

I AM

“God said to Moses, ‘I AM WHO I AM.’” Exodus 3:14 ESV



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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Each event and story in this book has been recalled to the best of my ability and recollection. All events and stories are true. No event or story has been imagined, fabricated, exaggerated, or dramatized in any way.

The content contained in this book is for entertainment purposes only, and is not intended as advice and should not be relied upon or acted upon.

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Chapter 1

Questions Answered

Many friends and church members after having finished reading my first book, *Ten One-Dollar Bills*, approached me with questions. Here are many of those questions, and my answers.

How is the relationship with your birth-mother? For the first couple of years my family and I would meet Nona and her daughter (and once with her children) at the Fatz Café restaurant in Clinton, South Carolina. And for many years she came to my house in Blythewood and enjoyed a Christmas meal and exchanged gifts. Cynthia and I have also visited her and her husband, Rick, in their home in Taylors. Our relationship has continued to be a blessing for both of our families.

Have you been back to Nicaragua to walk across the bridge? No, I have not. But my church's mission team leader at the time, Mike, has walked across it. But everyone can walk across it virtually thanks to Milosz with Bridges to Prosperity who shared his video of the bridge's opening celebration with the community. The video is on my website: www.tenonedollarbills.com

What is your most memorable comment? A church member had finished reading the book's second chapter while in the middle school's car rider line when her son got into the car and asked, "Mom, why are you crying?" She immediately stated, "Thomas' book is not about building a bridge . . . it is about faith."

At the end of chapter twenty-seven what do you mean by the statement, "God moved"? I meant that after everyone heard the sound of the rope snapping and then seeing the cable plummeting off the front of the far-side foundation (except for the end of the cable), and after getting to the other side of the river seeing the cable still secured to the rope, my initial thought was *God moved* . . . or, God intervened. However, years later after rethinking through the events of that day, I am certain that after tying the rope to the end of the cable, the men mistakenly pulled the excess cable to that far-side of the river and secured the excess rope with a second rope – which is the rope that broke when we began pulling the cable at the near-side foundation. The first rope tied to the cable did not break.

Is there anything you wish you had added in the book? At the end of the last paragraph in chapter twenty-seven I would have added, “And God also moved in the hearts of the people who donated their time and money in support of the bridge fundraising.”

When are you going to write another book? This is probably *the most* asked question. I published my second book, *Lord, Increase My Faith*, in 2017. It contains more individual, faith based stories. And I also wrote a third book, *The Treasure*. And now my fourth book, *I AM*.

How did you find time to write a book? On weekday mornings I would wake up at 5:00 AM and type for an hour or more. On Saturdays and Sundays I would type for seven or eight hours. Then I took a week of vacation to finish the rough draft.

AMAZON BOOK REVIEW: “Loved the idea of Thomas building a bridge for a small community in Nicaragua. Wish the book was more about the people he was aiding and less engineering jargon. Have to admit I skipped quite a few pages about rocks, and sand, and measurements, and levels, and tools, etc. I'm sure it would make a great gift for an engineer.” An Internet search will reveal several books written about the Nicaraguan people and their customs.

Was your prayer answered for one person to hear about the need for a bridge and to feel led to fully sponsor a bridge? Yes, that prayer was answered when one person contacted me and later handed me a check for \$25,000 to fully sponsor a bridge for a community in Nicaragua.

Chapter 2

My Salvation Testimony

Entering Sandy Level Baptist Church's fellowship hall for the Church Assessment Team's member-sharing meeting, I was not surprised to see the other church members seated and ready to begin. An email had informed me, other than answering a few questions, I would be asked to share my salvation testimony.

In the farthest corner of the room were four long tables arranged as a square, such that everyone was facing towards the center and each other. The chairs were arranged to allow for an empty chair between each participant, or what is referred to as "social distancing." I quickly took the first empty chair I came to. Tony and Danielle were seated to my left and Pastor Hanley to my right.

David and Joe introduced themselves as the moderators for the evening's meeting. A short prayer was said and David instructed each person to share their name, how many years they have been a member of the church, and their salvation testimony. Pastor Chris went first. And on-and-on it went around until there were only three people remaining: Tony, Danielle, and myself.

