

Jimmy Swaggart's Decision

In 1958, Jimmy Swaggart's cousin, Jerry Lee Lewis, was one of the biggest names in rock 'n' roll, and Jimmy a poor Pentecostal preacher. Then possible fame knocked on Jimmy's door, and he had to decide where his priorities lay.

The sleek, black Cadillac skidded in the gravel as it rounded the little Assemblies of God church and pulled to a crunching stop. It was late spring of 1958 and hardly anybody—at least in Pentecostal circles—drove Cadillacs.

But my Uncle Elmo wasn't just anybody. He was my cousin, Jerry Lee Lewis' dad. And everybody knew that Jerry Lee and Elvis Presley were the two biggest names in rock-and-roll music.

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Tall and lanky, Uncle Elmo was always in a hurry. He never seemed to stay in one place long enough to make friends, yet he was the kind who had never met a stranger.

Leaving the engine idling and the door open, he jumped out of the car and ran toward me.

"Man," he said, grabbing my arms, "do I have news for you!"

For a piano-playing Pentecostal preacher in the backwoods of Louisiana, struggling to support a wife and 3-year-old son, any news from a Cadillac-driving uncle had to be good news. Recently the offerings hadn't even been enough to pay for my gas to drive to church, much less put food on the table. Day-to-day living had become an unbelievable struggle.

"I've just left Memphis," Uncle Elmo grinned, "and Sam Phillips has sent for you."

Sam Phillips was about the most famous record producer in the world in the late 1950's. He was the man who had discovered Elvis Presley, Johnny Cash, Charlie Rich and my cousin, Jerry Lee.

Jerry Lee and I had been raised together. Even though we were first cousins, we were actually as close as brothers. At times it seemed as if we were twins. But things had changed. Jerry Lee was now "big time." He was making more than \$20,000 a week and the papers called him "the wild man of rock-and-roll," while I was struggling along on \$30 a week—sometimes even less—as a small time, wrong-side-of-the-tracks Pentecostal preacher.

Uncle Elmo was still rattling on, "...and you play the piano like Jerry Lee and you sing. In fact, some folks can't tell your piano styles apart. Sam already knows you're good. Real good. He told me to have you in Memphis first thing Monday morning and the contracts would be ready. So, I've come to get you."

"Now hold on, Uncle Elmo," I said, backing off. "I can't do that. You know I don't play that stuff. I'm a preacher."

"Oh," he laughed, "I forgot to tell you. Sam wants to start a gospel line for Sun Records. RCA has one. Columbia has one. Now Sun is going to start one. You'll be their first gospel artist."

My imagination ran wild. Records meant money. Big money. Now I could have a new car. A house of our own. Frances could buy a pretty dress. Maybe we could even save some money for Donnie's college. All those things I'd dreamed of but never had. All mine with one stroke of the pen.



Actual magazine ad for Jimmy Swaggart's music ministry
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"I'm ready!" I wanted so badly to say. "Lets leave right now."

But the words just wouldn't come out. Something—Someone—seemed to wire my jaws together. And inside, I felt this compelling urgency to say "no." I knew it was the Lord but I couldn't believe He'd tell me to refuse this offer.

"No, you can't go." The words rang in my ears. "This is something you can't do." The words were so forceful I had to put my hands on one of the food-laden tables to steady myself.

I looked around at the people in the church yard. It was Sunday afternoon, time for the all-day meeting with eating on the grounds. They were all poor but honest folks. Could I really turn my back on them for money?

Uncle Elmo looked at me strangely as the expression on my face changed.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"Well," I answered haltingly, "I can't go."

"Did I hear you right?" he questioned as if he couldn't believe his ears.

"I'm sorry," I responded, and turned my head away. My eyes were burning with tears. The crowd of folks all around were laughing and talking, but it was as though I had stepped into an aura of holy silence. Time had stopped. Even the sparrows in the nearby willow trees had been interrupted in their twittering.

Uncle Elmo ran his hand impulsively through his straight, black hair.

