

Orion Circles the Moon and Returns to Earth

The Wired Word for the Week of December 18, 2022

In the News

On Sunday, December 11, NASA's Orion spacecraft splashed down in the Pacific Ocean, west of Baja, California. The uncrewed spacecraft traveled more than 1.4 million miles on a path around the moon and then returned safely to Earth. During re-entry, Orion endured temperatures of about 5,000 degrees Fahrenheit, half as hot as the surface of the sun. Over the course of 20 minutes, Orion slowed from nearly 25,000 mph to about 20 mph for a parachute-assisted splashdown. This completed the flight test of the Artemis I mission.

The mission began with a successful liftoff from NASA's Kennedy Space Center in Florida on November 16, after several delays due to repeated fuel leaks. For over 25 days, NASA subjected Orion to the harsh environment of deep space. This flight test was performed in preparation for flying astronauts on Artemis II.

"The splashdown of the Orion spacecraft -- which occurred 50 years to the day of the Apollo 17 moon landing -- is the crowning achievement of Artemis I," said NASA Administrator Bill Nelson. "From the launch of the world's most powerful rocket to the exceptional journey around the moon and back to Earth, this flight test is a major step forward in the Artemis Generation of lunar exploration."

During the mission, Orion flew by the moon twice, coming within 80 miles of the lunar surface. On the final lunar flyby, traveling around 4,800 mph, Orion flew over some of the Apollo landing sites. In order to test and stress the systems in the spacecraft, Orion reached a distance of nearly 270,000 miles from Earth. This is more than 1,000 times farther than the orbit of the International Space Station.

"With Orion safely returned to Earth we can begin to see our next mission on the horizon which will fly crew to the moon for the first time as a part of the next era of exploration," said Jim Free, NASA associate administrator. NASA hopes to return astronauts to the surface of the moon as soon as 2025, using an Artemis Space Launch System vehicle and a SpaceX Human Landing System lander. (In upcoming Artemis missions, NASA will land the first woman and the first person of color on the surface of the moon.) This will pave the way for a long-term lunar presence, and will serve as a stepping stone for astronauts on the way to Mars. The risks and rewards of missions with crewed spacecraft will be higher than the mission of Artemis I.

NASA personnel said they analyzed a variety of anomalies during Orion's flight, but none posed major threats to the mission. While the flight was underway, engineers collected data about radiation from Orion, and experimented with how the spacecraft was oriented in space. The spacecraft also captured images of the moon, Earth and itself, and passed close to the lunar surface during a "propulsion burn" that sent the vehicle back toward Earth. During this propulsion burn, the spacecraft's engine fired for 3 minutes and 27 seconds, putting Orion on the correct trajectory to its splashdown in the Pacific Ocean.

"Orion has returned from the moon and is safely back on planet Earth," said Mike Sarafin, Artemis I mission manager. "With splashdown we have successfully operated Orion in the deep space environment, where it exceeded our expectations, and demonstrated that Orion can withstand the extreme conditions of returning through Earth's atmosphere from lunar velocities." On Artemis II, NASA plans to fly two astronauts around the moon in Orion. Then Artemis III will include the first human lunar landing in 50 years.

"It wouldn't be possible without the incredible NASA team," said NASA Administrator Bill Nelson. "For years, thousands of individuals have poured themselves into this mission, which is inspiring the world to work together to reach untouched cosmic shores. Today is a huge win for NASA, the United States, our international partners, and all of humanity."

In other lunar exploration news, the private Japanese start-up iSpace recently launched its HAKUTO-R lunar lander aboard a SpaceX Falcon 9 rocket. This is the first nongovernment moon mission. In December 2020, the Chinese Chang program returned samples from the lunar surface, and plans a manned mission in the 2030s. The privately financed Dearmoon mission is planned to launch next year on a SpaceX Starship rocket, taking artists from seven nations on a lunar flyby mission.

More on this story can be found at these links:

[Splashdown! NASA's Orion Returns to Earth After Historic Moon Mission. *NASA Press Release.*](#)

[NASA Prepares for Orion Spacecraft Splashdown to Conclude Artemis I Mission. *The Wall Street Journal.*](#)

[NASA's Orion Spacecraft Offers Last Breathtaking Views of the Moon as it Begins Journey Home. *Fox Weather.*](#)

Applying the News Story

Think about how the successful mission of the uncrewed Orion spacecraft prepared the way for the missions that will be launched in the future with astronauts on board. Reflect on the words of the prophets who prepared the way for Jesus, God's mission to us in human form. Identify some of the risks and rewards of God coming to us in the flesh, and some of the ways that you can respond.

