



Broadcast Transcript

Broadcast: A Pilot's Close Call on 9/11 – Part 1

Guest(s): Dr. Steve and Megan Scheibner

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Dr. James Dobson: You're listening to Family Talk, the radio broadcasting division of the James Dobson Family Institute. I am that James Dobson, and I'm so pleased that you've joined us today.

Roger Marsh: Well, welcome to Family Talk. I'm Roger Marsh, and today of course is September 11th. Younger generations don't know how life was before that day. Airport security took less time to get through, that's for sure, and there was far less concern about possible terror attacks ever taking place on US soil. The attacks that happened on September 11th, 2001 forever changed our country. People who watched what happened can remember exactly what they were doing on that day. I remember personally being at work, got to work early on that morning of September 11th, 2001, and when I heard the reports, I saw a video happening of the second plane going into the second tower. It was one of the most surreal experiences I've ever experienced. The world seemed to stop when the World Trade Center towers in New York were hit. And after a little while, it seemed like things may be over and then the Pentagon was hit. The disbelief and uncertainty of what might happen next was filling everyone's mind nationwide.

And then Flight 93 crashed after passengers and crew stormed the cockpit preventing terrorists from hitting yet another target this time in Washington. DC. Throughout the day, people called their loved ones to see if they were okay, and if they had seen what happened. Schools tuned into the live broadcasts of what was going on in the aftermath. It is definitely a day most of us will never forget. Now, today, here on September 11th, 2024, we want to remember the victims of the terrorist attacks on this day 23 years ago. Nearly 3,000 people lost their lives, including first responders. Brave men and women sacrificed their lives in an effort to save others, and we want to honor those who paid the ultimate price by bringing you the story of Steve Scheibner. Steve and his wife Megan have an unbelievable tale to tell of a close call and divine intervention on 9/11. Now, today's program originally aired about a decade ago, but we wanted to share the Scheibners story with you again here on this, September 11th, 2024. Here now is our host, Dr. James Dobson, to introduce the Scheibners right here on Family Talk.

Dr. James Dobson: Well, thanks everyone and welcome to another edition of Family Talk. I'm James Dobson, along with some guests today, and I'm anxious to introduce them to you. I was asked to speak in November of 2013 at a banquet, and before I spoke there was another speaker, and his name was Dr. Steve Scheibner, and he told an incredible story of his experience on September the 11th, 2001, which will be forever known as 9/11. I talked to him afterward and we became friends and I asked if he would agree to come to Family talk and tell his story to our guests. And he is here with us today along with his wife, Megan, and I'm delighted to have them here in the studio with us. There's so much for us to talk about today. And may I call you Steve?

Dr. Steve Scheibner: Absolutely.

Dr. James Dobson: You have a doctorate in theology, I believe.

Dr. Steve Scheibner: Yeah, I do.

Dr. James Dobson: And you got it where?

Dr. Steve Scheibner: Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary back in 2011.

Dr. James Dobson: You got a master's in a similar topic.

Dr. Steve Scheibner: Master's in Christian Counseling. Before that I pastored for a lot of years, and so those two degrees were very helpful in my vocation that I did for 10 years.

Dr. James Dobson: I still don't understand how that part of your life fits with the fact that you are a first officer for American Airlines and you're also a commander in the U.S. Navy Reserve. How do you do all that? You are also a head of a ministry.

Dr. Steve Scheibner: I am 101 years old. That's how I do it.

Dr. James Dobson: Megan, do you like running that fast? You're also tracking him.

Megan Scheibner: I do. I'm kind of like the center of the tornado that keeps everything from flying off into space and I make sure everything stays where it needs to be and everyone's where they belong.

Dr. James Dobson: And you also speak Steve.

Dr. Steve Scheibner: I do. I travel around the country, obviously telling my 9/11 story, which we're going to talk about today. And usually I'll be in a different pulpit on every Sunday with a few exceptions during the year, telling my 9/11 story, showing the "In My Seat" film and usually putting together a parenting conference or a marriage and parenting conference along on the same weekend.

Dr. James Dobson: Megan, you actually wrote *In My Seat*, is that right?

Megan Scheibner: I did. Yes, I did. And you'll see there's a portion Steve wrote in it where he says, pilots are fairly self-serving, but even he wasn't self-serving enough to write a book about himself.

Dr. James Dobson: And this book has been out for some time now, has it?

Megan Scheibner: It's been out since 2011 and after the film came out, after the "In My Seat" film came out, we just started getting emails from people saying, "Who are you people? And we want to know more about you." And it's really the story of two kids that weren't raised in Christian homes and how God brought us together and put oil in our lamp. And 9/11 was kind of the spark.

