

# **WALK THE LINE**

## **A Musical Bible Study Guide**



**Music, Movies & Meaning**  
**The Soundtrack to Johnny Cash's Rocky, Faith-Fueled Life**  
**By Craig Detweiler**

# WALK THE LINE

## A Musical Bible Study Guide

### Music, Movies & Meaning

#### The Soundtrack to Johnny Cash's Rocky, Faith-Fueled Life

By Craig Detweiler



What is the line? How do we walk it? And what happens when we cross it? Johnny Cash's life demonstrates the perils of straying from the path and the long road to get back on track. The new biopic *Walk the Line* chronicles the twists and turns of the legendary singer's formative years. It offers a rollicking soundtrack, riveting performances and a moving story of friendship and love. Yet, like Cash himself, the movie never resorts to easy sentimentality. It is authentic to the core, going so far as to demand original vocals from its young stars. **Joaquin Phoenix** and **Reese Witherspoon** go beyond imitation, to embody the spirit of both **Johnny Cash** and his feisty wife, **June Carter**. *Walk the Line* is a story of hard fought redemption. It celebrates how patient love eventually overcomes the most resistant of forces: the human heart.

Johnny Cash was one of the original rock and roll pioneers, a seminal part of **Sam Phillips' Sun Records**. Johnny's contributions to American music rival those of **Elvis Presley**. In fact, Cash and Presley are the only two musicians inducted into both the **Rock and Roll Hall of Fame** and the **Country Music Hall of Fame**. Cash merged multiple musical traditions, adapting the sounds of gospel, blues and country into a heady rockabilly stew. His rebellious spirit echoes even in the defiant strains of rap and punk rock.

*Walk the Line* traces Cash's musical evolution, recreating the vibrant era when rock and roll was born in Memphis, Tennessee. Yet, it also follows the poignant and passionate struggle for love between Johnny and June. As performers married to others, they labored with temptation, channeling their sexual tension into classic songs. *Walk the Line* provides a powerful introduction to the enduring musical legacy of Johnny Cash.

This musical guide is designed to enhance your appreciation of the film and Cash's music. It will also go further in revealing how Johnny and June's Christian faith sustained and inspired them. Based upon Johnny's autobiographies, *Walk the Line* portrays Cash as more sinner than saint, but it ultimately celebrates the power of love to redeem even the most broken of men. U2 front man Bono once said, "Johnny Cash doesn't sing to the damned. He sings with the damned, and sometimes you feel he might just prefer their

company.” *Walk the Line* serves as a powerful reminder of the choices we all face, the cries to God we all make. We’ve all crossed lines that we later regret. It is my prayer that in following the lines that Johnny Cash walked, you may determine what line *you* are walking.

### 1. THE LINE OF CIRCUMSTANCE

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow succinctly stated, “Into each life, some rain must fall.” In our youth, we have all had negative experiences and tragedies that define who we are. In the case of Johnny Cash, the death of his brother forced him to grow up fast.



*Walk the Line* begins in 1944, with Johnny as a child of poor cotton farmers in Dyess, Arkansas. Early on, the Cash family must cope with the accidental death of Johnny’s brother Jack, a dedicated Christian who intended to go into full-time ministry. On his deathbed, Jack asks Johnny, “Do you hear the angels?” Furthermore, Johnny’s father deepens his sorrow by declaring, “The devil did this. He took the wrong son.” While this experience clearly scarred Cash, affecting his relationships down the road, Johnny eventually was able to express his suppressed feelings in a song years later.

**PLAY: “Daddy Sings Bass”** by Johnny Cash, and listen to his sorrow. The song begins with the harsh reality that, “Little brother has done gone home,” but “Singing seems to help a troubled soul.” It focuses upon the heavenly hope that, “One of these days, it won’t be long. I’m gonna join the family circle at the throne.”

The Bible is full of stories of people who suffered tragedy and tribulation and how those experiences defined them. A good example is the story of Job, who literally had everything taken from him. At one point, he laments, “My spirit broken, my days are cut short, the grave awaits me.” (Job 17:1)

But in The New Testament, Jesus’ loving sacrifice changed all that by promising those who believe eternal life. In short, this gift renders any pain and suffering we experience as merely temporal.

**READ: John 16:20-22**

<sup>20</sup>I tell you the truth, you will weep and  
mourn while the world rejoices.  
You will grieve, but your grief will  
turn to joy.

