

*The New
Wine
is Better*

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ROBERT THOM

THE STORY OF ONE MAN WHO SAW THE INVISIBLE,
BELIEVED THE INCREDIBLE, AND RECEIVED THE IMPOSSIBLE



WHITAKER
HOUSE

All Scripture quotations are taken from the King James Version of the Holy Bible.

Boldface type in the Scripture quotations indicates the author's emphasis.

THE NEW WINE IS BETTER

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*To my friends,
Mr. and Mrs. Mark Leonard, and
Mr. and Mrs. Lucas Mason*

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FOREWORD

*T*he Christian Broadcasting Network program, *The 700 Club*, was well under way in our Dallas studio when my next guest was introduced and took a seat in front of the television cameras. You might imagine my surprise when the guest, without a word of greeting, raised one hand toward heaven in front of our nationwide audience and boomed forth in his stentorian voice, “The Lord has just shown me a vision—your next station will be in Seattle, Washington!”

If my guest had been anyone else but Robert Thom of South Africa, I would have dismissed this outburst as a publicity gimmick. But this was the man who, at a meeting in Virginia, had correctly predicted three days before the event that Senator Robert Kennedy would be struck down. When the word was spoken about the new television station, I listened intently.

I wasn’t too surprised, therefore, when just a week before receiving a copy of *The New Wine Is Better*, I sat in the office of the owner of a television station where I signed a contract to purchase his facilities. That’s right—in Seattle, Washington—less than four months after Robert Thom’s remarkable prophecy!

The New Wine Is Better is the exciting story of how Jesus Christ transformed a tough, alcoholic seaman from South Africa into a true New Testament man of faith. We have here a thoroughly believable account of a modern day miracle. Its true beauty lies in the fact that it gives glory to Jesus Christ.

Some people feel that a true man of faith must go about with a far-away, heavenly expression in his eyes, speaking of such other-worldly things as guidance, revelation, and spirituality. The apostle Paul thought otherwise, however, when he wrote, “*We have this treasure in earthen vessels*” (2 Corinthians 4:7).

In Robert Thom we have a merger of the authentic heavenly treasure and an authentic earthen vessel. The story of how the two got together makes very interesting reading.

—Pat Robertson, President
The Christian Broadcasting Network, Inc.

PREFACE

This is the simple story of how I—one of the most unlikely persons in the world—discovered the power of faith.

Often I have felt like the father in the Bible who said to Jesus, “*Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief*” (Mark 9:24). I am fully aware that whatever faith I have was given to me by Him.

The story is far from complete. So many miraculous things have happened that I hardly knew where to begin—or where to stop. But “*these are written, that ye might believe*” (John 20:31) that God truly does respond to simple faith, even today.

In order to protect the confidences of some, a few fictitious names have been used. But the story is true. May it bring glory to the wonderful name of Jesus.

—Robert Thom

INTRODUCTION

The Bible says, “Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1). One of the best examples of a man who believes this and lives by it is Robert Thom. Traveling around the world by faith, he carries the message of Christ and a contagious enthusiasm for simply trusting God to keep His Word. With this simple faith, Brother Thom has watched God provide every need both for his family and a ministry that has reached out to many thousands of people.

I’ve known Brother Thom since 1961. In that year I sat under his ministry for the first time in a church service in Lebanon, Ohio. During that service, God revealed to Brother Thom that there was a young man in the audience who needed a healing for a rupture. Immediately, I knew that young man had to be me! Rising from my seat, I went forward for prayer and was miraculously healed.

Later I took another step of faith and opened my own building and development business—partly through the encouragement of Brother Thom—and God has greatly blessed this business. Like the author, I too am learning the joys and unexpected adventures of living by faith.

The New Wine Is Better is a book that unfolds the secret of faith—how it worked in the life of Robert Thom—and how it can work for you.

