

**A PLEA FOR THE LIFE OF  
RONALD L. WATKINS**

**Submitted on his behalf and in the name of others by:**

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The Honorable James S. Gilmore, III  
Governor of the Commonwealth of Virginia  
State Capitol, Third Floor  
Richmond, Virginia 23219

Dear Governor Gilmore,

Insofar as possible, this will not be a legal document. It is a plea for an act of executive grace. It is an appeal from fellow Christians to exercise that grace in recognition of the power of God's grace in the life of Ronald Watkins and the worth of that life to others. Ronald Watkins is like a son to me, and to my wife, Elizabeth Bennett. Perhaps more importantly, we have learned much about the power of the Gospel from the example of his life in recent years. And so, it falls to us and the many, many others who join us through prayer, petition, and personal entreaty to your

office,<sup>1</sup> to persuade you to allow him to live out his remaining years in prison. We pray that God will guide our hands as we undertake that task.

Ron's life, since 1994, has in many ways mirrored that of Karla Faye Tucker. Unlike her, however, he is not telegenic and verbally articulate. He is a private person, at peace with himself and his God, and most reluctant to speak about private matters to the media. These very qualities have undoubtedly hurt his clemency efforts, though Lisa and I have striven to have his life recognized. In writing, however, directed to those he trusts, he is quite articulate. Consequently, I intend to let much of Ron's story be told in this petition through his own words to us. From literally hundreds of letters, I have included excerpts that reveal who Ron is now. I assure you these words were not written with any thought

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<sup>1</sup>Attached as Exhibit 3 are copies of petitions signed by persons who have reviewed, reflected and prayed upon Ron's case and life, and request a commutation of Ron's death sentence. Other petitions have been sent directly to your office. We strongly urge you to review and consider these petitions in coming to your decision in this case.

of clemency in mind, but that will certainly be apparent from the writings themselves. By any test you could formulate, Ron is a different person from the man sentenced to death years ago; he is now a redeemed child of God. He has made every effort to be a good father to his sixteen-year old son, David. He has reached out to repair the relationship with his own father, who abused him. He has been a peacemaker and a keeper of order in the prison. He has helped to keep another Danville teenager from going down the wrong road. He has not done these things out of some hope that you would one day see fit to spare his life, Governor. That he has done them is witness to the magnificent power of Christ to take the unclean vessel and use it to advance the work of the Kingdom on earth. Please let that work continue within the prison walls, where it is so badly needed.

## **The Old Ronald Watkins**

For many of his early years, Ron lived in a situation where he could not escape the constant threat and reality of violence. Outside the door in New York City lay violence and death. Inside the home, he was singled out and subjected to violent and humiliating forms of physical abuse. A summary of this frightening history is attached as Exhibit 1. The reason I do not detail these events, which are documented in the court records but were never heard by the jury, is that they are not at all offered as an excuse for what he did in 1988. Rather, they are relevant to an explanation and understanding of the young man that emerged from that environment. What would have been the extent of the damage to you, or to me, if, in our youth, there had been week after week with no escape or rest from violence, inside and outside our home?

It was after his family moved to Virginia that Ron committed his only other serious offense. It was a serious offense, abduction, and I do not wish to minimize it. But it was also not a random

crime. It grew out of a dispute over money owed for work and out of ignorance or indifference on Ron's part to the menacing nature of his behavior toward the victim. He pled guilty and received a sentence of twenty years. No one bothered to explain the parole law. Ron thought he would be in prison for twenty years. He thought his life was over. His prison record was terrible. It was a scarred, scared, and dangerous Ronald Watkins that was released. Tragically, driven by obsession with a woman--the mother of his son--who said he must obtain money, he killed William McCauley and took a thousand dollars. The very extent of his damaged state as a human being at that time is testimony to the magnitude of God's redemptive power exercised later.

### **The Present Ronald Watkins**

During his first three years on death row, the abused angry man had time to reflect and accept responsibility for his actions. He also found Christ. For six years, in hundreds of small ways, he has reached out to his family and to others, and has been a helper

both to corrections officers and to his fellow prisoners alike.

Statements on his behalf are attached as Exhibit 2. He will never have the notoriety accorded to Karla Faye Tucker, but he has touched many lives for the good. What is the evidence? How can one be sure? The best evidence is my testimony. My wife and I have been in close touch with Ron and with the people he has sought to help in his new life for nearly six years. I have been active in Virginia capital defense for ten years and I have never before undertaken to seek clemency for a prisoner.

