

Count It All Loss

If you've ever heard a song by the Christian rock band Skillet, then you've probably heard Jen Ledger. At 18, Ledger joined the best-selling band in late 2007 as the band's drummer and backup vocalist. In 2018, she released her solo debut EP *Ledger*. Today, she's a firsthand witness to how the Holy Spirit is moving among some of the darkest bands and music scenes in the country.

Ledger talked to Charisma about her radical testimony of coming to Jesus, the Holy Spirit nudge that made her audition for Skillet and why so many believers are uncomfortable with sacrificing to follow Jesus.

This interview—originally recorded for our New Year, New Voices podcast series—has been edited for length and clarity. Listen to the full interview here:

Berglund: Can you share your testimony?

Ledger: Basically, I grew up in England, a place called Coventry. I kind of knew about Jesus. I grew up in a church of England church, so it's kind of traditional. It's not quite Catholic, but I knew about Jesus. I knew He died for me. I knew a few stories like Noah. But that was as far as my faith went for my whole life while I lived in England. I never really understood the gospel. I never knew the power of it. I heard that Jesus wanted to know me. But as far as it actually impacting my life, that wasn't until I was 16 years old.

I came over to America to do a Bible worship school called the School of Worship. It's basically like a discipleship thing. I didn't really know what I was getting into. That was when I heard the gospel for the first time, and it was very clear to me I had been missing the point the whole time.

My brothers had previously done the worship school a few years before me, and it made me realize just how far from God I really was. Before they left, they were kind of party boys—they had naked chicks all over their walls and would go out clubbing to see if they could make out with some girls or such—and then they came back from America telling me about Jesus. They tore all the posters down from their walls. They said, “We’ve been missing the point the whole time. God is real. He loves you. He wants to know you. You can hear his voice.”

They came back so radically transformed that it made me realize, “Oh, wow. I don’t know what they’re talking about.” They honestly kind of freaked me out. They were the first people I met that were Spirit-filled, and to be 100% honest, it kind of was freaky. It wasn’t anything I’d ever experienced before. But the fact that they were so 100% all-in Jesus, and the fact that their lives had just completely transformed from hearing the gospel and from being filled with the Spirit, it was really impactful for me.

So when I came to America, I heard the gospel presented. It came at a time where I was willing to finally let go of everything I’d known in England. I had grown up popular in school, good at school, living a nice life. But I knew that everything I loved about my life didn’t compare to the truth of knowing Jesus. So when I came to America, I thought, OK, Lord, whatever You want. If this is true and I’m able to know You, there is nothing worth holding on to that compares to You. That was when my life massively transformed. The power of the gospel, the truth of what Jesus has done—the actual day-to-day living in the presence of God, seeking Him, walking in the Spirit—was when everything changed for me.

I was 16 years old, just falling in love with God and realizing the Bible was real. For me, when I got saved, everything became incredibly exciting to me. So I’d read about Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, and I’d say, ‘Oh my gosh, He

saved them from fire!’ I was just on fire for Jesus and excited to know Him. I read these stories with new eyes. To know that this is the same God today who wants to know me, that empowers me, who lives within me—that just blew my mind.

A year later, Skillet was holding auditions for the new drummer. At that point, I really didn’t care about drums. I was so excited to be used by God, to be living for Him and to find out that He was real, honestly. So when they asked me to audition, I at first said no, because I just really hated performing. I hated being in front of people. I was pretty insecure at playing drums anyway. I looked to my left and right and saw so many people that were better at it than I was. But I was praying about it, and I really felt like the Lord was prompting me to try out for Skillet. So I very much went to the audition purely out of obedience.

Actually, I was really reluctant to do it. I didn’t want to audition. I thought, Surely, God’s going to teach me humility or some character-building thing, because I know for a fact He would never want me to be a drummer. I suck at it, and I would never be good enough. It was very challenging and stretching for me to even show up to the audition. In the end, the very thing I thought I sucked at and that could never be used in my life was my drumming.

Obviously, the audition went well. God had an incredibly different plan for me.

So my testimony is such a whirlwind. I got saved, and a year later, God brought me on this adventure: “I can do impossible things with you. Whatever you think you can’t do, whatever you think is unusable about you, in My hand, it’s completely transformed.” From very early on in my walk with the Lord, I was able to experience His power. I stepped out in obedience and saw Him meet me in a way that, even now, when I get up and play drums with Skillet, I’m reminded of the faithfulness of God. With Him, things that aren’t possible become possible.

It's been a beautiful journey of being dependent on Him and seeing Him help me every step of the way.