—W. Blaine Amburgy,
President, Blaine Development Corporation

CHAPTER ONE

POOR LITTLE RICH BOY

*M*y name is Robert Thom, and I'm a living miracle; yet I'm just a very ordinary person who has discovered that life doesn't need to be a dumb humdrum of doing the same old things in the same old way, day in and day out...not if you're willing to take the risk of living by faith.

Take this \$2,000 check, for instance. Would you believe that a man just *handed* this to me, no strings attached? It happened just a few days ago. I was staying at the Travelodge Motel in Zanesville, Ohio. As soon as I awakened that morning, I began to think about my bills. Two thousand dollars is a lot of money when you don't have it. But our printing operation over in Africa needed at least that much just to get off the ground. I'd written about thirty inspirational books for Afrikaans-speaking Christians. The plates had already been made, the paper had been received, and the press was ready to roll. But I had no idea where the money was coming from to pay the employees.

"If I'm going to have enough to pay those workers," I said to God that morning, "You're going to have to perform a two-thousand-dollar miracle for me."

Haven't I always taken care of you before? He seemed to say.

"Oh, sure," I replied. "I just thought I'd mention it...."

Then why don't you start praising Me? the Voice reproved gently. Immediately I remembered that passage in Psalm 22:3

where David spoke of God as the One who inhabits the praises of Israel.

“Why not?” I asked myself. “I don’t have the \$2,000, but I’ve got God’s promises; so I’ll just take the day off and praise Him.”

Arising from my knees, I walked across the room and locked the door. I smiled to myself at what I was about to do. “Whoever heard of taking a day off to praise the Lord?” I chuckled.

I was sure it would be an uplifting experience, however; so I began enthusiastically: “Father, I thank You for supplying all I need. I bless Your name for this \$2,000 that You’re going to send me, I praise You that I won’t have to send out any begging letters to my friends. Praise the Lord! Hallelujah!”

I paced the floor of that motel room, just rejoicing in Him. The more I praised Him, the smaller that \$2,000 seemed! I began to think of many other great things God had done for me. I remembered how He had saved me and changed me so completely—from a drunken sailor to a preacher of the gospel. I remembered how He had given me a brand new car, absolutely free. I remembered how I’d been saved from a deliberate murder attempt. Every incident that came to my mind evoked more praise. I lifted my hands to heaven and worshipped in God’s presence. “Oh, God, You’ve been so good to me!” I exclaimed. “I worship You! I praise You!”

Shortly after noon, the telephone rang.

“Brother Thom?”

“Yes.”

“This is brother Chambers. Would you like to have a steak with me today?” Walt Chambers was a friend had met in Ohio at a tent revival.

“Well,” I said, half-drooling at the thought of a juicy steak, “I’d love to; I appreciate your invitation. But, you see, I’m taking today off to praise the Lord.”

"You're *what*?" he said with a slight chuckle.

"This is my day to offer God the sacrifice of praise," I explained. "I'm taking the day off to praise the Lord for something I need. I've made a covenant with God to praise Him all day today, and the need I have will be supplied, because God lives in the praises of His people."

"I never *heard* such a thing!" he exclaimed. "Anyway, that means we won't be able to get together today, doesn't it? Let's see—how about tomorrow?"

"Okay, Walt," I replied. "That's very kind of you. If you can pick me up tomorrow at midday, I'll be happy to have lunch with you."

"I'll be there," he assured me. Thanking him again and hanging up the phone, I went back to praising God for my \$2,000.

The next day, brother Chambers picked me up and we drove to a restaurant in downtown Zanesville. As we sat down to lunch, he said to me, "Brother Thom, I've just sold a nice piece of property, and now I owe the Lord some tithe money. *Would it be all right if I just gave you a check for \$2,000?*"

I praised the Lord right out loud! "Brother Chambers," I said, struggling to keep my voice down, "this *has* to be a miracle! Do you know that this is the *exact amount* that I was praising God for yesterday?"

We then praised the Lord together, and he took out his checkbook and began to write.

