

I AM

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



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AUTHOR'S NOTE

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

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“Then shalt thou call, and the LORD will answer: thou shalt cry, and He shall say, ‘Here I am.’” Isaiah Chapter 58 Verse 9a KJV

Chapter 1

Questions Answered

Friends and church members after 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 virtually walk across it 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 this excess cable with a piece of 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 *the most* asked question. I published my second book, *Lord, Increase My Faith*, in 2017. It contains more individual, faith based stories. 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. I 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, sand, and measurements, and levels, and tools, etc. I am sure it would make a great gift for an engineer.” An Internet search will reveal 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 sponsoring 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.

Is the picture on the front of the book the bridge built in Nicaragua? Yes, it is. Milosz, who worked for Bridges to Prosperity at the time, took it. I had asked Milosz to take a photo that could be used for the front cover of my book.

Was any other prayer answered after the book was completed? Yes, a prayer for a high school classmate, who during that time was not a “believer,” to hear about my book and to read it. After being featured as a new author in the Clemson World magazine’s Winter 2013 edition, I received a one page email from this classmate, telling me he saw my picture, the article, and how to download my book from my website.

CLEMSON WORLD magazine – WINTER 2013



Electrical engineering graduate Thomas Black of Blythewood was looking for a way that he could give back. The vice president of engineering at Fairfield Electric Cooperative took his Clemson education and life skills to serve as the project coordinator for a 200-foot pedestrian bridge over a raging river in rural Nicaragua.

The walking bridge improved the lives in two communities by allowing the people to reach stores, medical treatment and their farmland when the river floods. Black's experiences on the church-sponsored project led him to publish a book, *Ten \$1 Bills*. The book can be downloaded for free at www.tenonedollarbills.com.

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 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 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 moderators for the evening's meeting. A short prayer was said, and David instructed each person to share their name, how many years they had 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 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 I began . . .

I grew up, in 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 do not 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 I began talking about something else. I was just six or seven years old at the time.

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.

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 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 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 from the other kids, too.

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 am 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 several more seconds and 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 am 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. 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. (The tears now 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!" quickly interjected Danielle with a bright smile. Tony turned and gave her a quick look. I wiped my face, smiled over at both of them, and continued 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 authored 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 an analogous 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 couple of 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. 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 did not 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 much stronger, too, creating a strong undertow.

Looking down at the sandy beach, I reminisced of the times on the beach at Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, when my cousin, Will, and I looked 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.

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. 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 others, their first priority is to give ten percent, or a tithe, to their church; are they hoping God is listening and will grant them that winning ticket. But after weeks of not winning, I quit playing and continued with my daily routines.

Then one week there was hype on the early morning news; the lottery jackpot was now worth more than six-hundred million dollars. 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 buy a lottery ticket filled with five rows of random numbers, and then go 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 do 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 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 then reveal the other numbers after a fervent prayer. Or maybe since I am an electrical engineer, the numbers have 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 with 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. None are coincidences.

¹²Then 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 midday, 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 had 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. Some 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. 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 – does not 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? Now, what are the odds of that happening?

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.

Chapter 9

Prostate Cancer Diagnosis

It was April 7, 2023, when I received the biopsy results on MyChart, an online patient portal where a patient can review their test results. The biopsy, with ultrasound guidance, focused on two anterior prostate lesions found by the magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) scan in February, and twelve random prostate tissue samples. The MRI was a result of my prostate-specific antigen (PSA) blood test steadily increasing, going from 5.47 in 2020 to 7.02 in 2022. PSA is a protein made by the prostate gland. I was informed that a level greater than 4.0 of PSA in the blood could mean prostate cancer, and a biopsy was the only way to find out.

The biopsy's pathology report assigned each tissue sample a letter, followed by a brief description of the location from where it was taken. Then followed a section with the heading 'Diagnostic Opinion,' which is where I began reading. On page one: benign, benign, benign, benign, benign, and benign, which means a non-cancerous condition. Good news so far. I scrolled to page two. Benign, benign, focal adenocarcinoma . . . cancer . . . I have prostate cancer.

Before I could read any more, my phone started ringing. It was a nurse from the Lexington hospital's urologist's office. She knew the biopsy results were just posted to MyChart. She also knew the results were not good. Her job was to make sure I had seen the results, reviewed them, and to answer any questions.

