier that we kind of stumbled into and I want to bring it out tonight. You were telling me about a couple of childhood dreams or fantasies that all of us have had in our younger days but you had dreams as a youth that remarkably foreshadowed what your life would become. Tell us about that.

Jeff. Yeah, and I think I've only shared that with two people in the world previously...

Don. Well, it's about to exponentially explode.

Jeff. Most dreams we forget as soon as we wake up but these stuck with me and I contemplated them, I remember, as a child just because they fascinated me. One was being able to go swimming, and on the farm we had a little creek not too far away. We would go swimming in the swimming hole of the creek. But I had this dream of being able to dive down underwater and then stay there and somehow be able to breathe. So that was one. Very simple. The other one was to be able to just stand like on the floor or on the ground, the setting of the dream was outside in our yard, but to be able to jump up and get about 15-20 feet in the air and stay there and just float. And then later in life in about 2001, I think it was, early 2000s, I got asked to lead a crew of folks waiting for their first flight, it was after my first flight, on a nine day undersea expedition off the coast of Key Largo in a habitat called Aquarius where we went down to the bottom of the

ocean, stayed nine days there, every day spent six hours scuba diving out in the coral reefs and then come back to the habitat.

Don. So there is an underground structure that you were living in for those nine days.

Jeff. Yes.

Don. And you go out on these scuba diving expeditions from there, never surfacing above the water.

Jeff. Right, so living at the bottom of the ocean. And then, of course, the space flights which you're floating continually. So, I mean, it's a little strange almost and feels a little weird even to admit it, but in the providence of God he gave me those two imaginations, if you will, as a child that would be realized later in life.

Don. And one of the things that I've always appreciated about you, for all of the wonderful career and the wonderful experiences that the Lord has given to you, you think deeply theologically about these things in terms of providence, of what it reveals about man in the image of God and all of that. I know we don't have time to talk about that much but just give us a little bit of a biblical theological perspective on these things that we've been talking about here in the past 20 minutes or so.

Jeff. Well, like I said a couple of minutes ago, calling in life is something that hit me between the eyes right after coming to faith, and one of the books that impacted me was Os Guinness' book "The Call," and there were other books, many other books also that have influenced me over time but to realize that we are called in the offices and stations of life for a purpose, according to God's plan, and particularly the obvious opportunities, some are more obvious than others, but we are to steward them. You know, it's redeeming the time but then steward what we're given in life. Obviously the opportunities that I've been given related to space flight and all of that are unique and they have unique impacts on people in general. People are interested in hearing about the experience. It fascinates virtually everybody. So there was what I'm called to do it. I could easily go off and, you know, chop wood somewhere and grow a garden and....

Don. Be content.

Jeff. ...be content and just enjoy the memories but there's a responsibility, a sense of stewardship that comes with it that the Lord uniquely gave me some experiences that to steward for to witness to him, I need not go off on my own, that I need to steward that opportunity appropriately.

Don. And that actually applies to each one of us. Each one of us has been given a station in life from which we are to recognize God, honor Christ in it, and serve him in whatever circumstances he's placed us in, right?

Jeff. Absolutely.

Don. That's your point.

Jeff. That's my point and it has nothing to do with how prominent that station is or those circumstances are. We're all called in our stations and duties in life, our callings in life, and we are to steward them appropriately. And most of what we do, all of us, will never be known, publicly known in history but it'll be known to the Lord.

Don. Yeah. Whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.

Jeff. Yeah.

Don. Well, Jeff, thank you so much for being here. Take the greetings of Truth Community Church back to your church and to Alexey. We share a philosophy of ministry and a love for Christ that I think of you guys as a sister church with us, of course. We're going to end this time. As much as I'd like to talk another hour, I want to give you time to do the presentation that you came to do.

Jeff. He told me beforehand he was going to set a timer for himself.

Don. And I forgot to do that so I'm sweating how much time I've let go here.

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