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MEMORIAL SERVICE FOR THE CREW OF STS-107

JOHNSON SPACE CENTER

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TRANSCRIPT:

RABBI HAROLD ROBINSON: The Hebrew Poet Bialic wrote: (Reciting Hebrew.)

After my death, mourn me thus, there was a man and sea. He is no more. Before his time, his life was ended, and the melody of their lives were broken in its midst. Oh, they had one more melody and now that melody is lost, lost forever. Eternal God, when we view our little planet from out in space, we learn the unity of all humanity here on Earth. We are one as you are one. Did you not teach us this from the very beginning? As we read "And God created humanity in God's own image."

Still the ancient Psalmist asked and prayed, "Eternal God, what are we that you have regard for us? What are we that you are mindful of us? We are like a breath, our days are as a passing shadow. We come and go like grass, which in the morning shoots up renewed and in the evening fades and withers. You cause us to revert to dust saying return, oh mortal creatures, would that we were wise that we would understand wither we are going, for when we die we carry nothing away; our glory does not accompany us. Mark the whole-hearted, behold the upright, for their end is peace. Oh God, you redeem the souls of all your servants and none of those who trust in you shall ever be forsaken."

(Reciting Hebrew.)

May the abode of all creation grant consolation to all who mourn, comfort to all the bereaved, even here, oh God, you are the fountain from which our healing flows. Even now the stricken look to you for strength, for well we know all creation is the dwelling place of your great love and the fullness of all things is your glory.

We're invited to join in singing together "God of our Fathers."

SEAN O'KEEFE: On behalf of NASA, thank you all for your participation in this heart-felt tribute to seven courageous heroes, the intrepid crew of the Space Shuttle Columbia.

Throughout our proud NASA family, the bond between those who venture into space, our outstanding astronaut corps and those who make space flight possible, our dedicated scientists, engineers, safety and support personnel, this bond is incredibly strong. And today our grief is overwhelming.

Our duty now is to provide comfort to the brave families of the Columbia crew, the families who take so much pride in their loved ones' remarkable accomplishments.

We also have the tremendous duty to honor the legacy of those fallen heroes by finding out what caused the loss of the Columbia and its crew, to correct what problems we find, and to make sure this never happens again.

We owe this to you, the families and to the American people. With an uncompromising commitment to safety, we will keep this solemn pledge.

As we continue to pursue our mission goals of understanding and protecting our home planet, exploring the universe and searching for life, and inspiring the next generation of explorers, we hope our unceasing efforts will provide a fitting tribute to the Columbia 7.

This year our centennial flight inspires us to marvel at how far we've come from the daring achievements of two bicycle makers from Ohio, Orville and Wilbur Wright, and their achievements at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina.

And the astronauts' ambitious research and exploration activities honored the dreams of explorers and adventurers everywhere.

Nearly three weeks ago, we saw our seven astronauts head into space with smiles on their face, and as their families have so eloquently said, "with hearts full of enthusiasm, pride in country, faith in their God and a willingness to accept risk in pursuit of knowledge, knowledge that might improve the quality of life for all mankind."

Once in space, they tirelessly worked on research aimed at fighting cancer, improving crop yields, developing fire suppression techniques, building earthquake resistant buildings and understanding the effects of dust storms on the weather.

Students from all around the world, our generation next of those explorers, also contributed many of the science experience (sic) that was so important to the crew.

On the morning of Columbia's flight, I heard students from Fowler High School in Syracuse, New York, proudly describe their ant colony experiment, an experiment that the Columbia's crew delighted in observing. This was one of eleven different experiments that were put together by students and kids.

We will never know the results of some of Columbia's ambitious research agenda, but be assured, however, that future astronauts will orbit new experiments addressing the fascinating research questions that motivated this mission.

And we pledge that the students like those from Fowler High School will have similar opportunities to join our astronaut crews in these important learning adventures.

As Cmdr. Rick Husband said, "I think one of the legacies of NASA is that you always push forward, and STS-107 is doing that on the science side, pushing human science knowledge forward."