When I got back to my motel room, I looked at that check again and again with tear-filled eyes. Once again, God had proved *His* faithfulness to me. Had He not said, "*My God shall supply all your need according to his riches in glory...*" (Philippians 4:19)? It was on the basis of *that promise* that I had praised God in advance the day before. I hadn't had any of the money at that point, but I *had* God's Word. I knew by experience that God *always* keeps His

promises. If God said He'd supply my needs, then it was as good as done. So I had praised Him in faith. And now, here was the check in my hand. It wasn't any surprise though; it was just what I expected.

"Lord," I said, as I went to bed that night, "living by faith in You is the best way of all!" Adjusting my pillow to a more comfortable angle, I settled down for the night and began to recall how God had taught me to walk by faith. My mind went back to my boyhood days in South Africa where it had all begun in such an unlikely way....

The Methodist Orphanage was located in a rural suburb called Rondebosch, about eight miles out of the busy city of Cape Town. The five red brick buildings housed about 180 strictly disciplined children. There were three girls' houses and two boys' houses. Even on sunny days, those old two-story buildings seemed drab and depressing—their black roofs and gray dormers peering down at us like guards atop a prison wall.

It was in 1925 that my widowed mother took my sister and me to the orphanage; I was ten. Ma assured us that we would have good times with all the other children, and that the people in charge would give us plenty of love.

"You know, your father always believed in this place," Ma said to us. "Every year he gave \$700 to the support of this home, and I'm sure he'd be glad to know that two of his children are being loved and trained by Christian people."

But I didn't understand the kind of love they had there. I guess they meant well, but the discipline was so rigid that it was hard to feel any love. I spent four long years in that place, and the longer I stayed, the more I hated it. I hated getting up at six o'clock on cold, foggy mornings and being forced to scrub the concrete floors with nothing more on than a thin shirt, short pants, and no shoes or socks. "Dear God," I would sob as I knelt on the cold cement,

wielding that scrub brush, “why did you let Daddy die? Why do I have to live here in this awful place? I want to go back home!”

But God never seemed to pay any attention to me. So week by week and month by month, I kept getting up on damp, shivery mornings and scrubbing those concrete floors. Soon I began to have a bad cough and shortness of breath. I didn’t know it then, but the repeated exposure to those cold mornings was causing me to develop a serious asthmatic condition.

One morning when I was sure no one was looking, I slammed the wet scrub brush down and said, “I hate this place! I hate it, I hate it, I HATE IT!”

“Oh, you do, do you?” a voice said behind me.

I looked up, shocked and ashamed that anyone had heard me. It was Sister Emily Dunn, the matron in charge!

“Come along with me, Robert,” she said sternly. “You must learn to do what you are told without complaining. Haven’t you read in the Bible that when people complain, it displeases the Lord?” And she took me up to her office, gave me a good thrashing in the name of the Lord, and sent me back down to finish my job.

After the early morning work was done, all of us were required to strip and take baths in ice cold water. I remember one particularly cold morning when one of the boys said, “Hey, you guys, there’s ice in this water!” We all peered into the old fashioned tub, and sure enough, a thin layer of ice covered the water.

“I’m not getting in there!” one boy shouted. “Me neither!” another said.

“But if they don’t hear water splashing, they’ll know we’re not taking our baths!” another boy cautioned.

“Then break the ice, and swish the water around a little!” another kid suggested. That sounded like a good idea to the rest of us; so, one by one, we all stuck a toe into the tub and kicked the water about three times to make it sound like we were bathing.

But what we didn't know was that Sister Emily Dunn was watching everything through a hole in the ceiling! After we'd gotten dressed, there she was waiting for us! She marched us all off to her office and got out her four-foot quince stick. "Shame on all of you!" she said. "Don't you know the Bible says, '*Be sure your sin will find you out*' (Numbers 32:23)? If it is too cold to take a bath today, then perhaps *this* will warm you up, eh?" And, one by one, she bent our palms down tightly and delivered sharp, stinging blows to our hands with that dreaded stick. "Now get down to the dining room and eat your breakfast!" she snapped. "And don't ever again let me catch you not taking a bath!"