<sup>21</sup>A woman giving birth to a child  
has pain because her time has  
come;

but when her baby is born she  
forgets the anguish because of her  
joy that a child is born into the  
world.

<sup>22</sup>So with you: Now is your time of  
grief, but I will see you again and  
you will rejoice, and no one will  
take away your joy.”

Johnny Cash eventually learned how to walk the line of grief and sorrow. He stopped blaming himself for his brother’s death and transcended his earthly father’s judgment. Eventually, he turned this sorrow into something joyful.

**DISCUSS:** What’s the line that you’ve been forced to walk through no fault of your own – a death, abuse, an absentee parent? How has that experience defined you, both negatively and positively? What has been a sorrowful moment in your life? Is there yet a silver lining to the sorrow you’ve experienced?

## 2. *THE LINE OF HONESTY*



One of the hallmarks of Johnny Cash’s music is that it is brutally honest. In fact, Quentin Tarantino said this about the frankness of Cash’s music: “I’ve often wondered if gangsta rappers know how little separates their tales of ghetto thug life from Johnny Cash’s tales of backwoods thug life.” Cash’s music resonated

with his listeners because it was true – no matter how much the truth hurt.

**PLAY:** “*Folsom Prison Blues*” by Cash. The cutting lyric, “I shot a man in Reno, just to watch him die” gets to the murderous instincts lurking in all of us. He tells an ugly but genuine truth about the human condition and his own heart.

Evident throughout the film, however, is that this genuine transparency didn’t translate to his personal life. More often than not, Cash found himself hiding behind the masks of drugs and alcohol and pretending to be something he wasn’t – a faithful husband, a devoted father and even a good friend. Once in an interview, Cash admitted, “I used to sing all those gospel songs, but I really never felt them. And maybe I was a little bit ashamed of myself at the time because of the hypocrisy of it all: There I was, singing the

praises of the Lord and singing about the beauty and the peace you can find in Him – and I was stoned.”

Cash’s life eventually takes off when he stops pretending to be something he is not and accepts himself, for better or worse. He finds value in the music he is creating, realizes the important of friends and family and is able to deepen his relationship with God.

**READ: Psalm 139: 1-16**

<sup>1</sup> O LORD, you have searched me  
and you know me.

<sup>2</sup> You know when I sit and when I  
rise;  
you perceive my thoughts from  
afar.

<sup>3</sup> You discern my going out and my  
lying down;  
you are familiar with all my  
ways.

<sup>4</sup> Before a word is on my tongue  
you know it completely, O  
LORD.

<sup>5</sup> You hem me in—behind and  
before;  
you have laid your hand upon  
me.

<sup>6</sup> Such knowledge is too wonderful  
for me,  
too lofty for me to attain.

<sup>7</sup> Where can I go from your Spirit?  
Where can I flee from your  
presence?

<sup>8</sup> If I go up to the heavens, you are  
there;  
if I make my bed in the depths,  
<sup>[a]</sup> you are there.

<sup>9</sup> If I rise on the wings of the dawn,  
if I settle on the far side of the  
sea,

<sup>10</sup> even there your hand will guide  
me,  
your right hand will hold me  
fast.

<sup>11</sup> If I say, "Surely the darkness will  
hide me  
and the light become night  
around me,"

<sup>12</sup> even the darkness will not be  
dark to you;  
the night will shine like the  
day,  
for darkness is as light to you.

<sup>13</sup> For you created my inmost  
being;  
you knit me together in my  
mother's womb.

<sup>14</sup> I praise you because I am  
fearfully and wonderfully made;  
your works are wonderful,  
I know that full well.

<sup>15</sup> My frame was not hidden from  
you  
when I was made in the secret  
place.  
When I was woven together in  
the depths of the earth,

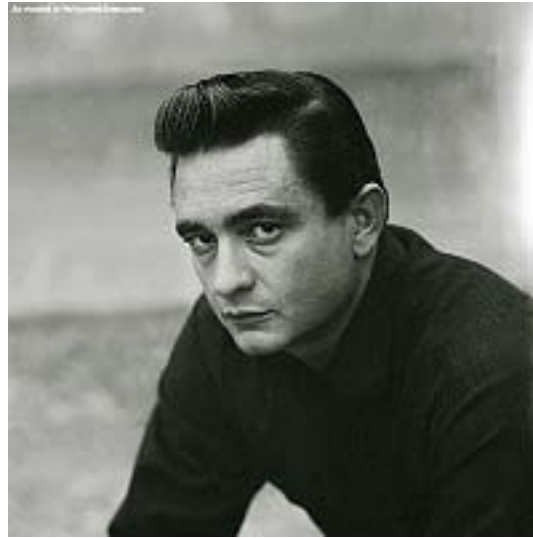
<sup>16</sup> your eyes saw my unformed  
body.  
All the days ordained for me  
were written in your book  
before one of them came to be.