This was the work that gave the Columbia crew such unbridled joy. This was their lasting gift to us all.

Last Wednesday as the Columbia crew was circling the globe, Kalpana took a rest from her duties to take in the stunning view of the Earth at sunset. A view that only a select group of space explorers have been privileged to witness.

Now, she told us from the flight deck that the entire Earth and sky could be seen reflected in the retina of her eye. She called her crew mates to come over to see this amazing site. It is this image, the image of Columbia's crew joyfully joining Kalpana to see our beautiful planet reflected in their friend's eye that we will remember and treasure forever.

And for these and for them and their memories, we will persevere.

CAPT. KENT V. ROMINGER: The world lost seven heroes. We lost seven family members. Coping with our tragic loss is going to be extremely difficult, but remembering the unique qualities of each and sharing our special memories will help us heal.

That's what I'd like to do today. Every shuttle crew forms into a family as they go through their months and, in this case of STS-107, years of training. But the STS-107 crew grew particularly close. They were a generous and caring bunch with a great sense of humor. As a matter of fact, they would bake birthday cakes for their training instructors. They traveled around with a mascot, a small toy hamster that sang the "Kung Fu Fighting" song. They referred to the crew secretary as "The Great and Powerful Roz." And they convinced her if she would keep candy on her desk, she would see a lot more of them.

At the astronaut Christmas party this last December, the STS-107 crew and spouses were there in rare form. They had paper crowns, they were sporting STS-107 tattoos and truly were the life of the party.

As a matter of fact, anybody that passed within ten feet of their table was encouraged, if not physically helped, into a chair and immediately branded with an STS-107 tattoo. And at the time, I didn't openly thank them for the tattoo square in the middle of my forehead, but I was very proud to be labeled as one of them.

This diverse crew functioned flawlessly together, but each individual brought much more than just technical ability to that crew. Let me go on.

Ilan. He was the perfectly poised fighter pilot with the sparkle in his eyes. His instructors remember a moment prior to getting in his launch and entry suit where he was standing there in dark blue thermal underwear with a Santa Clause cap and quipped, "Life is not a rehearsal."

He was also extremely caring. From orbit he sent an e-mail encouraging management, me and the other folks to immediately reassign this crew; that he could not imagine being part of or flying with any crew that was more deserving, more talented and more capable.

Laurel. The dedicated professional with a wide variety of talents. She was also the queen of STS-107 paraphernalia. She had a different pastel crew shirt for each day of the week complimented with crew patches and matching crew earrings. She had a perpetual smile, and would never send an e-mail or phone if she could find you in person.

She also was very caring and when away on vacation, would make a point to phone her crew mates and her crew secretary. But no matter how hectic the day, she inspired us with her ability to always reserve time and energy for her family.

Mike. He was a perfect choice for the payload commander. Organized, thorough, someone you could absolutely count on, a gifted leader. He was the quiet type, unless you asked him about his family or his Porsche. And perhaps because he was quiet, we all loved to see him laugh. And when he laughed, we laughed with him even harder, and he knew just when to drop a great punch line.

Kalpana, or K.C. to her friends, was admired personally for her extraordinary kindness and technically for her strive for perfection. She had a terrific sense of humor and loved flying small airplanes with her husband and loved flying in space. Flying was her passion. She would often remind her crew as her training flow would be delayed and become extended, she would say, "Man, you are training to fly in space. What more could you want?"

Smiling Dave, or Doc to his friends. Quiet and observant with piercing blue eyes. He was the bachelor of the group and as such was in constant search of food. Doc also loved cameras and always had a camera with him, riding out to the pad I've never seen anybody as intense at making sure he filmed every bit of what was going on with his crew as Doc. Usually when he was filming folks, he would tell them, "Just act like a little brown squirrel."

He also had a keen sense of humor and after one demanding simulator run, turned to K.C. and asked, "May I borrow your brain?" This comment illustrates his humility, because it was well known in the astronaut office that he was extremely capable.

