

God And The Gambler
A Message Of Hope
An Autobiography By Tommy Thomas

A Brief Look Into the World of Gambling and the Power of God

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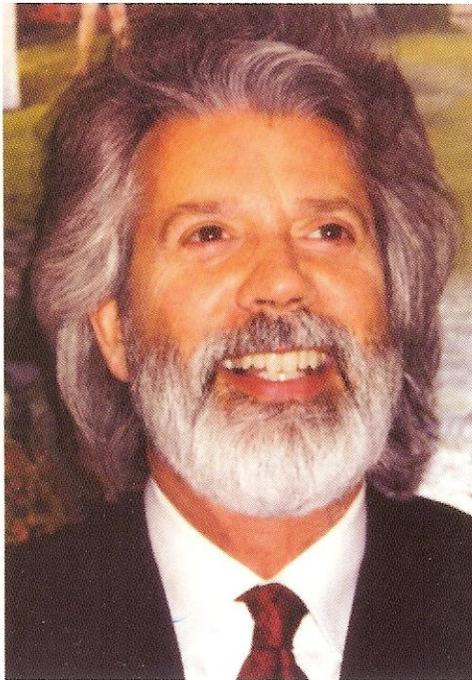
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Tommy Thomas, the son of the legendary gambler, Titanic Thompson, was a world-class professional gambler for over thirty years until God called his bluff. He is now an evangelist speaking out against gambling and how it is affecting the American people.



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God And The Gambler

REFLECTION

I was sitting in church, listening to the praise and worship when I saw a man looking at me from across the room. He was surrounded by many colors as the bright light shining through the stained glass window radiated about him. He looked to be in his late seventies and his eyes sparkled with life. I couldn't help but think how seventy didn't seem all that old as I continued to edge closer to sixty. There was a certain look to the man that stirred something inside me. Suddenly, my mind shot back almost thirty years to an encounter with the man he resembled on an equally bright day—one day I will never forget.

* * * * *

The year was 1974 and it was in the middle of the afternoon. It was an exceptionally warm spring day but you couldn't see the bright sun because of the old curtains covering the windows of the nursing home. I was playing cards with my father, Titanic Thompson, the most famous gambler in the world. He was then in his eighty-first year. When I walked out of there, little did I know I would never see him again.

Through The Eyes Of A Child

My story began almost thirty years further back in Evansville, Indiana. My mother gave birth to me while my father was playing in a high-stakes pool game with Minnesota Fats. What is it about a man that would make him want to shoot pool more than see his first-born son come into the world? To say the least, I asked myself that question many times while growing up. Maybe he just didn't know how to deal with having a kid; after all, he had never had one before. He wasn't there when I came into the world, and he wasn't around much after that.

I got used to him being gone but I always looked forward to his coming back home—because he always brought me a present. When he was home there was always a lot of excitement and laughter. People loved being around my dad.

When I was four years ago, my life was pretty good. Besides having a mother and, at times, a father, I had a wonderful dog—named Princess. She was a German Shepherd and I really loved that dog. When I turned five, my life took a major turn for the worst.

Someone fatally poisoned Princess. My parents got divorced. My dad left and never came back.

It doesn't matter what people tell you. When you're a little kid and someone tells you that the father you loved and the pet you cherished are gone forever—it's like the end of the world. I just knew I would wake up one morning and they would be there. I can remember when I would see a picture of my dog. I would cry. I sure missed that dog. Unlike my father, my dog had always been with me.

(Most of my life I have had dogs. In fact, as I sit writing, my two fox terriers are here. Jake is by my side while Jill is on the couch.)

My dad never called me or wrote me a letter.

Moving On

My mother and a wonderful lady named Jean Yokel took care of me. My dad set my mother up financially through some substantial oil royalties won while gambling. As a result, we were considered “well off” back in those days.

Jean Yokel loved Jesus and was always going to church. She was the first person I remember ever talking about the Lord. She did domestic work around our house and helped cater the many social parties my mother would have later on. Jean lived in a small house a couple hundred yards up the hill from us. Little did I know the effect she would have on my life years later.

When I was about seven years old, I came home from playing in the woods and my mother wasn't there. I remember it was only a few days before Christmas. It was just getting dark and starting to snow. I knew to go to Jean Yokel's house and knock on the door. I wasn't afraid of the dark, but it was one long walk before I got there. As I walked up the hill, my imagination really started doing a number on me. After knocking for what seemed like an eternity, the door opened—it was pitch dark outside and then I saw Billy Yokel, Jean's son, standing there in the light. Billy was a teenager and like a big brother to me. He spent hours teaching me to throw a football and to shoot baskets. I thought he was the greatest. I didn't have a father figure in my life, so when Billy would take time to teach me sports—it was really special.

When Billy opened the door and saw me standing there with tears running down my face, he reached down, picked me up in his arms and carried me into the house. He sat down in a big chair and held me in his arms. He then did something that impacted me for many years. He sang *Silent Night*. I felt so loved and so safe that I never forgot that feeling.

[For most of my life since, whenever I hear *Silent Night* during the holiday season, the tears most always come back. I asked God a couple of years ago about those tears and why the experience still affected me the way it did. It was like God said, "Tommy, don't you know that my Son Jesus put His arms around you that night and had Billy sing *Silent Night*? I wanted you to know how much I love you."]

When I was eight, my mother married a successful businessman and we moved into a new house further up the hill. The house was surrounded by woods and sat on four acres. My parents were always having big parties with lots of alcohol. I didn't care much for the upper class society people, and I spent most of my time hunting and fishing and playing in the woods. I got my first pistol when I was thirteen and would practice shooting all the time. I loved to fast draw and shoot things in the air. Little did I know that my ability with a pistol would save my life many times in the world of gambling.

THE TEEN YEARS

As a teenager I read stories about my dad in such publications as *Life Magazine*, *Sports Illustrated* and *Golf Digest*. Naturally, I was proud of who my dad was. A pride that would one day make me want to grow up and be just like him!

Dad got the name Titanic after beating a man shooting pool. While collecting his winnings, someone asked who dad was. The man replied, "Just call him Titanic; he sinks everyone!" While in New York, Thomas became "Thompson" after a newspaper got the name wrong. Dad liked the way it sounded...it stuck ever since.

I soon started practicing with a deck of cards and studying books on magic. I learned to manipulate the cards so I could cheat and win people's money. By sixteen, I was making hundreds of dollars playing cards at some of the local men's clubs.

Deep down, I thought that if I became a good enough professional gambler, one day my dad would accept me...and love me.

I spent my junior year at Western Military Academy in Alton, Illinois, a suburb of St. Louis. My mother and stepfather had become alcoholics. They were fighting all the time and wanted me out of the way. I will never forget my first day after they dropped me off at the school. We were all in line to get uniforms and I can remember how much I hated being there. My hair was longer than most and I knew they were

going to cut it short. I noticed two other guys with hair longer than mine. They looked pretty rough and I figured a judge probably sent them there instead of jail. We were put in special barracks for the new juniors because the seniors ran the school. If you didn't come up through the ranks, they wanted to make it real hard on you before you became a senior. They put me in a three-bed corner room...and who do you think I drew for roommates? You got it, the same two guys, whose names were Kempka and Mondick.

