

“From Prison to Pastor”

The Rick Vásquez Story



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From Prison to Pastor

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The Rick Vásquez Story

I was born in Lubbock, Texas in 1970, the second of three children. When I was three years old, an event happened that left a deep wound that marked the rest of my life. My mom, my two sisters and I watched sadly as my dad took all his things out of our house and put them in his truck. I did not understand why my parents were fighting and my sisters were crying but I knew that my dad was leaving the house.

It was a crisis for me because my dad had always been my leader, my example, my hero. I loved him and wanted to go with him, so when he came into the house to look for more things, I got in and hid inside the truck. They looked for me everywhere and when they finally found me, they took me out of my hiding place and my father left. I stared as his truck drove away from the house and my sisters and my mother cried beside me. My heart was broken that day because my hero had abandoned me.

My mom took two jobs to support us and she used to leave us a lot of time with others to take care of us when she was not at home. At five years old, I met some young men

much older than me who were involved in gangs and crime and I joined them. Sometimes I would go to work with my mom, which was a place where there was music, dancing, and alcohol. The men there treated me very well, taught me how to gamble and gave me money. I thought this was all good. It was my culture, my world.

My First Crime

When I was a 12-year-old teenager, one day my sisters came with a problem. We had not seen my mom in two days, and they were hungry. I decided to break into a neighbor's house and steal food. I brought the food to our house and gave it to my sisters, who were very happy. I was proud to have helped provide food for my sisters. However, the next morning the police came and knocked on the door. They asked, "Whose shoes are these?" "They are mine," I replied. "We are going to arrest you because you entered a house without permission."

They found me easily because there was mud between my house and the house where I stole, and they followed the tracks of my shoes to my house.

They put handcuffs on me, I got on the patrol and they took me to a juvenile prison. I felt a lot of shame, despair and anger. I tried to do something good, but I did it the wrong way. My heart hardened that day and I said to myself, “They will never catch me doing things again”.

I kept getting into trouble, breaking the law, committing crimes, and what Paul says in Galatians 6:7, “Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows.” I began to reap the fruit of my crimes. At 16 I was put in the adult jail. They said, “You behave like an adult, so we are going to put you in the adult prison”.

Nicknames

My dad came and out of my life giving me money from time to time, but what I needed was his time and his love, two things that he never knew how to give me. The few times that I could spend with him, he was working, and drinking with his friends. I learned to find friends outside the house with older people who were involved in criminal activity. Since I was a child, my dad, lovingly, called me “ugly” but for me, that nickname meant that I was ugly for him. Therefore, I was ugly, spoke ugly, and made decisions that led me to ugly paths.

At 18 I was in jail and I got involved in a gang where they changed my nickname from "ugly" to "Chamuco" which means devil or demon. I received this nickname because I frequently beat Christians in prison. I was very bothered by the hypocrisy of Christians who held the Bible in one hand and did bad things with the other. They were false and that brought to my memory falsehood and broken promises. So many times, I saw a man enter the house with my mother at his side, promising to take care of us, but soon he was leaving. On the other hand, my dad made promises to me, increasing my hopes, but he never kept them. This left a deep wound in my heart, thus causing a strong feeling of anger. So, when I saw someone who did not follow through on their commitments, which reflected falseness in their values and character, it infuriated me and confronted them with beatings.

As a result of my violent behavior, I was isolated because I posed a threat to the rest of the prisoners. One day in my cell, I had my headphones on while listening to a song by the group Metallica that talked about what was unforgivable. I asked myself the question, "What would be unforgivable for me?" I thought that if I changed my life and had a

home, a family, children, and a legitimate job, then that change of life in order to have something stable would be unforgivable in the eyes of my friends. As the leader of a gang, I was leading many people and they would never forgive me if I abandoned them for wanting to have something good and upright.

Alone, Lost and Hopeless

In the next song by the same group Metallica that started playing, the lyrics said, “I trust you and nothing else matters.” I asked myself, “Who do I trust?” I understood that I had no one in my life that I could trust. I was alone, lost, and hopeless. I could not blame anyone even though I tried to blame it on everyone: the authorities, the men, my family, my neighborhood, etc. But in the end, it was my decisions that led me to where I was now.

