

Jim Downing's Story¹

My early career ambition was to join the Navy for four years, save enough money to complete college, attend law school and become a lawyer as a base for launching a political career, believing the highest elective office in the land was a possibility.

The influence of true followers of Christ soon redirected my life.

Virgil Hook and I got up at 3:30am, had baked beans and cornbread for breakfast, then were boated to the refrigerated provision ship as part of a crew to manhandle a three month's supply of frozen beef to the West Virginia for its 1500 men.

I was very unhappy. This was not the glamor I had expected in the Navy. But Virgil's response was different. He was smiling and humming tunes.

It occurred to me that any inward joy I had ever experienced was due to favorable circumstances. If the circumstances were good outwardly, I was happy inwardly and vice versa. But this man was unmoved by his circumstances. He had a joy circumstances couldn't touch. Instinctively I knew he had what I had always wanted. I was well on my way to becoming a Christian.

I set out to read the Bible. The first message I got was, "He that has ears to hear, let him hear." I knew I was supposed to hear something, but didn't know what. Then I came to Romans 10:9,10:

If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved.

I highlighted the passage and put my Bible on the shelf. That was the message I was supposed to hear. Until I was ready to obey my spiritual journey was on hold.

¹ adapted from USSWestVirginia.org/stories/story.php?storyid=47 and recollections from personal interaction with Jim

I never doubted the Bible's truthfulness, but I also never appreciated it as the Living Word of the Living God. Then something I read pressed on me the truth that it really is God's Word. This came upon me so forcefully that I came under conviction for not submitting to it.

A few weeks later, I was listening to my friend's minister, Romans 10:9–10 began occupying my heart and mind. It was a challenge. God promised if I would publicly identify with Christ as Lord I would be saved. I wanted the assurance that I would spend eternity in heaven and this seemed a sure formula. I nudged my friend and said, "Call on me for a testimony." He did, and I talked about life before Christ being like going to sea in a sieve and other stuff I hoped was clever.

I returned to the ship that night feeling the best I had ever felt in my life, and realized that this is joy, this is fulfillment, and this is for life. Hebrews 6:4-5 became my reality. I was enlightened, I had tasted the heavenly gift, I had become a partaker of the Holy Spirit, I had tasted the good Word of God.

The next morning I was operating a pneumatic chipping hammer. It was dusty and noisy, but the noise seemed to me like majestic music. Then the joy ceased as suddenly as it had come, and I wanted it back.

One reluctance I had to giving my life to Christ was that He might want me to be a preacher or a missionary. Instinctively I knew He would overcompensate for any seeming sacrifice I would make.

So on April 8, 1935 at 7:45am in turret two aboard the battleship West Virginia, I bowed my head and told the Lord that whatever it meant to be a Christian, that I wanted to do—no reservations.

God responded. My joy returned and has been the dominant factor in my life to this very day.

When the Japanese attacked us at Pearl Harbor I kept telling God, "I will be with you in a minute." Instead God had a rich and wonderful life of ministry planned for me. Seventy six years later I finally entered His presence, where there is fullness of joy forevermore.²

² Read more of Jim's rich life in *The Other Side of Infamy: My Journey Through Pearl Harbor and the World of War*