Kempka was a tough street fighter from Detroit and Mondick was a gang member from Chicago. That first night, one of the floor chiefs, Jake Bentencord, strutted into our room and told Kempka to stand facing the wall...his head two inches from it. Jake then came up behind him and banged his head against the wall. When Kempka said something to him, Jake picked up my chest exerciser and started to hit him with it. I grabbed it from him and shouted, "You will not hit him with my stuff!"

Jake left but soon came back with more seniors, and I spent the night scrubbing the hall with a toothbrush. As I scrubbed my way inch by inch down the long hall, I began wondering how I had gotten to this place in my life. Walking to Jean Yokel's house in the dark was nothing compared to this, and I knew there was not going to be a Billy Yokel waiting at the end of the hall—waiting to pick me up and make everything all right.

Harassment was the order of the day, every single day. I didn't know how, but I knew I would overcome my circumstances.

RUNNING TO SPORTS

At the academy, you had a choice of either playing football or running cross-country. I had played freshman football at North High School in Evansville. We won the city championship, but I played second string and wasn't all that good. So, I decided to run cross-country even though I had never run two miles in a race.

I bought a pair of red and white spiked track shoes from the commissary. As I walked across the football field, a couple of seniors laughed at my shoes and said, "What do you think you're going to do with those?" They laughed at me, but I thought to myself, "I'll show them!" The next day, after school, about fifty of us showed up for the cross-country trials. The coach showed us the long, winding, uphill, downhill, two-mile course and told us the record was nine minutes and thirty-two seconds. He then lined us up, the race began, and I found my niche. I beat everyone and wasn't even tired or winded.

Every day we ran and the same thing would happen. My times improved—twelve minutes, eleven minutes, and soon the school paper mentioned there might be a slight chance I could beat the school record. I worked hard, getting up and running in the morning, at night, covering four to five miles every day. I would even run in the snow. I was a kid—again. Before the last meet, I told the coach I was going to beat the record. And I did! I finished the course in nine minutes and sixteen seconds. Life was good and I was so excited. I was told I would receive a special plaque at graduation...but it never happened.

Two months before graduation, I was kicked out of school for having a pistol in my footlocker.

I went back to my old high school and won the decathlon in track and got a special trophy. But, it didn't take the place of that plaque I worked so hard for. I always regretted being kicked out.

HITTING THE ROAD AND BACK

My first car was a 1945 Jeep. I got it my senior year, back in public high school. Things were so bad at home with all the drinking and goings-on that I finally quit school. Without his knowledge, I took one of my step-dad's credit cards and took off in the middle of the night with a friend of mine, Randy Ross. We pointed the oil-burning Jeep-heap due west and just drove away on Route 66 (and it wasn't anything like the TV series of the same name that was very popular at that time).

To make it harder to trace our location by the credit card usage, we had a fifty-five gallon drum in the back that we filled with gasoline each time we stopped, always putting a much needed case of oil on the tab for good measure). We went all the way to Long Beach, California, and lived out there for several months. We worked as busboys in restaurants until I returned home a month before Christmas. My parents were so glad to see me (particularly, of course, my mother, who really did worry about me while I was gone). They bought me a new car—a Jaguar XK150.

Back in the 60s, when you had wheels, you would cruise the "drive-ins" where everyone hung out. That was how I met my first girlfriend, June Westerman.

She, too, was sixteen years old and worked as a "carhop" at the Merry Go Round. She left home at fourteen and lived in her own apartment. Her parents and seventeen brothers and sisters lived in a small house across the street from the stockyards. In the winter, her family put plastic over the windows to keep the cold out and the house always smelled like the stockyards. However, there was always something in her family's house that wasn't in my own...it was love.

I remember one particular Christmas Eve. June and I stopped by her Mom's house in my new Jag. As we pulled up in front of her house, it had just started snowing. It was going to be a beautiful white Christmas. However, as we walked to the door, I realized that her family wasn't going to have a Christmas. They weren't going to have a Christmas tree surrounded by lots of presents. They didn't even have a tree.

June and I got back in the Jag and we drove out into the country, cut down a pine tree, and threw it in the back seat. Somehow, scratching up the paint didn't seem to make that much difference. After putting up the tree at her home, her mother popped popcorn and we strung it on the tree. Then we went over to my house where I had barrels of toys in the basement from when I was a little boy. We took them over to her house and put them around the tree. We bought some Christmas lights and put them up, as well.

It was the best Christmas I had ever had.

CONFUSION & TURMOIL

June and I spent a lot of time together over the next two years. I never stopped dreaming about going to Texas, meeting my dad, and becoming a professional gambler...like he was.

I was nineteen when a good friend of mine since the fourth grade, Mike Fritchley, knocked on my apartment door. He asked me if I knew Jesus Christ and I said, "Mike, I don't think I do." He invited me to the Mill Road Baptist Church in Evansville. I was wearing a pair of wrap-around sunglasses, and from the time I walked into that church, tears came to my eyes. I never took off the glasses. I was the first to answer the altar call and was baptized that night.

Jesus became my Savior and I was so excited I didn't know what to do next. And sure enough, that's exactly what I did...*Nothing!* I didn't know what to do. I didn't go back to the church, I didn't get in the Word, and I didn't spend time in prayer. All I knew was that I was told that I was going to heaven. I didn't know how to make Jesus my Lord, about having a relationship with Him, or that He is a friend forever that sticks closer than a brother. I didn't know that the Lord orders our steps and that God has a plan and purpose for each and every life. Nor did I look very hard for such answers.... A few weeks later, I drove up in front of June's apartment in my Jaguar. She was standing outside holding our two month-old daughter, Tonya.

I said, "June. I always told you that one day I was going to go to Texas and meet my father and become a professional gambler like him. Didn't I always tell you that?" She nodded in agreement. "June. I am leaving for Texas."

My dad ran out on me...I not only ran out on my daughter and her mother...but I turned my back on the Lord.

MEETING DAD

I pulled up in front of my dad's house in San Antonio in that XK150 Jaguar convertible. Did I tell you it was midnight blue with red leather interior and a white convertible top? You see, I can tell you all about that car, but I can't tell you when my daughter took her first step or spoke her first word.

My dad was hitting golf balls in the front yard when I pulled up. As got out of the car and walked toward him, he looked up at me and said, "Who are you?"

"I am your son and I've come to live with you." "What do you do?" He asked.

"I'm a gambler...just like you."

He smiled and said, "Do you have any money?"

"Yes sir, about four hundred dollars."

At that time, dad was seventy-one years old. My first impression was that he was an old man on his last leg. Then I met his 24-year-old wife (number five or six) and my four-year-old half-brother. Dad asked me again what I did for a living. I again told him I was a gambler. He then beat me playing every card game imaginable. He gave my money back after each defeat and we would start again.

We then decided to go to the gun range. After he beat me shooting trap and skeet, we went to the pistol range. I knew he was in trouble here. I had been practicing since I was thirteen and could split a card edgeways at fifteen feet. What I didn't know was that my dad could take a .45 pistol at that same distance and hit the same hole over and over. In my lightening fast mind, I finally figured out that my dad wasn't all that old and that I had a lot to learn if I wanted to be like him.

