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Rev. Nelson Fears, a Former Inmate, Brings Message of Hope to Wilkinson Prison

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Rev. Nelson Fears, left, and Warden Scott Middlebrooks

WOODVILLE, Miss. – The Rev. Nelson Fears, a former inmate in the federal prison system, has a special message for men doing time. He believes that they can find hope in the middle of hopeless situations.

“You’ve got to trust what you can’t see,” he said. “When you do better, and give respect to others, your situation will get better. Yes, there are benefits to making good choices.”

That’s the message that Fears delivered recently during a visit at Wilkinson County Correctional Facility (WCCF). The Alabama-based pastor shared his personal testimony and a message of encouragement with 50 men incarcerated at the facility.

Ultimately, he said, it was his acceptance of Christ that made the biggest difference in his life. That acceptance helped him to change his mind and his behavior, he said.

Fears is a native of Valley, Ala. and the pastor of Pleasant View Missionary Baptist Church in Salem, Ala. He served more than 15 years in federal prison. Interestingly, he spent some of those years working as an orderly for Warden Scott Middlebrooks, who is now the warden of WCCF.

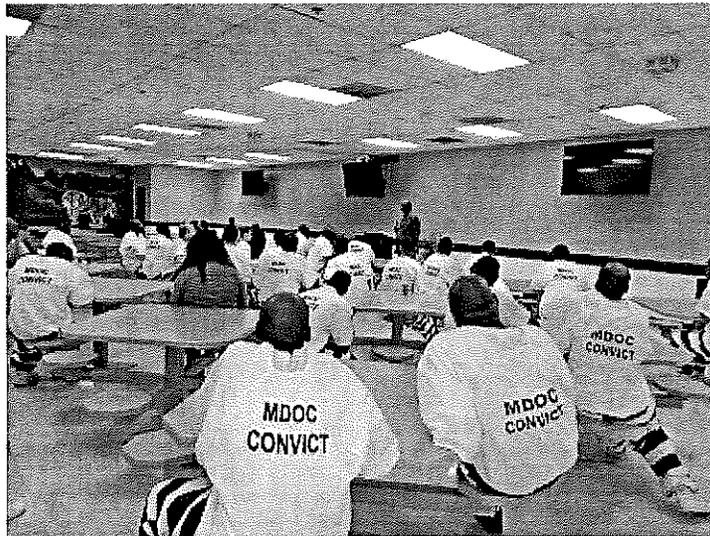
According to Middlebrooks, Fears is a good man who really cares about people. It was for this reason, among others, that he brought him to Woodville as a guest speaker. He suggested Fears has a message that is relevant, practical, and meaningful to the WCCF population.

"Our guys need to hear what he has to say," Middlebrooks said. "He's been where they are. So they can relate to what he says about life in prison."

Most of the men who came out to hear Fears are participants in a new WCCF initiative known as "Thinking for a Change." It is an integrated, cognitive behavioral change program for offenders. Some of the men are preparing to go home.

During his 40-minute talk, Fears quoted what is called the "golden rule" as he highlighted the importance of showing respect. "When you give respect, you will get respect," he said. "The way you carry yourself will make the man next door respect you."

Fears noted the respect that "you give to other folks will take you a long way."



Rev. Nelson Fears addressing audience at Wilkinson County Correctional Facility

When men are doing time, they often feel lost and all alone, Fears said. Sometimes they feel discouraged. But it's important for them to keep believing and keep doing the right thing, even when nobody is looking, he said. Eventually, something good will come their way.

