

Latin America's 'Billy Graham' Reflects on His Legacy as He Struggles With Stage 4 Cancer

Lead someone to salvation once, and you'll be hooked forever. Luis Palau Jr. experienced that truth more dramatically than most as a young man.

He vividly recalls the first person he ever led to the Lord. Palau was 18 years old and teaching a Sunday school class in Cordoba, Argentina, for 10 young boys. The quietest boy, Marcos, lived with his grandmother and came from a broken home. Palau confesses to this day he has no idea how Marcos came to church that Sunday, since his grandmother was not a Christian. But Marcos had questions for "Senor Palau," and the young Sunday school teacher led him to pray the sinner's prayer and accept Jesus in his heart.

About a week later, Palau received devastating news. Marcos had been riding his bicycle in the road and horsing around with a streetcar. His bike twisted beneath him and dragged him beneath the streetcar's wheels. Marcos was killed.

"When he first received the Lord, I was so excited," Palau says. "And the Lord took the little fellow home so quickly. But to me, it got into my blood: Once you experience leading people to eternal life, everything else is puny foolishness by comparison. ... If you experience leading someone to the Lord, you don't need anyone to kick you in the pants and tell you, 'Go and do it.' It comes from your DNA. It's part of your life."

Perhaps the drama and high stakes of the first time he led someone to Christ propelled the rest of Palau's equally

dramatic ministry. Since 1960, he and his ministry have shared the gospel with an estimated 1 billion people in 48 countries. Over one million have registered decisions for Christ. Palau has been called the “Billy Graham of Latin America.”

“My biggest legacy is all those who came to know the Lord.” Palau smiles, then pauses.

“I wish I had done more.”

The Empty House

For years, Palau—who turned 84 last November—told his wife, his four sons and his ministry partners that he would live to be 92 years old. He came to that conclusion because George Mueller—a man of faith he greatly admires—lived to be 92. Now, he jokes wryly, God is having a good laugh at his expense. In January 2018, Palau was diagnosed with stage 4 lung cancer. The doctor told him he would be dead within nine to 12 months.

When he got the diagnosis, his first thought was his own father’s death. His father, Luis Palau Sr., caught pneumonia when he was 34. Palau, who was only 10, rushed home on a train from boarding school to be with his ailing father. He didn’t make it in time.

His mother told him that his father “sat up in bed. He sang a Salvation Army song about heaven, clapping his hands as he sang, and then, because he was exhausted from the fever, his head fell on the pillow. He pointed up to heaven, and he quoted the apostle Paul: ‘I’m going to be with Jesus, which is better by far.’ A few moments later, he went to be with the Lord.”

Palau’s father’s death plunged his family into poverty. And Palau says he spent the first few days after his diagnosis terrified of leaving his family behind, particularly his wife of 58 years, Pat.

"Once in a while, I get emotional," Palau says. "I think, *They're going to live here alone in this house.* ... It really is hard."

But, he says, the Lord is in charge. And He reminds Palau of that truth whenever despair begins to creep in.

"One day, when I was kind of grieving a bit too much probably in the early days, I felt the Lord saying to me, 'Hey, do you think I can take care of her or not?'" Palau says. "I said, 'Yes, I think you can.' So I stopped over-weeping. ... I'm at peace with the Lord, and I think the team and the family picked up on that."

After decades to think about it, Palau thinks he understands now why God let his father die so young.

"My father dying when I was only 10 had a big impact on me, and I think the Lord allowed it because I can talk about eternity without any embarrassment," Palau says. "I don't apologize for talking about heaven and hell. I don't major on hell, but I do bring it in, because it's the only alternative to eternal life. But nevertheless, my father died as a believer, thanks to the missionaries who sacrificed and gave their whole life to bring the good news to Argentina. The Father's always been with me."