WEAVING THROUGH GOD'S FINGERS

As I look back over the years, I am so thankful that we have a God that never gives up on us. After I met my dad, I became friends with Reverend James Haupt, a Lutheran Pastor in San Antonio. I also met Judy Lynn Kanak, the prettiest girl in school. I found myself waking up in the middle of the night and driving to his church. They didn't lock churches in those days, and I would go in and read the Bible to an empty church until the sun came up. I did that for three nights. As I walked out of the church that last night, I remember saying to God, "I don't know why I am doing this, God. I am not going to school to be in the ministry." I didn't know that God called people into the ministry. I thought you chose the ministry and went to a seminary to learn Theology. God wanted me to follow Him and not my earthly father. When I read the Word all night, I always opened the Bible to the book of John. I didn't know one book from the other but God wanted me to know the love of His Son, Jesus.

Because I had wanted my dad to love me for so long, I spent all my time with him and none with my Heavenly Father. I went with him to poker games, the golf course, and the bowling alley. If he played golf on a regular course that wasn't too long, he could still shoot par. I was with him when he made three "holes in one" on a par three golf course.

Titanic Thompson loved life more than anyone I had ever met. He lived to gamble. It wasn't about money with him. It was about gambling. He loved the action. He liked being the most famous gambler in the world. The more I was around my dad, the more I wanted to be just like him.

Judy and I became very close and actually got married. It only lasted a year. She wanted me to settle down and get a regular job, but I still wanted to follow in my dad's footsteps. Working didn't really appeal to me after I got used to making easy money gambling.

After getting back with dad, I spent the next five years practicing with a deck of cards. All the top card cheaters would come through town to see him. They all had different tricks and would teach me how to do them. I practiced eight and ten hours a day, learning to manipulate a deck of cards. I got so good at cheating people that I beat everyone I gambled with.

As you can see, God continued to tap me on the shoulder.

MY GAMBLING LIFE

For the next thirty years, I went all over the United States and Europe and beat everyone who would sit down with a deck of cards and gamble with me. It didn't matter if they were gamblers, businessmen, con artists, thieves or suckers. I played them all and could always figure out a way to win.

Dad lived in a nursing home in Colleyville, Texas, from age seventy-nine to eight-one, when he died. I went to see him when I was in town and we would play cards for hours. My dad would look at me and say, "Son, you are the best card cheater I have ever seen in my life."

My dad was finally proud of me.... The last time I saw him was when I was on my way to Cincinnati to play in a high stakes poker game. I stopped off at the nursing home on my way out of town and something happened that day that had never happened before. My dad looked up at me and said, "Son, I guess I am going to die here." Then he put his arms around me and said, "I love you, son."

I had been waiting my whole life to hear those words! I realized he didn't say them because I was a gambler. My dad said them because he finally figured out that family was what life was all about. When I would ask him about God, he would say, "Look around son, there has to be a God."

I pray someone told him about Jesus before he died. He had two strokes while I was gone and died after the second one. My dad was gambling when I was born and I was gambling when he died.

How sad....

OTHER TAPS ON MY SHOULDER

I was twenty-six when I went to St. Louis with my gambling partner. On the way, we traveled from town to town, cheating all the local gamblers. In St. Louis, we played in a game made up of local gamblers and some mob people. We were holding out cards and switching them in and out when we needed them to make a winning hand. In that particular game, they played with two decks, a red and a blue, which made the game go faster (one deck was always shuffled and ready to deal). The play got so fast that my partner came in with a red card when they were dealing the blue deck. When they spotted it, we tried to laugh it off and act like it was mixed up with the wrong deck from a previous hand. No one said anything. After the game we left and went to his parent's house in the mountains. We had won over twenty thousand that night and had told them we would be back the next week.

The night before we were to go back, I couldn't sleep very well. I woke up several times during the night. I had a real bad feeling about going back to that game.

I carried a Colt Cobra .38 in a spring holster that hung upside down under my lightweight jacket. I could draw and shoot it in less than a second. Let me say right now that in over thirty years of gambling, I never

had to shoot or hurt anyone. But if push came to shove, people could see a confidence in me that kept them from pulling a pistol. I always said, "It's one thing to lose your money, it's another to lose your life."

As I look back over my life, I realize it wasn't the money I was willing to die for. I could always get more money. Rather, it was because I was trying to live up to being the kind of gambler that my dad would be proud of. I had read stories in the magazines and newspapers where my dad had killed five different men at different times in his life. Each time, they were all trying to rob him with a pistol. My dad would act like he tripped and was falling, but on his way down he came out with his pistol and shot them. I asked him about the last man he killed in Tyler, Texas. It was the only time I ever saw my dad with tears in his eyes. He related that he was playing golf and had a pocket full of thousand dollar bills. When they finished playing, a man wearing a hood threw down on him with a pistol and demanded his money. Dad acted like he was falling and shot the man dead. When he took the hood off the man, he recognized him as his eighteen-year-old caddy.

I got up early the morning we were to return to the St. Louis game. I walked into the bathroom and threw some cold water on my face. I looked out the window and realized it had snowed about ten inches and there was no way to drive out of the mountains. That afternoon we were sitting around the fireplace when the phone rang. It was the man who had originally taken us into the big game. He said, "It's a good thing you didn't come back because they hired a couple of guys to shoot you and throw you both into the East River."

That night I woke up about two in the morning. I put on my clothes, went outside and started walking up the mountain. Every time I would slip and fall, I would think about how cold it would be in the East River. When I got to the top and looked out across the mountains, it was like God had wrapped me up in a white blanket of snow and protected me. I fell down to my knees and cried out to Him. I asked if He had a plan and a purpose for my life.

If God answered, I didn't hear Him. I was too filled with pride to hear God, and I wasn't really ready to quit gambling. However, I began to get a revelation that maybe it wasn't my confidence with a pistol that kept me from getting killed, but rather a loving God who kept His hand on me.

Months later, I was at another high stakes poker game when gunmen kicked in the door and came in shooting. One man lay dead on the floor and they turned their guns on me. As they were about to shoot, I raised my hand and said, "Don't shoot, I will take care of everything." One of the guys said, "Don't shoot that man." They gathered up all the money and left me standing there.

God kept His hand on me one more time.

OTHERS

While chasing my gambling dreams, there were other situations and people involved in my life. After a short stint at Tyler Junior College and about a year in Los Angeles, trying to make it in the movies, I married my second wife. Her name was Debbie Sue Feddick. I ran a Bingo Parlor in the Miami area for about two years with one of my closest friends, Sonny Belt. Sonny, his wife Martha, and their children have been the closest thing I have had to a real family over the years. We got in financial trouble with the Bingo Parlor. Shortly thereafter, Debbie and I got divorced. Almost immediately after the paperwork was complete, she inherited a fortune from her father's estate, while I left town broke looking for another poker game. I had enough of business. From that time on I was never broke again.

At age twenty-nine, I met and married Elizabeth Luedke. We lived very well off of my thriving gambling income. The problem was that she wanted to go to Europe and walk hand-in-hand in gardens, smelling the roses and the like. While me? I wanted to go to Pittsburgh, sit alone in a straight-back chair around a high stakes poker table and smell the cigar smoke. So, I would send her to Europe with her son to visit her

relatives and I would stay with the cards. Between such differences that drove us apart and the drugs we took that falsely kept us together, the marriage ended after ten years.

MOTHER

After divorcing my step-dad, mother moved to Texas and still had a serious problem with alcohol. She ended up in a nursing home in 1990. I would go see her and bring her cigarettes and fruit each week but we couldn't get close. There was still a lot of bitterness and anger over the past. She always loved my dad. She had a sore throat that wouldn't go away and I thought it might be cancer since she smoked all the time. The doctors finally told her she had six months to live. I prayed every night for God to bring us close together before she died.