Dr. James Dobson: Steve, you have been deployed three times?

Dr. Steve Scheibner: Yes.

Dr. James Dobson: All right. Now, let me finish out the story. You have eight children?

Megan Scheibner: We do.

Dr. James Dobson: And you've homeschooled them all?

Megan Scheibner: Yes.

Dr. James Dobson: All of them?

Megan Scheibner: All of them.

Dr. James Dobson: And you're very involved in the homeschool movement?

Megan Scheibner: Yes. Yes.

Dr. James Dobson: See, I don't understand all this. I don't know how you do it. I'm busy and have been most of my professional life, but I think you guys have us beat. And tell us about the ministry that you have started.

Dr. Steve Scheibner: Well, I'm the president of Character Health Corporation and Character Health is a national ministry primarily to parents, but parenting is much more than just parenting. It involves marriages, character development for young people. Our mission, we want to really see the American culture transformed for the cause of Christ, and we believe that that's going to get accomplished as we help equip parents to train a new generation of courageous, Christ-like what we call Character Healthy leaders. And by that I mean problem solvers. There's no shortage of problems in the American family today, but there is a shortage of problem solvers. And so Megan and I have put together a thing called the *Nine Practices of the Proactive Parent*. It's a systematic parenting course that we really feel is very biblically balanced. It helps walk parents through the character

development process for children. It's not just a bunch of theory, it's a nice balance of theory and then what does it look like on Tuesday afternoon at your house? And that's the stuff that really resonates with families, and that's really our passion.

Dr. James Dobson: Your real passion is to win people to Jesus Christ, didn't it?

Dr. Steve Scheibner: Amen. Absolutely. And I'll go anywhere, anytime to share my story because my story, my 9/11 story is really a story about substitutionary atonement. What does it look like to have somebody die in your place? And the most important question any of us will ever wrestle with is the fact that Jesus Christ died in our place. And so my 9/11 story builds a wonderful bridge to the most beautiful story that's ever been told.

Dr. James Dobson: Well, let's build that bridge. Let's go back and tell us about that tragic day, September 11th in 2001, and the role that you played in it.

Dr. Steve Scheibner: Well, I'm a pilot still for American Airlines, and on September 11th, 2001, I was an active pilot for American Airlines, a first officer on the 767 out of Boston. As you remember on-

Dr. James Dobson: Logan?

Dr. Steve Scheibner: Logan Airport, right. On September 11th, Boston was one of the airports of choice, and the 767 was the airplane that the terrorists had trained on. The first airplane that was hijacked American Airlines Flight 11 was a flight that I was actually scheduled to be the co-pilot on. And I was bumped through a set of circumstances the day before on September 10th. Now, what led up to all that was this, I was pastoring a church in Maine. I was a bi-vocational pastor, had a job for American Airlines, also pastoring a church. I had something called Reserve at the airlines. And what reserve means is I basically worked part-time. I was on call to fill in for another pilot that couldn't make it.

Maybe they were sick, maybe they had to go to training. Whatever reason, from time to time, there's either a captain or a co-pilot that's not available for a flight. They will go down the list of reserves, American Airlines will fill that spot. You don't know it. When you show up, you don't know that the guy was called the night before to come out and take that trip. On September 10th, 2001, about three o'clock in the afternoon is when American Airlines would normally call and fill the trips. I went into my computer, I logged in to see if there was any unassigned flying for the next day. And as I looked, there was one flight that hadn't been assigned a co-pilot yet, and that was Flight 11 out of Logan to Los Angeles. The next thing I did is I looked at the list of available reserve pilots because there's more than one of me, and it just so happened on September 11th, 2001, there was only one guy available to fill in the co-pilot slot, and that was me.

Under that set of circumstances, the computer will automatically assign your name to the trip. On September 10th at three o'clock in the afternoon, I saw my name assigned to Flight 11. I said to my wife, I said, "I'm going to Los Angeles tomorrow." I went out to my car and got my old dirty luggage out and I threw the stuff in the wash and put the new stuff in the car and went up and even set my alarm for the next morning. And usually within two or three minutes after seeing your name assigned by the computer, somebody at American Airlines will call to confirm that assignment, so it's not a done deal until a phone call gets made. And I waited for the phone to ring and the phone never rang, which is not completely unusual, but I can tell you in 23 years of being an American, I've been bumped off a trip three times under that same set of circumstances. The last time was September 10th, 2001. That's how rare an occurrence it is.

