

Chapter 4

My Encounters with God

*“Faithful is he that calls you,
who also will do it.”
1 Thessalonians 5:24*

My Conversion Experience

John 3:7

Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.'

My mother believed that we all had to come into a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ. Each of us needed a personal experience of being born again. For me that day came when I was very young. I remember it clearly because it is the same day my brother Dave gave his heart to Jesus and he was seven years old. I was a year younger. We had been sitting at the kitchen table eating lunch in the first house we lived in on Keagan Road. We were eating tomato soup with saltine crackers and peanut butter. I think it must have been a Saturday. Mom was telling us about heaven and hell and the end of the world and that we needed to “get saved” or we’d go to hell. I didn’t care. I was having fun with my friends and hell was a long way off. I remember clearly the hardness of my little heart. David said, “Mommy, I want Jesus as my Savior. I don’t want to go to hell.” Mom took David into the bedroom so he could get saved. Little Mike followed them into the room. I stayed behind.

My big sister Norma, alias, Jeannie, came back into the kitchen and continued to preach mom’s sermon to the only heathen left at the table, me. She preached a hell fire and brimstone sermon. I remember her saying, “All of us are going to heaven except you, Dickie. Don’t you want to go to heaven when you die?” I clearly remember my answer was an emphatic, “No!” Then she really laid into me with the fires of hell. Finally, seeing she was getting nowhere, she added, “Besides I’m going to tell Mom what you said.” That did it. I must have figured I would get a whipping to get heaven knocked into me and another hotter place out of me. So, I went into the bedroom. It is weird how some things stick in your memory. As I arrived in the bedroom David and mommy were crying and praying, so being a good imitator, even at that age, I started to imitate crying.

At the end of that mom turned to David and said something like, “David, what just happened? Did you ask Jesus into your heart?” Goody two-shoes David said, “Yes, mommy, I asked Jesus in to my heart and he came in and I am going to heaven.” Then she turned to me and asked, “Dickie, did you ask Jesus into your heart to be your Savior?” It was like time stood still for a moment. I suddenly realized that I had not asked Jesus into my heart. I cried. I am sure I must have prayed something, but could not remember what. I panicked. If I said ‘no’ I would get a sermon or a spanking. If I said ‘yes’ I would be a liar and really go to hell. I did what any red blooded American boy would do, I lied. “Yes, mommy I asked Jesus into my heart too.” Mom hugged and kissed everybody as though the whole world just got saved. With that they all traipsed back into the kitchen to finish lunch – all, except for me. I remember it all so clearly, like a film rolling in my mind.

I stopped in the hallway really under a heavy sense of conviction that I had lied to my mom and was now really a sinner and headed to hell. I paused, leaned against the wall on my right shoulder and said, with eyes half open half closed, “Jesus, I lied. I am a sinner. Forgive me and come into my heart and be my Savior. Amen.” You see, I did not realize I was supposed to ask Jesus to come into my heart. I thought I just needed to go through the motions like my big brother and copy him. So I copied him. The revelation that I was a sinner and bound for hell came to a little six year old like a bolt of lightning. Don’t tell me kids don’t understand enough to get saved at an early age! They can. I did.

The back story to this incident is that when I was in college the leader of our gospel team had asked each of us to share our personal testimony of when we first came to Christ. I shared that I did not have a specific memory of the first time I asked Jesus to be my Savior. I must have responded and asked Jesus into my heart a hundred times for years during my childhood. He said, “Dick, there was a first time. Why don’t you ask the Lord to bring that first experience back to your memory so you can nail it down?” That night I did so. I asked the Lord to reveal to me the very first time I opened my heart to the Lord. That night God gave me a dream, or better yet it was a memory, of the story I just shared with you. Even the smells and tastes came back to mind. Yes, I think it is very important that every child of God KNOWS when and where he first invited Christ into his life. God doesn’t have any grandchildren. No one is grandfathered in because of growing up in a Christian home or church. Jesus said, “YOU must be born again.” That new life happens when you ask Jesus into your heart and life.

My Call to Be a Missionary

Jeremiah 1:5

Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations.

Each of mom's children were taken to church and dedicated to God in a formal baby dedication. I wasn't aware of my dedication since I was still a very tiny baby, but I grew up with the constant reminder that Mom had dedicated me to the Lord. She told me that the Sunday after I was born on September 14, 1947, I was in the back pew of the church being nursed by her and by the Word of God.

In my case mom had prayed that God would make me a missionary. Thirty years later Mom's prayer was answered. Mom always made sure we all knew exactly what she prayed for us. I grew up with that awareness from my earliest memories.

As I've already shared, we had a big family and we were often poor. Our houses were small and our furniture was used and well abused. Yet Mom considered it important to expose her children to missionaries whenever possible. Mom was a missionary prayer warrior. So, when the week-long missionary convention came around every year Mom made it her business to invite the missionary over for dinner. What better way to expose her children to the exciting life of a missionary? With so many other families better off and with fewer children it must have seemed strange to the pastor to send a missionary to one of the poorest families in the church. Those missionary conventions and missionary visits had a profound impact on my life.

When I was nine years old I remember going to the altar at the end of a missionary service and dedicating my life to the Lord to be a missionary. If I remember right, he was a missionary from West Africa. I was stirred by the adventure of living in the jungle. I am sure in my innocence I thought it was more like being Tarzan than evangelizing, but God used that to mark me for life.

