

DESTINATION: MOON

*The Spiritual and Scientific Voyage of the
Eighth Man to Walk on the Moon*



BY ASTRONAUT JAMES IRWIN

*To all my grandchildren
and to all the children of the blue planet*

ANNIVERSARY EXPANDED EDITION—FIRST PRINTING
COPYRIGHT © 1989, 2004 THE VISION FORUM, INC.
All Rights Reserved

“Where there is no vision, the people perish.”

The Vision Forum, Inc.
4719 Blanco Rd., San Antonio, Texas 78212
1-800-440-0022
www.visionforum.com

Distributed by The Vision Forum, Inc. and



A Division of New Leaf Press

P.O. Box 726
Green Forest, Arkansas 72638

ISBN 1-929241-98-4

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

PROLOGUE

When you lean far back and look up, you can see the Earth like a beautiful, fragile Christmas tree ornament hanging against the blackness of space. It's as if you could reach out and hold it in your hand. That's a feeling, a perception, I had never anticipated. And I don't think it's blasphemous for me to say I felt I was seeing the Earth with the eyes of God.

But the actual journey which brought me to the moon, began long before my rocket blasted off from Earth. It was a roundabout and amazing journey, a journey so unexpected and remarkable that it can only be explained as the providential direction of God in my life.

Before the flight of Apollo 15, I considered myself a technician, a test pilot, the operator of a spacecraft—really a nuts-and-bolts type. And I didn't have an unblemished record, either. I had made mistakes, goofed up many times, had my ups and downs, physically and spiritually. But on my third try, just as I reached the age limit, I was accepted into the astronaut program. This was the most elite group in the service. What a great honor. But even then, I had no idea that I would ever be chosen to actually go to the moon.

When I was selected as an astronaut, it was something of a miracle that I was still in the Air Force. I had squeaked into Annapolis with a fraction of a point to spare on the substantiating examination. Then, before I had even graduated from the Naval Academy, I was ready to give that up. The Navy was so outmoded, so old-fashioned in its policies that I didn't want any part of that branch of the service. It seemed ridiculous to spend so much time at sea, for example. Sure, it was nice to go for a short boat ride, but why spend six months or a year away from your family? There were so many more interesting things to do on land—or even in the air.

It was providential that the Air Force was created in 1949, and that they were looking for young officers. The Air Force was able to take twenty percent of our class at Annapolis. Fortunately, I drew a low number. If I had stuck in the Navy, I probably would have served the minimum time and then resigned.

As it turned out, I had some fantastic opportunities in the Air Force. I was even assigned to be the first and only test pilot on the world's highest- and fastest-flying airplane, the YF-12A, which made me so proud that I thought I was the hottest test pilot in the sky. But truthfully, throughout most of my Air Force career, I was sorry I hadn't gotten out of the service back in 1955 and gone with a commercial airline. At the time I thought that life would be more

satisfying if I could be a simple airline pilot until the age of sixty-five and then just retire. I couldn't think of a more relaxing life, particularly for a man like me who loves to fly. I would make enough money and still have a lot of free time.

I can't imagine life without flying now, but it wasn't an instant love affair. During my pilot training in Hondo, Texas, I came to the conclusion that I didn't care much for it. I had had about ten hours when I decided I wasn't cut out to be a pilot. Aviation wasn't challenging or exciting. I was uncomfortable in the bumpy Texas air. It didn't make me airsick, but I didn't feel comfortable.

I also didn't think I had any outstanding aptitude for flying. I was probably average. But I was relaxed and I slept a whole lot. Half the guys in my little flight group washed out. I've always thought that the only reason I didn't wash out was because I didn't clutch up. Maybe the fact that I wasn't particularly interested in flying made it easier to go through with it. Another important factor in my success was a great guy from south Texas named Ed Siers who was my flight instructor. Ed probably had fifteen or twenty hours at the time; he was an old crop-duster and had done all types of flying. "We'll try to work this thing out," he said. "I'll try to find some smooth air for you."

Ed didn't find much smooth air, but he took me through my training period. When I was knocked out with pneumonia and had lost two weeks, he even volunteered to fly with me on weekends to help me catch up. So I stuck with it and graduated with my class.

As much as I like Ed, I discovered something new about myself when I soloed. It was a great relief to get into an airplane by myself, with no instructor along. It was good to be rid of all that noise in the back seat. I flew better when I could get up there in the sky, close to God, all by myself. That solitude was and is complete joy for me.