"My dad was well-off. When he died, we lost everything, because my mother didn't know how to run the business, and we went into extreme poverty. At first, I thought, 'Wow. This is hell.' You know? Hardly anything to eat. Yet my mom never complained. She never blamed the Lord. We would get on our knees and thank God for a cup of coffee and a loaf of French bread that we divided into seven pieces so we could all eat a little bit of bread. I was always grateful that we even had seven pieces of bread. My mom never even hinted at anger or unbelief. It was beautiful. So I feel the Lord took my dad and left us to experience poverty so we would have compassion

later. ... So we would understand how the poor feel and how they needed."

That faith in God's perfect plans—even those that will only make sense on the other side of eternity—is why Palau says he trusts God even now, though his own terminal diagnosis confuses him.

"His way is perfect," Palau says. "I don't have to understand it all. I know my Father loves me. I know He cares. I can tell you this: ... I have never gotten a response to preaching—and I preached for 60 years—like [I get] now when I tell people I've got cancer. ... If the Lord wants to take me home, I'm ready."

The Two Airports

Palau says he's been thinking a lot about eternity and the afterlife since his diagnosis, studying what he can expect. He says perhaps his last book, to be released posthumously, will cover what he's learned about heaven in this season. (His most recent book, *Palau: A Life on Fire*, is now available.)

"There are little snippets all over the New Testament," Palau says. "Once you're aware of it, you go 'Oh, this verse is about heaven. How come I didn't notice that?' But I can see the tape at the end of the race, and I think a lot about what is going to be on the other side—and it is glorious."

For years, Palau has referred to heaven and hell in his sermons as "the two airports."

"When you die, there are only two airports you can travel to," Palau says. "Heaven is the recommended landing site. Hell is not recommended at all—everyone crash-lands over there."

As he prepares for his one-way flight, he says he's not worried about the world he leaves behind. Everyone in his family has received salvation through Christ—"To see your own children walking with God is the greatest joy," he says—and

his ministry has been prepared for years for the inevitable transition of leadership. More than that, Palau sees plenty of reasons to believe the next generation of Christians will continue to carry the gospel to every corner of the earth. He was particularly pleased to hear about The Send—a one-day event in Orlando, Florida, this February, where more than 10,000 believers pledged to evangelize their colleges, their high schools and the farthest nations.

“I was blessed to think of so many people committing to world evangelism afresh in this generation,” Palau says. “It’s a dream for any evangelist to see young people in particular who get fired up and who say, ‘I’ll give my life to proclaim Jesus.’”

Palau knows many older believers fear the next generation will abandon the Christian faith. He also knows those fears have existed since before he and Billy Graham began their ministries.

“The newspapers keep talking about these people abandoning the church,” Palau says. “First off, what churches are being abandoned? It’s not the biblical, Spirit-filled churches. It’s churches who are dead and whose leadership doesn’t trust the Word of God in all of its fullness. I would leave them too. Sure, some people drift away, but they have from the get-go. I mean, Jesus had 12 fellows, and one of them sold Him for 30 lousy pieces of silver. That’s a falling away. People have been falling away from the beginning, so we mustn’t get despondent.”

What people don’t understand, Palau says, is that evangelism and mass revival never go out of style.

“People love to gather in crowds,” he says. “They like to go to rock concerts. They like to go to musical shows. They like to go to sports arenas. So why wouldn’t they also want to come in crowds to hear the Good News—if it’s being done in the

Spirit and for the glory of God, not showing off?"

Palau also says maybe teenagers would be more passionate evangelists if today's leaders stopped "treating them like morons" and pacifying them with pizzas and movies. Instead, send them out on the streets or into younger students' classrooms and let them learn by trial and error how to preach the gospel. That's how Palau got started—and how he saved young Marcos' soul from a hellish fate.

"Teach your children the real heroes are the missionaries," Palau says. "The real heroes are the servants of God who translate the Bible into other languages and who bring the gospel. I personally am one of those millions who love missionaries, because they brought us Jesus Christ. They brought us a Bible, which we did not have in Argentina. ... We need to start younger, and put them to work [evangelizing] the children."

The Burning Bush

In April, the movie *Palau* opened in theaters nationwide, telling the story of Palau's life and ministry. But when executive producer Bill Busbice first approached Palau after a Chicago conference with the idea of a movie about his life, Palau wasn't interested.