Berglund: One of the things I find most interesting about Skillet is the fact that you guys are this incredibly successful musical band, but you're also ministry-focused. It's not just about the success for you guys. You use music to create opportunities to share the gospel with many people who wouldn't ordinarily hear it. Can you talk about the heart behind that?

Ledger: We play both the Christian market and the active rock market. That includes mainstream rock festivals, and then also festivals with TobyMac and Hillsong. As you can imagine, that's massive culture shock. But what's even more interesting is, you know, in the Christian world, I think we can sometimes scare some of the Christian fans because they say, "They can't be Christian. They have tattoos, and they wear black, and they scream." It's funny, because at the same time, sometimes mainstream rock fans or the "powers that be" in the rock world say, "They're too Christian. That's not sex, drugs and rock'n' roll. That's not what we're really about here, either."

So Skillet has lived in no-man's land, in the middle of these two genres, for basically its entire 22-year career. It's really interesting, because I just love being a part of something that so clearly only God could have done. For a band to last 22 years is kind of unheard of, especially when you don't fully belong in either of the markets that you live in. I've had this time to sit with John and Korey Cooper and hear all of the obstacles that have miraculously been overcome. You can see the hand of God on the band in a way that's just undeniable.

What I love about Skillet is that—even though maybe we look a little bit scary and our music may not be the typical Christian music you'd hear—we're a band of incredibly passionate believers. I just feel like it's been such an honor

to serve with John and Korey for the last 12 years of my life. They're so radical for Jesus. They've really taken me under their wing to show me this is what it means to live for Christ. And they are just people who will never compromise. They're so radical. They don't care if people don't get it. They know that this is what God's called them to right now. And they've just given their all to it for so long that it makes me feel truthfully honored to have been a part of what they are doing in the world.

What's so beautiful is we play some of these rock festivals with some of the heaviest and darkest bands in the whole world. It will literally be the bands that are the most famous for very dark, dark music. It's where people run to get away from anything holy, maybe to celebrate anger. People that are hurting really connect with this music, you know? It feels like the enemy's playing ground. People run to these places when they've been burned or hurt and want to celebrate things that just feel good to them.

So what's crazy is that God gave us the grounds to step onto the same stages of some of the darkest bands in the world, and we get up there and we sing about His hope, His truth and His light. And it's some of the times where I've felt the presence of God the thickest in my entire life, where you can sense His anointing and power. Sometimes light just shines brighter when it's in a dark room. Those are the moments where I can't help but celebrate and, in my heart, just think, Wow, only God! Only God could bring us here.

I think for anyone who may be reading and has been confused about Skillet's music or look or whatever it might be, I would love to share our heart with you. And that is that in the hand of our God, Skillet is a really powerful weapon that reaches into some of the darkest circumstances and shines His light. There are places in the world that can feel too far or too dark. No one can reach into there. But our God can. He's just so faithful, and no one is too far from Him. There is no

circumstance too dark for Him. And I just feel really honored to be a part of what He's doing. Obviously, I wouldn't say, 'Hey, everyone reading, go to the darkest places on your own.' It's somewhere God has called us to, because He's given us the ground, and we're part of a team that keeps each other safe. But be excited for what God is doing. Be excited to see how He reaches into those depths and He touches people's lives that you would think, They'd never care about this. The big, scary guy with tattoos may all of a sudden start crying because God's touched him. It's so wonderful and beautiful and miraculous to be a part of something like that.

Berglund: From that perspective, how are you seeing the Holy Spirit moving in the next generation?

Ledger: I feel like that's such a big question, and I'm not like the smartest person in the world, but I can tell you what I'm passionate to see in the next generation.

I've got to be careful what I say, because I don't want it to sound more edgy or controversial than I would mean it to sound. But, being a part of Skillet, which may not fit the typical mold, has sadly exposed a part of Christianity that's a little bubble. It's Christians who only feel comfortable speaking to Christians. Obviously, this isn't everybody; I am not lumping everyone into this. But being a part of Skillet and having a lot of Christians [say], "You guys played with Slipknot, so we won't support you anymore"—we've just had a lot of resistance.

I guess what I would like to say to the younger generation, and what the Holy Spirit is doing, is we need to be a people who are passionate and clear about the gospel. I think in our hopes and desires to be seeker-friendly, to be cool and trendy—in some ways, it's just isolated us. We don't want to let the gospel affect us. We're so desperate to fit in and be a part of the world and be trendy and cool that I think we've actually lost the power of the gospel within that. Jesus is

bigger than we know He is.