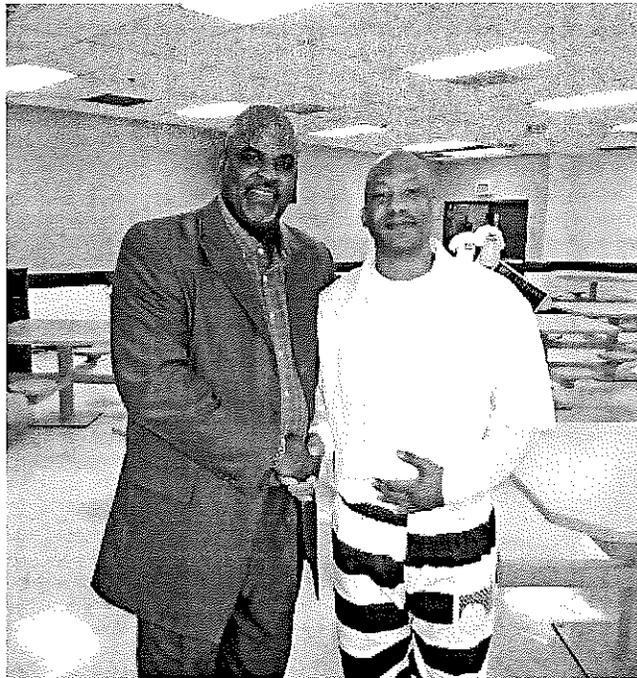
In his case, it was after 16 years of incarceration. He received a letter from the court saying he would be released. At first, he said, it seemed too good to be true. The news shook him. And as

he thought about his freedom, his mind flooded with thoughts about his family. On the day that he left prison, he saw his family waiting to pick him up.

"When I left home, my son was one," he said. "Now he's 17 and standing there taller than me. But thanks to God, my family was united. We stood there and hugged each other and just cried."

Fears went on to rebuild his family. He found a job and soon became a supervisor. He eventually became a pastor. "I once was lost and at my lowest, but now I'm a well-respected man in my community," he said.

Fears told the men: "Whatever you're going to do in life, remember it starts today. If you're not going to do it today, you're not going to do it when you get out."



Rev. Nelson Fears with Saheed Davis

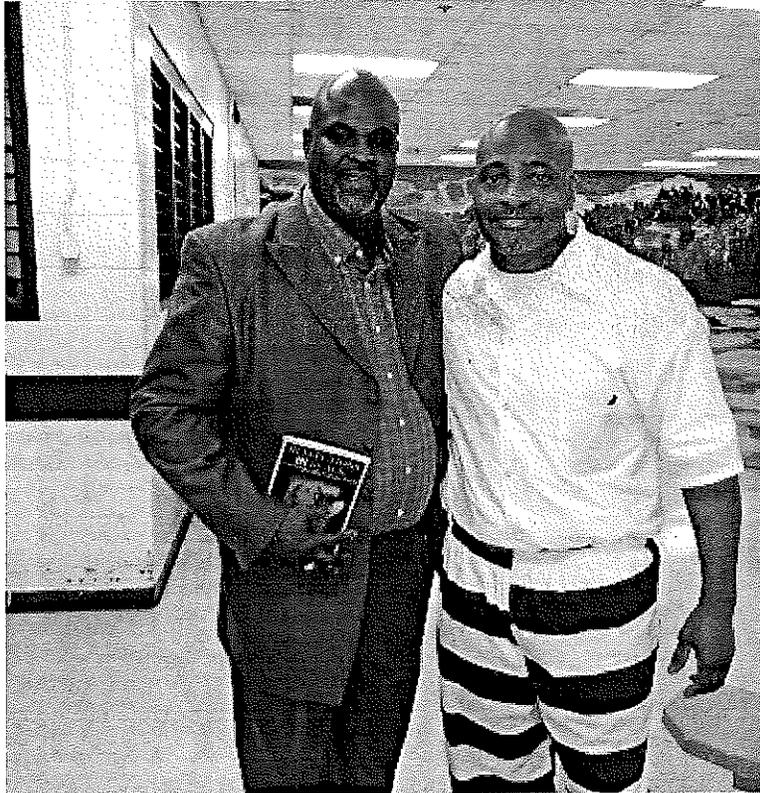
Several men said they enjoyed the presentation, and they thanked Fears for coming. One said he wept as Fears spoke.

"It was a message of hope from somebody that's been where we're at," said Christopher Myers. He explained that Fear's point about respecting others resonated with him in a special way. "Sometimes you have to respect others even when they're not respecting you," he said.

Warden Middlebrooks followed the presentation with a few words of encouragement. "I'm a firm believer that good things come to good people," he said to the men. "The choice is yours. You've got to make the right choice."

Fears encouraged the men to never give up. "Keep you heads up," he said. "Keep pushing forward."

WCCF houses 950 male offenders. It is privately managed by MTC or Management & Training Corporation of Utah.



Rev. Nelson Fears with Glen Conley II

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