The born again Ronald Watkins is a private person. He does not seek attention and he would not be able to plead for his life. I plead for it with his words. At my urgent request, he gave me permission to quote from some of the hundreds of letters we have exchanged over the years. I hope his words will help you see that commutation to life in prison without parole is the right decision in this case. The grace you extend to him will also be extended to the lives of others who have committed no crime.

## **The Voice of Ronald Watkins The Saving Grace of Christ**

Some years ago, as we became closer to Ron, we began quietly to witness Christ to him. What follows are excerpts from letters written during the last few years. They are words written, of course, with no belief that anyone except my wife and I would ever read them. [As mentioned, Lisa is my wife. Demetria is a young Danville woman whose parents credit Ron with steering her away from a bad crowd. Ron credits her with a part in his conversion. Thus does the Lord work wonders.]

*"So far as my faith goes, you and Lisa did have much to do with that and so did Demetria. Can't really remember exactly when it was, but it was in '94. Some time back then or before I told you that religion was something that was always forced on me. It was never said 'Ronnie consider. . . ', it was always said "You better". It's not that I didn't believe in God or anything like that because I do and I always have. I just wasn't ready to commit to something that I wasn't ready for and that I would have been doing not for myself but because it was what someone else wanted me to do. That wasn't going to work, nor would I have been sincere about it. When I felt that I was, I did what I had to do. This was after meeting*



*Demetria. I had also gotten influence from you, and it wasn't that "You better do" attitude. You've never approached me that way. It was after she got back from spending that summer in Maryland. While there she had gotten saved and put her life in order. She too talked to me about the change in her life and the things God can do, as you and Lisa have told me. I was tired of trying to solve this and work that out and going back and forth with everything that was going on at that time. I put it in God's hands.*

*It goes without saying that there were those who felt I had to prove myself to, but after a while it didn't really matter. There was only one that I had to prove anything to even though it wasn't necessary because He already knew. I felt a lot better about myself and a lot of things. I try to do what pleases God and not worry about what is thought of me. I do what I can to help people and try to do what's right. I read my bible, pray, and try to get others to see. I don't force or keep pushing it. Though I can't make anyone listen, I try to do what the bible says. I've made peace with myself, with God and my family. I have forgiven and asked to be forgiven. I pray for myself and everyone, even those who don't like and want to kill me. The Lord knows what is in my heart and that is what matters.*

*"I've been sitting here working on my Bible lessons and have some questions. Lessons 9 and 10 are on confessing and repenting. My question deals with confessing before and after baptism. I've no problem understanding either lesson because I pretty much know/knew most of it. But on the baptism*

*issue; if you've been baptized and saved, then back slide along the way and want to come back home to Christ, does one have to be baptized again? I wouldn't think so but I'm not sure. Doing them, the lessons, opened my eyes to a lot of things, making me see a whole lot about myself that could be better.*

*"Like I said, I'm trying. The lessons I'm doing tell me what I need to and must do, and I'm not doing them just for the sake of doing them. I want to better myself and make ready for my journey."*

In September, 1996, Ron was writing of an angry exchange with Sina Mayo. She is the mother of Ron's son, David. She was also complicit in his crime and now feels her own guilt. Her's is also a marvelous story of redemption. Not only is she raising David, she adopted two of her sister's crack-addicted babies. We have visited them often in a Danville housing project. The poverty does not keep it from being a loving home. But on this occasion, the redeemed Ronald Watkins was writing to us about the angry words he had spoken to her and what they prompted.

*"Anyway, without realizing it, I got on the subject of Christ and the Bible. I must have written 5 or 6 pages on that alone. I was thinking about what I*

*said to her and said that I had a lot of apologizing to do. In terms of anger and bitterness, I still felt a lot of that though it's not on the surface. That's wrong. So, I made a list of everyone I may have been upset with for whatever reason and wrote each and every one of them apologizing, though some probably will have no idea why. It doesn't matter that they don't know; it's something I felt that I had and needed to do. I'll tell you this; after reading over each letter I felt a lot better. Basically, I let each person know that I had some feelings that maybe I should not have and why. But the Bible teaches us that as Christians, we must be forgiving in order to be forgiven. "But if you forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your father forgive your trespasses" Matthew 6:15. It is a different Ronald Watkins. Not the one they knew years ago."*

### **Ron's Son David**

The new Ron Watkins has striven mightily from prison to be a father to his sixteen-year old son. We know David well. He is a bright young kid who will suffer greatly if his father is killed. He could go either way; he could become a veterinarian or another number in the prison system. He has already gotten in trouble for fighting when he is taunted about the fact that his father is on death row.

