

Jesus and Capital Punishment

By Jamie Buckingham

On December 23, 1973, a 20-year-old Carl Songer, high on drugs, shot and killed a state trooper who had found him sleeping in the back of a stolen car.

Justice was quick. Within weeks Carl had been convicted of first-degree murder and sentenced to die in Florida's electric chair. For 16 years he has awaited his execution on death row in the state penitentiary.

When John Spenkelink, the first man to be executed by Florida, went to the electric chair, he left his Bible with Carl Songer. Carl, who had been raised in a poor but God-fearing home, put the Bible on a shelf in his cell. It seemed irrelevant to his situation. Why was he on death row when others, who had committed far worse crimes, were being paroled—or acquitted? Why did those who had money to hire expensive lawyers seem to get out of prison, while the blacks, mentally retarded, and poor whites like him rot away in dismal existence?

The wheels of justice continued their slow grind toward the death chamber. Three times the governor of Florida signed his death warrant. Each time Carl was transferred from his cell on death row to a small cell called the "death watch cell" 30 feet from the execution chamber. Each time the appeals courts granted stays and Carl was returned to death row.

One evening, seven years after being convicted, Carl was sitting on the edge of his bunk staring at the floor when suddenly he was aware of a "light" in his cell, above and behind his head.

"When I tried to look up and see what it was, it moved back. I knew it was more than a light. It was a presence."

Confused and afraid, Carl sat immobile. The light returned, resting just above his head.

"God," the condemned prisoner whispered, "is that You?"

Instantly the light swept down in front of his eyes and in a silent explosion entered his chest. Carl Songer dropped his head into his hands and wept.

The weeping continued for three days.



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During this time he relived, in vivid detail, the events of his past life. He realized he had "bought" the arguments used by his defense lawyers—that he was not guilty. That he was a victim of drugs. That society was really to blame.

However, the light would not allow that. Now he saw himself the way he really was. Without cause he had taken the life of a woman's husband, a child's father, a mother's son. He was a sinner. He was a murderer.

Somehow Carl Songer related this to the Bible. Although his parents were members of a little Baptist church, he had not been to church since he was a child. He opened the book but it didn't make sense. Then he came to the Gospel of John: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."

"Jesus," Carl whispered. He said the name again and again, louder and louder. Jesus was God. It was Jesus who had come into his cell and entered his body and spirit. He had been filled with the Spirit of Jesus.

For the next several years Carl devoured the Bible. Then he received a letter. Lisa Crews, who had sat on the jury that convicted and sentenced him, had become a Christian. She was in our church. When she heard the governor had signed a fourth death warrant, she wrote to ask Carl's forgiveness and to share her faith in Jesus.

Carl wrote back. He forgave her for

her part in his situation and told her of his own experience with God—an ever-growing relationship that had given him unbelievable strength when he last faced the electric chair.

Lisa sent him several of my books. Then Carl wrote me. Would I be willing to come up, stay with him in his cell the night before he was to be killed, then witness the execution?

I made several trips to see him. I spent the week with him before his scheduled execution. I met his parents, poor but godly people who had driven their pick-up truck to Florida so they could return his body to Oklahoma for a "Christian burial."

I enlisted my church in prayer, and, 10 hours before he was to be executed, the U.S. Supreme Court granted another stay.

That was four years ago. Few things have shaken me as that experience. I had always been a passive believer in capital punishment. But this time it was evident the state of Florida was killing the wrong man. The old Carl Songer died nine years ago. The man they planned to execute is a new creature.

I went to the Bible. While the levitical law calls for death, the prophets tell us of a different God. "I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked," Ezekiel quoted God, "but rather that they turn from their ways and live" (Ezek. 33:11).

Some ask: "What if it were your son that he killed?" But that's not the right question. The question is: "What if it were my son who killed someone?"

The basic question is not, Did Carl Songer deserve to die? No, we all deserve to die. The real question deals with Jesus. Would Jesus pull the switch? He came to fulfill the law of retribution with the higher law of transformation. The question that must be asked with capital punishment—as with all social issues—is, What would Jesus do?

In May the Florida Supreme Court determined Carl should not be executed. They changed his sentence to life in prison. Even though he'll be behind bars for a long time, he's a free man. Set free from the law of sin and death by Jesus. ■