

**Grace to You** :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

**Grace in Space: An Interview with Astronaut Jeff Williams**

Scripture: Selected Scriptures

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**JOHN MACARTHUR:** Well today it's a wonderful privilege that comes to me and that is to introduce to you Jeffrey Williams. Jeffrey Williams is a Lieutenant Colonel in the United States Army and maybe more notable than that, he is a NASA astronaut and what a tremendous privilege and opportunity to share in that incredible experience.

Jeff also is a Christian. He knows and loves the Lord Jesus Christ. And I first found out about Jeff in a most amazing way. It was in the year 2000, it was the month of May, and he was taking off in the Atlantis Space Shuttle to do a mission in the international space station. And he notified us to let us know here at Grace To You that he was going to be taking a very special...well a very special item with him into space and it turned out to be the MacArthur Study Bible. And we were all in a state of shock. We knew that MacArthur Study Bible had a very extensive capability potentially, but we never had any idea it would get into space. And with that, we found out that Jeff had been a listener to Grace To You maybe since back in 1988 and that the Lord had used our radio ministry to shape his life and to have an impact on his marriage and on his family. And so, since that time we've interacted a little bit here and there and we've kind of planned for this special day to come about, when I could personally introduce you to Jeff. And that's my privilege today. And I just want to welcome you, Jeff, great to have you here in the studio.

**JEFF WILLIAMS:** It's an honor to be here, John.

**JOHN:** Well thank you. And we had the privilege today of meeting Jeff and meeting his wife Anna Marie and at least one son, Brad, and Jason's not here today but we're so thankful for what the Lord has done in your family and what the Lord has helped our little family at Grace To You to contribute to that. That's just a special joy for us.

Well let's just get to a little conversation between the two of us and talk about some of the things that I know our listeners would really be very interested in. I suppose one of the dreams that many young boys and girls as well have is to get into space and to be an astronaut. I just wonder if that started early in your life. Where did you really begin to want to do that and take some steps to make it happen?

**JEFF:** Well I think as early as grade school I had a very strong interest in science and aviation and technology and engineering kinds of fields. But I grew up in a small farm in northern Wisconsin and

didn't know about opportunities out there. Coming out of high school I received an appointment to the military academy at Westpoint and that was the first door opened along the path to become an astronaut. Subsequent to graduation I went into Army Aviation, became a pilot, later a test pilot, got a degree in engineering, an advanced degree, a Master's and all of those things qualified me for NASA's program and my interest only increased over those years.

**JOHN:** So this went way back. I mean, as a kid you were watching the launches on television and saying, "Some day I want to do that."

**JEFF:** Sure...sure, I remember the moon race and the landing on the moon...I was a kid then.

**JOHN:** Well I tell you, when I first came to Grace Community Church, the year was 1969, I was a kid in my twenties. And it was later that year, I think, that the moonwalk occurred, or was it 69? So all of us have grown up with that and the incredible, incredible abilities that God has given to man. When we say man is created in the image of God, there is this amazing adventurous spirit, there is this amazing challenge to discover things. And that's how man has unlocked the riches of the planet. I mean, God made a planet just filled with riches and it's that exploration that has released those riches and He made a universe filled with the same thing. And I think you feel that that's why man goes out there. That's why NASA exists, really in the end, because it's there.

**JEFF:** Sure.

**JOHN:** And you've got to explore it.

**JEFF:** It's human exploration, it's something in our nature that wants to seek beyond what we know.

**JOHN:** And I always remember the first Russian who went into space and came back and said he didn't find God out there. But you did, didn't you?

**JEFF:** Oh yeah...yeah.

**JOHN:** What did you see out there that clearly revealed God to you?

**JEFF:** Well the details of the earth and the details of the cloud formations and the currents around the planet and across the oceans and what not, at night time when we were looking down at the U.S. we could see the patterns of thunder storms and the rippling of lightning across the way. We got some great views of the southern aurora, the aurora australis as we passed over southern Australia, looking out into the heavens, in the dark you could see the magnificent star field, an infinite number of stars, far more than you can see from the ground. You could actually see the Milky Way out there as a solid faint background behind the star field.

**JOHN:** Backing up a little bit, we'll talk more about that mission in a moment. Your parents were okay with these kinds of aspirations as a kid?

**JEFF:** Yeah, well it's my father especially, was very supportive of my aspirations along the way. My mother, of course, was supportive but a little bit more nervous. She wanted, as most mothers do wanted to shelter her son a little bit more but they've been great supporters all through the years.