I felt a sigh of relief when David called on Danielle. I knew Tony would likely be next. I still had time in my mind to put together the timeline of events in my spiritual journey. And finally it was my turn. And so I began.

I grew up, my early school-aged years, in Sumter, South Carolina, where my dad was a jet engine mechanic at Shaw Air Force Base. It was June and my cousin, Will, came to stay with me for a week – to celebrate my birthday. It was during that week that a neighborhood friend, Chris, had walked over to my house.

Chris, though only seven years old, was hard of hearing. So as Chris and I finished talking, Will loudly proclaimed, "Tommy does not believe in God." I don't remember any reaction from Chris, or any other words spoken by Will, but those words made me feel confused and embarrassed. I did not know how to respond, so began talking about something else. I was just six or seven years old at the time.

Several weeks later, while my mother was painting in her ceramics shop, a single-wide trailer directly behind our house, I remember sitting in the hallway on the metal grates of the built-in floor oil furnace. Directly in front of me was a flimsy, three-shelf metal bookcase. A set of Funk and Wagnalls encyclopedias practically filled the entire bottom shelf. On the top shelf were a couple of picture frames and other knickknacks and what-nots, including a small wooden box with the words “cuss box” printed on the front – with a narrow slot at the top to insert coins; my parents cussed a lot.

The second shelf was filled with books covering all types of subjects. Wedged tightly between all of those books was a black, softcover book. Gently spreading the other books apart with one hand, I reached in and grabbed firm hold of it. I was careful not to pull any of the other books off the shelf. I stared for a moment at the words printed on that book’s front cover, “Holy Bible.”

I opened it and quickly scanned over the table of contents, fumbled through its pages, read a few sentences, and then quickly closed it. I carefully placed it back exactly where I had removed it. For some reason I was afraid of getting into trouble for reading it. I wanted to learn more about God, but my parents never showed me that Bible. They never took me to church. Thinking back now, my cousin never told me anything about God either.

At night my mom or dad would come into my room and tell me goodnight, always followed by, “Say your prayers.” And I would. My mom taught me this children’s model prayer, “Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep . . . and if I die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take. Amen.” I remember one night praying for lots of different animals, because I had heard a child on television do the same.

The next school year at Cherryville Elementary School the second graders were chosen to put on a play about Noah’s Ark. I do not remember a lot of the story line, but I do remember my part of helping “build” the boat by using a small hammer and banging on the large cardboard cutout of a boat. Many of my other classmates played the animals. I learned from the other kids that this was a story from the Bible, but I could not have told you where to read it.

Author’s Comment: The story of Noah’s Ark and the great flood is recorded in Genesis, the first book in the Bible, in Chapter 12.

Another Bible story I remember hearing about in elementary school was that of David and Goliath. One day my teacher asked the class, "Does everyone know where to find the story about David and Goliath?" The whole class shouted out, "The Bible," except for me . . . "a Saturday morning cartoon." The only David and Goliath I knew was a Saturday morning television show which featured a young boy, David, and his large dog, Goliath. I got an odd look from the teacher and a few of the other kids.

My mother drove me to elementary school every day. I would always stare at a church as we passed by it. Occasionally I would get brave enough to mention to my mother about wanting to go. And one Sunday we actually did go. Being only seven years old, I do not remember anything about the worship service, only my mother telling me as we were leaving, "We are not going back." And, for whatever reason, we never did. And I never asked to go to church again.

Years later, after my dad retired from the Air Force, my family moved from Sumter to mom's hometown of Great Falls. She had a sister (Aunt Jo) and brother-in-law (Uncle Bob) who lived in Lancaster. Aunt Jo and Uncle Bob were founding members of Jones Crossroads Baptist Church. We began attending. It was a small membership church located about fifteen miles from our house in Great Falls.

