

What We Can All Learn From Johnny Cash's Faith

On the 26th of this month, legendary singer/songwriter and iced-cool customer Johnny Cash would have celebrated his 85th birthday. Even as I write, his live version of "Folsom Prison Blues" click-clacks through my earbuds like a Southern Pacific boxcar over oily railroad ties.

The memories abound. We were "The Treetops," a not-so-legendary middle school garage band from the sticks outside Norman, Oklahoma. I was the drummer, and "Folsom Prison," our very first song, sounded pretty dang tight, what, with the concrete acoustics in our two-car studio and all. My buddy Chad Usry (man, could that cat play guitar) did a great imitation of the Man in Black—great to a seventh-grader, anyhow.

Like October leaves, the winds of time, as they say, scattered The Treetops down dusty roads far-removed. Sadly, I learned a few years back that Chad ended up sentenced to his own Folsom Prison for a series of burglaries and violent crimes. He'll have 40 years in this self-wrought wilderness to cry out to God for a second chance at life.

Few know it, but Johnny Cash, late in his own life, and likewise wandering a wilderness of his own making, cried out to God in a big way. He had to. Or else die.

The Creator of the universe answered. "God cut him down," as it were. The Lord of lords and King of kings freely and graciously offered Johnny Cash a second, third and 77th chance at redemption.

And so Johnny believed.

And Johnny accepted.

"I believe what I say, but that don't necessarily make me right," Cash told *Rolling Stone* in 2000, laughing that deep, raspy, hard-livin' laugh. "There's nothing hypocritical about it. There is a spiritual side to me that goes real deep, but I confess right upfront that I'm the biggest sinner of them all."

And a hard-drinking, pill-popping, womanizing sinner he was.

As sinners we are.

"I used drugs to escape, and they worked pretty well when I was younger. But they devastated me physically and emotionally—and spiritually ... [they put me] in such a low state that I couldn't communicate with God. There's no lonelier place to be. I was separated from God, and I wasn't even trying to call on Him. I knew that there was no line of communication. But He came back. And I came back."

Cash lived firsthand the transcendent reality, available to all, "that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 8:38-39).

In his 2003 book, "The Man Comes Around: The Spiritual Journey of Johnny Cash," author and music critic Dave Urbanski wrote, "A writer once tried to paint Cash into a corner, baiting him to acknowledge a single denominational persuasion at the center of his heart. Finally, Cash laid down the law: 'I—as a believer that Jesus of Nazareth, a Jew, the Christ of the Greeks, was the Anointed One of God (born of the seed of David, upon faith as Abraham has faith, and it was accounted to him for righteousness)—am grafted onto the true vine, and am one of the heirs of God's covenant with Israel.'

"'What?' the writer replied.

“‘I’m a Christian,’ Cash shot back. ‘Don’t put me in another box.’”

Confusing? For Johnny Cash, it wasn’t. For the Christ follower, it isn’t. “But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned” (1 Cor. 2:14).

So was Cash a Christian “fundamentalist”? It would seem so. He once wrote, “Please understand that I believe the Bible, the whole Bible, to be the infallible, indisputable Word of God. I have been careful to take no liberties with the timeless Word.”

“Being a Christian isn’t for sissies,” he once said. “It takes a real man to live for God—a lot more man than to live for the devil, you know? If you really want to live right these days, you gotta be tough.”

Yeah, tough as “a boy named Sue.”

“If you’re going to be a Christian, you’re going to change,” Cash continued. “You’re going to lose some old friends, not because you want to, but because you need to.”

To be sure, they may even hate you for it. Still, and as Christ warned, “If the world hates you, you know that it hated Me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own. But because you are not of the world, since I chose you out of the world, the world therefore hates you. Remember the word that I said to you: ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you. If they kept My words, they will keep yours also. But all these things they will do to you for My name’s sake, because they do not know Him who sent Me” (John 15:18-21).

“The gospel of Christ must always be an open door with a

welcome sign for all,” concluded Cash. Indeed, he was right. But his observation did not derive from a vacuum. “Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavily burdened, and I will give you rest” (Matt. 11:28).

Johnny Cash walked through that open door.

And he’s at rest.

My friends, you never know when it may arrive. Sometimes it’s early, sometimes it’s late, but it’s always right on time. So, before you hear that final “train a comin’, rollin’ ’round the bend,” take a moment to reflect on the storied life and deep Christian faith of the mythical Man in Black. Though he surely walked the line, as so many of us do, and, while he was indeed a Johnny come lately in his eternal walk with God, Johnny Cash finished well.

It’s never too late to finish well—to become a disciple for Christ.

Cash sang these words in one of his last songs, “Ain’t No Grave Gonna Hold My Body Down,” recorded in 2003 in the final months of his life and released posthumously in 2010: “When I hear that trumpet sound, I’m gonna rise right out of the ground. Ain’t no grave can hold my body down. ... Well, meet me, Jesus, meet me. Meet me in the middle of the air. And if these wings don’t fail me, I will meet You anywhere.”

Like Johnny Cash, you need only ask.

And Christ will meet you anywhere.