God already knows us. He knows our comings, our goings, our every thought. There is no point in hiding anything from Him. He's drawn to us in our weakness, not in our invented perfection. It's this openness and vulnerability that draws others to us, as well. Although it took him a while to accept this truth personally, Johnny Cash learned it early on in his musical career. A magical moment in the movie occurs when Cash auditions for record producer Sam Phillips. Cash sings a gospel song but fails to impress Phillips. The producer challenges Johnny to "sing something real, something you felt. That's the kind of song that truly saves people."

**DISCUSS:** Are you honest with yourself about who you really are? In what simple ways do we mask ugly truths about ourselves? Is the knowledge that God knows *everything* about you frightening or liberating?

### 3. *THE LINE OF TEMPTATION*

If you have ever seen VH-1's *BEHIND THE MUSIC*, then you know the life of a musician on the road is tough. It almost seems as though every band has its own story of bottoming-out with drugs, money, women and other excesses that seriously jeopardize both family and career. Johnny Cash was no different. As a new rockabilly idol, Cash enjoyed the adoration of his female fans. But back in Memphis, his wife, Vivian, and young daughter, Roseanne, grew increasingly distant from his thoughts.



**PLAY: “I Walk the Line”** by Cash – his first No. 1 hit (in 1956) written as if to ward off the temptations of adultery.

Can you hear the tension in Cash’s voice? He vows to, “Keep a close watch on this heart of mine.” But notice the duplicity in a lyric like, “I keep my eyes wide open all the time.” By the time he affirms, “I find it very, very easy to be true,” one can almost sense how he has deceived himself. The movie suggests that his assertion that, “I find myself alone when each days through” was a blatant lie. Cash wrote “I Walk the Line” out of crossing the line rather than walking it.

As the movie progresses, Johnny admits his growing affection for (even obsession with) June Carter. While their onstage duets create serious sparks, a song like “Jackson” confesses the failures of both of their marriages: Young love doesn’t survive under the strain of touring.

**PLAY: “Jackson”** sung by Cash

Johnny and June sing Jackson as a duel confession. “We got married in a fever,” the fever of young, immature love. Now that the fire has gone out, Johnny admits his plans to go to Jackson and “mess around.” June says, fine, “Go ahead and wreck your health, make a big fool of yourself.”

If adultery almost unravels Cash’s marriage, his addiction to pills take him even further into an abyss. Years later, Cash said, “Drugs are so deceptive. It’s like a demon that say, ‘Hey, I’m so pretty, look at me, I’ll make you feel better! Take me.’ When you’re on that stuff one is too many and a thousand is not enough.”

Director Quentin Tarantino noted, “Cash sings tales of men trying to escape. Escape the law, escape the poverty they were born into, escape prison, escape madness, escape the people who torture them. But the one thing Cash never lets them escape is regret.” In his

own life, Cash ended up with plenty of regrets: A failed marriage, a drug arrest, pushing away his one true love, June Carter, for so long. Essentially, Johnny became a prisoner in a cell on his own making.

Giving in to temptation is what leads to regret. The Bible provides numerous warnings about giving in to temptation, but God does make one very important promise to us:

**READ: 1 Corinthians 10:13**

<sup>13</sup>No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out, so you may be able to endure it.

**DISCUSS:** What tempts you? Is 1 Corinthians 10:13 true – *does* God provide a means of escape from all temptation?

**4. THE LINE OF LOVE**



To confess our love for others is a risk. To allow ourselves to be loved is also risky. The potential for disappointment and heartbreak is always high, and June Carter knew that getting involved with Johnny Cash would test her like never before. Having already endured two divorces, she had plenty of reasons not to trust, not to risk, not to love. Looking back upon that uncertain period of their life, June wrote, “It took such a long time of praying and of walking away when I knew from first looking at him that his hurt was as great as mine, and from the depths of my despair, I stepped up to feel the fire and there is no way to be in that kind of hell, no way to extinguish

a flame that burns, burns, burns. And so came the song, “Ring of Fire.” In this song, June outlines the dangerous side of love – the fine lines between love and lust, salvation and damnation.