Fast forward five years. I am riding in the back seat of my family's car leaving the Black family's Fourth of July celebration at Lake Wateree. I could feel the car's side-to-side movements as dad maneuvered around the tight curves on the loose gravel dirt road. As dad accelerated more going into the next curve, I felt the car lose traction and begin to slide towards the ditch. I got scared and cried out, "Dad, slow down! I'm not saved yet." Both of my parent's heads immediately turned and looked in the back seat at me. The previous Sunday at church each of them had gone forward and got saved.

Author's Comment: Saved means accepting Jesus as one's personal Lord and Savior, and one day going to Heaven.

Later the next week the doorbell rang. Dad went and opened the door. From the carport walked in Pastor Hefley and my cousin, Tony. I sat down on the coach, with Tony and Pastor Hefley sitting on each side. I remember answering the questions asked by the Pastor, the last one if I believed Jesus is the Son of God and died on the cross for my sins? Of course I answered yes.

At the beginning of the next school year, my ninth grade teacher, Mrs. Nix, asked with a big smile, "Thomas, tell the class what you did exciting this summer." Everyone who heard her stopped talking and looked at me . . . and I froze. Knowing she was the pastor's wife at my Aunt Gail's church in Winnsboro, I knew she wanted me to say, "I accepted Jesus Christ as my personal Lord and Savior." Instead, I stared back at her and said nothing. After a few more seconds sensing I felt uncomfortable answering her question, she simply smiled and said, "Its ok."

Once after a pep rally, the Assistant High School Principle, standing in front of a small group of boys, asked for someone to tell him who picked up the money from the bleacher. Shawn looked and pointed at me, "Ask him, he will tell the truth . . . he is a Christian." I immediately shook my head and said, "No . . . I'm not." My remaining high school years I wore a religious mask when out with my best friends and at church. For years I fooled everyone – but not God. He knew my heart.

Then one night at the age of nineteen, while sitting home alone, I started thinking about my life, where it was going, church, and God. I was "saved" as a younger teen, but knew I had simply gone through the motions. It was a decision made because it was the right thing to do at the time. It was what my parents wanted. It made them and other people happy. Now, kneeling on the living room floor, I began to pray.

At this moment, I stopped and tightly closed my eyes, holding back the tears building up in my eyes. Everyone in the meeting was silent. Almost a minute went by before I continued.

I poured my heart out to God. I asked for forgiveness for all the times I denied being a Christian. (Now the tears flowed freely down my face in front of everyone.) I invited Jesus into my heart and life. I was sincere this time. It was real this time. I was saved.

"And you are a Gideon, too!" interjected Danielle with a bright smile. Tony gave her a quick look. I wiped my face and smiled over at both of them, regained my thoughts, and continued with my testimony.

From there I finished my engineering degree at Clemson University, got married, moved to Blythewood, and joined Sandy Level Baptist Church in 1999. Ten years later I attended our church's Nicaraguan mission team meeting, and later went to Nicaragua to help build a walking bridge for two communities. I wrote a book ('Ten One-Dollar Bills') telling my whole faith journey. And finally in 2013, while promoting that book, I was approached about joining the Gideons International ministry . . . and I did.

Chapter 3

God, Are You There?

In the 1980's television show 'Mork and Mindy,' Mork was an alien from the planet Ork. He was sent by his superior, Orson, to study the people on Earth. To communicate his weekly reports back to Orson, he would repeat over and over, "Mork calling Orson . . . come in Orson. Mork calling Orson . . . come in Orson." He would continue this until Orson replied. As a new believer, I would often role play, just for fun, with God in a similar manner; "God if you are there, then do this."

As a teenager growing up in the small town of Great Falls, I cut grass for my neighbor, Diane, at her house to earn weekend spending money. To get to Diane's house, I would ride my dad's old Craftsman brand lawnmower a small distance on Golf Course Road, then turn right into her long dirt driveway. Her yard was not that big, and I would cut it in less than thirty minutes. It was on one such occasion during the slow ride back to my house that it began to rain. Just for fun I shouted out, "God, if you are there, please stop the rain until I get home." Needless to say, I got soaking wet. Fast forward fifteen years.

Working at my desk at work to finish a few last minute tasks, it began to rain. Leaving my office and walking down the long hallway towards the exit door into the garage, I mumbled a simple statement, "God, if you are there, then do not allow me to get wet."