"Jimmy, don't you realize what this could mean? This is the man who started Elvis Presley, Johnny Cash and Charlie Rich. I'll bet there are 10,000 people who'd give their right arm for 10 minutes with Sam Phillips. And he's sent for you! I've got it all set up, and now you're telling me you can't go."

"I'm sorry," I answered again as my embarrassment grew.

He scratched his head. "But it's gospel music," he said. "You couldn't object to that."

"No, it's not that," I said. "It's something else."

"Look at that old car," he suggested, pointing to my rusted old hulk. "Don't you know it's all to pieces? And your clothes! I've seen you in that same suit a dozen times."

He was right. My battered blue Plymouth was literally falling apart. Frances had only four cotton dresses. Donnie's clothes could have been carried in a sack, they were so few. All I had was a \$20 Stein suit and a single pair of shoes. Our living conditions were poor, staying in church basements, pastors' homes and small hotels. We went to bed some nights without anything to eat. Yet I knew the answer was still no. I couldn't go to Memphis.

"Uncle Elmo, I know you're trying to help me," I said, trying to make amends for my refusal, "and I love you and appreciate you for it."

"How much money are you making here?" he asked.

"About \$30 a week," I answered.

"In 30 days you'll be able to buy a new Cadillac—and pay cash! I personally guarantee it. You play and sing better than many of the top entertainers today. You've got talent. Ability. Looks. Everything you need to become famous. You'll be rich."

"I can't do it."

We stood for a long moment, looking at one another. "You mean

you'd turn down all that for..." and he waved his arm toward the crowd of church folks, "for this?"

I nodded.

He shook his head and started back toward his car. Then he returned, grabbed my hand in both of his, and squeezed it tightly.

"I think I understand." And he was gone.

As the Cadillac turned out of sight, an overwhelming temptation came over me to run after Uncle Elmo's car and hail him down. I felt foolish and terribly alone. I had embarrassed my uncle who had gone out on a limb to help me.

How many times had he filled my gas tank? Put groceries on my table? Now he was trying to do even more, and I had turned him down. Had I done right? Was it God who had wired my jaws shut, or Satan? Right then the Lord's presence seemed to be a million miles away.

Normally I enjoyed these church dinners-on-the-grounds. Sometimes it was my only chance to eat decently. But my appetite had disappeared.

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I left the people still eating and talking over the dinner tables. Many of them had been impressed with Uncle Elmo's Cadillac and they talked of Jerry Lee's fame and fortune. I walked inside the little white frame building where I had been preaching a week-long revival. I found one of the smelly Sunday School rooms where I wouldn't be interrupted, and leaned against a wall.

"Lord, why?" I asked as tears ran down my face.

"I've told You I'd serve You. You know I'll preach Your Gospel

if I've got to hitchhike to do it. I wanted to say yes so badly, but You wouldn't let me. Why?"

Thoughts of my family's pressing needs began flooding through my mind, wrestling for my attention. It appeared as if I had passed up an excellent opportunity to help my family. For some reason, I had made a decision that was beyond me. In my mind, I could see a kaleidoscope filled with new cars, fine suits, clothes for my family. Things we desperately needed.

There was no earthquake. No thunder and lightning. No roaring voice. But the Lord began to speak.

"Son, I'm going to tell you two things about this. First, I have better plans for you. If you accepted this offer, I could never use you as I desire. Second, trust Me. Even though it doesn't look good now, I promise that you won't be disappointed."

Trust. Me.

The words stood out strongly. "I can't see anything but living in poverty and preaching in some backwoods church, Lord, but I'll do it. I'll trust you."

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As I walked out of that Sunday School room, I still felt that overwhelming desire to find Uncle Elmo. But I didn't. I knew I had leaped a giant hurdle. I had crossed an unfordable river. The immediate future hadn't changed. It still looked bleak and gloomy. I didn't know where the next dollar or revival meeting was coming from but I was determined to trust God.

In my heart, I knew I had made the right choice.

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permission. Continue to lift up the Swaggart family in prayer during this incredibly difficult time.