Five months before she died, I had a dream in the early hours of the morning. I dreamed I was a young boy in olden times running and playing in the woods, when all of a sudden, I came upon a clearing. I looked across and saw a man wearing a robe standing on a hill talking to a lot of people. I watched him for a long time, and then I ran back into the woods again. Before I knew it, it was dark and I was lost and afraid. I didn't know where my mother was. Then I looked up and the man in the robe was standing there reaching his hand down for mine. I took his hand and was no longer afraid. He took me to find my mother and when I saw her, I was so happy I yelled, "Mother, mother! This is my friend Jesus."

I was so excited, I woke up. I knew I was supposed to go to the hospital and tell my mother about the dream and ask her if she knew Jesus. She said, "Of course, son, I know Jesus." We held each other and cried. I hadn't felt like that since I was a young boy and my mother would tell me how much she loved me. God had answered my prayers and restored our relationship.

She died that year, on Mother's Day Eve....

THE DREGS TO THE DIVINE

After my mother died, I felt extremely empty. For the next five years, I tried to fill that emptiness with more cars, boats, motorcycles, drugs and women. During this time I was doing drugs with two friends, Steve Blevins and Jimmy Don Hardin. My life was going nowhere.

Thank Jesus, because He changed all that!

Four weeks before Easter of 1995, I got up early one morning feeling emptier than I had ever felt. I took a good look at myself in the mirror and didn't like what I saw. I said, "God, I have been taking all my life and I want to give something back. When I die I want someone to remember me for giving instead of always taking." I fell down on my knees and cried out to God.

Two weeks later I went to see my good friend (a hair stylist), Lori Mc Donald. She was doing the hair of a lady sitting in a wheelchair. Her name was Margaret Moberly. A moment later, Lori came running to me in the back of the shop and told me Margaret had said, "That man is a professional gambler. He has a lot of nice things but isn't happy. He has a big heart and God has him on a long leash."

Margaret had never seen me before so I went up and introduced myself and made light of her comment. "I guess it doesn't get any better than being on a long leash with God, does it?"

She didn't laugh and I knew something was up in my spirit.

Two weeks later, the night before Easter, I was having dinner with Lori's husband. He and I had been friends since we were twenty. We had also made a lot of money gambling. He would find places for me to play and I would give him a percentage of the money. We were eating Chinese food and I was just about to take my first bite when he relayed that there was another message from the lady in the wheelchair.

I suddenly lost my appetite.

I called Lori to find out what the message said. She said, "Now, let me get it just right....Tell him that God now has him on a short leash...that the devil has made a bet on his soul, and God has covered the bet."

Through a lump in my throat, I said, "Tomorrow is Easter Sunday. Tell me, where do you go to church? I want to be there!"

That Easter Sunday, I went to church at The Church In Cityview. After the service, I walked out with Margaret and her husband, O.B. Pastor Burton Purvis was shaking hands as people filed by. When he shook my hand, Margaret said, "You guys need to get to know each other."

Burton looked at me and said, "Really, what do you do for a living?"

Not wanting to lie to a man of God, I simply stated, "I'm a professional gambler."

He replied, "I hope you're good at it. We don't get many of those around here." (And Margaret was right-on. Today, Burton remains one of my closest friends in the ministry.)

After the service, Margaret, O.B., Lou and myself went to lunch. I looked across the table at Margaret and said, "Okay, what's up?"

She smiled and said, "Tommy, when you were a teenager, God called you to be an Evangelist and everything in your life has led up to that end." When she said those words I felt like someone had poured hot oil in me. She smiled even brighter and added, "Look at his face! Can you all see the difference?"

They all could...and I have never been the same since that day. That was the day I fell in love with Jesus. I knew right then, there were only two winning hands and they were both nailed to that cross for me.

I suddenly knew that gambling had kept me from God's will, His plan and purpose for my life. I wish I could say that I quit gambling forever that day...but that's not how it happened.

UP JUMPED THE DEVIL

After that lunch, I got in my truck and drove to the house of my weightlifting trainer and friend, Dwight Hampton. I told him and his wife, Sharon, what had happened. He said, "Tommy, I am going to tell you a story that only five people in the world know." As he began to tell the story, I could see goose bumps all over his arms.

He said, "When I was nineteen I went to school in Mississippi. I was a football player and was a real tough guy. There was a devil worshipper on campus and he and I got into it. I whipped him real bad. That night in my parent's house, I woke up at midnight. There was a fowl smell in the room. The room was warm and there was a reddish glow. When I sat up in bed there was some kind of demon. Whatever it was hit me in the head so hard it knocked my head back against the headboard and cracked it. I still have that headboard in my attic. My parents heard the noise and tried to open the door but it wouldn't open. My dad felt heat coming from the room and started quoting scripture. The door opened and whatever it was left." He added, "Tommy, I don't know what was in my room, but there was a knot as big as your fist on my forehead and marks around my neck where something had grabbed me."

Up until this time, I thought the devil was something they made up for Halloween. I had not read the Bible that much and I really didn't know about Satan. I left my trainer's house and stopped by my friend Vicki's house (where I would later hold Bible studies). After I told Vicki what happened at lunch, she

brought out boxes of sermon tapes and books, including my first Bible, and gave them to me. She said she knew I was going to be a man of God and that God was going to use me to reach the lost.

After I left Vicki's, I wanted to go home and try to figure all this out. Before I got to the house, I saw a friend, Linda, standing out in her front yard. I told her what had happened.

She said, "Tommy, I have to tell you about the dream I had last night. In this dream I had a fight with the devil. When I was growing up, my brothers were into karate and they had two swords on the wall. I am fighting with the devil and I saw the swords on the wall and I grabbed one of them and stuck it in the devil. When I did, I woke up. Now Tommy, I know it was just a dream but the lamp next to my bed was broken and I had bruises all over my body."

I had made enough stops. I just wanted to get to my house. I didn't go to church for several weeks. I felt like Jonah. I didn't want to come up out of the bottom of the ship. I just wanted to hide.

Burton Purvis called and invited me to lunch. We met and as we ate, I found myself asking all these questions about what had happened. I asked him why God would want to use someone like me who had lived the life of a gambler. He said we were in the end times and that God was calling all kinds of people to preach the Gospel. He said that if this was truly a call from God, it would be confirmed two or three times.

The next Sunday, I went to church with Scott and Donny, two of my Harley-riding buddies. Scott's dad was a Pentecostal Preacher in Hurst, Texas. After the service, a young man walked up to us and said that God was going to use us and we were going to be blessed. We then went to Scott's dad's house and asked him what he thought about what had been happening to me. He agreed that it sounded like God was calling me into the ministry. His dad became my first Bible teacher.

I had met a girl at The Church in Cityview and wrote her number down on a pamphlet I was given. The following Saturday, I found the pamphlet and was about to call her, when something told me to read the pamphlet. It said Charles Lynn, an internationally known Evangelist, was going to be speaking at Cityview that night at 7:00 p.m. I knew I was supposed to be there! I called Margaret. She said she and O.B. would join me there. We three sat on the front row. When Charles Lynn got through speaking, he gazed directly down at me and asked my name. I told him my name was Thomas. He said what is your other name, and I said it was also Thomas. He said Thomas; you are going to be like a warrior for Christ with a great sword, but more like David with a slingshot. He must have prophesied for ten minutes about what all I was going to do for God. It was the first time I had ever raised my arm in church and when I did, it was like it was no longer mine. My arm felt like it belonged to Jesus.