**PLAY: “Ring of Fire”** sung by Cash (written by June Carter).

June and Johnny had to overcome a terrible test –his drug addiction. At his lowest point, June was there for him. It was the power of love that gave her the strength to stand by Johnny and witness the darkest time of his life. June confessed in the liner notes to a collection of Cash’s love songs, “There was so much hurt for both of us and hurt for those we loved that only God could have pulled us out of that ‘Ring of Fire.’ ”

**READ: Psalm 23:4**

Even though I walk  
through the valley of the shadow of death, <sup>[a]</sup>  
I will fear no evil,  
for you are with me;  
your rod and your staff,  
they comfort me.

**DISCUSS:** Have you ever done anything crazy in the name of love? Can you think of a time when someone has stood by you because of love? What makes risk such an inseparable companion to love?

## ***5. THE LINE OF SALVATION***

Ultimately, Johnny Cash learned to stop trying to beat his addictions on his own. He had to admit his need and acknowledge his weakness. The admission of his mistakes and the transparency of his faith made Cash all the more endearing to his fans. In 2000, Cash told Rolling Stone Magazine “There is a spiritual side of me that goes real deep, but I confess right up front that I’m the biggest sinner of them all.” Bono once said, “Big John sings like the thief who was crucified beside Christ, whose humble entreaties had Jesus promising that night he would see paradise.”



The resurrection of Cash’s career, and even his life, began with a live concert at Folsom Prison in 1968. For the first time in a long time, he didn’t just sing the lyrics of his songs ... he felt them. There, he performed a gospel song penned by a prisoner at Folsom, Glen Shirley.

**PLAY: “Greystone Chapel”** by Cash.

Cash sings, “You wouldn’t think God had a place here at Folsom, but he’s saved the soul of many lost men.” Johnny believed in singing to prisoners because he believed in forgiveness, second chances, amazing grace. In the chorus, Johnny sings, “Inside the walls of prison, my body may be, but the Lord has set my soul free.”

**READ: Ephesians 2:8-10**

<sup>8</sup>For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – <sup>9</sup>not by works, so that no one can boast.

<sup>10</sup>For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

Like many of us, Johnny Cash had to go through painful experiences in his life to understand forgiveness and grace of God. We all must endure such trials and tribulations to realize our own frailty and inability to save ourselves.

**DISCUSS:** A tangible result of Johnny Cash’s salvation was his lifelong desire to comfort prisoners. Is there an example of faith leading to action in your own life? What is the relationship between faith and your deeds?

**6. CONCLUSION**



While *Walk the Line* is a love story, Cash’s story is one of self-awareness. Johnny had to come to grips with the circumstances of his youth, with the consequences of his own choices, with temptation and with failure. In the end, it was the power of love that set him free – the love of June Carter, for her man, and the love God had for his creation.

Before his death, Cash wrote a searing meditation on the finality of life:

**PLAY:** “The Man Comes Around” by Cash

**READ: I Corinthians 13:12**

<sup>12</sup>Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then

we shall see face to face.  
Now I know in part; then I  
shall know fully, even as I  
am fully known.

True love requires absolute truth. God knew Johnny Cash inside and out. June Carter knew Johnny Cash through and through. When Cash finally embraced being fully known, his life was changed forever.

For further reading on Johnny Cash, we recommend three excellent resources written by men of deep faith and profound musical passion:

*The Man Called Cash: The Life, Love and Faith of an American Legend* by Steve Turner

*The Man Comes Around: The Spiritual Journey of Johnny Cash* by Dave Urbanski

*Spiritual Journeys: How Faith has Influence 12 Music Icons* especially Steve Beard's chapter on Cash

**Craig Detweiler** is a screenwriter and director of Film/TV/Radio at Biola University. He is the co-author of *A Matrix of Meanings: Finding God in Pop Culture*.

Publicity information and images © 2005 20th Century Fox. All Rights Reserved.  
No other uses are permitted without the prior written consent of owner. Use of the material in violation of the foregoing may result in civil and/or criminal penalties. Credits and dates are subject to change. For more information, please visit their official site.