

How Psalm 19:14 Became a Way of Life for Johnny Cash

Read time: 3 Minutes 48 Seconds

The large gilt-edged slab of black marble marking the gravesite of Johnny Cash is inscribed in gold lettering:

John R. Cash

Feb. 26, 1932 Sept. 12, 2003

PSALM 19:14 Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, My strength, And my redeemer.

As a Christian for almost 50 years and a pastor for decades, I know that verse well. I also find it interesting that it was chosen for “The Man in Black’s” memorial.

“Let the words of my mouth . . .” That’s ironic, given that nobody had a voice or cadence like Johnny Cash. A touchstone in my life dating back to my childhood, I remember watching Cash perform on television with my grandparents and hearing that deep booming voice—once called “The Voice of America.”

He could tell a story as he did in his iconic 1969 song “A Boy Named Sue,” and he could quote Scripture chapter and verse like he did in his recording of the entire New Testament. Therein lies the paradox of Johnny Cash. He was both a sinner and a saint.

Like millions of people, I was touched personally by Cash’s life and music. When I became a Christian in 1970, the “Jesus Revolution,” as Time magazine dubbed it, was in full swing. The high-water mark for many of us was a massive event called Explo ’72 in Dallas, Texas that brought new forms of worship into the church and paved the way for contemporary Christian

music. Adding star-studded legitimacy was the presence of Billy Graham and a host of performers such as Kris Kristofferson, Love Song, Andrae Crouch and the Disciples—and Johnny Cash.

Cash was many things to many people: a country music artist who sang and acted in a rock 'n' roll context; a social activist and a jailbird; an evangelist and an addict; a humanitarian who often stood up for the underrepresented and often butted heads with authority figures; a master storyteller and a world-class embellisher; an outlaw with the soul of a mystic; an impossible, tortured man who pinballed back and forth between extremes.

“I confess right up front that I’m the biggest sinner of them all,” Cash admitted. “But my faith in God has always been a solid rock that I’ve stood on, no matter where I was or what I was doing. I was a bad boy at times, but God was always there for me, and I knew that. I guess maybe I took advantage of that.”

He had an angel on his shoulder, but the devil was always on his back.

In the first half of his life, he was a walking contradiction who identified with the apostle Paul—often ashamed and lacking the courage to stand up for Christ. All these traits and foibles were rolled up in a larger-than-life, one-of-a-kind personality that put its unique, indelible stamp on popular music and pop culture.

He was a devout Christian who divided his time between sinning and seeking forgiveness, frequently going from jail to Jesus. He was arrested several times because of his addiction to pills and sophomoric shenanigans. But he knew almost every hymn and gospel tune ever sung, often performing them on stage between such hit songs as “I Walk the Line,” “Ring of Fire” and “Cocaine Blues.” He acknowledged God as the supreme power

in the world, but viewed Satan as a close second.

"I learned not to laugh at the devil," Cash was once famously quoted as saying.

When living by the Word, he was inspiring. When diverted by temptation, his life became ugly and out of tune.

Like many entertainers, Cash had two personas—the down-to-earth, doting family man at home and the defiant outlaw on the road. Dinners at home were warm and inviting, with lots of prayer, family time and down-home music, everything from traditional hymns to rock standards. On the road, Cash was often distant, hard-driving, pill-popping—a full-tilt party-time outlaw who secretly carried a Bible in his briefcase. The struggle was constant, a never-ending competition.

The approach to the film "Johnny Cash: The Redemption of an American Icon." isn't a straight biography. Anybody can look up the bare facts of Johnny Cash's life and career by going on Wikipedia or consulting a number of standout Cash books like Robert Hilburn's "Johnny Cash: A Life"; Michael Streissguth's "Johnny Cash: The Biography"; or Steve Turner's "A Man Called Cash."

This cinematic offering traces the roots of Cash's faith long before he became a household name. That faith was often tested in tortuous, turbulent ways. I've talked with friends, acquaintances, business associates, musicians and close relatives who knew Johnny to learn how he dealt with those tests to become the man he was. The film doesn't cover his scars with make-up or his failures with syrupy idolatry. And it don't get into every granular detail of his epic life.

The truth of the whole man is compelling, and the story of Johnny Cash is a roadmap for every conflicted soul for whom redemption too often seems a destination far off the beaten path.

Thank you for accompanying me on this very personal and meaningful journey.

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Greg Laurie is the pastor and founder of the Harvest churches in California and Hawaii and of Harvest Crusades. He is an evangelist, best-selling author and movie producer. Laurie is releasing two upcoming films: “Johnny Cash: The Redemption of an American Icon” in theaters December 5-7 in partnership with Fathom Events, Kingdom Story Company and WTA Media, and “Jesus Revolution” from Lionsgate and Kingdom Story Company in theaters February 2023.