DENIAL

When I left there that night, my mind tried to figure it all out. As a professional gambler, I had seen just about every kind of scam there is. But this one took the cake. I could tell Burt Purvis knew this guy from before, so I figured they got together to plan out the best way to part me from my money. Too much was happening way too fast for it all to be just a coincidence. I figured they must have thought I had a lot more money than I actually did...and they were out to get it! I didn't go to church that Sunday. I knew it was a set-up.

I got up Monday morning and told myself I would get to the bottom of this. I would make sure they knew I was onto what they were trying to do. The pamphlet said Charles Lynn was ministering at the Restoration Church in Euless.

I rode my Harley to the church where I asked the receptionist if I could speak to Charles Lynn. She asked me if I was the guy he prophesied over Saturday night. I told her it was me. She smiled and said he and the pastor were out getting lunch and would be coming through the door any minute.

About that time a beautiful blonde lady walked in. She introduced herself as Jackie Holland. She said she had seen me around the neighborhood for a long time and had been praying for me the last couple of years.

About then, the pastor and Charles Lynn walked in and said they had been talking about me at lunch. This was turning out to be the most elaborate con I had ever seen or heard of! I had no idea all the churches worked together! You talk about being organized! The mob didn't have anything on these people. In fact, they could learn a few tricks from them. Before I left they all laid hands on me and prayed. I had no idea at the time how Jackie Holland would play such an important part in my future ministry.

MEETING THE CALL

For the next several months, God would wake me up in the middle of the night and remind me of all he had done in my life. He began to put a testimony together, beginning with when my dad left up to the present time. For months, every night I would wake up—going over and over in my mind what God would bring to my memory. He reminded me of all the times He saved my life and was there for me. Jesus had kept His arms around me all those years and protected me.

Finally, I got a video camera and set it up and made a tape of my testimony. It lasted for thirty minutes. I could say it over and over again, word for word and never make a mistake. God made sure I could say it the way He wanted me to deliver it.

God didn't have to wake me up anymore in the middle of the night.

I gave the video to Lori to look at. Her husband joined in on the review and said, "I don't know what is going on but Tommy is not the same person he used to be. There is something different about him."

When I shared my testimony, it was like it wasn't just me doing it. My whole countenance changed. I was no longer the same person. I knew God was real and it wasn't a con. I still gambled but my heart wasn't in it.

Reverend McGaha, Scott's dad, took me to a men's fellowship in Lufkin, Texas. A powerful minister, Bobby McCool, was preaching. I had shared a little of my testimony at lunch with him. In the middle of his sermon, he came up to where we were sitting and said, "Tommy, God just told me everything was going to be alright with you." Reverend McGaha started crying.

After the service, Bobby asked me if I had ever been baptized in the Holy Ghost with evidence of speaking in tongues. I told him no. I really didn't understand about having a prayer language and didn't want anything to do with it. (How many of us miss out on all that God has for us because we don't understand it and can't figure it out in our head.) He told me he was going to be ministering in Fort Worth on Sunday at Reverend McGaha's church. I told him I would be there.

That next Sunday morning, I sat in the back of The First United Pentecostal Church, not quite knowing what to expect. After Bobby got through speaking, the men and women went forward. The men gathered around the men and the women around the women, laying hands on them and praying until they received the Baptism of the Holy Ghost with evidence of speaking in tongues. I wasn't comfortable with this so I slipped out the back door.

That afternoon at five, the Lord spoke to my heart and said, "You need to ride your Harley to Reverend McGaha's church." I called his son, Scott, and told him we have to ride to his dad's church for the six o'clock service. We arrived and sat next to Scott's mother on the front row.

After Bobby finished preaching, Scott's mother said to Scott, "Why don't you and Tommy go up front." We got up and walked up front. I stood there with my eyes closed while the men gathered around behind me and began to pray. I knew nothing was going to happen, that they were just wasting their time. Then a man, a complete stranger, came around in front of me, put his hands on my face.

He whispered in my ear. "I had a dream last night about a man on a Harley and God told me He was going to use that man, and that I was supposed to tell him about the dream. I knew when I saw you ride up, that you were that man. When I saw you go up front I knew I was supposed to tell you about the dream. I am a minister and I knew I was supposed to be in this church tonight, to do just that!"

"Shammah, Shammah, Shammah" came bubbling up out of my spirit and I had the beginning of a prayer language. It was like I was supercharged with a thousand volts of energy. I had never experienced anything like that in my life. I couldn't sleep for several days. I went to a new level in God. I didn't know it was possible to love God that much and all I wanted to do was tell people about Jesus Christ.

I later learned in Bible School that Shammah in Hebrew meant, God is with you.

GOD'S PLAN FOR ME

Not long after getting my prayer language, Jackie Holland invited me to go to Wackenhut Prison to share my testimony with the prisoners. I told her I would go, but I would have to see how I felt when I got there as to whether or not I would actually get up and share my testimony.

After we arrived, we went into a room and began to set up the speakers and instruments for the praise and worship. There were about fifty chairs set up and about twenty inmates already there, waiting for the service to begin. I asked the guard how many usually showed up for the services and he said about fifty. Then the praise and worship began and you could feel the spirit of God move through the place. They had to bring in more chairs as over a hundred men attended the service.

I sat there with my chair propped up against the wall. I was trying to decide if I would get up and share my testimony. I was afraid if I did, I might start crying in the middle of it and I didn't want to be embarrassed. Then I cut a deal with God. (You can always tell you're a baby Christian when you're making deals with the God of the Universe, forgetting that He holds all the cards and the only reason you're playing in the game at all is because of His grace and mercy.) Nonetheless, I said, "God, if you can show me that what I am about to do will make a difference to these men, I will take your Word into the streets, the jails, the prisons, the churches and anywhere else you want me to go. I will follow you all the days of my life."

I got up and spoke. As I began to share what God had given me so many times in the middle of the night, something happened! It was like it was no longer me who was doing it. Tears were running down my face and it didn't make any difference. When I finished, all the men jumped up out of their chairs and ran forward.

One man said, "I ride a Harley in a gang and I want to ride for Jesus."

Another said, "I am getting out next week. Where do you go to church?" They all wanted prayer. They walked by, one at a time, and shook hands with all of us. They encouraged me and thanked all of us for being there.

Since that day, I have kept my end of the bargain I made with God. And he has kept His.

MY MINISTRY REALLY BEGINS

Several weeks later, I found myself standing behind Burt Purvis's pulpit at The Church In Cityview, getting ready to minister on the busiest day of the year. It was the Sunday before all the young people were getting ready to go back to school. I ministered two services, but I want you to know, I had very little to do with what happened. I had just finished a cough drop and got up on the platform to speak when the power of God came over me. I thought the cough drop had something in it to make you high. It's like it wasn't me speaking. Before I knew it, Burton was doing an altar call and people were coming forward with tears running down their faces, giving their hearts to Jesus.

The same thing happened the next service—except I noticed a man was sleeping while I was ministering. After the service, I mentioned it to Burton. He said, "Tommy, welcome to the ministry."

