



J.C. Penney 1875-1971

In the midst of the Great Depression, one of America's leading businessmen sank into a personal depression of his own. Now in his fifties, James Cash Penney had already built an empire of dry goods stores, dedicated to following the Golden Rule as a basic commercial principle. But when the economy caved in during the 1930's, Penney lost nearly everything – including his health.

His parents had instilled in him a basic Christian faith that had given him the principles on which he had based his life and his business, yet now that faith was being tested. "I was at the end of my rope," he said later. "My business had crumbled, my communications with colleagues had faltered, and even my . . . wife and our children were estranged from me. It was all my fault." He was even contemplating suicide.

An old friend convinced him to enter a sanitarium in Battle Creek, Michigan. The rest and medical attention did him good, but there was another event that restored him spiritually. One morning he awoke too early for breakfast and was wandering the corridors when he heard a hymn he remembered from childhood.

"Be not dismayed whate'er betide,
God will take care of you
All you need he will provide
God will take care of you."

Following the sound, he stumbled upon a chapel filled with worshipping doctors and nurses. Someone read a Scripture passage, "Come unto me all you that are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." It was a moment of clarity for the hard-working entrepreneur. He had been striving all his life to honor God with his business, but now it was time to rest in the Lord's grace. "At that time something happened to me which I cannot explain," he said later. "It was a life-changing miracle, and I've been a different person ever since. I saw God in his glory and planned to be baptized and to join a church.

James Cash Penney learned about faith and business from his father, who served as the pastor of a small Primitive Baptist church in Hamilton, Missouri, and

struggled to make a living off the family farm. At age 8, young Jim was told he would have to start buying his own clothes and earning his own money. Life was tough, his father said and success only came through hard work and long hours. But things would turn out all right he was told, if he just followed the Golden Rule, treating others with fairness and respect.

As a teenager, J.C. Penney worked on surrounding farms growing watermelons and feeding pigs. Shortly after Jim graduated from high school, his father, dying of tuberculosis, asked a friend to give his boy a steady job. So J.M. Hale, who owned a dry goods store in Hamilton, agreed to hire Jim for \$2.21 a month. The young man worked hard as a clerk and learned all he could about the business. He seemed to have a knack for merchandising. Within two years, his pay increased twelve-fold.

After a bout with tuberculosis, J.C. Penney moved to Colorado, began working for a man who "gave him an exciting new commercial concept," the Golden Rule. He married and eventually bought his first store at the age of 26. Guided by the love of his new wife and the Golden Rule principle, the inspired young businessman began a journey that would take him to undreamed of success. Within five years, Penney opened two more stores, then three more. There were more than 30 within that first decade. Penney followed a training strategy that allowed managers to become part owners and then purchase their own stores. Not only did this contribute to company morale, it allowed for steady expansion of a chain of stores that held to Penney's original principles.

The business incorporated in 1913 as J.C. Penney and Company, Inc., adopting seven business principles of fair pricing and good service. More than a thousand stores were launched in the Roaring Twenties, and the growth even continued during the Depression. But Penney's own fortunes were not so bright. While the company prospered, he lost a bundle that he had invested in banks and real estate. That's what put him in the Michigan sanitarium in 1932.

In the years following his epiphany in that hospital chapel, Penney spoke often of that experience. He talked about the mistakes he made in trusting success rather than God.

His financial fortunes began to be restored in the mid-1930's. As that happened, he renewed his support of various charities, putting millions of dollars into the Penney Retirement community in Penney Farms, Florida, *Christian Herald* magazine, and more than 100 other organizations ministering in the United States and around the world.

He lived and served until he was 95, frequently sharing a Bible verse he had memorized as a child and claimed as his favorite: "I have trusted in the Lord

without wavering. Prove me, O Lord, and try me. Test my heart and my mind. For your steadfast love is before my eyes and I will walk in faithfulness to you.”
(Psalms 26:1-2)

J.C. Penney once said, “The assumption was that business is secular, and service is religious. I have never been able to accept that line of arbitrary demarcation . . . Is not service part and parcel of business? It seems to me so; business is therefore as much religious as it is secular. If we follow the admonition to love God, and our neighbors as ourselves, it will lead us to understand that, first of all, success is a matter of the spirit.”