After I had gotten my wings, I picked an assignment at the Air Force base in Yuma, Arizona. When I got to Yuma, I saw P-51s there on the runway. Just seeing them was all it took. Flying that 51 really caught me by surprise. It opened up a whole new thrill for me in flying. Suddenly I came into my own. All the tedium and boredom and everything else I had been trying to escape was behind me. I was hooked.

But in those years, my career was forever being blocked. I was grounded many times for violations—a little too relaxed and high-spirited maybe. And then I almost wiped out in a terrible air accident. I thought I'd lost my chance to fly the YF-12A, the test pilot's dream. When I had recovered sufficiently to report for duty, they told me, "No, Captain Irwin. You have had a concussion. You have even had amnesia. We can't let you fly for at least a year while we completely evaluate you."

In 1963, I applied to NASA's space program, but they turned me down. I believe they felt my accident was too recent. The second time around, NASA was looking for scientists with doctorates and I couldn't qualify. I was hounded by the history of my injury and fast approaching the age limit for astronauts. In 1966, I made one last desperate effort.

My boss at the Air Defense Command in Colorado Springs, Col. Wilton Earle, went to bat for me. He must have contacted all the generals he had ever known in the Air Force. I don't know what he told them, but obviously it had a powerful effect. It was fortunate for me that this time around, in the selection of the fifth group, they picked nineteen, the largest number ever. There were examinations and interviews and physicals and all the rest of it, and finally the announcements were made. Jim Irwin was selected.

This was the highest honor I could imagine. I had only one way of explaining this mind-boggling thing that had happened to me. But the explanation did not fully come to me until the flight of Apollo 15 was over and I had a chance to fully reflect on what God had done in my life. The Lord wanted me to go to the moon so I could come back and do something more important with my life than fly airplanes. During the years of training and the many months of competition with the other astronauts for the assignment as a primary crewman, I had been so absorbed in preparing for the scientific flight that it never occurred to me how high the spiritual flight could be.

As we reached out in a physical way to the heavens, I was moved spiritually. Flying into space, I had a new sense of who I was as a man created in the image of God, of the wonder of the remarkable Earth that God created for man to inhabit, and of the very presence of my Creator.

As I headed into the cosmos, I became increasingly aware of how different my present circumstances were from the reality of life on Earth. Within my very spirit, I sensed the beginning of a glorious change taking place inside of me. Looking back at that spaceship we call Earth, I was touched by a desire to convince man that he is a unique creature made in the image of God, and that he must learn to honor God and love his fellow man.

During this sort of flight, you are too busy to fully reflect on the splendor of space or even to appreciate the deep spiritual significance and honor of man journeying into the heavens. But the ultimate effect this journey had on me was to reshape my very faith in God. Throughout my space journey, I felt an overwhelming sense of the presence of God, especially on the moon itself. I felt His spirit more closely than I have ever felt it on Earth. Standing on the moon, with the expanse of space before me, I rejoiced in the nearness of God. And

when our astronaut team was struggling with the difficult tasks, I prayed and the Lord always sent an immediate answer.

I am not the only astronaut to be affected by this experience on the moon and in space. Every man who goes to the moon is deeply affected, one way or another, by the journey. The effect on me was to draw me closer to my God, Jesus Christ.

I think there are things that God does not intend man to understand, things that man is to take on faith. Believing in the Creator and taking Him at His word is a matter of faith. But the Bible teaches that the very heavens declare the glory of God, even His eternal power and godhead, such that man is without excuse. Man was designed to respond to his Creator, and the Bible teaches that Jesus Christ, the second person of the Trinity, was the very Creator of the universe. That is why nothing will ever surpass the beauty and simplicity of the message of the Gospel. I hate to see people confused about it.

It took me about a month to discover what had happened inside me. When I first talked to people about Apollo 15, I would tell them anything they wanted to know about space, about the scientific side. The scientific voyage of discovery was, after all, what NASA had invested years preparing us to accomplish. Shortly after the flight, we started our visits around the world—goodwill missions directed by the President. Al, Dave, and I participated as a crew on these occasions. They were designed to be scientific exchanges. I didn't have the satisfaction of telling the complete story and sharing my own religious experience.

