

Apollo 8's Christmas Message 50 Years Ago

by Suzanne O. Shera



The iconic Apollo 8 mission in 1968 was first brought to my attention five years ago, through Awana's T&T (Truth and Training) curriculum, *Ultimate Adventure Book 1* (2010): Leah mentions to star-struck Arthur that three astronauts on the spaceship celebrated Christmas Eve with the whole world by reading from the book of Genesis. This December marks the fiftieth anniversary of Apollo 8's flight, which was considered a victory for the United States, the scientific world, and God.

During the 2008 Annual John Glenn Lecture Series at the Smithsonian Museum, astronauts Bill Anders (Lunar Module Pilot), Frank Borman (Flight Commander), and Jim Lovell (Command Module Pilot) candidly described the details of the mission before and during the Apollo 8 flight. Frank Borman mentioned that Apollo 8 was initially supposed to be an earth orbit exercising the lunar model, but the plans were changed in August to make it a lunar orbit mission in order to beat the Soviets, who were intending to attempt a similar mission at the end of the year. NASA had only sixteen weeks of planning before the launch day on December 21.

Bill Anders described how they trained for every possible emergency while enduring many simulations and survival trainings in the jungle, the desert, and the ocean. They were subjected to gravities up to 15 G (fifteen times more than Earth's gravity)

while on the human centrifuge. They rode the launch abort trainer that simulated the rattling vibrational effects of the spaceship. Yet, the trip itself presented unexpected challenges such as the huge sideways vibrations during the launch, the sudden thrust during the rocket stage cut-offs, the uncomfortable sensation of low gravity for a period of time, the noise level that hindered their communication, and nausea.

Nevertheless the mission was a success as they were able to meet every goal assigned to them. They escaped Earth's gravity traveling at a speed greater than man had ever reached and orbited the moon ten times, thus seeing its far side hidden from Earth. Bill Anders and Jim Lovell took many photographs to prepare for a landing spot of a future Apollo mission, naming each crater and mount with inspiring names. The success reached its height during their third revolution around the moon when they observed the unexpected rising of Earth. Since the spaceship was rotating around its axis, they scrambled madly for photos before losing sight of our planet, thus resulting with the iconic earthrise photo.

NASA management had asked the astronauts to say something appropriate for the occasion without giving them specific instructions. A friend advised them to read from Genesis 1:1-10, which they did without hesitation on the eve of December 24; they took turns reading a few verses each. The last astronaut concluded the message by saying "And from the crew of Apollo 8, we close with good night, good luck, a Merry Christmas—and God bless all of you, all of you on the good Earth."

The response to the reading from Genesis was overwhelmingly positive by the majority of the one billion spectators, and the US Postal Service released a commemorative stamp using the famous earthrise photo with the words of Genesis 1:1, "In the beginning God..."

When asked about their impressions of the flight, Frank Borman described his overwhelming feelings of gratitude to 400,000 Americans who put the program together, from the NASA giants all the way to the janitor. Jim Lovell remarked that they didn't understand the significance of this epic event at first, and how the success of their mission was important for their country that year since it had been a particularly difficult one for the United States—Martin Luther

King, Jr. and Senator Bobby Kennedy were assassinated in 1968, the war in Vietnam was escalating, and riots had filled the streets of the United States. Bill Anders felt a little guilty because he thought that Apollo 8 was a lot safer than the missions of some of his comrades fighting in Vietnam.

God's Sovereignty was glaring through the timing and location of the events of this space mission, reminding us once more that He alone can bring order amidst chaos by shining His light in darkness. God allowed these astronauts to carry on the mission with excellence and to agree on reading from Genesis 1—straight from the heavens so that God was glorified as the Author of all Creation. Its coincidence with Christmas Eve reminds us of the supremacy of Christ as described in Colossians 1:15-23 where we find the strongest statements about the divine nature of Christ as the firstborn of all creation and the one who can reconcile us with the Father.

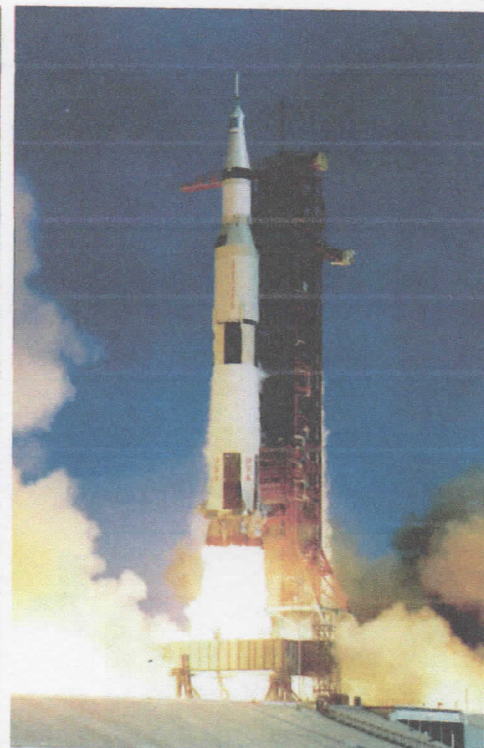
During this Christmas season, let us therefore praise Him together through an excerpt of the Awana T&T theme song:

I will train for the mission He has for me.

I will trust in Him to give the victory.
As I read His Word and pray, He gives direction,
As I follow Him each and every day.

In the sky, undersea, in the wild,
Christ with me. ■

Suzanne Ourfalian Shera is the author of Lightlab, a book for kids to explore the nature of light and to know Jesus. She still has one homeschooled child in grade 12 and



has been teaching Math and Physics to various age groups in the Philadelphia area. In the past fifteen years, she has been involved with children's ministries



such as Child Evangelism Fellowship, Awana, and vacation Bible schools. She is married to David Shera, and they have two children: Marcus (20) and Miriam (17).

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For more information, check out these links:

"An evening with the Apollo 8 Astronauts,"
Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum
[youtube.com/watch?v=Q2h_FtLzrrU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q2h_FtLzrrU)

Apollo 8 – Genesis Reading (1968)
[youtube.com/watch?v=XEmn0uaQCYc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XEmn0uaQCYc)

Awana: Truth and Training Song
[youtube.com/watch?v=iTDWOhKOGKY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iTDWOhKOGKY)



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