What was taking place at the same time that I got bumped was a fellow by the name of Tom McGinnis. Tom was a co-pilot at American Airlines, a little bit senior to me. He was a regular line holder, so he had some privileges that I didn't have as a reserve pilot. He could shop around for a little better trip. And so what he was doing on September 10th, which happened to be his 42nd birthday, he was celebrating his birthday with his wife and his children. About three o'clock in the afternoon, he went over to the computer to see if there was any unassigned flying. He saw that my name had been assigned to that trip, but he saw a little code next to my name that said I hadn't been called yet. He called down to American in a hurry and said, "Is it too late for me to have that trip?" They said, "No, you can still have it, but you got to let us know."

I assume he had a conversation with his wife and he called back a few minutes later and said, "I'll take that trip." And at that moment, they erased my name off the trip and they put Tom's on it. And now as we know-

Dr. James Dobson: Why had they not called him and confirmed?

Dr. Steve Scheibner: Because he wasn't on reserve. He wasn't in a list to be called. It was just really a matter of timing. Had he waited another five minutes to make that phone call, if they had made the phone call to me, then it wouldn't be available to him. If he'd called, they would've said, "Nope, the trip's already been assigned. It's too late." It was God's timing if you want. It's hard to quantify all of that, but it was definitely a unique set of circumstances that led to me getting bumped.

Dr. James Dobson: Did you know him?

Dr. Steve Scheibner: I had only met Tom once, so I wouldn't say I knew him real well. I knew the captain on that flight a little bit better. I'd flown with him a couple of times. But as a co-pilot, you never get to really meet the other co-pilots. You get to meet the captains.

Dr. James Dobson: And you Megan knew nothing about all this, right?

Megan Scheibner: No, I just knew he didn't go to work. And I actually didn't even know September 11th was happening. I was homeschooling. And so we didn't have the TV on or the radio on, and I found out... We had a group of construction workers in the house, they'd been there for about a month working on our new home. And so they were kind of friends and they were avoiding me, and I couldn't figure out why. And their boss called me and said, "Where is Steve?" And Steve had gone into the Navy that day and his guys were just scared to death that I was a new widow and they were going to have to take care of me. And so they didn't even want me to know what had been happening. And shortly after that, Steve called. When the second plane hit, Steve called and said, "Breathe, this isn't me, and everything's okay."

Dr. James Dobson: Where were you and what time of the day in this saga? Where were you when you heard what was happening in Washington, D.C. and New York City?

Dr. Steve Scheibner: Well, in the morning of September 11th, I got up, and since I hadn't been assigned a flight by American Airlines, I put on my Navy uniform that day. I was doing some work as a Navy Reserve officer on the local base, and I went in on the Navy base that day and was meeting with a guy in the morning. And I had to go over and get something off my desk, so I went over to the other building where I normally worked. And then of course, as I walked in, all the televisions were on and the first airplane had hit the first building, the airplane that I should have been on. Now, I didn't know that at the time, I wasn't connecting all the dots quite yet. As we're standing there watching the TV, trying to figure out what was going on, we all watched the second airplane hit the second building

And at that moment then it became crystal clear, I think, to the world that it wasn't a fluke that first airplane, we were under attack. Now on a military base, we locked down. We were going to war that day. And so everybody was running around trying to figure out what was going on in the best next steps to take. The impact of it all kind of came to me when my cell phone started to ring because I wasn't thinking that anybody would think that I was one of the pilots on those flights because here I am on the ground. Why would anybody think that? Well, everybody was thinking that, so my cell phone rang and I'm in this office around this beautiful table with all these senior officers and we're all making war contingencies. You can picture that scene with all these guys in their Navy uniforms.

And as we're doing that, my cell phone rings and I pick it up and I answer it, and it's a secretary from my seminary, a beautiful lady by the name of Evie. And as soon as Evie heard my voice, she started crying. And when she started crying, I started crying. Here I am at this big wig meeting and I got tears running down my face. I got off the phone with her. I told her, I said, "I'm fine. I'm not on the airplane, just spread the word." Two minutes later, another friend called from Texas, same thing, another woman, she started crying. I started crying all over again. I thought, this is going to be a really long day. Then I called home to my wife and I said, "Honey, you got to tell everybody it wasn't me." And again, the church-

Dr. James Dobson: Excuse me. Megan, that's the first time you knew?

Megan Scheibner: I knew it wasn't him. Again, I didn't think to tell people that, but we had several things when he was in the Navy, when the space shuttle blew up, things like that, that you just need to hear his voice because it could have been him and it wasn't. It's a very hard feeling to describe.