I started to think: “At any moment I am going to die, whether they kill me or give me the death penalty because of the decisions I am making and the direction of my life. And then what? My spirit will reach the throne of God and I will have to give an account”.

Never have I thought about this. God was someone who was very far from my mind but at that moment I realized that without a doubt my destination was hell.

I saw myself rejected from His presence, and from His throne because I was not holy. I saw myself spending the eternity in the flames of hell.

All because I was living a life without purpose, following a cause that was ultimately destruction, evil and perdition.

Suddenly my eyes filled with tears. A man in prison, a gang leader with the nickname “Chamuco” should not cry, but I cried because I did not want to go to hell.

I Heard a voice

Finishing that song, I heard the words, "Follow me and nothing else matters". Those words were not part of the song. When I heard those words in my spirit, deep inside me, I asked, "God, is it You speaking to me? And if it is You, please show me that it is You and I will give myself to You. I will give my life to you. I do not want to be the same anymore. Give me another chance".

The next song started, and I took off my headphones. I said, "No, this can't be happening to me. This cannot happen. I am becoming weak. What are people going to think if they look at me crying and talking to God? I am Chamuco, I am a leader, I am strong, I am tough!"

I lay down, and on top of my bed I had a shelf with a Bible. I didn't read it, but I used the paper to smoke cigarettes. I took out a leaf, smoked a cigarette, and went to bed to sleep. I said to myself, "What a strange experience".

While I slept, I dreamed I was going down a dusty road and came to a crossroads where I didn't know which way to go. In my dream I saw the two paths: one on the left and one on the right. Standing there I heard a voice, the same voice that had spoken to me earlier

saying: “Choose life or death”. I woke up immediately.

That was a radical experience, an experience I was not looking for. I understood that God was calling me and inviting me to make a decision. I had asked him, to “show me that You are real, and I’ll live and die for You. Just give me another chance”. The Lord said to me, “I am showing you the way. You have to make a decision: life or death”. He was calling me to life because the path I was on was the path to death. I started walking in my cell from one side to the other and I thought, “What are people going to think? My pride, I am a leader, I, I, I...” But one day I will be before the throne of God.

I knelt down and put my hands on the bed to pray. At that moment, the Bible fell off the shelf and hit me on the head. I think God was drawing my attention. I opened it and tried to read it but did not understand it.

However, I knew it was my map for life, my GPS. Kneeling by my bed I prayed the best I knew and surrendered to the Lord Jesus Christ. Romans 10:9 says, “If you declare with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.”

Ralph, the Christian I almost murdered

It was September 1994, and the first thing I did after my prayer was to notify the authorities that I had renounced to all association with the gangs. To protect me and others, I was transferred to another part of the solitary section where the ex-gang members were under observation. This block had the most violent criminals who represented a danger to others. Some had attacked the guards, others had stabbed prisoners, and were generally the worst of the worst.

As two guards escorted me to my new cell, a foul-mouthed inmate named Ralph began insulting officers who were removing the body of a man who had just committed suicide from my new cell. After a few minutes Ralph tapped on the wall and asked, "Who are you?" I replied, "What do you care?" "Who are you?" "My name is Ralph; I am a Christian". "Why don't you behave like one?" I answered. "Because my experience is that true Christians don't behave like this. They have control of themselves". Ralph started insulting and cursing me, which everyone in that block heard. "You know who I am?" I asked. Ralph said, "I don't care if you're the devil". "Well

that's what they call me, my name is Chamuco”.

In my mind, Ralph was a fake Christian and I had just given my life to God that very day, so my duty was to eliminate him. Although my heart had been transformed the instant I repented and put my faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, my bad habits, my bad behavior and my wrong way of thinking had not been transformed. It took me many years to renew my mind with the Word of God as it says in Romans 12:2, “Do not conform to the pattern of this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will”.