Willie was incredibly humble with exceptional talents. He was especially gifted at quickly learning and mastering technical information, but was also known for his tremendous consideration for others. He enjoyed surprising people with flowers and Hawaiian leis. Willie was also uncharacteristically punctual for an astronaut. And his training team was dismayed that over several years of training, he was only late for one event, a record I'm sure never to be broken, especially by an astronaut.

Rick. Rick was a terrific human being and a great leader. He was my pilot on his first flight. I grew to really appreciate all of his talents, his gifts, and laugh at all of his Amarillo sayings. His favorite saying, and I can hear him saying it right now, is, "You know, I feel more now like I did than when I first got here." And when we were training, it took me six months to learn how to say that. As a matter of fact, Rick e-mailed me six days ago from orbit and that was in the subject line, that saying.

He was a naturally gifted pilot. I was envious, even though I was his more experienced commander, and an outstanding leader. He molded seven individuals from different parts of the world with diverse backgrounds, various religious beliefs, into an incredibly tight knit and productive family.

The night before launch, Rick gathered his crew and spouses to discuss the final details of the mission. He finished by reciting the following passage from the Bible, Book of Joshua, from memory. "Be strong and courageous because you will lead these people to inherit the land they swore to their forefathers to give them. Be strong and very courageous. Be careful to obey all the laws my servant Moses gave you. Do not turn from it to the right or to the left; that you may be successful wherever you go. Do not let this book of the law depart from your mouth. Meditate on it day and night so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful. Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified, do not be discouraged, for the Lord, your God, will be with you wherever you go."

Rick, Willie, Mike, K.C., Laurel, David and Ilan, I know you're listening. Please know you are in our hearts and we will always smile when we think of you.

PRESIDENT GEORGE W. BUSH: Their mission was almost complete and we lost them so close to home. The men and women of the Columbia had journeyed more than six million miles and were minutes away from arrival and reunion. The loss was sudden and terrible and for their families the grief is heavy.

Our nation shares in your sorrow and in your pride. And today we remember not only one moment of tragedy, but seven lives of great purpose and achievement.

To leave behind Earth and air and gravity is an ancient dream of humanity. For these seven it was a dream fulfilled. Each of these astronauts had the daring and discipline required of their calling. Each of them knew that great endeavors are inseparable from great risks and each of them accepted those risks willingly, even joyfully, in the cause of discovery.

Rick Husband was a boy of four when he first thought of being an astronaut. As a man and having become an astronaut, he found it was even more important to love his family and serve his Lord.

One of Rick's favorite hymns was "How Great Thou Art" which offers these words of praise: "I see the stars, I hear the mighty thunder, thy power throughout the universe displayed."

David Brown was first drawn to the stars as a little boy with a telescope in his backyard. He admired astronauts, but as he said, "I thought they were movie stars. I thought I was kind of a normal kid."

David grew up to be a physician, an aviator who could land on the deck of a carrier in the middle of the night, and a Shuttle astronaut.

His brother asked him several weeks ago what would happen if something went wrong on their mission. David replied, "This program will go on."

Michael Anderson always wanted to fly planes and rose to the rank of lieutenant colonel in the Air Force. Along the way, he became a role model, especially for his two daughters and for the many children he spoke to in schools. He said to them, "Whatever you want to be in life, you're training for it now." He also told his minister, "If this thing doesn't come out right, don't worry about me, I'm just going on higher."

Laurel Salton Clark was a physician and a flight surgeon who loved adventure, loved her work, loved her husband and her son.

A friend who heard Laurel speaking to mission control said there was a smile in her voice. Laurel conducted some of the experiments as Columbia orbited the Earth and described seeing new life emerged from a tiny cocoon. "Life," she said, "continues in a lot of places and life is a magical thing."

None of our astronauts traveled a longer path to space than Kalpana Chawla. She left India as a student but she would see the nation of her birth, all of it, from hundreds of miles above.