By the time I was in high school we were still going to those week-long missionary conventions even on school nights when we had homework and better things to do. In many ways we hated being dragged off to church every night, but the long term effect was to infect us with a love for God and missions. Though I wandered far from that call on my life, it still was stuck in my heart and mind.

A Bright New Hope

Jeremiah 29:11

"For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future."

I hated school. I loved study and learning but classrooms did not fit my learning style. Being ADD (attention deficit disorder) with a busy mind and loads of imagination much of my grade school years were wasted on daydreams, paper airplanes, spit wads, straight pin darts, and anything but listening to a teacher drone on and on. I really identify with Charles Schultz's comic strip, *Peanuts*. He depicts Charlie Brown's teacher with the sound of a trombone going, "Wah-wah, wah-wah, wah." That's about all I heard my teachers saying.

A fascinating thing happened in the sixth grade at Boyd elementary school. For the first time in my life I had a male teacher. That was rare. I believe it was God's doing. Mr. McNew also attended our church. I remember one day while I was doodling pencil drawings, making spit wads, and basically ignoring the teacher, that all of sudden Mr. McNew threw a piece of chalk at me as he was lecturing. I saw it coming. I ducked and it missed me, but I got the point. I was supposed to be listening.

That year he announced that we were to have IQ testing. I dreaded that. I hated tests, and still do today. I freeze on exams. I remember taking the test and thinking this was pretty easy. It wasn't asking a myriad of questions about science, math or English. It was different. It was more of a reasoning and logic test. It didn't really feel like a test. It was more of an exercise. It was one of the original multiple choice tests where you answer by blacking in a circle with a special pencil. That was easy.

The surprise came weeks later when the results of the IQ tests came back. Mr. McNew announced that he was astounded by the results, and though he was not supposed to reveal students' IQ, he said he thought it was important to do so for someone's sake in that classroom. So, he proceeded to list the top three IQ scores in our class of 30. Top dog was John Campbell. Everyone knew he was the smartest kid in the class with straight A's. Then, Trula Brooks, who was our neighbor and later became my girlfriend. Finally the teacher said, "And now here is the surprise. The third smartest kid in this class is...Richard LaFountain, and he gave the IQ score. I was shocked. My friends were shocked. The whole class gasped audibly.

Mr. McNew asked me to stay after class to talk with him. I was terrified. He said, "Dick, I don't know if you understand what this score means. With a score like this you could be anything you want to be, even the President of the United States. You have the potential to be anything you set your mind to be and have any career you choose." Then he said he believed something was hindering me from achieving that potential and it had to do with my home life.

He made a special appointment with my parents to come in and talk to him. That night he showed them my IQ score and compared it to my D and C classroom work. He was very honest and blunt with them. Later they told me what he said. He believed that there was too much criticism and too little affirmation in our home. They needed to be aware of holding me back by not believing I could do anything I put my mind to do. He said Dick needed positive reinforcement, not more spankings, less criticism, and more love and understanding.

But God knew I needed a teacher to believe in me. Mr. McNew broke all the rules and I believe he played an important role in changing my life. Despite all of this encouragement and hope not much changed in my life. I can't remember there being any significant changes in our home. Things continued as they always had. I had very low self esteem. I really thought the IQ test was a fluke and somehow I guessed at the right answers. I continued to hate school, be an underachiever, and to feel insecure. I had an inferiority complex. In later years our pastor, a professional counselor, said, "All the LaFountain boys have inferiority complexes." Obviously God had a work to do in me.

My Re-Commitment to Christ

Romans 12:1-2

Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. ² Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.

It was in the middle of my 11th grade year that the Lord again got a hold of my heart and affirmed my call to be a missionary. I went forward one night at another missionary conference with deep conviction about what God had said to me when I was nine years old. I wept at the altar telling the Lord I was too shy and too stupid and too allergic to be a missionary, but if that was what He wanted I wanted to hear it directly from Him with no doubts. My grades were still the underachiever's D's and C's, and I wasn't a stranger to an F on my report card either. I did not have the grades to go to college. In fact, I was never sure I would pass to the next grade at the end of each year.

I was the shiest child in our family. I couldn't speak in public. I was a poor reader. I didn't ever raise my hand in class for fear I'd be wrong, and someone would laugh at me. Every year I came down with the dreaded "weed poisoning." How could I ever become a missionary?

I was not a prime candidate for missionary service. That night God got a hold of my heart and again called me to be a missionary. I told Him I couldn't and that I thought He had the wrong man, but God's Spirit persisted. That night, in the quiet of my upstairs room, when my brother Dave, my inevitable sleeping partner, wasn't in the room, I got down on my knees again and argued with God about my potential to do what he asked of me. In desperation I asked for a sign from His Word. I knew that was a dangerous thing to do. But I was desperate.

I opened the Scriptures and immediately my eyes fell on the page like a spotlight was shining on it. "*Go into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature.*" (Mark 16:15) I rejoiced in sobbing tears, "Okay, God, then You have to do what I can't do. You have to give me intelligence and discipline to get good grades so I can get into college. You have to take away my shyness and you have to heal me of this weed poisoning. God answered that prayer almost immediately.

From that moment to high school graduation my grades went from D average to the honor roll. I remember my brother Dave having a fit when I came home with an honor roll report card. He said, "How'd you do that? You must be cheating. You're just as dumb as I am." Yeah Dave, you're right. I'm as dumb as a brick, but God can do anything with anyone who is surrendered fully to His will.