When I opened the door and walked into the garage area, I could hear the rain pelting the metal roof. It was deafening. I continued walking down the concrete ramp to the rear exit door. I knew past that door there was only about thirty more feet of covered truck shed to walk under.

Exiting the building, I walked past Dennis and another lineman who were talking. To use this moment to test my faith, I knew I could not stop and talk with them. So I continued walking at the same brisk pace towards my truck – which was parked another fifty feet away.

Amazingly, the closer I got to the end of the truck shed covering, the lighter the rain became. Not breaking stride, I continued on the straightest path towards my truck. I took what I knew was my last “dry step” and closed my eyes, knowing the next step would result in a wet face. As I took the next step onto the wet concrete, it happened. The rain completely stopped! The chatter from my two co-workers stopped, too. For a brief moment they stood in complete silence.

As I continued walking to my truck, I overheard Dennis ask the other man, “Hey, wasn’t it just raining?” A big smile came on my face as I made my way to my truck, but not before feeling a single drop of water run down my right cheek. I am unsure if it was a last drop of rain or a tear. It didn’t matter to me, because the rain had stopped. God was there.

Another instance was when visiting my wife’s aunt and uncle in Gulf Shores, Alabama. At the beach they informed everyone that the beach was different from other beaches – it was a steeper entrance into the ocean from the beach. This was apparent as I entered the water, finding it difficult to stand straight in one place. And the waves were a lot stronger, too, creating a strong undertow.

Looking up and down the beach, I reminisced of the times on the beach at Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, when my cousin, Will, and I would look for shark teeth. The teeth he would find would always be nearly perfect, while mine all looked like they had been tossed around in the ocean for years.

Looking around, I closed my eyes and quietly prayed, “God, show me you are here by allowing me to find a shark’s tooth.” I opened my eyes as the next wave crashed and rushed through my slightly parted legs. I looked down, and there tumbling between my legs, was a shark’s tooth! I quickly bent down and picked it up. The tooth was perfect and unblemished; it was beautiful. In fact, it is the one I am holding in my hand on the front cover of this book.

And since that day, there have been other times I have asked in similar ways, even for something specific to occur – and it has; God, are you there? “I AM.”

Chapter 4

Is Seeing Really Believing?

A well-known story in the Bible surrounding this question, “Is seeing really believing,” involves one of Jesus’ disciples, Thomas. Even after the other disciples tell Thomas they have seen the risen Lord after his death and resurrection, Thomas doubts. Thomas proceeds to tell them, “Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe.” (John Chapter 20, Verse 25 ESV)

Thomas doubted for eight days before Jesus showed himself again to the disciples, including Thomas himself. Jesus, knowing Thomas’ doubt in his mind, said to Thomas, “Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe” (John Chapter 20, Verse 27 ESV). And after doing these things, Thomas then believed and exclaimed, “My Lord and my God!”

Yet even today, after reading these first-hand accounts in the Bible, people doubt. Jesus knows our human nature; that people only believe what they see. So Jesus finishes the encounter with Thomas (and the other disciples) by stating, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.” (John Chapter 20, Verse 29 ESV)

Is seeing really believing? In the Bible, based on Thomas’ personal encounter with a risen Jesus Christ, the answer is unequivocally yes. So why is it so difficult for other people to believe? Is it because they were not there? But that is impossible at this point. Should not it be just as easy to believe now after reading John’s first-hand account of this encounter between Jesus and Thomas?

And I know that no commentary or words from another person can convince someone that Jesus is who He said he is . . . the Son of God. In fact, in the Bible, not everyone believed Jesus was the Son of God – even after seeing firsthand all of the miracles He performed.

Chapter 5

Praying at the Altar

The lottery; people all dream of winning it, especially when the amount exceeds two-hundred million dollars. People go out and buy lottery tickets filled with multiple lines of five numbers and a number for the power ball. Some have a set of special numbers they play each week, while others let the computer pick all the numbers.