The Big Questions

1. The uncrewed Artemis I mission prepared the way for future missions with astronauts. In what areas of your life is such a "flight test" helpful? What aspects of your life do you test and improve along the way?
2. The Orion spacecraft traveled through the harsh environment of deep space. What would you describe as a difficult environment in your life, personally or professionally? Where do you find strength and insight to face it, to deal with it, and to endure?

3. The Artemis I mission paved the way for a long-term presence on the moon, much as the biblical prophets paved the way for Christ's presence on Earth. What is the significance of the Incarnation, God's presence in human life? What advantages does it have over earlier messages from God?

4. The risks and rewards of missions with crewed spacecraft will be higher than the mission of Artemis I. What risks did God assume with the birth of Jesus? What rewards have you gained from a relationship with Jesus?

5. NASA Administrator Bill Nelson said that Artemis "wouldn't be possible without the incredible NASA team." Who is part of your team at home, in the community, and in the church? What do they help you to accomplish?

Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

Isaiah 7:14

Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son and shall name him Immanuel. (For context, read [Isaiah 7:10-17](#).)

Isaiah lived in the eighth century before Christ, during the reigns of King Ahaz and possibly King Hezekiah. A strong connection exists between Isaiah and Jesus, since people often see Jesus as the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecies, and since Isaiah is the prophet that Jesus quotes the most frequently (eight times).

In this passage, God speaks to King Ahaz, asking him to request a sign. Ahaz declines to do so, saying, "I will not ask, and I will not put the LORD to the test" (v. 12). Then Isaiah criticizes Ahaz, asking him not to "weary my God" (v. 13). Isaiah says that God will offer the sign of the birth of a child named Immanuel (meaning "God is with us"), one who will soon "refuse the evil and choose the good" (v. 15). The sign sends the message that in a short time, the military threat of "two kings" (v. 16) will come to an end.

Questions: What is the value of a human messenger over a written message? Where do you find hope in the promise of Immanuel, "God is with us"? How do you respond to this sign? Be specific.

Micah 5:2

But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days. (For context, read [Micah 5:2-5a](#).)

The book of Micah, named for a prophet from Moresheth in the land of Judah, begins with prophecies of doom directed toward Israel and Judah. But the book also promises restoration, and the fifth chapter speaks of a shepherd-king who will come to rule Judah. Micah anticipates a new ruler from the little town of Bethlehem, a rural savior who is not a part of the wealthy

Jerusalem establishment. God says "from [Bethlehem] shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days."

Bethlehem is the place to connect to "ancient days," to see God at work in the world, and to find Jesus, one who "shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the LORD" (v. 4). Jesus is a king who rules like a good shepherd, keeping his flock well fed and secure. Coming from Bethlehem, which means "house of bread," he nourishes with his teachings, his example and his gifts of forgiveness and new life. In addition, Jesus "shall be great to the ends of the earth; and he shall be the one of peace" (vv. 4–5).

Questions: What expectation do you have of Jesus, based on this prophecy of Micah? Where do you find nourishment, inspiration and guidance in this vision of a shepherd-king? Which qualities of this king mean the most to you?

Matthew 3:1-3

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight.'" (For context, read [Matthew 3:1-12](#).)

The gospel according to Matthew is the first of four accounts of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Matthew is concerned with placing Jesus in the story of God's saving work, which began in Genesis and continued through the Hebrew Scriptures. The book begins with an "account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham" (1:1).

Matthew tells the story of the birth of Jesus being connected to Isaiah's prophecy of "Emmanuel" (1:23), and then recounts the proclamation of John the Baptist. John fulfills the prophecy of Isaiah, who spoke of one crying out in the wilderness to prepare "the way of the Lord." In the message of John, people are challenged to bear fruit "worthy of repentance" (v. 8) and to prepare for the one who "will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire" (v. 11).

Questions: Those who heard the proclamation of John the Baptist were subjected to a high-temperature stress test. What does it mean to you to bear fruit "worthy of repentance"? How does the challenge of John better prepare you to follow Jesus, God in human form? What are the rewards of following the one named Emmanuel?

John 1:14

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. (For context, read [John 1:1-17](#).)

In the fourth and final gospel, John begins by saying, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (1:1), echoing both the creation story in Genesis 1 and the passage about Divine Wisdom in Proverbs 8.