"Yes, ma'am!" we sang in chorus, and quickly trooped down to join the others. With every step, I was saying under my breath, "I hate this place! God, how I hate it! Them and their religion! I hate it all!"

In the dining room, we stood like soldiers and repeated the same prayer we always used before every meal: "May the Lord make us truly grateful for this that we are about to receive. Amen." I even hated that prayer. Same old prayer, three times a day, day in and day out. To me, it was disgusting.

After a breakfast of porridge, thick slices of bread, and cups of cocoa, we had to wash the dishes. My assignment was to scrub the big pots and pans. I usually finished the job just in time to dash off to class.

We had school at the orphanage, which was one of the few things I enjoyed about that place. In South Africa the education is quite advanced, due to the considerable amount of preschool training which is required. Because of this, I was expecting to graduate at age fourteen. Not wanting to stay at that orphanage a day longer than necessary, I worked hard at my studies so I could graduate on time. All four years I was at the top of my class.

After the morning classes, we'd be back in the dining room saying that same old prayer: "May the Lord make us truly grateful

for this that we are about to receive. Amen." I doubt if even one of us gave any thought to what we were saying. It was a strictly mechanical routine we went through, and anybody who wanted to eat had better say those "passwords."

After lunch, there were more pots and pans to scrub before we went off to afternoon classes. School was out at three-thirty, and then for an hour we'd scrub and wax floors some more. By the time we were finished, those floors shone so brightly you could actually see the reflection of your face in them.

We were permitted an hour of play before supper. If it hadn't been for that hour, all of us might have gone crazy. But even then we were carefully watched, lest we become too raucous. Still, it was better than nothing, and we were grateful for a little relief from the grinding discipline of the day.

At five-thirty, we assembled in the dining room for supper. Again there was the dull repetition of childish voices in hollow unison, grinding out that prayer: "May the Lord make us truly grateful...."

Sometimes as I sat at the table, my mind would go back to those happy days in Oudtshoorn, three hundred miles away. We were rich then. I remembered it all so clearly: the arching shade trees on our front lawn; the twelve-bedroom stone house on High Street, standing like a stately plantation mansion; my mother riding off to do her shopping in a handsome cab drawn by six white horses, with gorgeous white ostrich-plumes in their harnesses; the servants who waxed the floors, weeded the gardens, washed and ironed our clothes, and waited on us at the table; my seven brothers and sisters, and the faithful servants who watched over us and played games with us under the trees.

My father, Alexander Thom, was a big, blond Scotchman, six feet four inches tall, and one of the prominent businessmen of Oudtshoorn. Oudtshoorn was the ostrich capital of the world, and owed its success to the fashionable women all over the world

who were wearing those elegant ostrich plumes on their hats. My father was a jeweler, but when he saw what was happening in the ostrich feather market, he decided it would be a good side investment to help finance some ostrich farmers in the area who wanted to increase the size of their flocks. For a time, it seemed that he had made a wise investment, and the profits rolled in. But one day in 1922, my father came home with bad news. "Maria," I heard him say to my dark-haired Irish mother, "the feather business is going downhill."

"Oh?" she replied with some surprise. "Does that mean we're in trouble?"

"Well, it's bound to be a bad thing for the ostrich farmers. And can you imagine what will happen to us if the farmers are forced out of business? After all that money I loaned them...."

Ma stood in deep thought for a moment, seemingly not knowing what to say. But only for a moment. "Maybe it's not as bad as it seems," she said, trying to comfort my father. "Every business has its bad days."

"A bad *day* we can tolerate," he replied, "but when it goes into *weeks*, you know things aren't good."

When the big smash finally came a few months later, it hit us hard. Farmers all around the area owed us money and were unable to pay. My father still had the jewelry shop, of course, but I can remember that we had some desperate times of prayer together when we gathered for our customary family devotions. I remember well how embarrassed the young fellows were who came courting my sisters during those days, when my father made them sit through our prayer sessions before going anywhere!