In the summer of 1995, having found the Lord, Ron very much wanted a like experience for David. Through a Christian colleague on the law faculty at Washington and Lee, I learned of Young Life. Lisa and I were pleased to be able to put David in touch with Young Life in Danville and to pay his way to Young Life Camp in New York. He was one of only two black kids on the trip, but this bothered him not at all. He fit in well, and most importantly, he accepted Christ. This letter is from Ron before the camp.

*“Tomorrow I’m going to put a bible and one of my brushes with the package. They’re for David. I have two large print bibles so I’ll give one to David. As far as my son and family goes, no one appreciates more what you’ve done and are doing for him than I do. I took a lot away from David by being in this mess that I’m in and it’s a wonder that he doesn’t have any resentment towards me. I know too, that there is a way that I can never give that back to him even if I were to walk out of here tomorrow. I know that it hasn’t really hit him yet, but you know as well as I that there will come a time when it will and he’s going to need someone. That boy has suffered a lot unjustly because of me and he didn’t deserve it. Without going into a long drawn out thing, I appreciate what you’re doing for him and without*

*there being any doubt in my mind, I know that you and Lisa will handle things as you have said you will. Still, you know I am going to worry about him."*

### **Reaching Out to An Abusive Father**

To us, one of the most amazing examples of the transforming power of God's grace is the story of Ron's efforts to repair his relationship with his violently abusive father, Leon Watkins. That abuse was a family secret and it took years for Ron to speak of it at all. The jury that sentenced him to death never heard of it. His letters do not carry the full flavor of what he went through. While Ron does not like to speak of the abuse he suffered, he has spoken often about the progress of his efforts to repair the relationship. Here is part of what he has said over the years.

*"Leon said that he beat me because his father beat him. I knew how my dad was brought up but didn't know how hard it had been. Even still, I wouldn't treat my child the way that I had been. I'd rather kill myself first. I understand a little, but he should have gotten some kind of help."*

*"Going back to my father, you know, that once upon a time he and I couldn't even talk to each other*

*without getting into it. I wasn't trying to make peace with him, nor he with me. It took a couple of years, for us both to get to the point we are now. The thing is that it was me who made the first move as far as trying to make peace and, I had to keep pushing before I got him to come around. In some of the previous letters, I sent you, I explained to you why it was that I wanted to make amends. If I have to die, I don't want it to happen with the hostility that there was between us."*

*"Leon still has this thing about family business going outside the family. To him there were things that just shouldn't be told. I did let him know though that to me you were one who would listen and advise all those difficult, depressing and lonely times, I had someone that I could turn to. He knows full well the reason why I couldn't write about those things. There was a lot of hurt and anger at that time. Though our relationship is much, much better that what it used to be years ago, there are still those times when he's in one of his moods. I've mentioned in previous letters that with things being the way they are, I don't want there to be any kind of ill feelings between my family and I."*

*"You know yourself that for a long time I was mad at my family, but what I've realized is that they are going through tough times. Pop's and me. We took each other through the ringer over the years, but he and I both have changed within ourselves and are trying to make the best of things. What I do feel safe in saying is that I have made my peace with him and he with me. We both still have some things to work*

*out, but the relationship that we have now is the best that we have had from my childhood on up. If there could be a second chance, I want one with him and I know it would be different.”*

### **Given the Grace to Experience Remorse**

During one of our visits with Ron, he expressed his great remorse over the death of his victim, William McCauley. It was difficult for him to say these things to us face-to-face. Although he had written many times over the years how much he regretted his actions, and told us the same over the phone, his sincerity was evidenced by his actions that day. At his request, we tried to find the McCauley family to convey his remorse. After several false leads, at one point we erroneously believed that Dr. McCauley had died. What follows is part of a letter from Ron after we wrote to him about the “death”.