John's account of the life of Jesus stands apart from the preceding gospels, and his first chapter says that "the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of

a father's only son, full of grace and truth." This Word is *logos* in the Greek of the New Testament, and here it means God's reason or plan. "From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ" (vv. 16-17). Jesus reveals God's reason, order, meaning and plan for the universe, and shows us the face of God most clearly.

Questions: How does Jesus reveal the Word of God to you? What value do you find in God's decision to appear as a human being? What risk did God take, and why? What did this mission accomplish?

For Further Discussion

1. Artemis was a widely venerated Ancient Greek deity, worshiped by people throughout the ancient Greek world. She was goddess of the hunt, and was strongly connected to the moon. Artemis had multiple temples, altars and shrines, including her great temple at Ephesus, one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. When the apostle Paul was preaching in Ephesus, followers of Artemis (some of whom were sellers of religious items associated with the temple) rioted, and Paul was imprisoned for a bit prior to leaving the city. What do you think the apostle Paul thought of Artemis when he was writing his letter to the Ephesians? How should Christians connect NASA's Artemis I mission to Christian mission, if at all?

2. TWW Team Member Frank Ramirez writes, "God is active at all times in things we take for granted -- grass growing, leaves falling, snow melting in spring, winds blowing -- but put a baby in a manger and suddenly we're paying attention to Emmanuel, God Among Us." Why do you think this is the case, if at all? Why are we drawn to this particular mission of God? What difference does it make to you?

3. A "propulsion burn" sent the Orion spacecraft on its journey back toward Earth. During this propulsion burn, the spacecraft's engine fired for 3 minutes and 27 seconds. Where do you get a "propulsion burn" in your spiritual life? What keeps you on the proper trajectory in your personal life and in your service to Christ?

4. The gospel of Matthew ends with Jesus sending his followers on a mission: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations" (28:19). He knew that there would be risks and rewards in such a mission. How are you responding to this Great Commission in your life as an individual, and as a member of a congregation?

Responding to the News

Use this week to reflect on passages in the Bible that can prepare you to receive Christ fully at Christmas. Look at the stresses of these days as tests that can strengthen you for a life of discipleship, following the one who is Emmanuel, "God with us."

Prayer

Almighty God, we thank you that your eternal Word became flesh and lived among us as Jesus Christ. May we see discipleship as a challenge and an adventure, following the path of the One who fully reveals to us your grace and your truth. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Other News This Week

Scientists Affirm Benefits of Faith for Health and Happiness

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In the News

In a recent piece for *The Guardian* entitled [Beyond Beliefs: Does Religious Faith Lead to a Happier, Healthier Life?](#), author David Robson wrote that thousands of scientific studies conducted over several decades around the world show a positive correlation between religious or spiritual beliefs and practices, and physical and mental health benefits.

Frequent involvement in a supportive faith community has proven to reduce stress, depression and anxiety and can add years to one's life by lowering the risk of cancer, cardiovascular disease and suicide.

In one 2018 study of more than 1,000 obituaries of people across America, Dr. Laura Wallace of the University of Chicago found that those whose religious affiliation was mentioned as a significant aspect of their identity lived for 5.6 to 10 years more, on average, than those whose religion had not been recorded.

Robson acknowledged that people who follow spiritual practices may, as a general rule, have healthier living habits than many nonreligious people, which may partly account for their improved health outcomes. But the development of healthier habits may also be due to the adoption of religious teachings about moderation, self-control and abstinence.

Some of the ways religion and spirituality can provide physical and mental health benefits include:

- Building a sense of belonging to a safe community where people connect with like-minded worshipers and are accepted and valued
- Allowing people to mark significant milestones together and cope with difficult life events through rituals
- Participating in intercessory prayer, which emphasizes empathy and care for others besides oneself
- Practicing gratitude, which helps people reframe problems and find something positive in negative circumstances. "It's a form of cognitive reappraisal," says Professor Patty Van Cappellen at Duke University in Durham, North Carolina.
- Cultivating a sense of awe and wonder, which helps worshipers break out of self-centered thinking and develop the ability to look at the big picture
- Creating a sense of purpose and meaning through service, volunteering or acts of charity. "When people have a core set of values, it helps establish goals. And when those goals

are established and pursued, that produces better psychological well-being," says Professor Eric Kim at the University of British Columbia

- Provides principles upon which to build a stable, moral life

Robson, who self-identifies as an agnostic, suggests that the benefits religion and spirituality provide may be available to the nonreligious, but "[you would have to] build all these behaviors into your routine, so that you perform them with the same regularity and devotion normally reserved for spiritual practices."

