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where transformation happens

God Used Poverty to Prepare CBSI Leader for Prison Ministry

As Raul approaches the violent El Salvador gang prison, he knows he easily could have been an inmate instead of a Bible teacher.

Life was rough for Raul right from the start. When Raul's mother was only 14, she fled from her parents in El Salvador with an older man. The two went to Guatemala, where at age 15 she had her first baby. Another child came when she was 17, and Raul was born when she was 19.

Raul's father was a violent man under the influence of alcohol and drugs. He made life miserable for the whole family. When Raul was just a few months old, his mother couldn't stand it anymore and ran away with the children.

She searched for work. She had to feed her children, but no one wanted the little family in their homes. Eventually a baker hired her on the condition that she would not bring her children to work with her.

Desperate Days

Raul's mother built a shelter out of plastic bags and bamboo in a crime-ridden part of Guatemala. The children survived on the barest amounts of food until she could save enough to take them back to El Salvador.



When Raul speaks, the inmates in the gang prison listen. He shares common experience with them. He knows them and where they have come from, and he's not intimidated by them.



Young inmates meet weekly to work together on their CBSI lessons.

Even back in El Salvador, the family lived in extreme poverty. These conditions are prime recruiting ground for gangs, who lure the poor, broken, abused, and abandoned into their subculture of violent crime.

But it was a Christian, not a gang member, whom God used to change the course of Raul's life. When Raul was 17, a friend invited him to a church where he eventually gave his life to Jesus.

Despite his poverty, God made a way for Raul to earn an engineering degree. Diploma in hand, Raul prayed for a job. As Raul earnestly sought the Lord, however,

he realized that God was calling him to share His Word full-time. Soon after, he turned down a significant job offer, choosing instead to obey God and go to Bible college.

A decade later, his preaching is passionate. Raul is overwhelmed by how the Lord searched for, found, and saved him. He knows that someone with a past like his could easily have had a very different future.

A Place to Belong

Signs of violent gang influence are pervasive throughout the prison at which Raul ministers. Even the walls are covered with graffiti—except for one room. A room built by Christians still has clean white walls. The prisoners respect this room where Raul and his team lead three Community Bible Study classes every Friday. In each class, as many as 30 youths crowd into the room to study God’s Word. Here they are called by their names, not their gang nicknames. They are welcomed, hugged, and cared for.



A prison pastor baptized each new believer in Jesus’s name. It was a glorious time as each one came up out of the water!

The young men work together, answering the questions and discussing the lessons. Many faithfully recite the memory verse. Raul brings out each lesson’s central idea and application in his wrap-up talk.

Lives are being changed! As they engage with God and His Word through CBS, incarcerated gang members are discovering the love, joy, and peace that only Jesus can give. The belonging they never found in gang membership is now truly theirs through Jesus and being part of God’s family.

Recently 16 new believers were baptized. A 55-gallon barrel was placed in the prison’s graffiti-covered courtyard and filled with water. One by one, the new believers stepped off a chair into the barrel as a small group sang hymns and rejoiced.

You Have a Part

Jesus said that the Spirit of the Lord had anointed Him “to proclaim liberty to the captives” (Luke 4:18). He came to bring good news to the poor, sight to the blind, and freedom to the oppressed. Jesus is still liberating the captives.

Raul is only one person in only one prison, while thousands upon thousands around the world are crying out, “Please bring us God’s life-changing Word.” Fortunately, also there are CBS servant leaders who are willing to sacrifice their time, energy, and personal gain to advance the gospel. Would you prayerfully consider how God would have you serve alongside them, both through intercession and a financial contribution to the Americas Region or the worldwide ministry of CBS? Thank you!



Grateful for you,

Keith Sparzak
International Director

P.S. For Raul’s safety, please do not forward this letter outside of the United States.



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