

Aaron S. Thiel author of The Payload
Interview Questions

1. Is it worth all that money?

\$820 million for both the Spirit and Opportunity projects is quite an investment for the American people. But I find it difficult to believe that we're there just to find out whether life once existed on the Red Planet. Given the number of geologists involved in the mission, I wouldn't be surprised if they were also looking at what Mars could yield as far as natural resources.

2. Can we claim ownership to what we find on Mars?

According to the Outer Space Treaty of 1967, no country can claim ownership over any celestial body. But during the lunar landings, the U.S. gathered some moon rocks and brought them back to Earth. The Russians did the same. Nobody has ever contested these actions. Whether these actions would serve as precedent for the U.S. to claim ownership over any Martian rocks, is still open for debate.

3. Which set of laws are used in outer space?

Today, space law is governed by four major treaties. All of which were negotiated by the U.N. during the space race. Unfortunately, these treaties sought a compromise between Soviet Marxism and Western Capitalism. This compromise created a number of obstructions to private commercial space growth; obstacles which remain in place to this day.

4. What would you say is the biggest obstacle today?

Ownership rights. For example, if private enterprise were given absolute ownership over what they could extract from Mars, then people wouldn't have to complain about the government spending \$820 million on space exploration. Private enterprise would raise the money themselves and the American people wouldn't have to spend a dime.

5. Going back to the \$820 million-what if we don't find what we're looking for on Mars?

Then perhaps we might find something that we weren't looking for. Something unexpected. Something more than just a desert landscape with red rocks and a red sky. Keep in mind that humans have been launching things into space ever since the late 50's. Who knows what objects may have tumbled into deep space towards Mars?

6. And that's the premise of your new book, *The Payload*?

Absolutely. What if a country or private corporation tried to get rid of something by sending it into deep space only to have something go terribly wrong? What if that same payload strayed off course and had a rendezvous with Mars? And now, the United States has a little rover snooping around on the Red Planet. Think they wouldn't want to sabotage it? Think again.

7. How would you describe *The Payload*?

The Payload is the first novel in a legal thriller series which engages a different spiritual theme throughout each book. *The Payload* involves a young law school graduate, Dutch Bennett, whose life is turned upside down when he inadvertently receives an e-mail from NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory. With the help of private investigator, Tamara Jennings, he uncovers its meaning, or so he thinks. He blindly places his faith in Tamara who uses him to perpetrate a multi-million dollar blackmail scheme. But when the truth finally surfaces, Dutch finds himself covered in blood and begging for God's forgiveness.

8. Describe the main character, Dutch Bennett.

Dutch is an Ohio valley native who was raised on a farm by his God-fearing father. When Dutch enters college, his father dies in a freak farming accident, leaving Dutch with no surviving relatives and huge a spiritual void. He eventually goes to law school to appease his father's dream of him becoming a tax attorney but poor grades take his law career in a different direction when he lands an intern job with Nathan Kelley, a professor teaching the little known practice of space law.

9. If you had to describe the spiritual theme of *The Payload* in a verse or two, which would it be and why?

Proverbs 3:5-6. Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight. Dutch is used to trusting himself. He is constantly trying to solve his problems on his own. He doesn't rely on anybody or anything for help. It's his way of taking control of the situation. But when his own solutions go tragically wrong, he is forced to question who's really in control.

10. Private investigator, Tamara Jennings, is a very powerful character. How have you developed such an ability to create powerful women characters?

When I was seven years old, my parents separated. I was basically raised by my mother. Although my father was still very active in my life, my mother went through some difficult times. I saw some incredible strength and determination on my mother's part. What I saw was God at work in the life of a single mother. Those memories will always impact my writing.

11. Corporate scandals? Energy crisis? Government conspiracy? Environmental and Space Law issues? How do you weave the spiritual aspect into such a fast-paced thriller?

I'm convinced that God can be related to any plot no matter how "un-Godly" it may seem. It boils down to the characters and where they put their faith. Is it in themselves, their money, or other material things of this Earth? Or is it in Jesus? Every character must choose and every decision will have consequences - some of which are predictable, but others being totally unexpected and twisted.

12. Besides Dutch Bennett, who is your favorite character and why?

I'd have to choose Freddie, a homeless man who grabs Dutch's attention on a bus ride to

Harper's Ferry. Freddie hasn't bathed in weeks, if not months, and emits a putrid odor. He points his grimy index finger on the water stained pages of his bible as he reads aloud. Although he only appears in one chapter, his impact on Dutch's life is huge. As he forces Dutch to read about the raising of Lazarus, Freddie cheerfully points out that as Jesus was about to work a miracle, all Lazarus' sister could do was complain that the tomb would smell. It showed Dutch that if he continued to focus on his "circumstances" he could very well miss the miracle that was about to happen in his life.

13. What should someone expect if they bought the book?

Expect suspense, fast-paced action, and a surprising twist in the end, but at its core you'll find an inspiring story of how a young man takes a spiritual "roller coaster ride" to the truth.

14. How did you begin writing fiction considering you came from a legal background?

I was fasting in the summer of 1996 when the plot to *The Payload* suddenly came to mind. I had never considered writing a novel but after the plot appeared so clearly, I knew I had to write it. The first draft was written for the secular market, but in early 2000, God breathed life into my characters as I completely re-wrote the book. It was at that point that I knew my calling was to honor him as a contemporary Christian author. Being an attorney has helped by giving me a perfect backdrop for unique characters and tricky plot structures. I can now understand why God wanted me to be an attorney!

15. Do you have a goal or purpose for your writing?

I believe my calling is to place characters into difficult life situations and challenge the reader to deal with these issues spiritually along with the character. Whether that means overcoming an addiction, finding God's will for your life, or coming to Jesus for the very first time, I want the reader to come away feeling that their personal relationship with God has been strengthened.

16. How many books are in the Dutch Bennett novel series and can you give us a glimpse of what's to come?

Right now, we plan seven books. In the next book, *The Foreigner*, Dutch battles with Samantha Lankford, a hard charging litigator who views all religion as "irrelevant." She is particularly bitter towards Dutch because he is, "one of *those* people." But what really makes it interesting is that they're on the same team representing a group of plaintiffs suing the U.S. Government for its involvement in the deaths of 61 elite Russian soldiers on the Israeli border! Spiritually, several of the characters in *The Foreigner* struggle with the question of, "why do bad things happen to good people," as well as, other disappointments with God. Seeing how each of these characters respond to their own tragic circumstances will ultimately give us hope in a world where we all are just a bunch of foreigners.