When the sad news reached her hometown, an administrator at her high school recalled, "She always said she wanted to reach the stars. She went there and beyond." Kalpana's native country mourns her today and so does her adopted land.

Ilan Ramon. Also flew above his home, the land of Israel. He said the quiet that envelops space makes the beauty even more powerful and I only hope that the quiet can one day spread to my country.

Ilan was a patriot, the devoted son of a Holocaust survivor, served his country in two wars. "Ilan," said his wife Rona, "left us at his peak moment, in his favorite place with people he loved."

The Columbia's pilot was Cmdr. Willie McCool whom friends knew as the most steady and dependable of men. In Lubbock today they're thinking back to the Eagle Scout who became a distinguished naval officer and a fearless test pilot. One friend remembers Willie this way, "He was blessed. And we were blessed to know him."

Our whole nation was blessed to have such men and women serving in our space program. Their loss is deeply felt, especially in this place, where so many of you called them friends. The people of NASA are being tested once again. In your grief, you are responding as your friends would have wished, with focus, professionalism and unbroken faith in the mission of this Agency.

Capt. Brown was correct; America's space program will go on. This cause of exploration and discovery is not an option we choose, it is a desire written in the human heart. We are that part of creation which seeks to understand all creation. We find the best among us, send them forth into unmapped darkness and pray they will return. They go in peace for all mankind and all mankind is in their debt.

Yet some explorers do not return and the law settles unfairly on a few. The families here today shared in the courage of those they loved, but now they must face life and grief without them.

The sorrow is lonely, but you are not alone. In time you will find comfort and the grace to see you through. And in God's own time we can pray that the day of your reunion will come.

And to the children who miss your mom or dad so much today, you need to know they love you and that love will always be with you. They were proud of you. And you can be proud of them for the rest of your life.

The final days of their own lives were spent looking down upon this Earth and now on every continent and every land they could see, the names of these astronauts are known and remembered. They will always have a honored place in the memory of this country. And today, I offer the respect and gratitude of the people of the United States. May God bless you all.

RABBI HAROLD ROBINSON: Words of open faith, the twenty-third psalm. (Reciting Hebrew.)

CAPT. GENE THERIOT: The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He leads me beside still waters. He makes me to lie down in green pastures. He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his namesake.

RABBI HAROLD ROBINSON: (Reciting Hebrew.)

CAPT. GENE THERIOT: Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me, your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

RABBI HAROLD ROBINSON: (Reciting Hebrew.)

CAPT. GENE THERIOT: You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

I invite you to join me as we pray together.

Eternal Father, strong to save, thank you for honoring us with your presence at this ceremony of remembrance. To know you in times of joy and success is a wonderful blessing for which we are truly grateful, yet to experience you in times of tragedy and sorrow, to experience you when everything goes wrong and all our best efforts are not enough, to experience you then is to us life and our only reliable hope.

Thank you, oh God, for having been with us through the past four difficult days. We thank you in advance for your presence with us in your future, but oh God, it is your presence with us now that enables us to persevere when we think we no longer can.

We lift before you these seven families, as well as the NASA family, for whom this loss is personal and intense. Please lead them through the valley of the shadow of death. Where there is sorrow, we pray for your comfort. Where there is loneliness, we ask for a reassuring sense of your presence. Where the great questions beg for answers, grant your wisdom, and where it seems the ability to face the next day is no longer there, grant your guidance and the strength to finish well.

Dear God, we pray also for ourselves as a nation. May we not only mourn the loss of our valiant crew, may we also be inspired by their lives of purpose and accomplishment. From America or India or Israel or any other place where people live in freedom, raise up among us some boy or girl, some college student who will catch the vision and dedicate themselves to the disciplines necessary for excellence.

Help them see in these, our heroes, the qualities against which to pattern their lives and then explore, probe, experiment and in so doing catch a further glimpse of you through the wonder of your creation.

As we depart this place, we pray now your blessings upon these families, the NASA community, and upon our great nation. God Bless America. Amen.