Dr. James Dobson: Was there any moment where you thought he was on that plane?

Megan Scheibner: No. I knew he'd gone into the Navy, so I knew he wasn't on the plane.

Dr. Steve Scheibner: One of the things of the story that's so unique is that I didn't connect the dots. It didn't click for me until later on that day. We were so busy. We had a little prayer meeting that night at our house. And after the prayer meeting was over, I went back into my office and I thought, I wonder if I can find the names of the crew members that were on those flights because I was sure I would know them, except this time there were no names listed. My name was scrubbed off of it, and all it said was sequence failed continuity. And what that means at the airlines is that the flight never made it to its destination, but when I saw the screen visually in front of me, it hit me like a ton of bricks that that's the flight I had packed my bags for and that was the first flight that was hijacked.

And so a few minutes later, she came around the corner and said, "What are you doing?" I said, "Do you remember I told you I was going to LA yesterday?" And she said, "Yeah." And I said, "That was the first flight that was hijacked this morning." It's been a lot of years since 9/11. I still can't describe the feeling of that moment. It's a vacant feeling. You can't feel happy, you can't feel sad. I didn't feel angry right away. I just felt empty. And we held each other, stared. After all these years I still can't describe the feeling of that moment, but knowing that you should have been some place and you weren't, there's an obligation that comes with that.

Dr. James Dobson: As a theologian today, how do you deal with that from a divine point of view? God is not a selector of people to suffer, I think. I don't know how to make sense out of all that. Have you?

Dr. Steve Scheibner: I'm working on it, but I get asked that question a lot, and it's an important question to ask. And I can't waste my days. I've got to make the most out of my life and not the most for me, but the most for the bigger picture, the kingdom of God, the cause of Christ. And that has really developed a passion for us now over these last many years, since 9/11. We really are passionate about the American family. We were passionate about our family, eight kids, you have to be, on September 11th, 2001. But that passion for our family has now grown into a passion for the American family because Megan and I really feel like the American family's in crisis.

Dr. James Dobson: You and I share those same perspectives because I have that same passion. I have that same desire to win as many people to Christ as I possibly can with the remaining time that I am but you've come to that same conclusion.

Dr. Steve Scheibner: Yeah, that's right.

Dr. James Dobson: And Megan, you too.

Megan Scheibner: Yeah. Well, you asked us, how do we fit so much into our time? And I think that's the answer is we are urgent and we are passionate about it, and we've been able to pass that on our kids. They don't take it for granted that their dad's alive. And so when we travel, it's not mom and dad are leaving again, it's you go tell them mom and dad, they caught it.

Dr. James Dobson: They know all about that 9/11?

Megan Scheibner: Oh, yeah. And it's interesting. Our youngest, who we adopted from Guatemala City was born right after September 11th. And so for him, it's history, but he's seen the film with his dad, and so he doesn't get it with the same impact that his older siblings get it, but he gets that this is what God called dad to.

Dr. James Dobson: Megan, how did you deal with it theologically and in your relationship with the Lord?

Megan Scheibner: Well, thankful. I was very thankful, but there's a sense of, it's almost like mixed guilt, so spending the day, homeschooling my kids, changing diapers, tucking children in bed, thinking about Tom's wife who sent her kids off to school on a normal day, and then everything changed. And so just thinking how another woman-

Dr. James Dobson: You can't celebrate that.

Megan Scheibner: Somebody else lost a husband for me to keep mine. And it's like Steve said, what's the emotion you feel? It's just kind of vacant.

Dr. James Dobson: When he came home that night, what kind of conversation did you have?

Megan Scheibner: Oh, I think everybody in the United States had the same one. You just wanted to hug your family. We just really wanted to hug the kids, hug each other, and it wasn't immediate that it was, we've got to do something with this. It was really a process over time, but more and more it became everything we do needs to be on purpose.

Dr. James Dobson: Steve, you mentioned anger in passing a minute ago. Were you angry at the men who did this?

Dr. Steve Scheibner: I'm not naturally an angry person, but I think anybody, if you step over a line, you can make just about anybody angry. Years ago, Osama bin Laden was shot and killed. And I've got a number of questions along those lines. How do you feel about him being gone or dead? And my response was, "Good riddance," because the world is a very small place if you think about it. He, Osama bin Laden, personally, hand trained the man who was going to come and cut my throat. That's pretty close, but he missed. Missed his target. And so with that second chance, if you will, I could sit around and get angry about that and I could fume over it, but I don't think that does anything at the end of the day.

