

Jesus Is Transforming Salvadoran Gang Members

This Monday, I stood in front of 600 male inmates at a prison in Izalco, El Salvador. The men were dressed in white T-shirts and white drawstring pants, and many of them sported tattoos on their faces and necks. All the men were members of violent gangs when they were incarcerated. About 20% of them were affiliated with the MS-13 gang—a group known for horrific attacks on women, children and police officers.

Yet I felt no fear as I looked out over the crowd and shared a message from Luke 15 about the prodigal son. Most of the men were carrying Bibles, and when I announced my text, they immediately turned to the passage. I could hear them yell, “Amen,” or “Gloria a Dios,” when I stressed an important point. And they clapped and cheered when I reminded them that the kosher Jewish father in the story welcomed his wayward son home even though the boy smelled like pigs.

Almost every prisoner in this huge group became a Christian after arriving at the Izalco prison. Two churches now operate inside the facility, pastored by men who were once tough criminals. All the men now gather for Bible study every day, they hold prayer and fasting vigils, and they are helping each other to grow spiritually.

When the men worshipped on Monday, six guys used plastic paint tubs for drums while an inmate with a huge smile led the praise choruses. The men sang louder and with more passion than I’ve witnessed in most churches in the outside world.

I told the inmates: “¡Jesucristo vive dentro de esta prisión!” (“Jesus Christ lives inside this prison!”) The men screamed with approval.

“Our government is encouraging this movement,” says Oscar

David Benavides, director of the prison. He says in 2016 he was allowed to encourage evangelism among inmates. When men experienced conversions, he intentionally moved them into buildings where there were non-Christian inmates.

Faith was never forced on anyone, but more and more men began to find Jesus in a chain reaction of grace. The new converts changed dramatically. They were no longer angry and depressed. They became cooperative and friendly. Their frowns turned to smiles.

Today, El Salvador's government leaders see evidence that Christianity is good for violent offenders.

No serious crimes have occurred inside the Izalco facility since the prison revival began. The inmates treat each other with respect, even though they were affiliated with rival gangs. "The transformation is an obvious miracle," Benavides says.

This was certainly obvious to me as I walked through the crowd and shook hands with the guys after my message. Most of them wanted to give me a hug. They all had big smiles. All were eager to say, "Dios le bendiga," or "God bless you," when I looked their way.

"Some of these men participated in massacres or other forms of gang violence," Benavides told me. "But today they have been changed by the grace of God."

I felt I was witnessing a true miracle as I looked into the eyes of these men, some of whom may have participated in massacres or beheadings a few years ago. The feared MS-13 gang has even been responsible for setting fire to public buses with people inside them. Salvadoran gang members who traveled to the United States have also spread terror within our borders.

I told the men in Izalco that I was honored to be with them.

“There are many people in my country who are afraid of you,” I said. “But I wish they could see what I am seeing today.”

They cheered again as the drummers pounded on the plastic tubs.

Here in the United States, we are skittish about mixing government and religion. We don’t want prayer in schools. We don’t want the Bible to influence public policy.

And yet our prisons are so dangerous they are like hell on earth. A report released last year by *The New Republic* said 428 inmates died in Florida’s prisons in 2017, hundreds have died in prisons in Oregon and Washington since 2008, and the rate of prisoner-on-prisoner violence has doubled in Alabama in the past five years.

I’m not going to hold my breath until America’s prison officials try El Salvador’s unusual method of reform. But why wouldn’t we? In this tiny Central American nation—the only country in the world named after Jesus Christ—a true miracle has happened. We are foolish if we ignore it.