My Friend 99 and the Knife

A friend of mine named 99 was in this block because he had quit the gang that I belonged to. 99 asked me if I was going to allow that man to speak to me in that disrespectful way. I asked him if he had a knife and he said yes. I asked him to send it to me because he was going to kill him. He said, “Wait, why are you here?” I explained that I had quit the gang. “Why?” 99 asked. “Because I gave my life to God.” 99 replied, “I cannot say that I am a Christian, but I am

writing to a young lady who is a Christian and she sent me these verses from the Bible. Read them and if you still want to do it then I'll send you the knife". The Scripture said: "Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, 24 leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift". Matthew 5:23-24

When I read the verses, I was frozen. I have never read that in all my life. He had not even started reading the Bible. I started crying and cried for six days. I did not want to eat because of the anguish that those verses caused me. This God to whom I had just given my loyalty asked me to reconcile with this fake Christian and to forgive him from the heart. I had never forgiven anyone, and it seemed unfair to me what God was asking me to do.

On the sixth day I was crying a little bit prostrate in my cell when Ralph touched the wall and asked, "Are you okay?" I said, "I'm fine". He went on to say, "May I talk to you? I need to apologize to you". I said "What?" Ralph continued: "Yes, you are right. No one has ever told me what you told me. I have not

behaved like a Christian and you are the first to tell me. Sorry, I'm a Christian, do you forgive me?" I replied, "I need to ask you to forgive me". Ralph said, "But you didn't do anything, I'm the one who offended you". "Yes, but I wanted to kill you". "Are you a Christian?" Ralph asked. "I think so, I don't know. I gave my life to God" I replied.

Ralph knew the Bible from cover to cover and taught me many things about the Bible. He became my first mentor. In his sovereignty, God placed me next to someone who could disciple me during those first months as a follower of Jesus.

I began to read the Bible, take correspondence Bible courses, and share the gospel with other prisoners. I had been a fearless gang leader and that same quality made me a powerful witness for the Lord Jesus Christ. I developed a routine where I stayed up all night reading and studying the Bible and fell asleep at 9 am after listening to my favorite preacher, Chuck Swindoll on the radio. During the day, the prisoners make scandals, they shout, they fight, they make riots and I did not want to participate or listen to these matters. I woke up at 5 in the afternoon when they brought dinner, and everyone was calmer.

Little Mo, Leader of an Islamic Gang

A year had passed since my conversion and I was at a point in my life where I was tired of struggling with meat. We read in Hebrews 12:1, “Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us”. My spirit was being renewed with the Word of God but struggled with self-control in the sanctification process. I was continually asking the Lord for forgiveness for my mistakes and the struggle to live godly seemed too hard. Although I continued to share the Lord Jesus Christ and disciple new believers, I was about to abandon the faith.

One afternoon, shortly after waking up, new believers were asking me questions about the Bible and I was answering them. Thereupon the guards brought a new inmate, Little Mo, to our block. He was a violent leader of an Islamic militant gang. Hearing the conversation, Little Mo announces, “I don't believe in that white man religion”. I told him that Jesus was not white, he was a Middle

Eastern Jew and most likely had dark skin. Little Mo replied, “I don't think Jesus is alive”. I said, “Look, I assure you that Jesus lives and is real. If Jesus is not alive then I am ready to throw my Bible out of my cell”.

The other Christian prisoners were very quiet. They had never heard me speak like that. It was not a joke: I was being very serious. “I am going to pray and you are going to pray with me and if Jesus Christ does not answer then I renounce my faith and I will say that he is not alive and that he does not exist. That is how confident I am that Jesus is real and that He exists”.

Inside of me, I was thinking, “God, if you do not answer, then I'm glad because I will throw in the towel because I am too weak to control my flesh without you. I need to know that you really exist and that all this effort to change my life is not in vain”.

The Prayer

“What would be a prayer request that only God could answer?” I asked. There was silence for a few minutes and then I heard Little Mo say, “My grandma raised me, and she was like a mother to me, but I haven't heard from her in 12 years. I have written her letters but have received no reply. I don't know if she's alive or dead. If God loves me so much, why doesn't He allow the person I love the most in the world to write to me?” “All right let's pray”.