He was only won over upon hearing the heart behind the movie.

"I said, 'Look, I want it to glorify Jesus Christ, not me,'" Palau says. "[The producer] said, 'I want two things for this movie. I want it to make young people feel the Lord can take someone from a cow town in a third-world country who had no money to his name, and take him around the world and win many millions to the Lord. And second, I want friends of mine who come from the same background as you to come to know Jesus Christ.' I think the movie achieves that."

Of course, Palau says, even those reasons weren't enough to

convince his wife of the film's importance. After hearing someone wanted to make a movie about her husband, she asked, incredulous, "What is so exciting about your life that they'd want to make a movie out of it?"

But Palau believes his ordinariness is precisely the reason God chose him. In November 1960, when Palau was single and living in Portland, Oregon, he listened to a sermon by Major W. Ian Thomas about Moses and the burning bush. Thomas explained that Moses knew God had called him to liberate the people of Israel from slavery, yet lacked the power of God. He tried to do it by his own might but killed just one Egyptian before he had to flee. For 40 years, Moses asked himself the same questions young Palau was asking: "How can I be fruitful to the calling God has placed on my life? Where do I get the power to live a spiritual life on fire?"

That's when Moses encountered the burning bush. Thomas taught Palau the miracle of this bush is not that it was on fire, but that it was not consumed. Any bush could have caught on fire. But the fire only lasted because God was in it.

"Any old bush will do as long as God is in the bush," Palau says. "You are the bush. God is the fire inside you. And I can [become] that 'any old bush' if God is ruling my life.

"It revolutionized my life. From then on, I could preach the same gospel, and there was a joy and a freedom and an unspeakable unity. Everyone's going to focus on the resurrected Christ—His indwelling life in me—and the power of the Holy Spirit. Using the same messages, suddenly we're bringing hundreds of others to Christ."

The Forerunner

Besides Jesus Christ and his parents, Billy Graham may have been the single most influential individual on Palau's life and ministry. When Palau first encountered the Holy Spirit in a real way, Graham was there—even though they hadn't yet met.

Palau was kneeling on the floor of his room in Quito, Ecuador, listening to Graham's "The Hour of Decision" program on shortwave radio.

"I heard him one night when I was still kind of spiritual but not filled with the Spirit yet," Palau says. "I loved the Lord. I had eternal life. But I wasn't totally committed and Spirit-filled until that moment when I heard Billy Graham finish up his message and then [heard the hymn]: 'Out of my bondage, sorrow and night/ Jesus, I come! Jesus, I come!' I surrendered my life to the Lord."

Later, when Palau began his ministry, Graham mentored and invested in him.

"I could write a whole book on what Mr. Graham did for me and what I learned from him," Palau says. "One of his key guys joined our board. He also gave us some money to get rolling and to get going as a team. And then he gave me advice. I called him whenever I wanted to."

Perhaps, then, it's only natural that when Palau goes to heaven, he can't wait to greet his old friend Billy Graham at the gates.

"At the end, [Billy] could hardly communicate because he couldn't hear and he couldn't talk," Palau says. "So I would write to his secretary, and she would read it to him, but I knew he was failing. So when he went home, I knew he wanted to go home badly. ... He said, 'I want to go to heaven and be with Ruth, and with everybody else up there.' So I was ready for it. ... [When he died,] I just cried with joy, because he was such an honorable man, did not do anything that dishonored the Lord, was successful and blessed by the Lord and kept a humble spirit."

Palau knows he will soon follow in his friend Billy's footsteps. With eyes fixed on eternity, he will finish the race well, treading the same ground the apostle Paul and his

own father once walked. And as he goes, he will repeat their words: "I am going to be with Jesus, which is better by far."

"Yes, my body has gotten old," Palau says. "Now it's sick. I'm going to go home pretty soon. But looking back, it was worth it all—more than worth it all, a privilege beyond description—to serve the Lord Jesus Christ in so many countries, to lead many thousands to the Savior, to glorify His name in front of a multitude of rich and poor and atheists and believers. What a privilege. I am old but not burnt out. I'm still burning." {eoa}

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