Regardless of their method, most begin spouting out to family and friends all the things they would buy with the money. And, like a lot of others, their first priority is to give ten-percent, or a tithe, to their church; maybe they are hoping God is listening and will grant them that winning ticket. But after many weeks of not winning, probably like a lot of others, I quit playing and continued on with my daily routines.

Then one week there was a lot of hype on the early morning news; the lottery jackpot was now worth more than six-hundred million dollars. A lot more people started buying lottery tickets, and my family was no different. Each week we would buy a handful of tickets, and then wake up the next morning to check the rows of numbers. Most mornings were the same, matching only one or two.

I am not sure when this started, but I began praying to God to allow me to win the lottery. After all, in the Bible it says, “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened.” (Matthew Chapter 7, Verses 7-8 ESV)

I quickly established a Tuesday night routine. First buying a lottery ticket filled with five rows of random numbers and then going to the church to empty the Tricia’s Trunk clothing donation box. After taking the last bag of donated clothes upstairs, I would go into the sanctuary. Pulling out the lottery ticket and kneeling at the altar, I would pray for God to allow me to win. I would pray for several minutes before ending with, “But God . . . your will be done.” Then I would stay quiet for a few more seconds before leaving to go home.

Chapter 6

Random Numbers

It was while teaching Vacation Bible School (VBS) that the day's lesson was on Jonah. God instructed Jonah to go and deliver a warning message to the people in Nineveh. Instead, Jonah boarded a ship going in the opposite direction. The lesson emphasized how God intervened and hurled a great wind upon the sea, threatening to sink the ship. The ship's crew cast lots to see who was responsible for the evil that had come upon them. The lot fell on Jonah; Jonah confessed to fleeing from God's command.

Then the crew threw Jonah overboard and the sea became calm. A great fish swallowed Jonah. Then I discussed the miracle of Jonah surviving after being in the belly of the great fish for three days, and how God commanded him a second time to go to Nineveh. Jonah obeyed God and went to Nineveh.

After the children had left the room, I commented to another VBS leader, "I believe God was in the lots. God was in control of each bounce, because they had to point to Jonah. So the rolling of the lots could not have been random. If Jonah was not the one chosen to be thrown overboard, then the story would not be what it is in the Bible. "People throw lots to make a decision, but the answer comes from the LORD." (Proverbs Chapter 16, Verse 33 NCV)

My thoughts now turned to the lottery; are the winning numbers random? If the winner prayed and chose their numbers or had the computer choose their numbers, then God must have allowed those numbers to be drawn. During the drawing of the lottery numbers, God would be in control of each number drawn. Not a single number could be random *if* God's answer to an individual's prayer is to win the lottery. "And whatever you ask in prayer, you will receive, if you have faith." (Matthew Chapter 21, Verse 22 ESV)

Chapter 7

Draw Near to God

“Tommy . . . we were close,” were the words spoken with certainty by Uncle Robert, as he held up two fingers clenched tightly together. His demeanor was serious. That was May 26, 2010. One passage of Scripture immediately came to mind: “Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded.” (James Chapter 4, Verse 8 ESV) To draw nearer to God, I began reading my Bible daily, listening to only Christian music, and praying more.

I continued the Tuesday night routine for several more weeks: purchasing lottery tickets, emptying the clothing donation trunk, and stopping to kneel at the altar to pray – for God to reveal the numbers to me, unsure of how He would do that. Maybe God would reveal the first number, and reveal the other numbers after a fervent prayer. Or maybe, since I am an electrical engineer, some of the numbers having a mathematical relationship to figure out from the other numbers. How *would* God answer?

What about the answers to prayer I have experienced in my life: the rain stopping just as I walked out to my work truck, and finding the perfect shark’s tooth in the next crashing wave. My experiences when building the bridge in Nicaragua, with my prayers answered then, too. Finally, after I whispered a prayer for God to show me the person to whom I should hand my first Gideon scripture to, that my eyes would instantly lock eye-to-eye with the worker in the restaurant who wanted a pocket size Bible for his birthday (that actual day), and whose mother had shopped all over Lexington and could not find one. That a complete stranger gave him what he wanted for his birthday. That is the Holy Spirit.

