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THE GOSPEL SAYS WE CAN CHANGE

Nicholas Sutton, 58, was executed by electrocution recently by the State of Tennessee. What was unusual about the situation was Mr. Sutton had applied for clemency and the application was actually supported by the correctional staff, victims' family members, the original jurors, as well as the people whose lives were saved by him while in prison.

Governor Bill Lee denied the plea for clemency and Mr. Sutton's execution was carried out. Despite the governor's decision, Mr. Sutton had gained a lot of support in favor of his clemency application. In it was a quote from a federal district court judge stating, "Nick Sutton has gone from a life-taker to a life-saver." He also had the support of seven former and current Tennessee correction officials who described Mr. Sutton as "an

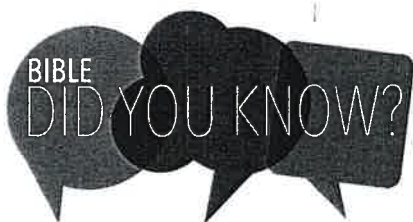
honest, kind, and trustworthy man who has used his time in prison to better himself and show that change is possible." One even further wrote that Mr. Sutton's "efforts at self-improvement and willingness to embrace change are an inspiration." Throughout his time in prison, Mr. Sutton saved the lives of three correction staff. He protected a guard from five prisoners who were trying to take him hostage during a 1985 prison riot. In the clemency petition the guard said, "Nick risked his safety and well-being in order to save me from possible death. I owe my life to Nick Sutton. If Nick Sutton was released tomorrow, I would welcome him into my home and invite him to be my neighbor. It is my opinion that Nick Sutton, more than anyone else on Tennessee's Death Row, deserves to live." Mr. Sutton

once prevented an inmate from attacking a Sheriff's Deputy from behind while he tried to break up a fight. He also once protected a female correctional worker who had been injured in a fall. In Nick's petition she wrote, "He sprang into action, helped me to my feet, retrieved my keys and radio, and alerted staff to come to my assistance. This was typical of Nick, who always puts others before himself and is willing to help anyone in need." Others witnessed a kindness he displayed to other fellow inmates. One man suffering from untreated multiple sclerosis left him unable to walk, and the prison denied him a wheelchair, so Mr. Sutton carried him around the prison. He took him to the shower every day to help him wash, and carried him to visits with his mother. She wrote in Nick's petition, "Nick is the only reason Paul is alive today." Mr. Sutton also saved the life of a man who had collapsed in his cell from a punctured intestinal tract. He eventually went blind and when he was denied a cane or a walking stick, Mr. Sutton guided him through the prison to provide him safety. He also studied meditation and conflict resolution to assist both peers and staff in reducing conflicts.

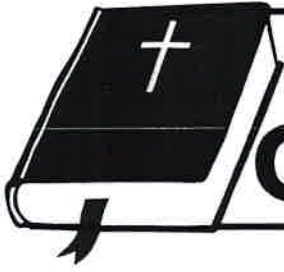
He even became a leader in a combined class of divinity students and people sentenced to death taught by Professor of Ethics at Vanderbilt Divinity School. Many corrections officers stated that Mr. Sutton was not the same man who committed his crimes. One said, "He has worked harder than any inmate I have known to better himself. He has learned from his mistakes, has grown and matured, and he has become one of the most influential inmates, inspiring other inmates to better themselves." Others stated that Mr. Sutton was "living proof of the possibility of rehabilitation and the power of redemption." Yet, despite the persuasive petition for clemency, Mr. Sutton was still executed. Regardless of whether or not any agree as to whether or not he should have been pardoned from a death sentence, it is compelling evidence that one can genuinely change. Many today still doubt the validity that the most vile and vicious amongst us could ever change their ways, and yet we see the example of it being done around us in a variety of ways. Even Christ showed us the compassion He had for a condemned thief who had changed his ways. Initially, the

thief joined in with all the others insulting Christ while hanging on the cross beside of Him. "He saved others; He cannot save Himself. He is the King of Israel; let Him now come down from the cross, and we will believe in Him. He trusts in God, let God rescue Him now, if He delights in Him, for He said, 'I am the Son of God.' The robbers who had been crucified with Him were also insulting Him with the same words," Mt. 27:42-44. One of the robbers changed his tune along with his whole attitude towards Jesus. "One of the criminals who were hanged there was hurling abuse at Him, saying, 'Are You not the Christ? Save Yourself and us!' But the other answered, and rebuking him said, 'Do you not even fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed are suffering justly, for we are receiving what we deserve for our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong.' And he was saying, 'Jesus, remember me when You come in Your kingdom!' And He said to him, 'Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise,'" Lk. 23:39-43. The whole appeal of the gospel is not only that God is willing to forgive, but also the appeal of

repentance, which states anyone can change. A persecutor of Christians can become a defender of the faith, a condemned, mouthy thief can become a humbled defender of Jesus and a sinner can become a saved servant of the Lord. What in your life still needs changing? Do you believe in the power of the gospel to turn it around? "Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand, repent and believe in the gospel.'" Mk. 1:14-15. — Daniel Ruegg



"Thus says the LORD, 'Let not a wise man boast of his wisdom, and let not the mighty man boast of his might, let not a rich man boast of his riches; But let him who boasts boast of this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am the LORD who exercises lovingkindness, justice and righteousness on earth; for I delight in these things,' declares the LORD."
Jer. 9:23-24



MONTHLY CHALLENGE

DIRECTIONS: Each first Sunday of the month, we will have challenges that you should attempt to complete by the end of the month. If we all, as members, complete these challenges, our church will grow in spirit and in number.

1) Prayer For Open Door Challenge

Colossians 4:2-4 *"Devote yourselves to prayer, keeping alert in it with an attitude of thanksgiving; praying at the same time for us as well, that God will open up to us a door for the word, so that we may speak forth the mystery of Christ, for which I have also been imprisoned; that I may make it clear in the way I ought to speak."* It amazes me to think that perhaps the reason we often go through droughts of hungry inquisitive minds wanting to learn more about the gospel is simply because we are not praying to find them. While the Lord is indeed searching and looking for honest souls hungering and thirsting for righteousness and truth, He is also searching for those with burning hearts eager to share the message of the gospel with a genuine compassion for the lost. Let's spend this month engaged vigilant in prayer asking God to open doors of opportunity for us to spread His word. Let's spend each week this month both fervently praying to the Lord to open doors for us to plant the seed of the gospel and also diligently looking for those doors to be opened with a readiness to bring the message of Christ through it. While we anxiously await for spring to come, let's fervently pray for opportunities to plant the greatest seed on earth, God's word, in to lost hearts.

2) USING YOUR BIBLE IN THE WORLD

Share the following verses with someone who does not attend this congregation at least twice this month:

John 13:1-8

"Now before the Feast of the Passover, Jesus knowing that His hour had come that He would depart out of this world to the Father, having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end. During supper, the devil having already put into the heart of Judas Iscariot, the son of Simon, to betray Him, Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He had come forth from God and was going back to God, got up from supper, and laid aside His garments; and taking a towel, He girded Himself. Then He poured water into the basin, and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel with which He was girded. So He came to Simon Peter. He said to Him, 'Lord, do You wash my feet?' Jesus answered and said to him, 'What I do you do not realize now, but you will understand hereafter.' Peter said to Him, 'Never shall You wash my feet!' Jesus answered him, 'If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me.'"