*“As for Dr. McCauley, I’m sincerely sorry to hear that he’s passed. I really don’t know what to say except that I hope he’s gone on to a better place and has found it in his heart to forgive me. Hopefully his widow will be willing to meet with you but as I think about it, I can understand how something like that would be difficult. Please let me know how that goes.*

*I would like to know.”*

In Ron's case, the redeeming power of God rebuts the death penalty's assumption that, once condemned, he could have no human qualities, particularly remorse. Typical of the person he had become, Ron expressed his humanity and remorse years ago in a poem he never expected anyone but us to read. The poem is as follows:

**“MISINTERPRETATION OF ME”**

*If I am a prisoner  
Then whose eyes do I see through  
When I am awed by a beautiful sunset?*

*If I am such a villain,  
Then whose heart is this that aches for  
The abused and missing children? The mistreated  
And battered women? The homeless and starving?  
For these, a monster has no feelings.*

*If I am without remorse  
Then whose tears, tell me, run down my face  
At night when I look back on the pain I've caused?*



## **The Grace to Minister To Others**

Since Christ entered his life, Ron has quietly ministered to his fellow prisoners in a variety of ways. He was quite candid about the fact that this part, concern for others, did not come easily.

*“For the longest time after I got here, there wasn’t much that I cared about. Anything and anyone. I had that same kind of attitude. I felt that it didn’t make a difference what I did, the State is going to kill me anyway so why try. The difference with me is that I was wrong about a lot of things. I didn’t care because I felt that no one cared about me. Anger, bitterness, hate... These are the words to describe what I was feeling back in ’88, ’89, ’90. I wasn’t heartless, but I was a cold individual at that time. It took me a long time to wake up. It took a while for God to reach me.”*

From many small but significant gestures, we have chosen one brief example of Ron’s kindness toward another. Joseph O’Dell was despised by his death row fellows. He had a big international campaign going for clemency. The U.S. Supreme Court had agreed to hear his case. He had a rich girlfriend who

sent him lots of money. He monopolized the telephone, keeping others from communicating with their lawyers and loved ones. Then one day it all came apart. He lost in the courts. His girlfriend cut him off. Everyone on the row loathed him. He was utterly alone and he had brought it on himself. He was executed in July, 1997.

Ron's letter describing his gesture to O'Dell, was a familiar blend of pride in his new found self and residual con toughness. He wanted to tell about reaching out, but to make sure that no one mistook the gesture for weakness. He was apparently unaware of how closely his situation resembled that of the redeemed thief, crucified with Christ, whom his fellow criminal on the third cross had mocked.

*"Let me tell you of the good deed I did for a person that I have no liking for. Surprised myself actually because I don't even talk to him. . . haven't in weeks. Just felt sorry for him and did him a favor. . . The guys were laughing at him and throwing it in his face for days. The man is literally broken. . . I have never seen anyone cry the way he did. . . I had \$8.37 on the books. I took \$7.50 of it and ordered a*

*carton of cigarettes for him and told him to give it back when he could... Everyone deserves a chance. I told him it's not that I don't like him. It's what he does that I don't like. I felt sorry for him and helped him out to show where my heart is."*

### **Ministering to the Ministers**

Often, we as Christians think we are heeding the call of Matthew 25 and doing something for the less fortunate. We get so proud of ourselves. Then time and again we learn that we are the ones who have been ministered to. The objects of our compassion are actually teaching us about the meaning of the Gospel.

The 1997 poem reprinted below is one example of what Ron has taught us. We have heard the old, old story many times. Like many Christians, however, we sometimes succumb to the temptation to see the crucifixion as a stylized, romanticized event rather than the bloody and brutal carrying out of a death sentence that it was. We thank God for the insight given to us by an uneducated black man who is himself under sentence of death. It helps us understand the enormity of our Lord's sacrifice for us.