"The power of religion is that it gives you this package of ingredients that are pre-made and organized for you," says Van Cappellen. "And if you are not religious you have to create it on your own."

More on this story can be found at these links:

[Beyond Beliefs: Does Religious Faith Lead to a Happier, Healthier Life? *The Guardian*](#)
[Religiosity, Spirituality, and Mental Health. *Mentalhealthph.org*](#)
[Even Scientists Find That Religion Has Many Benefits. *Bill's Faith Matters Blog*](#)

The Big Questions

1. What motivates you to persist in the Christian faith?
2. What tangible benefits have you received from your Christian beliefs and faith practice?
3. Have the benefits of your faith been worth whatever sacrifices you have made to be a disciple of Christ? Explain your answer.
4. What spiritual disciplines or practices have you found that have contributed to better health and happiness for you?
5. How might belonging to a community of faith and following spiritual disciplines contribute to a better understanding of who God is, who you are in relation to God, and how you fit in the universe?

Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

Psalm 8:1-5

O LORD, our Sovereign,

how majestic is your name in all the earth!

You have set your glory above the heavens.

Out of the mouths of babes and infants

you have founded a bulwark because of your foes,

to silence the enemy and the avenger.

When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,

*the moon and the stars that you have established;
what are humans that you are mindful of them,
mortals that you care for them?
Yet you have made them a little lower than God
and crowned them with glory and honor. (For context, read [Psalm 8:1-9.](#))*

Contemplative meditation on God and on the works of God in creation and among people is one of the spiritual disciplines that increase the psalmist's awe and wonder, which scientists say enhances physical and mental health.

In [Genesis 15:5-6](#), God brought Abraham outside to look at the night sky, to see if he could count the stars. "So shall your descendants be," God promised. Obviously, counting the stars would have been an impossible task, even before modern technology expanded our sense of the vastness of the universe! The experience of contemplating the stars in the heavens is about more than appreciating something beautiful, though. It is directly tied to the development of Abraham's faith: "And he believed the LORD, and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness."

When the psalmist looks at the heavens, it causes him to reflect on the way God cares about human beings. The psalmist learns something about God and about the way God relates to humanity by observing what God has made.

Modern songwriter Jane LaRowe wrote of how God thought about people before creating the heavens and the earth in her song, "[I Was In His Mind](#)," but continues the theme, declaring that Jesus was thinking of us the night he prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, and that he held us in his heart when he died on the cross.

Questions: When is the last time you marveled at some aspect of God's creation? What effect did that moment of reflection have on your understanding of God and of your place in the mind of God?

How did God "found a bulwark to silence the enemy and the avenger out of the mouth of the infant Jesus"? Why is that a source of amazement that still produces a sense of awe for us today?

How does the idea that Jesus was thinking of us at the time of his death impact you?

Luke 2:42, 46-49

And when [Jesus] was twelve years old, they went up as usual for the festival. ... After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. When his parents saw him they were astonished, and his mother said to him, "Child, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously looking for you." He said to them, "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" (For context, read [Luke 2:41-52.](#))

In this passage, we learn that Jesus' parents were committed to traditional faith practices, since they made the annual trek to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. We are not told whether they had previously brought Jesus and any of their other children, but they certainly set them an example of respect for Mosaic law and solidarity with the Jewish people by their actions.

The 12th year of a Jewish boy would have been a particularly significant time to include Jesus in the pilgrimage, since it marked the recognition of his passage from childhood to adulthood. Jesus' spiritual formation was likely of great concern, given the way he was conceived and brought into the world.

When the festival was over, Joseph and Mary headed back to Nazareth, thinking that Jesus was somewhere in the caravan, only to realize that he was missing. Retracing their steps, they searched for him for three days, finally finding him in the temple where he was engrossed in theological discussions with the teachers. Jesus seemed to think it was the most natural thing in the world for him to be pursuing his religious education there, in his Father's house!

Questions: How might observing the festival of Passover, during which the story was recited about the sacrifice of the Passover lamb that led to the escape of the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt ([Exodus 12:1-13, 21-28](#)) have influenced Jesus' spiritual formation? How might this experience have helped to shape Jesus' understanding of God? His understanding of his own identity and destiny?

Psalm 139:1-2, 6-7

O LORD, you have searched me and known me.

You know when I sit down and when I rise up;

you discern my thoughts from far away. ...

Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;

it is so high that I cannot attain it.

Where can I go from your spirit?

Or where can I flee from your presence? (For context, read [Psalm 139:1-24](#).)

The psalmist is blown away by the sense that God's vast knowledge is infinite and that God is omnipresent.

