

62. Inspiration4

In September 2021, SpaceX embarked on a historic mission named Inspiration4, marking the first private orbital mission commanded by Jared Isaacman, a modest yet accomplished tech entrepreneur and pilot. Unlike billionaires Richard Branson and Jeff Bezos, who participated in their own space adventures earlier that July, Elon Musk, SpaceX's CEO, elected to stay grounded, focusing on the broader objective of democratizing space exploration. Isaacman, who had forged his path from high school dropout to CEO of Shift4 Payments—a company processing over \$200 billion annually—sought not personal glory but to champion a cause. By purchasing this flight, he aimed to raise funds for St. Jude Children's Research Hospital, assembling a crew that included a young cancer survivor among its civilians.

Pre-launch preparations emphasized safety, with Musk urging the SpaceX team to openly communicate concerns. A significant risk identified was the mission's unique high orbit, reaching an altitude not attempted since the 1999 Space Shuttle mission to the Hubble Space Telescope. This altitude exposed the crew to increased danger from orbital debris, prompting adjustments in the spacecraft's orientation to mitigate risks. Bill Gerstenmaier, replacing Hans Koenigsmann as vice president for flight reliability, presented these strategies to Musk, emphasizing the inherent uncertainties but achieving a compromise to lower the risk.

Despite safer, lower altitudes being viable, Isaacman's desire to push boundaries for future lunar and Martian endeavors led him to accept the higher risks of their ambitious orbit. The mission, aside from its exploratory goals, symbolically aimed to heal the national trauma from the 1986 Challenger disaster, with Musk's partner Grimes engaging in rituals for good luck.

The narrative captures the juxtaposition of technological advancement and human emotion, as Koenigsmann, an early SpaceX pioneer, bids an emotionally charged farewell to Musk post-launch. This mission, set against the backdrop of Musk's broader ambitions—articulated in his musings about future Mars colonization—highlights individual courage and collective endeavor in the new era of civilian space travel.