I knew when he said it, I was really in the ministry and I would be doing this the rest of my life. God had revealed to me that the devil was real and he wants to steal, kill and destroy our lives. Not long after I ministered in Burton's church, an old friend called me from Houston on a Thursday night. He said, "If you'll come down for the weekend we could win twenty or thirty thousand playing blackjack with a group of doctors." Instead of saying, "I don't do that anymore, and let me tell you what God has done in my life," I said, "Let me think about it." I hadn't closed the door to the devil.

I heard God speak to me and say, "Go to church." Calvary Cathedral International was the only church I knew that had a Thursday night service. I drove downtown and realized it was an hour before church started. I decided to get something to eat. I walked into a Mexican restaurant and sat down at a small table on the patio outside. Five women sat at the table behind me, three white, two black. They were drinking and enjoying happy hour after work.

One of the white women said, "I love a man who rides a Harley and works out." I was wearing my Harley vest and knew she was trying to be cute. So, I turned around and said hello to everyone, then turned back around and ordered my food.

Then God spoke to my heart and said, "I want you to tell them what I have done in your life." I said, "God, you have got your wires crossed. These women are partying and having a good time. They don't want to hear about Jesus."

As I was eating my food, I heard the same lady say something about the Lord. I turned around in my chair and said, "Did I hear you say something about the Lord?"

One of the black ladies said, "She sure did! Do you have a testimony you want to share?"

As I pulled my chair up to tell them what Jesus had done in my life, I said, "Lord, you don't have to worry about that blackjack game or any other game. My gambling days are over. I have quit gambling"

THOSE MYSTERIOUS WAYS

A few months later, an old friend told me he had seen Walter Gaddy in my neighborhood and that he was in the ministry. Walter used to go by the name Woppy and he was a great pool player. I traveled with him in my early twenties. We would go into pool halls and, after shooting pool, I would challenge people to play cards. We made a lot of money together during those years.

It had been at least twenty-five years since I last saw Walter. I didn't know how to find him, but after some time the Holy Spirit put it in my heart to track him down. I found a listing for a Walter Gaddy, but it was his nephew. He said his Uncle was a minister in Palestine, Texas, and gave me his number. I called

Walter up and he said he got saved in the early eighties and had been praying for me ever since. I told him what all had happened and he began to cry with joy.

I sent him the tape of my testimony from Burton's church and he played it for Joyce Green. Joyce had taken over her husband's ministry after he died. Her husband, Milton Green, was a precious man of God who had a real love for people that were hurting. After listening to the tape, she told Walter that she knew I was a man that knew the real Jesus and wanted me to go into the prisons with her. The promise I had made God that day in Wackenhut Prison was becoming a reality. It was the day before Christmas and I had decided to spend it alone with Jesus.

God had another plan.

Joyce Green called and asked if I would come down to the prison Christmas Day. My prison ministry was born and off I went!

I looked at my watch. It was five in the morning. I had been driving for two hours and had another hour before I reached the prison. I remember thinking how lonely it seemed as I was driving down the deserted highway. I couldn't believe I was actually going to one of the toughest prisons in the state of Texas to share what God had done in my life. I had to laugh a moment! I had spent most of my life trying to avoid ending up in prison. Then I thought about how many lonely roads I had driven down early in the morning after playing poker all night. Gambling was a business and I would win the money and go on to the next game. I suddenly felt good about what I was about to do and began thanking God for calling me out of the life of a gambler and into the ministry. I put on a praise and worship tape and rejoiced in the Lord as I completed the journey.

I met Joyce Green and Walter at the gates and we were escorted to the prison Chapel. Joyce began to tell me about a man they called Big Mo. He had started coming to the services about six months before, and every time he entered, she would always reach out her hand to him. Big Mo was a large black man who hated white folks. He had always walked right on past Joyce and her outstretched hand...and plopped down in a chair. The Lord told her to keep reaching out to him, week after week, but he had never acknowledged her.

When the men came into the chapel it was obvious which one was Big Mo. I got up and shared my testimony and ended it with, "This old gambler knows now that there are only two winning hands...and they were both nailed to the cross."

When I sat down, Big Mo got up, walked forward to the front, took the microphone and said, "That reminds me of a song I haven't sang in over twenty years, He Touched Me." And then he began to sing the words, ".../ was shackled by a heavy burden beneath a load of guilt and shame, and then the hand of Jesus touched me and I will never be the same...." As he stood there and sang, I could see the yoke-destroying power of God setting a man free from his past.

He then said, "I am going to tell you why I have hated white folks so much for the past thirty years. I lived in Mississippi with my mother and father. It was in the middle of the winter and there was snow on the ground. I was fourteen years old when, suddenly in the middle of the night, a Ku Klux Klan mob kicked in the front door and dragged my mother and father out into the snow. I watched them hang my father and beat my mother almost to death. My uncle who lived forty miles away was awakened in the middle of that same night, and God told him to go to little Mo's house. He came and took my mother and me to the hospital. My mother barely survived the beatings. That's why I have hated white folks so much."

The men filed out of the room, one at a time, except for Big Mo. He walked over to where I was standing and reached out his hand to me, and we shook, not as a black man and a white man, but as two brothers in Christ.

It was the best Christmas present I ever had.

I found myself going to the prisons for the next five years and preaching the Gospel. I became an ordained minister two years after God called me. Since then, as an evangelist, I have ministered all over: churches, schools, colleges, jails and prisons. I haven't forgotten that promise I made to God when I first stood up in Wackenhut Prison.

THE VISION

I couldn't believe all that God had done with me in 1995, but it was now 1996. In the world of gambling, my pistol and decks of cards were in a bag ready to go when the phone rang. The phone always rang. But now I had my Bible and was ready to go, but the phone never rang. Needless to say, I was a little concerned. I had quit gambling for the life of the ministry and now what?

At midnight on February 27, 1996, that all changed!

I was coming home from a movie. The Lord spoke to my heart and said, "Dream within a dream." I drove home thinking about it and had no idea what it meant. Just a few weeks before, I had bought a computer and printer but had no idea why. I didn't really know much about computers. I tried to remember how to type and it wasn't easy for me. When I got home, I typed the words "dream within a dream"...and something happened. I just kept on typing!

God gave me a vision.

The Vision:

I was a professional gambler for thirty years and used all the tricks of the trade to win, and then God called me to play in a different kind of game. In this game, the devil deals off the bottom and knows all the tricks, while I have been asked to lay all my cards face up on the table and let Jesus play my hand for me. He wants me to win so badly He died on the cross, so that I could win the biggest jackpot of all—my salvation. I keep asking myself why this walk with Jesus seemed at times to be so difficult. Could it be because Satan wants us to believe that our wife or husband, family or friends or anything else we cherish is more important than God is? I think he would like for us to believe just that, but God is very specific when He says we are to worship Him above all things. God created us to worship Him, and only by doing so will we ever really find peace and joy. In the whole scheme of things, our stay here is very short, and when it's time to leave, it comes down to one thing. It doesn't matter how many loved ones you have. You have to make this journey by yourself. What happens to your spirit depends on your walk with Jesus on earth, and just how much you have become like Him. When we first begin the journey, the road is wide and God is more forgiving. But as we grow in the Lord, the road narrows and He expects more from us. Narrow is the gate into the Kingdom of Heaven. So what really happens when we die and we have fallen from God's grace—will there be weeping and gnashing of teeth?