Francis Thompson penned what some interpret as a poetic version of this psalm in *The Hound of Heaven*, in which God pursues the narrator patiently, inexorably and inescapably.

It is not only that God can pinpoint the exact physical location of every single one of his creations at any given point in time, but God also knows the condition of the heart and mind (vv. 23-24).

But there are times when it is hard to feel God's presence with us. In her recent article, "[The Feeling I No Longer Pray For](#)", published in *The Christian Century*, Debie Thomas, an Episcopal minister and author, wrote of her childhood desire "to feel God's presence ... in palpable ways":

"For years, my litmus test for a mature faith was affective: Did I feel God in my everyday life? Did I sense God's love, feel God's forgiveness, experience God's joy? ... now, I see that my problem wasn't faulty spiritual circuitry but rather an impoverished conception of God. For much of my life, my sense of what counts as a spiritual experience was too small. ...

"Most of us have an easy time perceiving God in our gratitude, our awe, our reverence, our delight," Thomas continued. "But what if God is just as present in our boredom, our irritation, our hunger, and our fury? ...

"There is nowhere I can go where God is not," Thomas affirmed. "There is no experience I can have apart from the one in whom I live and move and have my being. ... I'm learning to experience God's presence in all things -- even in God's apparent absence. Even in the hunger that causes me to yearn, ask, seek, and knock. God is fully present in the absence and the hunger, just as God is fully present in the communion and the feast."

It is this kind of faith that gave Jesus the ability [to commit his spirit into the hands of the God](#) by whom he felt forsaken on the cross ([Matthew 27:46](#)).

Question: How do you maintain your faith in God when you do not feel his presence and are suffering severely?

Hebrews 10:23-25, 35-36

Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching. ... Do not, therefore, abandon that boldness of yours; it brings a great reward. For you need endurance, so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what was promised. (For context, read [Hebrews 10:19-39](#).)

The writer of this passage assures his readers that they can have complete confidence that they can enter into God's presence because Jesus has opened up "a new and living way" through his self-sacrifice (vv. 19-21). He is fully aware that they have already suffered for their faith (vv. 32-34) and are likely to be tested yet again.

He reminds them that God promised "in a very little while, the one who is coming will come and will not delay, but my righteous one will live by faith" (vv. 37-38).

Questions: What strategies (or spiritual disciplines) are lifted up in this passage that can help believers endure hardship, continue believing in God's promise of our Lord's return, and do God's will by loving and doing good deeds? What makes those strategies effective? How are you implementing those strategies? What can you do if those strategies are less available to you (as happened for some of the original recipients of the Hebrews missive who were separated from the community of believers when they were imprisoned, for example)?

For Further Discussion

1. Where, if ever, do you sense or feel the presence of God? If you find that kind of experience lacking in your life, does that mean your faith is somehow deficient? Why or why not?

2. Respond to this, from *The Wired Word* team member, Joanna Loucky-Ramsey, who recalls visiting Yosemite National Park years ago. "The entire experience was heart-stopping," she writes. "But taking in the panoramic view of the valley floor, with its pristine waterfalls and the formidable El Capitan and majestic Half Dome rock formations, was unforgettable. I remember thinking nonsensically to myself, 'I could die and go to heaven right now, and it wouldn't bother me a bit!'"

"To experience in some small measure what some call the sublime left me with an impression of something or someone much greater than I. I left with a greater sense of awe and wonder, humility and thankfulness that has stuck with me to this day," Loucky-Ramsey says. "I was left to ponder how I could live my life in a way that would honor the gift of that encounter with the sacred."

3. In the song, ["If Heaven Never Was Promised to Me."](#) Andre Crouch and the Disciples sang,

You may ask me why I serve the Lord,
Is it just for heaven's gain. ...
But if heaven never was promised to me,
Neither God's promise to live eternally,
It's been worth just having the Lord in my life.

What keeps you motivated to persevere in following Jesus, even in times of adversity and difficulty? Would you still choose to follow Jesus, even if you did not have the promise of heaven and eternal life? Why or why not?

Responding to the News

1. Keep a gratitude diary, or write one thing for which you are grateful in your calendar every day.
2. Brainstorm ways you can cultivate awe and wonder.

Prayer

Examine our hearts, Spirit of God. Shine your searchlight on our motives, and reveal to us whether we are following Jesus for what we think we can get out of him, or because he calls us to something greater than self-interest. Cleanse us from impure desires, and lead us in the paths of righteousness, for your name's sake. Amen.