**JOHN:** Somewhere along the line you met Anna Marie, your wife.

**JEFF:** Yeah, we met while I was a cadet at Westpoint. I was in my junior year. She had just come back from a year and a half in Saudi Arabia with her parents where her father was on assignment. And we met shortly after that, began dating and about two years later we were married.

**JOHN:** And that marriage didn't always go the way you had hoped, right?

**JEFF:** No it didn't. We lived what I would call secular lives. About seven years into our marriage it essentially came to a point of crisis and it was out of that crisis that in God's providence He led us to Him.

**JOHN:** And from what you told me, you were taken away for a five-month period for some special training at that crisis point of your marriage.

**JEFF:** Right, I had just moved the family to a new community where they didn't know anybody and then the Army had sent me out for five months for flight training.

**JOHN:** And while you were gone, Anna Marie came to know Christ, right?

**JEFF:** She did. Through the witness of neighbors.

**JOHN:** Neighbors...and, of course, you're gone and this dramatic change takes place and you're talking by phone but you know something's happened.

**JEFF:** Something dramatic happened to her and I couldn't figure it out.

**JOHN:** Well you figured it out because she started sending you things and...

**JEFF:** Yeah, she tried to explain it to me and send me tracts and to me they were propaganda but I had an uncanny confidence in the Bible. I didn't know what was in there but I began reading it and studying it and measuring the tracts against what I found in Scripture. And I spent several months studying primarily the book of Romans and John.

**JOHN:** You know, that's really a very, very important thing for people to understand. Where does a secular guy and a guy who is self-sufficient, self-confident, motivated, self-directed like you, would have to be to achieve the kind of things you achieved? Where do you get this almost inexplicable trust in the Bible? And the answer to that is that is the work of God.

**JEFF:** Absolutely.

**JOHN:** I have never believed that you can take apologetics or any kind of argument, rational argument and bring light to a dark mind and bring life to a dead soul just on the basis of human reason. We work hard sometimes at trying to defend the faith and defend the Bible and the truth of God and all of this, but in the end, and I've seen it again and again, I've seen it with staunch life-long atheists, all of a sudden there is this amazing awakening to the truth of Scripture. And I really believe that is the work of God.

**JEFF:** I absolutely believe it too, that He miraculously removed my heart of stone and replaced it with a heart of flesh.

**JOHN:** And that was the beginning of that regenerating process that brought you to the knowledge of Christ. And the Lord through that brought your marriage together. How many years ago would that be now?

**JEFF:** Thirteen years ago. We just celebrated our 20th anniversary in December.

**JOHN:** Oh, that's so wonderful...that's so wonderful. Let's talk a little bit about what was called STS 101, that was the mission that you were on. But I understand there are many more astronauts than those who actually get on a mission.

**JEFF:** Well there are about currently 160 to 170 active duty astronauts. Of course, the typical crew is anywhere from five to seven on a space shuttle. Every crew is a mix of experienced astronauts and rookies so everybody eventually flies. In the meantime, everybody is embedded out into either the space shuttle program or the space station program, helping to develop the hardware and the capabilities and the procedures for future missions.

**JOHN:** So you're sort of in the pile of 160 or 170 people and what happens when you get a call and they tell you you're going?

**JEFF:** I'd say that's a big day...it's a big milestone when you get surprised with that phone call. And, of course, it turns your whole world upside down personally with the family, the extended family, all the people that have supported you over the years and what not.

**JOHN:** Now do they pick you or do they pick your team that you've been on?

**JEFF:** They pick you individually to be among a crew of five to seven, so each individual will be called and assembled to compose the crew.

**JOHN:** And what was the goal of your mission?

**JEFF:** Our mission objective was primarily to take equipment to the International Space Station and also to repair some failed equipment both inside and outside the Space Station.

**JOHN:** Now the Space Station exists, as I understand it to collect data. Is that right?

**JEFF:** Yeah. It's primary purpose is to help us develop the technology required to go beyond earth orbit, to go back to the moon or on to Mars, it's also given us a lot of experience in long duration space flight and the impacts it has physiologically on people.

**JOHN:** So it's sort of a stepping stone.

**JEFF:** Sure.

**JOHN:** It's a starting point to go beyond that.

**JEFF:** Absolutely.

**JOHN:** And you, I'm sure, were given a specific job. What was your task?

**JEFF:** For the ascent and entry I served as the flight engineer for the shuttle. During the flight I was the lead space walker and we did one space walk outside the Space Station where we repaired some equipment and also assembled a crane that will be used for future space walks.