I think resolve to see the world change for the cause of Christ is going to do more to fight radical Islam and to fight radical terrorism around the world than anything else. I want to see more people come to Christ, more disciples made than anything else I can describe on this earth. And with that, if that's my legacy at the end of the day, then I've been successful and I have vindicated then what happened on 9/11 in my own small little way.

Dr. James Dobson: Have you found yourself thinking about what those moments were like, those last moments of the flight and the terror, which they intended and the fear and the chaos with the other passengers and the crew and so on? Have you walked your way through that?

Dr. Steve Scheibner: Yeah, I do. That's a great question. I don't think I've ever been asked that before, and I do. I don't want to over exaggerate this, but there's hardly a day that goes by that I don't think about that. As I share my story in pulpits and at different churches and different venues, we always show the "In My Seat" film. And in the middle of the film, the filmmaker takes you up on the airplane and you hear a dialogue between one of the flight attendants, Betty Ong, and the people on the ground. And she's-

Dr. James Dobson: Did you know her?

Dr. Steve Scheibner: I did. She was a friend of mine, and it's still hard after all these years to hear her voice and she was trying to be professional, but yet she was scared. She didn't know what was coming next. And she's talking about people being stabbed on the airplane. And I just go through that whole episode where you are going to work, you take off out of Logan like you normally would on a beautiful day. It was a beautiful day on September 11th. You climb up to altitude, you're making some small talk. What are you going to do when you get to LA?

You hit the autopilot to take you the rest of the way, and then the door to the cockpit gets broken into and you see two guys with knives and what do you do at that moment? It wouldn't have made any difference if I'd been on the airplane, I would've died just as well as everybody else did. But the idea that the co-pilot and the captain were killed in cold blood that way and then left to die on the airplane with some other passengers and first-class and so forth, it's breathtaking to think about it. It's changed our world, but there's not a day that goes by that I don't think about it.

Dr. James Dobson: Our guests today have been Dr. Steve Scheibner and his wife Megan, and we're not through talking, so if you don't mind, we're just going to continue here in the studio and we'll let people hear tomorrow what is about to occur, is that okay?

Dr. Steve Scheibner: That's okay.

Dr. James Dobson: I appreciate you all being here. More than that, I appreciate you taking a very near tragedy and using it for the Lord and to help people realize we're all on borrowed time.

Dr. Steve Scheibner: That's right.

Dr. James Dobson: None of us can count on a single day.

Dr. Steve Scheibner: No.

Dr. James Dobson: And you never know when you leave the house in the morning what the world has in store for you. But if you love the Lord and He's in control, you can rest in that. And I want to hear more about your thoughts about that. Megan, thank you for what you're doing.

Megan Scheibner: You're welcome.

Dr. James Dobson: You've lived this with your husband and you almost found yourself raising eight children without him, and I want to know more about your thoughts about that. Thank you all for being with us. Don't move a muscle. We're going to keep talking.

Dr. Steve Scheibner: Thank you, Dr. Dobson.

Megan Scheibner: Thank You.

Dr. Steve Scheibner: Looking forward to it.

Megan Scheibner: Thank you.

Dr. James Dobson: Okay.

Roger Marsh: Well, our guests today here on Family Talk have been Dr. Steve Scheibner and his wife Megan. Be sure to join us again tomorrow as Dr. James Dobson will continue his conversation with the Scheibners as they share about how they have found peace and meaning in their lives in the days after 9/11, 2001. Now, when you visit today's broadcast page at drjamesdobson.org/familytalk, you can find out more about the Scheibners organization called Character Health. You'll also learn how to get a copy of *In My Seat*. Again, that's drjamesdobson.org/familytalk. And keep in mind, terrorism is one of the issues that the next President of the United States will have to deal with. And with

election day coming up, do not let it catch you off guard. Sign up to download our free election guide when you go to drjamesdobson.org and click on the tab marked Countdown to Decision 2024.

It's right next to the countdown of how many days, how many hours, how many minutes until election 2024 takes place. That's at the top of our landing page. This helpful resource will let you know what each candidate stands for, and maybe more importantly what they are against. Again, go to drjamesdobson.org/countdown-to-decision-2024, or just click that icon on our landing page. Well, I'm Roger Marsh, thanking you so much for listening today. Be sure to join us again tomorrow when you'll hear the conclusion of the powerful testimony featuring Steve and Megan Scheibner, along with our own Dr. James Dobson. That's coming up next time right here on Family Talk.

Announcer:

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