I had a dream last night, and in this dream, the last thing I remember was turning out the light next to the bed before I went to sleep. I lay there dreaming about a trip I made to Gatlinburg, TN. There were eight of us and we were all riding our Harleys in the mountains. With the wind in my face, I remember thanking God for being alive and feeling so good in this beautiful country. One of the guys saw a sign giving directions to some large caverns, so we decided to park the bikes and go inside where there was a guide waiting. We started down into the cave and stopped in a large cavern. I remember walking into another chamber and after looking around, I suddenly realized everyone else had started back up and I

wasn't sure which way to go—then the lights went out. I stood there listening for a sound. There wasn't any! I wanted to light a match but since I don't smoke I didn't have any. I then passed my hand in front of my face to see if I could see it. I couldn't. I began shouting! I felt a desperate need to hear another voice but there was nothing. There was just blackness, and complete silence. I listened for any kind of sound, even a drop of water falling from a stalactite, but there was none. It's like I was buried alive in a tomb. I knew it would be just a matter of time before someone would miss me and come looking for me.

Then I thought to myself, what if this wasn't a dream? What if I had died and this was eternity and it would always be dark and empty? I would never see my family and friends again. I would never hear another sound. I would be completely alone forever. I was afraid! I want to wake up now God! Why can't I wake up? Oh, I know, this must be a "dream within a dream", and I am just dreaming I couldn't wake up. That's it! Wow, I was afraid there for a minute, but surely I am going to wake up any second now. The first thing I am going to do is turn on the light and call my brother. I want to hear his voice. I want to tell him I love him. I am not really worried. I know I will wake up any second. Please God, I want to wake up now! Oh God, if you will just let me wake up, I promise everything will be different! I want to be in the light, God. I want to live my life for you, God. I want to worship you, God. I don't want to stay in the dark forever and ever. I will do anything, God! What's that? Am I dreaming or is that really the phone ringing?

"Hello, is that you, brother? What time is it? Oh no, nothing is wrong. Hey brother, I just want you to know that I love you."

God gave me this understanding of the vision:

- 1. The light next to the bed was Jesus.*
- 2. I turned the light off and couldn't see Jesus.*
- 3. I chose to go into the dark.*
- 4. The cave represents sin.*
- 5. Like sin, it looked good. There were beautiful rock formations.*
- 6. Like sin, it felt good. It was cool and refreshing.*
- 7. Sin takes us deeper and deeper until it brings death.*
- 8. Repentance brings Jesus, and Jesus is our brother.*

From the haircut to the letter, these are the people that God used.

Margaret Moberly	My Spiritual Mother
Burton Purvis	A guiding light and friend in the ministry
Dwight Hampton	Helped me see that Satan is real
Vicki Biel	Fed me needed materials, first Bible, Home of our Bible studies
Linda Williams	Another testimony to the reality of Satan
1st church stranger	Touched my face and told me of God's Plan for me
Charles Lynn	Again, reminded me of God's plan
Jackie Holland	Got me to that first prison

Bobby McCool	Again, reminded me of God's plan
2nd church stranger	Again validated God's plan
Walter Gaddy	Got me to Joyce Green & Big Mo
God's Letter to me	Showed me how to preach about what a <i>Godless eternity</i> would be like

THOSE SOMETIME BITTERSWEET PATHS

A couple of weeks later, I was driving down Ft. Worth's Loop 820 at eleven o'clock at night and God spoke to my heart and said to exit and make a right turn on Meadowbrook Drive. He then said to make another right turn and before I knew it, I was in the driveway of Steve Blevins. He was an old friend that used to do drugs with Jimmy Don Hardin and myself. I heard Steve had been clean for a couple of years.

I knocked on the door and he answered it with a blanket wrapped around him. He had been sleeping on the couch and didn't look very good. He said he had been sick. I asked him to come out to my truck. He did and I put in my testimony tape.

After he listened to it, he said, "I am real happy for you."

I told him this was for anyone who wanted it. I then read him the letter— "Dream within a Dream"—and it frightened him. For years he had done so many drugs he would swear to us that he was seeing demons and they really frightened him.

The next week he got a Bible and gave his heart to the Lord. I stopped by the men's club where he played cards almost every day. I invited him to come to my Bible study. He always said that he would try to make it but never did. After asking him several times, he promised me he would be there without fail the next Monday.

The preceding Friday, I was driving down the freeway and started to go to his house to make sure he was coming—something stopped me. I felt like I had pushed him enough and he did say that for sure he would be there. The same thing happened to me on Saturday and Sunday. I would start to turn toward the house, but didn't.

Monday night he didn't show up at the Bible study. I told Burton Purvis that we should go by Steve's house. Burton said he was going out of town and didn't have time. I went home and heard the phone ringing as I walked into the house.

It was Steve's son. He told me his dad had died alone in his house, last Friday.

Steve's brother asked me to minister his service. There were hundreds of people there. I read the "Dream within a Dream" letter and got to tell everyone that Steve had accepted Jesus Christ and was in heaven. A precious little lady in her seventies came up to me and said, "Son, I don't know where you have been but I know where you are going."

Another lady walked up and gave me a piece of paper. She said that she had cut Steve's hair on Friday. For some unknown reason, he left a piece of paper on her station with my phone number on it. He knew my number by heart but I think he knew he was dying and wanted her to call me if anything happened.

Six years later, I also did Jimmy Don Hardin's funeral service. He spent the last two years before he died in Federal Prison. Before he went to prison, I had been praying for him after I heard he might be in

trouble. After not seeing him for over a year he walked into Soup & Salad while I was having lunch. I sat down with him and he gave his heart to Jesus.

Three friends on a fast track to hell saved before they had a chance to crash and burn for eternity.

The Bible study was a God idea. Burton Purvis called me one day for lunch. He said he felt like the Lord wanted me to put together a Bible study. I said I would pray about it and we would see what happens. The Lord told me to talk to Vicki and sure enough, after she and her husband prayed about it, their home became our initial meeting place. Vicki has two beautiful daughters, Angie and Carmen, who also attended and brought several of their friends.

The Bible study really grew. It seemed everywhere I went I would run into someone who wanted to come. I would be talking about it and people would overhear me and walk up and ask if they could join in. I was with Vicki and her husband at a Mexican restaurant in Grapevine, Texas. Two guys walked up. One of the guys had worked on my garage door the previous year and heard me talking about it. The other guy, Rex, asked if he could come, too. They both showed up the following week.

The weekly Bible study was great. Everyone would sit in a large circle. Someone would start talking about their week and share what God had been doing in their life. After a couple of weeks, there were between twenty and twenty-five people in attendance. Each time we would get in a circle and start the meeting, the Holy Spirit would come down on someone and they would start weeping and sharing things about their life. It was awesome to see God at work.

The Holy Spirit really touched Rex. God did a mighty work in the young man. I baptized Rex the following Sunday at The Church In Cityview. Just before he went under, he asked me a question about the sins of the father. I asked why he wanted to know. He said his father, who was killed, was Horace Copeland.

Horace was the first man I gambled with when I came to Fort Worth with my dad, I was twenty years old. We played knock poker and I beat Horace out of five thousand dollars. He was hot about it. When he found out I was Titanic's son, the word on the street was, that he wanted to kill me.