Of the twelve random samples, only one tested positive for cancer cells, and of the two tumors, or region of interest (ROI), one tested positive for cancer cells. The two positive samples were each followed by a Gleason score and Grade Group. The nurse encouraged me to read the Prostate Cancer Early Stage patient guide to educate myself before my follow-up appointment with the urologist, when he would explain the results in more detail and discuss treatment options.

After we hung up, I began reading the patient guide given to me by the urologist during my previous visit, given in anticipation of today's positive test results. It explained in detail what cancer is, the causes and risk factors for developing prostate cancer, the types and symptoms of prostate cancer, the

types of prostate cancer tests, the clinical terms Gleason score and Grade Group, and treatment options. The random sample which tested positive was assigned a Gleason score of $3+3=6$ and Grade Group of 1. The patient guide explained the first 3 means the cancer present has a cell pattern which looks more like normal prostate tissue in the majority of the sample. A cancer assigned to a Grade Group of 1 is less aggressive and likely to grow and spread very slowly; there is minimal risk, and it may never need treatment. This was referred to as active surveillance.

However, the sample from the tumor was assigned a Gleason score of $3+4=7$ and a Grade Group of 2. The patient guide explained the 4 means the cancer has an abnormal cell pattern but because it comes after the 3, the majority of the cell pattern in the sample looks more like normal prostate tissue. A cancer assigned a Grade Group of 2 is considered moderately aggressive and likely to grow and spread; there is low to intermediate risk and treatment may be needed.

The patient guide explained that the need for treatment is based on several factors, the most common being age or life expectancy, risk factor, Gleason score, and Grade Group. The type of treatment is based on the number of positive biopsy samples, tumor size, and if it is determined the cancer has spread outside of the prostate gland. Based on everything I had read so far concerning my MRI and test results, as well as having no physical symptoms, my cancer had been caught early. It seemed that all available treatment options, including active surveillance, were on the table for me.

During the follow-up visit with the urologist, I began the conversation with, "This past week I read more about each treatment option, and actually had a conversation with other men about their treatment experience. Taking all things into consideration, I have decided on proton beam radiation at the University of Florida Health Proton Therapy Institute in Jacksonville, Florida." He agreed with my decision and signed the required pre-authorization paperwork for UF Health. I thanked him and as I went to walk out, he held out his hand, "Leave that with me. I will have it scanned and emailed to UF Health for you."

Days later I received an email from UF Health's Patient Intake Coordination. Attached were a Proton Cancer Consultation Questionnaire and an information packet which contained details about proton therapy and their facility. There was also a link to patient testimonials on their website.

On April 20, 2023, I received a second email from UF Health informing me they had received all of my medical records and test results from my urologist. Then days later I received confirmation of approval for a consultation visit for May 11. It would be a quick, one day trip. My wife, Cynthia, drove us to Jacksonville, Florida that day for the consultation visit. I also had a required chest x-ray. Everything went well that day, or so I had thought.

On June 4 I reviewed the results of the chest x-ray. The x-ray showed a small, calcified nodule within the upper lobe of the right lung. I immediately emailed the nurse at UF Health asking for an explanation on the results. The next day I got a reply from Caroline, "Yes, typically something like this small nodule would not be of concern as it is most often related to old disease like a previous respiratory infection or something irritating the lungs even like allergies."

A PET/CT (Positron Emission Tomography / Computed Tomography) scan was scheduled for June 16 to give them a detailed three-dimensional image of the inside of my body as to whether this area needed any following up on. I knew it was to determine if the cancer had metastasized or spread outside the prostate to other parts of my body. More prayers . . . more unknowns . . . and more worry for me and my family.

I was thankful and relieved after reading the first line of the results, "No evidence of metastatic prostate cancer by PSMA PET/CT. (PSMA is a biomarker that is found on prostate cancer cells, including those that have spread beyond the prostate.) The PET-CT scan was the last thing needed to ensure the cancer was contained within the prostate. Finally, after over four months of tests and prayers, proton beam radiation was now confirmed to be the best treatment option for me. Now, to talk to my CEO about being away from the office for six weeks, schedule my treatments, and find a place to stay.

I was given two radiation treatment options, 29 and 40; I chose 29 to minimize my time away from the office. My CEO fully supported my decision to take radiation treatment in Florida. In determining when to begin the first treatment, I suggested that I wanted to be home for Thanksgiving; November 22 needed to be my last treatment day. Caroline agreed, and began counting, careful not to include observed and unobserved holidays in her count.

