

Pre-Teen Gang Member Turns to Christ

"I felt strong with a gang," he said. "It made me feel good about myself."

Luis was angry because he didn't know his real father.

"He wasn't a part of my life," he said. "To feel better, I ran with a gang and could do whatever I wanted."

Luis busted windows and damaged private property for fun. Then his destructive behavior graduated to beating up other boys.

Most of the time he was the better fighter, until the day a member from a rival gang pulled a knife on him during an argument.

The boy jabbed the knife into Luis' arm. The injury wasn't life threatening, but it was serious enough for Luis' mother, Ricci, to realize that her son might not survive into adulthood if she didn't intervene.

Ricci's marriage to a man named Rotolfo, and the family's move from Lima to the town of Arboleda, probably saved young Luis' life. By divine appointment, their new next-door neighbors were Pastor Wildoro and his family, of La Iglesia de Cristo Vida.

"The pastor invited me to church," Luis said. "He kept telling me, 'God loves you and can change your life.' But I didn't really care."

The relocation to a new city could not prevent Luis from continuing some of his old habits. After repeated fights in school and disruptive behavior, he was on the verge of being expelled.

Ricci, at her wits' end, encouraged her son to attend a church service. When Luis finally agreed, she was amazed that he kept going back. She started going with him—every Sunday—and she eventually committed her heart to Jesus Christ.

“At first only my son and I attended church,” Ricci said. “Luis asked his stepfather to come, too. He told [Rotolfo] that the mothers and fathers of the other children come to church together, and he wanted that for his family.”

For months, Ricci rose each day at 5 a.m. to pray for her husband and son. Those prayers were answered when Rotolfo started coming to church with them last Christmas and later gave his heart to Christ.

“There was a great change in our home after that,” Ricci said. “Rotolfo was an angry person, proud and self-sufficient, and he has changed in so many ways. Coming here has changed life for all three of us.”

Luis' tough heart was softening too, albeit slowly. Continued fighting at school led to his dismissal in January—around the time he received an Operation Christmas Child shoe box gift and was invited to the church to attend The Greatest Journey, the discipleship program developed by the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association and Samaritan's Purse.

Luis complied with his mother's wishes to go to the classes, but he had no desire to be there. A battle was raging inside him as he wrestled with years of anger toward God and the earthly father who had abandoned him.

“During the first two classes, Luis couldn't be calm or quiet,” said his teacher, Rosana. “He was a troublemaker, so I gave him some responsibilities to help improve his conduct. He did not like to talk about himself. He seemed very sad. Slowly, he shared with me his problems at school.”

By the third lesson, Rosana noticed a change in Luis'

attitude. He started to pay attention and to ask questions. She was elated when he volunteered to pray and participated in the Bible readings.

"Every verse we memorized, he seemed to take to heart," she said. "He became the best student of the class and has been sharing Jesus with others."

Although Luis had heard the gospel preached many times, he found it hard to believe that God really cared about him. It wasn't until he took part in The Greatest Journey and studied the 12 lessons about Bible heroes like David and Zacchaeus that the reality of God's love truly began to take root in his heart.

"At church they explained that God sent Jesus to die for me," Luis said. "It surprised me that God sent His Son to do this for bad people like me. I was a bad person who liked to hit people and get in fights. But because of what the Word of God says, I know I don't need to fight anymore."

Accepting God's gift of forgiveness by receiving Christ as Savior gave Luis a new sense of peace. It also helped him begin the process of forgiving his biological father and letting go of old grudges against anyone who had hurt him.

A few months after he accepted Christ, Luis, now 13, visited some of his gang member friends during a trip to the city.

"They found out I was a Christian now, and they asked me, 'Why did you change? What happened to you? Why are you telling us about God?' Some of them mocked me and called me *el curita* (the little priest)," said Luis.

"I told them that God loves them, too. I pray for them to know Jesus," he said. "I believe Jesus can change the lives of my friends in the gang, because He has changed mine."

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