**JOHN:** I mean, that's got to be just absolutely the most staggering experience that a person could have in a human realm to be walking around in space above the air, at what altitude?

**JEFF:** We were about 200 miles.

**JOHN:** Two hundred miles and you're just floating around out there looking down at the blue Earth.

**JEFF:** That's right. Just floating around, very busy, but having a moment or two to stop and just pinch yourself and imagine this is where I am, I'm actually here doing this and to survey the Earth below and the stars above. It was absolutely incredible.

**JOHN:** I think all of us have gotten up in the morning one time or another and watched those early morning launches. It was about six o'clock in the morning. What was it like on May 19 the year 2000 for you?

**JEFF:** It was, I don't know how to describe it, of course it was the combination of many months of preparation. There was a part of me that didn't believe it was really going to happen. Part of me was excited. Part of me wanted to be very focused on the task at hand. Obviously you want to pay attention to what's going on during the ascent and the insertion into orbit and the beginning of the mission is a little bit of anxiety not over what you might expect but more so over not knowing how your body is going to react when you get there. You know, you don't want to be sick, you want to hit the ground running, figuratively and get the work done.

**JOHN:** By the time you launch though, I mean, you have been in similar situations, simulated experiences like that, so you essentially know what to expect. You can't get the same kind of adrenalin rush or the same kind of thrill as the real thing but you can certainly anticipate. And then you add to that the complexity, I mean, certainly while the passengers in the back of a commercial airplane might get a little nervous on take off, the pilots have much more to do than to get nervous. I mean, it's a very complex kind of thing.

**JEFF:** You bet. I felt very prepared for the mission and any kind of nervousness I had wasn't there at the time of launch and I was able to do my job. The crew was able to do their job in total and we had a very, very successful mission.

**JOHN:** You know, it's not much different in preaching. If I'm prepared, I don't have any fear if I'm not prepared, I look out there and see all these people and I could frankly crash and burn, you know. So I do have that fear occasionally.

In the launch, I guess I would wonder is it loud? I mean, is it deafening? Or are you muffled somehow with equipment?

**JEFF:** You're muffled because you're wearing a suit and you have a helmet on and you have head gear on with a communication system. You hear the sound definitely but more so, more than that, you feel the dynamics, the shaking, and the power...the energy and the...

**JOHN:** So you can feel the power.

**JEFF:** Oh yes. You can feel the G's, you feel the dynamics and the shaking and the rumbling of the solid rocket boosters as you leave the pad.

**JOHN:** And you're hoping that that thing doesn't spring a rivet somewhere.

**JEFF:** You want everything to work as designed, that's for sure.

**JOHN:** This was your first time into space.

**JEFF:** Yes it was.

**JOHN:** What was the most surprising? What you never might have anticipated?

**JEFF:** Well I felt very prepared for everything we had to do. I had heard a lot of talk about what you can view from space, viewing the Earth and what not. But you can't get prepared just listening to people talk about it, it is absolutely spectacular. Puts new meaning in the phrase "out of this world." But transcending all of that, transcending all the events of the mission, I was surprised by the overwhelming nature of the awareness of everybody watching and encouraging and vicariously taking so many people along with me. And the prayers that not only for me but for the family during the endeavor were very obvious and very apparent and put us all at peace.

**JOHN:** Well we were all of Grace To You people were praying for you as you went.

**JEFF:** And I was very much aware of it.

**JOHN:** And as you think about that, tell us a little bit about what prompted you to take what you took? I know NASA let's you take a few little things up there.

**JEFF:** Right, we were able to take some things for personal use, for family. We were able to take a little bit of entertainment, although I don't know why because I didn't find a whole lot of time for entertainment.

**JOHN:** It's intense, isn't it?

**JEFF:** It is.

**JOHN:** You sleep and when you're not sleeping you work.

**JEFF:** That's right. It's a very aggressive schedule. But I had the opportunity to take some CDs, primarily music CDs and I used that opportunity mostly to fly CDs for those that prepared us for the flight, our trainers, to give them something, to give them something back.

**JOHN:** Sure.

**JEFF:** But one of the things I wanted to fly was a study Bible. So I flew the study Bible on CD as well.

**JOHN:** The MacArthur Study Bible in the CD form. And that is such an interesting, interesting thing to think that you would take that. Tell us, and I think our listeners will appreciate this, tell us how you came to be connected with our radio ministry and how God has used it in your life.