We forget that the gospel itself is power. The gospel itself is the only thing that matters. It doesn't have to be the gospel said in a way that makes it sound cool. I've sadly met a lot of believers who are so desperate to make the gospel cool, when actually, they don't end up standing up for what Jesus actually meant.

We just ran into a guy called Mylon LeFevre. He's this rock star who in his 20s, he was playing with the Beatles and The Who. He was the guy whose career was completely taking off. And he got saved and gave everything up. He spoke to the pastor of his church and was like, "I don't know how to live for Jesus." And the pastor said, "Come show up here at 8 a.m. tomorrow and clean the toilets." So this guy who came from money, wealth, esteem, everything you could ever want that the world can offer—he gave up all of that so he could know Jesus. He's this guy with tattoos and long hair. He becomes a part of this church, and he's even getting judged from within the church because of the way he dresses and whatever. So then he buys himself a suit and continues to serve God by cleaning the toilets.

I was really struck by hearing his testimony and his story, because Christians today, we can kind of try and want to make Jesus look cool. We want to have thousands of followers on Instagram and make Jesus trendy. But I think we don't need to change the gospel, because the gospel is a powerful thing on its own. The Bible is so clear that you can consider it all a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. And maybe it means I'm not as popular. Maybe it means I'm not as famous.

For Skillet, we would have gotten a lot further in the rock world if we stopped proclaiming the name of Jesus. We've had people even tell us, "Can you guys just turn it down with the Jesus thing? Because then you'd become a way more successful

and bigger band.” For me in my solo career, I’d be a lot easier to sell in the mainstream world if there were certain things [that] right now I won’t compromise on. I won’t sing about certain things. I won’t dress a certain way that, yeah, maybe would sell more records. But I consider it all loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.

I just think that in culture today, there is a danger of confusing the gospel with being fulfilled, healthy, wealthy and blessed. I think we can get our calling mixed up with the gospel, like: ‘I love Jesus as long as He fulfills my heart. Or as long as He uses me as a musician. Or as long as He uses me on a platform that’s big.’ I just think that we’ve confused being radical for Jesus for something that it’s actually not. Are you willing to just serve Him and be invisible and lose all things to know Him? This is something that alarms me.

I feel like if we’re not careful, we can miss the basic 101 of Christianity, which is your life is not your own anymore. It belongs to Him. So maybe it means He calls you to be in a rock band and play drums, even though you hate performing in front of people. Maybe it means He calls you to an office job you hate but maybe He wants to use you there to bring the kingdom of heaven to the people around you. I think we forget that knowing Jesus might actually cost you something. It’s like the parable of the treasure in the field—when you find that treasure, you sell everything to have it.

I feel that God’s calling me to do music. There’s not really much room for a personal life for me right now, you know? It’s not like I can settle down and have a family or find a husband. But I really believe that this is what God’s calling me to right now. And it might actually cost me something. It might cost me the things that I really want in my life. But if that’s what it means to serve Him wholeheartedly, and to run the race that’s set before me, I consider it all loss to know Him and to serve Him and to know and be obedient to Him.

... If you're suffering for the gospel, it's something you should rejoice in. I just think that because of Western Christianity, we've got a lot of weak believers. We have one trial and then think God doesn't love us anymore. The Bible is just so clear about suffering with Him—it's an honor. I mean, look at Paul's life. How many times was he was put in prison or shipwrecked? All sorts of stuff happened to him, but you don't see him saying, "Oh, I think God doesn't love me anymore." He just says, "You know, I consider it all a loss." He just wants to run the race with his eyes fixed on the prize of Jesus, no matter where it takes him, no matter the trials he goes through.

I would just love to challenge the next generation of believers to study the Word and go back to basics. Make sure you know the Gospels for the actual gospel—not the Westernized Christian version of it. Read and study the disciples and the people who suffered for Jesus. Study the people in the Old Testament who died in faith but knew who God was. Despite how hard their lives were, He was worth it. He is the treasure at the end. They had an eternal perspective, knowing that life is just a breath, knowing that it's a short window you get to live here. It's going to be hard. But their faith was stronger than that. And they still prayed to their God and served Him and knew who He was, despite perhaps being unpopular here because of it.

... I hope that anyone reading this will just feel challenged and inspired to run the race set before them. Even if you're feeling weak in your faith, just remember to fix your eyes on the end—not what's going on right now, but the eternal glory of what's ahead of us.

—Find Jen Ledger on Twitter, Instagram and Facebook.