In preparation for my first radiation treatment, I was required to come two weeks prior for a final consultation, simulation scans, and receive a pre-treatment procedure to insert SpaceOAR Hydrogel. The SpaceOAR Hydrogel is inserted between the prostate and large intestine to prevent the radiation from damaging the large intestine. Cynthia and I would also tour the Hope Lodge located on the campus of the Mayo Clinic. The Hope Lodge provides free lodging for adult cancer patients, and their caregivers, needing to travel more than 40 miles for treatment. It was a really nice facility.

Cynthia signed the necessary paperwork to be a caregiver, so she could stay on the weekends. Before leaving I confirmed my treatment dates and received check-in instructions. Everything was done. My first in a series of 29 treatments would begin on Monday, October 12.

Chapter 10

The Hope Lodge

I spent the following week making lists and choosing clothes to take to Florida, which meant matching shirts with shorts, counting underwear and pairs of socks, and packing my truck. I was both excited and nervous. Leaving, I was putting months of tests, doctor visits, and studying treatment options in my rear view mirror. The next four and a half hours of driving would give me more time to reflect back on the previous sixth months since being diagnosed with prostate cancer.

Arriving at the Hope Lodge in Jacksonville, Florida, I quickly went inside to get checked in and get the luggage cart. It would soon be dark, and I had lots to unload: a cooler full of frozen and refrigerated food, clothes, shoes, dumbbell weights, and snacks. I would wait and go to the grocery store the next day for milk and eggs.

After hurriedly hanging up my pants and shirts in my room, I took the cooler and headed to the kitchen. There are two large kitchens shared by the thirty-six residents, each equipped with three stoves, three dishwashers, and three refrigerators. Everyone was allotted a twelve by thirty-six inch space in a refrigerator, and about the same size space in the freezer side. The very bottom and majority of the right side in each refrigerator was the “shared” section, with common use items like ketchup, mustard, and salad dressings. Across the room from the refrigerator were the dry storage cabinets for canned goods and boxed food items.

Since I had not eaten supper, I pulled out a can of chicken noodle soup. By now there were others in the kitchen unpacking groceries or fixing supper like me. I looked around the room; I did not know anyone. I began having an anxiety attack, like it was the first day of college. I brushed the feeling aside and began looking for a soup pot, quickly opening and closing cabinet doors. I could not find one. I then felt the cold stares. I became panicky.

Finally, I stopped and said aloud, “Yes, I admit it, I am the new guy who does not know where anything is.” Everyone nearby stopped and turned around. One man walked over, held out his hand, and introduced himself, “Hi, my name is Larry,” while grabbing a pot from under the counter. He smiled and handed it to me. And from that day forward, we were friends. not only because we seemed we were always in the kitchen at the same time, but the doors to our rooms were directly across the hall.

In the days to come, I find myself doing the same thing, introducing myself to someone new in the kitchen, and finding out if they were a caregiver or the person receiving treatment. Larry and his wife were caregivers to her daughter, Denise, who had leukemia and had received a bone marrow transplant at the Mayo Clinic. A lot of times at night I would sit and eat with them. Most of the time Denise would sit with a knitted cap on her head, but other times she would not, revealing her bald head. This made me realize that the Hope Lodge was an accepting place for everyone, since we all had one commonality . . . cancer.

It did not take long to meet other men at the Hope Lodge who were receiving proton beam radiation treatments at the University of Florida Health Proton Therapy Institute. We would sit and share stories of how each researched prostate cancer treatments before deciding to come to Jacksonville for proton beam radiation. These men and I coming to the same conclusion was encouraging to not only myself, but to them as well.

At my treatments, it was suggested I exercise thirty minutes a day to maintain physical strength. This was not a problem for me, since for the past five years I had developed a daily morning regiment of strength training with heavy weights in my garage. The Hope Lodge had an exercise room with three treadmills, so I began walking for thirty minutes each morning.

One evening while returning from the grocery store, I noticed people walking on the concrete sidewalk which snaked beside the road to the Hope Lodge. I remember at the Hope Lodge there being a map of the Mayo Clinic campus on the counter where you signed in and out. I looked at it more closely when I got back to the lodge and sure enough, there was a sidewalk encircling the entire campus. That first night I completed one lap.

The next evening as I was walking, I noticed people walking from the building to their cars to go home. I decided this was a terrific opportunity to share with a few people whom I would encounter each night a green business card with my website address, so they could download a free copy of my books. This went really well, as I handed out two to three business cards each night. Later that week I decided to walk two laps so that I could meet more people.