Poor rich people! Somehow, God saw us through those difficult days without too much loss, except a little damaged pride. Ma testified that God had heard our prayers, and I believed He had!

Every now and then, in those prayer times, Dad would get to talking about death. "You know what I'd like?" he'd say. "When I die, I'd like to go to be with the Lord on the same day that my Savior died: Good Friday. Wouldn't that be a fine day to go?"

"Oh, Dad," Ma would reply sadly, "must you always be talking about dying?"

"Well, we've all got to die *someday*," Daddy would reply. "And Good Friday would suit me just fine."

"Well, I don't see what difference it should make about the *day* you die," Ma would say.

"Maybe not," Daddy answered, "but the Lord has granted smaller requests than *that*, hasn't He?" My father was a peculiar man. He was a Presbyterian of sorts with great interest in the Bible and prayer; yet I can't remember ever seeing him in church. But he was respected by all the townspeople as a man of deep devotion, and he was greatly loved, especially by the underprivileged people of the Cape.

I remember the day he died. I was only ten years old. Daddy had been suffering from a respiratory problem, and his breathing had been becoming increasingly difficult. One day, when he still hadn't gotten up by noon, I went into his bedroom to see why he was sleeping so long. There he was, breathing hard. For a moment, I watched him holding his sides, battling for every breath. Then I darted back out to get my mother.

"You'd better check on Daddy," I called out. "He's not looking very well."

She could tell by the tone of my voice that I was badly frightened. She hurried into his bedroom and was obviously shocked to find him laboring so to get his breath. He was only fifty-two years of age, and it never dawned on her that he could be *that* sick. She tried to help him, but nothing she could do made it any easier for him. He continued to get worse, and at exactly 3:00 p.m., completely

unexpected, he passed away. In our shock, it never occurred to us until a while later that it was *Good Friday*....

When we laid my father away, both sides of the streets were lined with poor people for the entire three miles to the cemetery—a unique thing in South Africa. Those people loved my father.

It was shortly after Daddy's funeral that Ma decided to send my sister and me to the Methodist Orphanage three hundred miles away. It was an awful decision for her to make. So suddenly, her world had fallen to pieces! Never expecting to die so young, Dad hadn't made out his will. Ma was left with nothing. He was about \$50,000 in debt, and Ma didn't think she had enough of a business head to handle all the details of the jewelry business.

"I can't *do* it," she sobbed. "Alexander always handled the business, and it's just too much responsibility for me."

The local magistrate offered to help her, but that \$50,000 seemed like an immovable mountain to her. So she decided to walk out and let the property go up for sale. The jewelry shop, the big stone house, the furniture, and our horses—she brokenheartedly walked out on it all, and went to Cape Town....

The screeching of chairs being pushed away from the tables in our orphanage dining room brought me back to reality with a jolt. I had been so completely immersed in the memories of Oudtshoorn that I had hardly been aware of the passing of time. Quickly I scooped up the last two or three bites of potatoes from my plate, put them all into my mouth at once, and jumped up from the table to catch up with the other boys who were heading for kitchen duty.

After the kitchen was in proper order, we were then sent off to our rooms to study until bedtime. At eight o'clock we mumbled through a memorized prayer, fell into bed tired and exhausted—and the lights were turned out.

Ma had rented a little house out in Maitland only about four miles from the orphanage. But much to our sorrow, she was permitted to come and see my sister and me only four times a year. It was usually on a Saturday afternoon. At first, I looked forward to her visits with much eagerness—but after a year or two, our love wasn't the same any more. We lived in our little world and she lived in hers. Sometimes it was hard to know what to talk about when she came, and we sat there awkwardly, like strangers straining to get a conversation started.