**JEFF:** Well coming out of the crisis in our marriage and Anna Marie becoming a Christian first, and after several months of study of Scripture me committing myself to Christ, I started searching for ways to grow and to grow in my understanding. And one of those ways, of course, was Christian radio. And I spent a lot of time listening to Christian radio trying to sort out the different programs there, and I eventually migrated and stuck to the Grace To You program and became a faithful listener. It woke me up every morning. In those days it aired twice a day and woke me up and I went to bed by it as well.

**JOHN:** And you have developed in your heart a real passion for His Word and His truth.

**JEFF:** Yes He has.

**JOHN:** I understand that. You and I have that in common and it doesn't get any less, it doesn't diminish through the years, it just gets more intense.

**JEFF:** That's right, it only grows.

**JOHN:** Yeah and what really helps it grow is what you're doing right now and that is you're teaching...aren't you?

**JEFF:** Yes I am.

**JOHN:** You're teaching the Word of God regularly in your church.

**JEFF:** Yes.

**JOHN:** Well that's just wonderful to hear that. Back to the Study Bible for just a moment. When you got up into orbit and you had this Study Bible up there, what use did you find for it?

**JEFF:** We carried some lap top computers that were very critical to the early part of the mission, but once we undocked from the Space Station, their criticality was reduced. So I gained permission from the ground from Mission Control to load the Study Bible on one of the lap tops...



**JOHN:** So you had to have a conversation with Mission Control, "May I please load The MacArthur Study Bible.

**JEFF:** Yeah, well I think I actually did it via e-mail.

**JOHN:** Oh via e-mail....

**JEFF:** Sent an e-mail to the ground and got permission and I really wanted to do it because the day before landing was our day off, quote/unquote, where we really had an opportunity to view the Earth and spend time in the windows and look at the sunrises and the sunsets and all of the details of God's creation. So we spent that time, we loaded up the Bible and spent the time, a couple of us on the crew, doing searches on words like Earth and creation and related words reading the passages as we viewed God's creation below us.

**JOHN:** That's just absolutely wonderful. How do you...and I suppose this needs to be asked to everyone, but yours would be such a unique answer, how do you see your relationship with Christ? Influencing your job or giving you opportunities to communicate the gospel that are unique?

**JEFF:** Well I have found that when you are an astronaut that you get an undeserved audience with many people. And there's just two sides of that. I'm frankly and personally very uncomfortable with that, however, I realize there's a duty to get the Word out to the public, to the tax payers of our country. It's also a great opportunity to demonstrate if not actively passively, if you will, a Christian witness and somebody that understands a vocation and calling outside the church, if you will, and to dedicate everything I do to the glory of God and to be His instrument in that calling, in my service, in my public service in the space program, in all walks of life. So my prayer for years has been to be God's faithful instrument in all I do and that I would submit to His will in wherever He sent me and He's given me this great privilege.

**JOHN:** And He's sent you to some unusual places. Well I think that it's safe to say you would view your Christian life the way the Bible would want us to...God would want us to view it, but the primary goal of your life is to glorify God...

**JEFF:** That's right.

**JOHN:** And the means to that is through your career as an astronaut.

**JEFF:** That's right.

**JOHN:** That opens the doors. That allows you to live your Christian life in a unique environment surrounded by pilots and engineers and military people and scientists and you live your Christian life there and when God gives you that platform because of your unique role to communicate His

gospel...that's a special privilege as well.

**JEFF:** Yes it is.

**JOHN:** And, you know, I really think...and I've said this for years...I mean, we're all essentially in full-time Christian ministry. I mean, it's our life, isn't it? It's not a part of our life, it is our life...

**JEFF:** It is our life.

**JOHN:** From start to finish. And all of a sudden, everything you do takes on that eternal...that eternal consequence, how I live my life in every opportunity God gives me to communicate the joy of Christ. Maybe the last and appropriate question to sort of end our whole conversation here is what do you think about the future? Do you have any plans to get back up there?

**JEFF:** I hope to go back. I am willing. It's a matter of whether NASA's willing to send me. I look forward to going back and I look forward after that even to go back for a long duration flight for several months in the space station. I believe in human exploration of space. I believe in the program, what we do. I believe in the future. I am honored to be a participant in it. And going in long duration is just the next step.

**JOHN:** Well we're very honored, Jeff, that you're a part of our Grace To You family and while you represent a very, very, very small group of people on the face of the Earth, I'm sure there are other Christians among the astronauts...

**JEFF:** Absolutely!

**JOHN:** Who see the glory of God in a way that those of us who are down here on the Earth are going to have to wait for in the Rapture.

Listen to the 2007 GraceLife Conference, "*The Heavens Declare*" with guest speaker Jeff Williams.

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