After one week I had developed an exercise routine: walking thirty minutes in the morning on the treadmill and walking two laps around the Mayo Clinic campus in the late afternoon. Thankfully, I remembered to bring extra business cards, since I was handing out so many. Sharing the story of the 'Ten One-Dollar Bills' was still exciting for me, especially seeing people's faces when I offered them a free book.

During the morning walk on the treadmill, I would look up music videos on YouTube or a Bible devotional to listen to on my phone. Then one morning I got the idea to look up sermons by Dr. David Jeremiah, a preacher whom my Gideon friend Don recommended. I had no trouble finding his sermons on YouTube. Thankfully, most were between thirty and forty minutes long, meaning only a few extra minutes on the treadmill were needed each morning to finish a sermon.

The first sermon I listened to dated back to July 25, 2021, and was titled, 'The Spirit and the Flesh.' I listened more intently when Dr. Jeremiah mentioned his cancer diagnosis and treatment. "Almost exactly at this particular time twenty-five year ago," he began, "I was diagnosed with lymphoma, a type of cancer that, at the time, had a very poor survival rate. Shortly after my diagnosis, I went to the Mayo Clinic, and I was operated on immediately. The surgery was called a laparotomy, and, really what it was is they cut me open from stem to stern, like a fish. After my surgery, I was taken to another floor to recover, and I remember this like it happened yesterday."

"On this particular floor," he continued, "the patient rooms were in a circle and the nurses' station and desks for staff were in the middle. And as soon as it was possible, the doctors told me I should get up and try to walk. So, knowing this was an important part of my recovery, I pushed myself to do a full lap around the nurses' station, starting at my room and passing every other patient's room until my room came up again and then I went back in and got in bed."

“My goal that first day was one lap; that is all I wanted, one lap. And that was pretty challenging, and I was barely able to finish it. So, the next day I decided . . . I am going to do two laps today. My plan was to do one more each day than I had done the day before. So, I set out walking slowly around the circle. By a strange coincidence, the doctor who had performed my surgery was dictating his notes about me when I shuffled by his desk.”

“All I remember hearing him say was, ‘A pastor from California who has Stage 4 large cell lymphoma cancer.’ Now, that might not seem important to you, but nobody had told me I had Stage 4 cancer. I had cancer but I did not know I had Stage 4 cancer. I was not even sure what that was, but I knew it was worse than Stage 3. Somehow, I completed those two laps and got back to my room. And, I remember sitting there feeling really scared. And overwhelmed.”

“But then, that feeling completely left me and was replaced by another. I realized, ‘I am not in control of my life.’ I told myself that. But the Spirit of God is in control of me. And a sense of what I can only describe as peace began to come over my heart. I am going to let God do His work, and I will do mine. My only thought was, “Well tomorrow I am doing three laps. I do not know what you are doing God, but I am doing three laps tomorrow. Right.”

My routine for the final couple of weeks of treatments was to listen to Dr. David Jeremiah while walking on the treadmill in the morning, and in the evening walking two laps around the Mayo Clinic campus. Each evening, on my first lap, I would hand out two or three business cards to employees and students who were leaving, and hand out three or four more during the second lap around the Mayo Clinic campus, sometimes to other walkers.

Most people would continue walking to their car after receiving the card. But other times they genuinely wanted to know more about the story. And each time I would give them the first part of the story, the part where I received the ten one-dollar bills.

Strangely, one evening while walking my normal two laps, I did not meet anyone. I stopped in front of the Hope Lodge and thought for a moment of what to do. I remember during one of his sermons that week David Jeremiah had said, “We have to do what we need to do, then God will do what He needs to do.” Dr. Jeremiah walked a third lap. But it was now getting dark. I said a short prayer and

said to myself, *If Dr. Jeremiah, who has cancer, can walk a third lap, then I can walk a third lap.* Then I set out walking that third lap and what would be five miles.

During that third lap I met two people, giving each person a business card and a brief summary of my book. Then from a short distance, I saw a lady briskly walking towards the crosswalk leading to the parking lot. I tried to gauge if our paths would cross. It would be close, so I began walking a little faster. After making the left turn on the sidewalk at the intersection, she was slightly ahead of me.