The only other diversion from the cheerless routine of the Methodist Orphanage was the threeweek holiday at Christmastime. As the time drew near each year, we could scarcely restrain the wiggles and giggles that seemed to come so naturally when we thought about getting out of our “prison” for a few weeks. But we knew we must keep our gaiety to ourselves. It would have been very bad had Sister Emily Dunn known how eager we were to leave!

But somehow, those vacations were always a little disappointing to me. It was hard to forget all the rigorous disciplines of the orphanage. Sister Emily Dunn seemed to watch over me like a silent specter. Her iron-clad religion had me walled in, like the fortifications that walled in Jericho.

Ma's new home was a disappointment too. I missed our palatial stone house on High Street, the sprawling lawn where we used to play, and my own pleasant bedroom. The change must have been as difficult for her as it was for us, though she never said a word about it. She made her living by caring for elderly people, doing housework and other odd jobs. Remembering the servants we had had in Oudtshoorn, I wondered how she could be so cheerful and outgoing.

“That's a bad cough you have there, Bobbie,” she would say. “Come here and take a dose of my cough medicine.”

I took dose after dose of her medicine, but it didn't help much.

"How on earth did you ever catch such a cold?" she asked with great concern. "Haven't you been wearing your coat when you go out to play?"

"Yes'm, I always wear my coat," I said. "It's really nothing to worry about—just a little cough. I'll probably be over it in a few days." I didn't want to tell her about scrubbing those cement floors and about how cold it was early in the morning.

By the time the third week of vacation rolled around, a spirit of melancholy began to grip me as I began to realize that we would soon be going back to the orphanage for another year. I wanted to tell Ma how much I hated it, but I could never bring myself to do so. Probably she knew anyway. I fought tears all the way back to the orphanage. Before she left me, Ma laid her hand on my head and said, "I'll be praying for you, Bobbie. You know how your father and we have always wanted a minister in the family. And you're going to be a right *good* one!" And away she went.

"Minister! Not *me*!" I was so sick of religion I could die! "Dear Sister Emily Dunn, and her stinking prayers! Prayers—every morning—every night—every mealtime! Same old religious yak-ity-yak over and over! I'm so sick of it all I could throw up!

"Dear God," I prayed that night, "there *must* be more to the Christian life than I'm seeing *here*." After some thought, I surprised myself by adding, "You know, I really *would* like to be a minister as Daddy and Ma said—but not if I have to be like these people here!"

I lay down on my cot, feeling a little guilty for thinking such evil thoughts. After all, the orphanage people *were* feeding and clothing us and giving us an education. It wasn't that I didn't appreciate this. But something was missing—an indefinable something that I desperately needed. I lay there in the dark with tears streaming down my face, trying to figure out what was wrong.

A few evenings later, all one hundred and eighty of us gathered in the orphanage church to hear a student minister preach. I don't remember his name but I'll never forget what he said.

"God really *loves* you," he declared earnestly. "You kids *mean* something to God. You're very special to Him!"

I drank in every word. So did the others. His words fell like drops of rain on a wilted garden. "Love!" We hadn't heard anything about that for a long time!

"Listen to me," the young preacher went on. "God loved you so much that He sent His only begotten Son to *die* for you! Jesus gave His life and shed His blood to pay the penalty for your sins. And you can know Jesus and you can experience His love if you'll just ask Him into your life!"

When I got back to the dormitory that night, I couldn't get to sleep. I tossed restlessly for several hours and kept thinking about God and wondering if He really *did* love me.

"God," I prayed under my breath, "if You really *are* God, and if You truly are interested in me, then appear to me tonight and let me be conscious of Your presence next to my bed."

I had no sooner prayed that prayer than I heard the church clock striking midnight. I had heard those doleful chimes many times before, but this time they sounded like the harps of angels. Immediately I became aware of God's presence. His glory swept over me like waves and waves of liquid electricity. It was almost as if I could feel Him bending over me as He whispered, "I love you."

For a long time, I cried and cried. I just couldn't get over it. God loved ME!