Days later, I walked into a club called the Nutcracker on Camp Bowie. I saw Horace go to the restroom and I followed him. I had my pistol under my coat and when he turned around, I said, "What's this I hear about you wanting to kill me?" He knew one of us was about to die.

He smiled real big and said, "I guess if you're going to be a sucker you ought to be a quiet one." We never had a problem after that.

After I baptized Rex, I thought again about the grace and mercy of God. I went from almost shooting a man to baptizing his son thirty years later.

MORE DOORS OPEN UP

In March of 1996, God opened doors for me to minister to teenagers. A woman walked up to me at Cityview and said the Lord told her I was to come and minister at her school. It was the Sycamore School in Fort Worth where I ministered to the eighth graders. As I was sharing with them, one of the young men said, "If you're really that good with a deck of cards, show me!" He took a deck of cards out of his backpack and handed it to me. After I showed the kids how I used a deck of cards to make a living, I told them what Jesus had done in my life.

The next day, the lady who owned the school called me and said I needed to come back. The entire class wanted to get saved. I was there the next day. I explained what it meant to be born again into the

Kingdom of God, to confess Jesus as the Lord of your life, and to repent for your sins. All eighteen gave their hearts to Jesus that day.

A girl who was a friend of mine had listened to my testimony tape with her family. Her younger brother called me and asked if I would come to his school and share about what had happened to me. He went to Saint John's Catholic School in North Richland Hills. Joyce Green and I prayed about it and felt like I was supposed to go.

I rode over on my Harley. As I walked up to the classroom, all the students were standing outside waiting for me. The first thing I heard was two girls saying, "Our daddy rides an Indian motorcycle and they are a lot better than those Harley Davidsons." (I knew this was going to be a real test of faith.)

We walked into the room and everyone took their seats. As I stood there looking at everyone, I was thinking how nice it would be to have some praise and worship. I said, "Lord, I need some help here." Then the teacher got up and they all said the Lord's Prayer. I was so grateful they hadn't taken it out of this school. The teacher sat down with the students as I started speaking. The same two girls started laughing. When I shared about the dream and Jesus reaching down to take my hand to find my mother, the anointing fell. The two girls who were laughing suddenly started crying. And every time I would look over at the teacher, her mouth was wide open, and she never closed it for thirty minutes.

Not long after riding away from the school, the mother of the boy who had invited me, called. She said, "Tommy, I don't know what happened but they spent the next hour in religious class trying to figure it out. They had never experienced anything like that." I realized it's nice to have praise and worship, but when we step out in faith all we need is Jesus...

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Sitting there in the church, my mind suddenly snapped back when I heard the pastor call out my name as he introduced me to the congregation. I suddenly realized that seeing the old man in the light from the stained glass window not only reminded me of my dad but also had taken me back over the events of my life.... The pastor told them the message I was going to share was vital to the church and America. He then opened his arm toward me, bidding me to the pulpit.

As I stood behind the pulpit getting ready to minister, I was so thankful for all that God had done in my life. My message was entitled, "The Truth About Gambling."

After I concluded my message, I gave an invitation to anyone who wanted to become a Christian. I asked them the same question I am now asking you. Do you want to invite Jesus into your heart and make Him the Lord of your life? If so, say these words, mean them in your heart, make Jesus the Lord of your life, and you will become a Born-Again Christian:

Father God, I know I am a sinner. I want to turn my back on the way I have been living and repent for all my sins. I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and that He died on the cross for me, shed His blood for all my sins, and rose again. I surrender my heart to You, Lord Jesus. Come into my heart and be the Lord of my life. Thank you for hearing my prayer and saving my soul. In Jesus Name I pray. Amen

2 Corinthians 5:17: *Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new.*

Romans 12:2: *And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.*

Epilogue

After Jean Yokel went home to be with the Lord, I was told she always prayed for me. God bless her and her children, Carol and Billy, who have been a real blessing in my life.

Mike Fritchley has remained one of my closest friends over the years. I am so thankful for his faithfulness to knock on my door and ask the most important question we can ask anyone. *Do you know Jesus Christ?* June, the first love of my life and mother of my daughter, never stopped loving me. She married twice over the years but the marriages ended in divorce. Whenever she looked at me she didn't see a gambler, she saw a sixteen-year-old boy who cut down a pine tree one Christmas eve. She had accepted Jesus before I ever left for Texas the first time. I visited her and my daughter, Tonya, numerous times over the years. Our daughter, Tonya, and my grandchildren, Nicole and Brittany, are a real blessing in my life today.

But all situations do not have storybook endings. About three years ago, June was killed in an armed robbery at a small town convenience store in Henderson, Kentucky. She normally refused to work any midnight shifts because of such dangers. June worked this shift because her relative, a mother of two, was going to have to work the shift if she didn't. I conducted June's funeral and it was the hardest thing I have ever done in my whole life. I loved her more than she ever knew. I loved her more than I ever knew.

God gave me the name for my ministry. *The Light Of Life Ministry International*. For the past five years I have been a volunteer Chaplain in the Fort Worth Tarrant County jails. God has continued to open doors to minister the Gospel in churches, schools and prisons. *Sky Angel*, a Christian Satellite Network, has given me free airtime to have a thirty-minute show each week.

The name of the show is, "*How To Beat The Odds*" and deals with the addiction of gambling and other addictions.

If this booklet was purely about gambling, I could tell you story after story about a world that very few people even know exists. Gambling is a business and it is not harmless entertainment like it is advertised. Years ago, people would warn their children about gambling. They knew syndicate people and crime bosses ran the casinos.

Today, gambling has been given a face-lift. It's called gaming. Las Vegas caters to families by providing entertainment for children. You take your children around gambling and they can't wait until they're old enough to do what you do. What if one of them turns out to be an addict? Is it worth it to see their life ruined?

The Lottery is saying to people that are trapped in poverty in the inner cities and elsewhere—Don't worry! We've come up with a game you can play that will solve all your problems. Don't worry about working and getting an education. All you have to do is win the lottery like the people they show on television getting the checks. They don't show you all the losers and tell you the odds of your winning are tens of millions to one.

They also don't tell you that a large percent of pathological gamblers have committed at least one felony to support their gambling habit. Nor do they tell you that gambling is addictive, progressive and dangerous. That it can ruin people's lives; costing them everything they ever worked for or cared about.

When you legalize gambling you are positioning people to become addicts that would have otherwise never gotten on a plane and flown to Vegas. It is no different than legalizing drugs. How many more drug addicts would there be if they became legal? How many stayed away from them because they are illegal?

And it can start so innocently. You pay for your gas and before you know it you're buying lottery tickets and playing the scratch-off games. And please don't tell me about how the state schools are being subsidized. Even if by some miracle the money did reach the schools—at what cost? How many lives have been ruined in the name of such education funds? Gambling is big business, taking in billions of dollars annually. That is why you see politicians passing laws for casinos on the Indian reservations and for the gambling boats that are springing up everywhere something can float. And please don't think gambling brings in more money for the local businesses. The only businesses that really thrive when gambling comes to town are the casinos and the pawnshops.

God has really put it on my heart to speak out against legalized gambling and what it is doing to people. There are a lot of people who don't know that the power of God can set them free from any addiction—if they will only make Jesus the Lord of their life and take time to renew their mind with the Word of God.

Who the Son sets free is free indeed.

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