However, when we visited Italy, there were many questions at the press conference about the religious implications of the trip to the moon. Since Dave and Al considered me the preacher, I answered the questions. In the weeks, months, and years that followed, I had the great satisfaction of being able to share the complete message. I started working unofficially on weekends, trying not to create a problem for NASA. I received so much encouragement from the churches where I had been speaking, and from Mary and the children to go ahead with this work, that there has been a growing conviction about my commitment and a strengthening of my message. I feel a terrific compulsion to hit as hard as I can while I can be useful, before my fame fades.

The response from people everywhere has been tremendously moving. Everybody wants to talk to a man who has been to the moon. They think that since he has seen something they have not seen and will never see, he must know something they do not know. They are interested in the scientific voyage, but they are also interested in the spiritual voyage. They are interested in what happened inside us, in our hearts and souls. They can't go to the moon, but they can take this flight.

When I came back from the flight, I was baptized at the Nassau Bay Baptist Church in Houston with my daughter Jill. I had accepted Christ when I was a boy of eleven in New Port Richey, Florida, at a revival meeting, but I didn't stay as close to the Lord as I should have. But after the flight, the power of God was working in me and I was possessed by a growing feeling that God did have a new mission for me.


I tell people that God has a plan for them. I say that if God controls the universe with such infinite precision, controlling all the motion of the planets and the stars, this is the working out of a perfect plan for outer space. I believe that He has the perfect plan for the inner space of man, the spirit of man. This plan was manifest when He sent His son Jesus Christ to die for us, to forgive our sins, and to show us He has a plan for our lives.

It seems plain to me that the hand of God has been in my life as far back as I am able to remember. I think Providence has been a factor in every important thing that has ever happened to me. As strange as it sounds, my flight on Apollo 15 was the fulfillment of a dream I had all my life. I have talked of wanting to go to the moon since I was a young boy. My mother says that she remembers this, and some old neighbors of ours whom she talked to recently also remembered that when I was a little boy I used to point up to the moon and say, "I'm going to go up there someday."

I probably said this, but I don't know how much confidence I had that I would be able to do it. Reverses along the way made it seem unlikely that I was headed in this direction. When it happened, I felt that I was doing something I had always wanted to do. But the most startling thing to me now is not that I have made the flight but what the flight has done to me. God has changed my life.

On the mountains of the moon, I had an opportunity to quote a favorite Psalm: "I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help." As I quoted, I had the impulse to add, "But of course, we get quite a bit from Houston, too." This incredible flight that we made with help from Houston is one of the extraordinary technological achievements in the history of man. I can believe it only because I understand it and can retrace it step by step. As I tell this story of the scientific voyage of Apollo 15, I will also try to tell the story of that other voyage I made with the help of God.

ASTRONAUT JAMES IRWIN



Have you ever thought about what the moon is like? For thousands of years, children have looked at the moon and wondered what it would be like to go there. It seemed to be an impossible idea. They couldn't just strap wings on their arms and fly there like a bird. In fact, it wasn't until 1906 that there were flying machines. And even with the invention of jet planes, we could not escape from the Earth's atmosphere. So the moon seemed like an impossible goal. Like many children, I dreamed of going to the moon. There's only one difference between my dream and that of most other kids. My dream came true! I would like to tell you about how I became one of only twelve men to walk on the moon. I saw and experienced some amazing things. But the trip also changed my life in a most unexpected way.

Until 1957, space travel was only a fantasy. We could read stories about what it might be like. But that was only our imagination. Then the Soviet Union launched a satellite called Sputnik that circled the Earth many times every day. Four years later, Yuri Gagarin became the first human being to fly in space.



The first American to orbit the Earth was John Glenn. He was part of a program called Project Mercury. That was the first step toward the dream of President John F. Kennedy who challenged the United States to *commit itself to achieving the goal, before this decade is out, of landing a man on the moon and returning him safely to the Earth.*

Each trip into space was a little longer and more complicated. After Project Mercury came Gemini where two men flew together. During some of these flights, an astronaut actually left his spacecraft and floated in space.

More astronauts were added to the space program as the time for moon flights drew closer. My, how I wanted to be one of those astronauts. But there was a problem. I was teaching a student how to fly and lost control of the plane and we crashed into the desert. I was a mess—two broken legs, a broken jaw, and a banged-up head. It was so bad that the doctors wondered if I'd ever walk again. Fortunately, the student pilot also survived, though he had serious head injuries.

God was good to me and I did fly again. However, twice I applied for the space program and was turned down. They didn't tell me why, but it probably was because of my injuries from the plane crash. I was almost thirty-six-years old, the point when I would be too old to be considered as an astronaut.