“Dear God, I ask you in the name of Jesus that you work to bring to Little Mo news of his grandmother because he has not heard from her for 12 years. Because You are God, you are real, you are alive, and You can do anything. Please allow Little Mo to hear from her granny. In the name of Jesus, amen”

The Letter

After saying AMEN, two things happened. We hear Little Mo moan “Ugh” out loud. Then there was a kind of explosion; the glass of several windows was broken, and the light went out. We all hid under the beds. We didn't know if it had been a hurricane or if it was God's hand that caused it. Everything was dark until the electricity was restored.

Immediately the doormen entered to sweep the glass, and we were all talking about this unusual event. An hour passed and the atmosphere had calmed down when the guard entered to distribute the mail. He stopped in front of Little Mo's cell and handed him a letter. Within a few minutes we hear Little Mo crying. Someone asked him, “Are you okay, Little Mo?” He didn't answer but walked over to his cell door and announced, “Brother Rick, I just received a letter from my granny”.

All the inmates on the block began to celebrate with Little Mo. They hit the bars, whistled, applauded, shouted “hallelujah” and rejoiced to see God’s supernatural response to a request that seemed impossible. I also began to cry for this affirmation of God that He does exist, He sees my struggle and He is there to help me. Jeremiah 33: 3 says, “Call to me and I will answer you and tell you great and unsearchable things you do not know”.

Little Mo went on to say that the moment I said “AMEN”, he felt a hand on his shoulder. That's the reason why he groaned “Ugh” out loud. “I almost died of fright”, said Little Mo. “That was Jesus!!” he affirmed to us. “Come on, I want to pray!” Right there Little Mo prayed putting his faith in Jesus Christ as his only Savior. The entire block (about 80 men) witnessed this miraculous event and Little Mo's prayer of faith.

Radio Amistad

Within weeks of being converted, the first Christian station I found on the AM dial was Radio Amistad, and the first voice I heard on Radio Amistad was Dolly Martin. Her voice was very different from all the other voices on all the stations in the AM band. It was a different and pious voice, so I always came back to it to be nourished by the Word and

grow in my faith. There were other Christian radio stations, but Radio Amistad offered solid teaching with sound doctrine compared to others who were radical, selfish, always asking for money, or preaching the doctrine of prosperity. Radio Amistad also took prisoners into account, so that moved my heart.

I spent another ten years in prison, alone, growing at the feet of Radio Amistad, discovering who this God is, who forgives me, accepts me, loves me and has chosen me for a purpose. During that time, I received an Associate in Pastoral Ministry from the Hispanic American Theological Institute and another in Biblical Theology from Christ for the Nations, Pastoral Ministry Grace College and so many other diplomas from so many different theological training schools.

After 19 and a half years in prison, I was released, and the Lord allowed me to serve as Texas Field Director with Prison Fellowship ministry. Then he brought me to Houston where I was able to connect with Radio Amistad through the “Angel Tree” program. Our amazing God allowed me to be in the booth with Dolly Martin and witness live the role that Radio Amistad played in my spiritual formation.

I now serve as pastor of Crosspoint Church and have a beautiful wife, Maribel, who serves by my side in ministry. 2 Corinthians 5:17 says, “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!”.

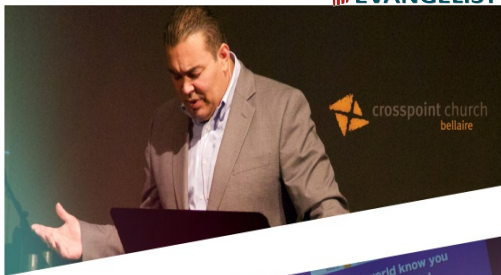
Do you want a new life? A new beginning without letting the past determine your future. Ask Jesus Christ to forgive you and come into your life... and call out to Him and He will respond and fill you with hope!

16 For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

John 3:16



Rick Vasquez now services as Hispanic Campus Pastor along side his wife Maribel. Enjoys the opportunity to share the gospel through the non profit 501 c3 organization he founded TexasEvangelist.org. His them is "Do Good Give Hope"





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