## **A VISION**

**Ronald L. Watkins**

***The man on the cross appeared  
to have plucked out  
most of the hair of his beard.  
And in the middle of his swollen, battered eyes,  
I thought I saw pride.  
a splotch of blood and saliva and flesh  
and what else there was I couldn't guess.***

***But somehow, though ugly it seemed, my eyes looked  
as it glistened, sparkled and gleamed. Perhaps He  
winked as if to say that He would come again someday.  
But maybe it was just a spasm, a twitch as  
He began to cross that chasm.***

***For surely He was close to death; His flesh in tatters,  
barely a breath. His hands and feet were fastened  
tight and nailed down as if His might would be too  
much to rope alone so they put pressure on His bones.***

***I looked around the back and saw his rib cage, spine,  
and muscles raw protruding through a skinless shell  
that had been beaten, whipped and ripped as well.***

***I wondered what it was that this man had done  
to so enrage the centurions, that at His feet they cast  
the lot to see how His garments they would part.***

***And while they mumbled, mocked and jeered, I saw the  
mouth beneath the beard open wide and begin to speak.  
I was surprised to hear his voice wasn't weak. He cried  
out something strange to me. 'Eli, Eli, lama  
sabachthani'.***

***The people ran to cast upon Him shame. They mocked  
And cursed his lowly name. Then to Him they  
gave vinegar from the end of a stick which in His  
Weakness he couldn't lick.***

***Yet in his state, it was plain to see the Son of God  
Upon that tree. And when He cried  
out yet again, the Temple's veil was rent in twain.  
The earth did quake; the rocks rent. His holy life  
had just been spent. . . .***

***And I heard the people begin to talk of opened  
graves and the dead that walked.  
And on his knees one proud centurion cried out,  
'This was God's Own Son. . .'***

## **A BRIEF WORD ABOUT CLEMENCY, LAW, AND FAIRNESS**

In the case of William Saunders, Virginia recognized the  
relevance of reformation and a changed life to the clemency

decision. To be sure, there are many ways to distinguish the cases if one is of a mind to do so. There was a question of innocence, and a recommendation from the Judge and the Commonwealth Attorney. But the record shows that Saunders' post-sentence conduct was an important factor, if not the only factor. It is to be assumed that if doubts about guilt were the primary factor, Saunders' sentence would have been commuted to something less than life without possibility of parole, the commutation sought by Ronald Watkins. The post-sentence record of Ronald Watkins is superior to that of William Saunders. That is not to say that Mr. Saunders did not deserve this act of executive grace. It is to say that Ronald Watkins has shown himself equally worthy and has demonstrated that he is no danger to anyone.

Second, there is the question of the abuse Ron suffered and its explanatory relevance to the crime he committed. Again, this horrifying experience could not be offered as an excuse. That is not the reason we point to it now. But the fact is that the sentencing jury never heard the evidence. That the courts may have

disposed of the legal question as a matter of counsel performance under the doctrine of *Strickland v. Washington* only magnifies rather than diminishes its relevance to the clemency process.

Finally, there is the question of your role in a process that simply has no procedure at the moment. You were the Attorney General during all of the litigation in this case. You certainly cannot be faulted for directing your subordinates to make use of existing legal doctrines to defend jury verdicts. But your role is different now. It is in many respects a more difficult one. Conscience, fairness, the worth of human life are now crucially important. Legal doctrines and case precedents are no longer relevant. Political considerations are plainly improper. We do not envy you this part of your responsibilities as Governor. We simply pray that you will recognize your new role and exercise executive grace, so that the grace of God may continue to manifest itself in the life of Ronald Watkins.

## **SUMMARY OF APPEAL**

- Whatever was true in the past, Ronald Watkins of today is a redeemed child of God, whose life behind prison walls has meaning and value.
- David Watkins is a sixteen-year old who committed no crime. If his father is allowed to live and continue the guidance he has been providing, David has a chance in life.
- Leon Watkins is an abuse victim who became an abuser, hid his guilt, and watched silently as his son was sentenced to death. If his son is allowed to live, the healing process can continue and he will have a chance to find meaning in his own life by continuing to seek the reconciliation initiated by Ron.
- Donna Watkins, Ron's mother, committed no crime beyond standing by in the traditional passive role typical of the times. But she will suffer perhaps more than anyone if Ron is killed.

There have been enough victims in this tragedy. The McCauley family will not find peace in Ron's execution. And I doubt that they would consciously choose to visit the loss of a son



upon Leon and Donna Watkins or the loss of a father to young David. We are unashamed to make this plea for mercy to you in the name of Christ. That is because we search in vain in His gospel for examples of the good being taken and made better. But we see story after story of the wretched and sinful being transformed into instruments of God's will. At the end of the day, redemption is what the gospel story is about. Please ignore your lawyers, your political advisors, get on your knees and seek God's will in this case. That is all we can ask, but we do ask it. Please spare the life of our friend.