¹²“Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you. ¹³You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart.” (Jeremiah Chapter 29, Verses 12-13 ESV) But is there a difference in physical circumstances playing out according to a person’s prayer and a person making a decision based on hearing God’s voice? What if I missed hearing His voice?

Chapter 8

The Numbers

January 13, 2016. The estimated Powerball jackpot was at \$1.5 billion just hours ahead of Wednesday night's drawing, with same-day ticket sales to push the record-breaking amount even higher. Lottery officials said 85.8 percent of possible number combinations had been selected by mid-day, increasing the chances that someone would win the world's largest lottery jackpot. But the odds of winning were still extraordinarily slim.

That prior Friday while sitting at my desk busy making a list of to-dos, I heard a soft whisper in my mind, "19 . . . 27." I stopped and sat still for a moment. Then I heard the voice again, "19 . . . 27." And yet a third and final time, almost emphasizing their importance, "19 . . . 27." I jotted them down on a yellow sticky note. I sat still for a moment, thinking about what I just heard.

The lottery drawing on Saturday night had produced neither the 19 nor the 27. The nightly news was featuring a special segment on the best practices for picking winning lottery numbers. A few hints included not picking all of the numbers within the same multiple of ten series (i.e. 11, 12, 14, 17, and 18, or 31, 35, 36, 38 and 39), but choosing numbers from multiple of ten series (i.e. 7, 11, 17, 25 and 38). The reporter finished the segment by stating, "Some people choose numbers based on the month of their parent's birthday." Unfortunately, Cynthia and I had already purchased ten lottery tickets filled with numbers for the night's drawing.

My mind drifted back to the previous Friday as I glanced over each ticket to see if any single line had the numbers 19 and 27 – none did. I wrote them down on a small piece of paper, and began thinking about birthdays: my dad was born in April and my son, Jordan, was also born in April, the fourth month of the year; I wrote down 4. Then I quietly said to myself, "Ok God, what are the next two numbers." I immediately heard a voice in my head, "8 and 12."

I now had four numbers spoken to me, 8, 12, 19 and 27, and one number from my birthday list, 4. For some reason, I had a strong feeling about the number 4, which also had a mathematical relationship to the series of numbers: 12 minus 8 equaling 4. Worst case, I now had two sets of four numbers: 8, 12, 19 and 27, and 4, 8, 19 and 27. I looked over at all the lottery tickets spread out on the kitchen counter, looked up, and said, "God, show me the fifth number."

As I glanced over all of the numbers, searching, I almost immediately found myself in a tranced stare. Among all of those random numbers, my eyes were locked onto the number 34. I wrote it down with the other numbers. Then I said another short prayer, "Ok God, what is the power ball?" Almost immediately I heard His voice, "Write them down." So I did: 4, 8, 19, 27 and 34.

Cynthia was at the sink washing dishes when I started to tell her that "God gave me the numbers to the lottery." But when I went to speak, not a single word came out. Anyways, I still needed to figure out the power ball number. Could it be mathematically hidden within the sequence of numbers I had been given? I looked over the numbers again and began adding them together: 4 plus 8 equals 12, 12 plus 8 equals 20 – that does not make any sense. 27 minus 19 equals 8, 34 minus 27 equals 7 – doesn't seem significant; another dead end.

Later that night, unable to sleep, I got up and went into the kitchen. I re-focused my thoughts on the sequence of numbers I had written down. Then I had an idea. Starting with the last number in the sequence, 34, I added its individual digits: $3 + 4 = 7$; that is the 7 in the 27. Then for the 27, I added the $2 + 7 = 9$; that is the 9 in the 19. Finally, I added the $9 + 1 = 10$, that is the 10 in . . . the 10 and in the title of my first book, *Ten One-Dollar Bills*, the answer to the fundraising for the bridge in Nicaragua, and now . . . the winning power ball number in tonight's lottery?

I quickly turned on the eleven o'clock news. The lottery numbers were being drawn: 8 . . . 27 . . . 34 . . . 4 . . . and . . . 19. "And the power ball is . . . 10." There were three winning jackpot tickets sold: one in California, one in Tennessee, and one in Florida.