“Hello there,” I said. She stopped and turned back towards me. “Would you like a free copy of my book?” while holding out a green business card for her to see. “Sure,” she said, “What is it about?” “It is a from a time when my mother was in the hospital losing her battle with cancer. I was studying in the hospital waiting room, trying not to flunk out of my Junior year at Clemson University. They had called the family in, and my great aunt came from Lando. She handed me a card. Then she just stood there and smiled. So, I opened it, and there in front of me where all of these dollar bills; ten one-dollar bills. My aunt said, “You are going to be here all week, and sometimes you cannot find change for the drink machine or cracker machine.”

And that is just the beginning of the story, but all I am going to tell you. You will have to read about the rest. She smiled and asked, “Did the bridge get built?” Like the card says, “The incredible true story of how God blessed ten one-dollar bills and built a bridge in Nicaragua.” She still looked inquisitive, so I said, “Yes, the bridge was built and at the end God answered my one prayer, and that was to allow me to find my birth mother. And the last day, when they were putting the final planks on the bridge, I got a call from the agency who had been looking for my birth mother . . . they had found her. By the way, my name is Thomas, and I am adopted.” With a startled look she stated, “My husband’s name is Thomas . . . and he is adopted, too.”

“God, are You there?” **“I AM.”**

Author’s Comment: I finished my 29th radiation treatment on November 21, 2023, the Tuesday before Thanksgiving holiday. In October of 2024, my PSA level dropped to 1.7, well below the 10.5 result in April of 2023.

Chapter 11

Ten Years

On my living room wall hang three shadow boxes. One contains a three and one-half inch long arrowhead; the second is a tribute to my adopted father's twenty-three year Air Force career and includes a picture of him in uniform; and the third is a tribute to my adoptive mother's love of bowling and includes a picture of her bowling team taken during a tournament in Spartanburg, South Carolina.

Several years ago, while helping Cynthia clean the house, as I dusted the top of my mother's shadow box, in the photo a banner with the date of the tournament suddenly caught my attention . . . 1978. Why? Less than ten years from when that photo was taken, my mother would be diagnosed with breast cancer and then lose the battle two years later in 1989. I stood there and stared at that picture for almost a minute. In ten years, she went from living a vibrant, enjoyable life to fighting the final battle for her life . . . one that she would ultimately lose. All the dreams she had for me were put aside during that final week as she lay in a hospital bed. I remember the last words she spoke to me while staring into eyes, "Take care of your daddy."

In those ten years, my mother would see me grow up through my teenage years. She would support me in the middle school band and hear all the noisy practicing on my trombone. For fun we would compete for the high score on the Atari video game system's Super Breakout game. Then in high school, attending four years of marching band competitions. My senior year I drove a bus route and joined the tennis team. After graduation I started college at The University of South Carolina at Lancaster.

The summer of 1987 was when my mother discovered a lump in her left breast; it was cancer. The next two years would become almost a blur for our family, with mom's chemo treatments, my college, and mom helping to plan her high school class reunion – a reunion she would not be able to attend due to the return of the cancer in the fall of 1989. But earlier that summer she would see me and my best friend, Jesse, compete in the Flopeye Fish Festival's homemade

paddle boat race. I designed the plywood paddle boat, and dad helped me build and test it. Jesse and I finished fifth out of eight entries – and not that we outraced anyone, but only because two boats broke, and one team gave up. We did not give up. At the finish line, located at the old Spring's park beach, our parents were there to congratulate us for finishing the race. They were proud of our accomplishment. Even another team, whose boat was obviously professionally made, came over and congratulated us for building a successful boat. I still remember mom sitting in a chair on that beach, smiling at me as I walked up the beach towards her. Mom passed away six months later.

My purpose in sharing all of this is to remind everyone that years pass quickly, and the time to plan that dream vacation, to sign up for that church mission trip, or to start writing a book . . . is today. No one wants to look back ten years from now and have feelings of regret.

“Come now, you who say, ‘Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit’ – yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes.” James Chapter 4 Verses 13 – 14 ESV

About the Author

Thomas Black presently works at Fairfield Electric Cooperative in Blythewood, South Carolina. He is a member and deacon at Sandy Level Baptist Church in Blythewood. He and his wife, Cynthia, are the proud parents of two adult children, Shelley and Jordan. In 2012 he published his first book, *Ten One-Dollar Bills*, in which he tells of his experiences while serving as the project coordinator for the Gavilan-Patastule Suspended Bridge built near the town of Matiguas in Nicaragua. Thomas published his second book, *Lord, Increase My Faith*, in 2017.