

## Can God Forgive Me?

In addition to his responsibilities as a parish pastor, Pastor Steve Southward works in prison ministry. Currently he serves inmates at three Illinois facilities, including Western Illinois Correctional Center in Mount Sterling.

There, on one occasion, an inmate asked Pastor Southward a question after Bible study. This man was serving two consecutive life sentences for murdering two people. What he wanted to know was: could God forgive him for what he did?

He had asked God to forgive him, he said. Yet he just wasn't sure whether the all-important forgiveness would be granted. This was the uncertainty that caused him to approach Pastor Southward.

"Father, forgive them" was the very first thing Jesus said from the cross, Pastor Southward pointed out. Can Jesus forgive murderers? Look what He was saying about those who were in the process of murdering Him! Yes, God forgives, Pastor Southward went on, quoting 1 John 1:9: "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from *all* unrighteousness."

Yes, Pastor Southward said, God forgives you. Then he asked whether the troubled man believed this. He said he did. Pastor Southward assured him that because of God's promise on account of Christ, he could be certain of God's love and pardon for his sins.

The man smiled. A tremendous weight had been lifted, he said.

Three months later this inmate died of cancer. He died having been assured that God's forgiveness was also for him because of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection.

"I was truly humbled," says Pastor Southward.

The Lord has used your congregation's gifts to the Central Illinois District to put Pastor Steve Southward into Illinois prisons for more than a quarter-century. Thank you!

*"I thank my God . . . because of your partnership in the gospel"* (Phil. 1:3-5).

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