



THE VOICE OF THE MARTYRS

February 2022

COLOMBIA MINISTRY IN THE CROSSFIRE

NO ONE GETS
OUT ALIVE

THREE HOURS
TO LEAVE



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“Remember them that are in bonds, as bound with them.” Heb 13:3



Going Where Nobody Gets Out Alive

In 2000, Andres sensed God calling him to leave his successful furniture-export business and move his family to a town in one of Colombia's dangerous "red zones," areas controlled by violent guerrilla groups.

Everyone he shared his plans with pleaded with him not to go. "My parents told me, 'Don't go.' My pastor told me, 'Don't go.' They called someone to physically block me from going," Andres said. "But God had told me that I needed to go there."

Before sharing his thoughts beyond his immediate family, Andres spent a few days fasting and praying to confirm the calling. While he was seeking assurance, his wife, Juanita, began to grow anxious. "I was fearful because we have four kids," she said. "I was very worried, but I trusted in the Lord. Andres told me, 'The Lord has sent me. When God sends, He is going to protect us. He is going to take care of us.'"

But others were more concerned for their safety. When Andres told his pastor

about his decision, the pastor told him nobody ever comes out of that town alive. And Andres's father was even more blunt. "Here's half the money you'll need to buy a coffin," he said, pulling money out of his pocket and throwing it on the table. "Don't leave here without buying your coffin first because we know that you are not coming back."

Still, Andres was confident he was doing God's will. "God is sending me," Andres told them. "If it pleases Him that I die there, then I will die there. Christ gave His life for me, and I have to give my life for Him."

Immediate Opposition

Andres clearly recalls the uneasy welcome he received when he first arrived in the town, before his wife and children moved there. "When I got there to preach, I felt a tension so strong," he said. "I saw the guerrillas, armed completely, come out of the jungle while I preached the Gospel."

He preached his first message from

Mark 10:48–52, a passage in which Jesus restores sight to a blind man because of his strong faith. The sermon seemed to have little effect on the villagers, however. No one would make eye contact with Andres, and by that evening he had begun to understand the fear the guerrillas had instilled in their hearts.

"No one received me because the guerrillas gave the order that if I stayed in that town, no one could give me a place to stay," he said. "I slept outside in the street. I barely slept, but I asked God to show me a miracle because God told me He had people to save there in that town."

A few days later, Andres was approached by members of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), a Marxist rebel group. "You need to leave because no one here is going to convert," one of them told him. "This town belongs to us."

With an unwavering boldness grounded in faith, Andres let the guerrillas know where they stood in relation to God. "I'll leave when He who sent me tells me to

“God is sending me. If it pleases Him that I die there, then I will die there. Christ gave His life for me, and I have to give my life for Him.”

go,” he replied. “Until then I am staying, because He has more power than you.”

Within about six months of his family moving to the town, Andres had led three people to Christ. Word of the conversions soon spread, and one day a FARC guerrilla came to his family’s house. The man told Andres that he would escort him to the FARC camp in the jungle at 11am the following day, but he didn’t explain the reason.

The next morning, Andres said goodbye to his family knowing that he might not return. “If this is the last time that I see you,” he told them, “let me recommend something to you: Do not leave Christ.”

Visiting the Enemy

The next day, the guerrilla fighter led Andres into the thick jungle as promised. Despite the potential danger, Andres said that when they arrived at the camp three hours later his fear had disappeared and he again sensed God’s presence.

Once in the FARC camp, a few other guerrillas led Andres to their commanders. Andres sat down on a fallen tree, and one of the commanders began to ask him questions about his work.

Eventually, another commander stood up and started talking about Jesus. The man tried to paint Christ as a revolutionary, but Andres was quick to explain what Scripture says about Him. Then, Andres said he sensed God nudging him to tell the commander something powerful — that God loves him.

“When I told him that, he started to cry,” Andres recalled. “When the first boss saw that he was crying, he said, ‘This conversation is over. I didn’t bring you here to convert my men to Christ.’”

Before leaving, Andres told the guerrillas he wanted to pray for them. So, standing among 60 FARC rebels with AK-47s slung over their shoulders, Andres led the group in prayer. The guerrilla who had led him into the jungle then dutifully escorted him on the three-hour

return trip to his home and family.

Juanita said she felt a huge sense of relief when Andres arrived home. “I knew of many cases where once people go, they just don’t come back,” she said.

One month after Andres prayed for the FARC guerrillas, one of the commanders he had prayed for surrendered to Colombian authorities and was sentenced to prison. From that day forward, Andres’s church experienced increased persecution.

A Life of Stress

Soon after the FARC commander surrendered, other fighters from the group began to watch, harass and threaten Andres. “Be careful,” a guerrilla warned after giving him a shove one day. “Watch where you are going. One day, you are just not going to come back.”

Andres said the church as a whole is heavily restricted by the FARC. For example, the guerrillas impose curfews on church members and occasionally disrupt services. And in addition to monitoring Andres’s sermons for any hint of opposition to their activities, they often tell church members to give their tithe to the FARC instead of the church.

Andres eventually confronted the guerrillas when church members quit

▼ For more than 20 years, Andres has risked his life serving as pastor of a red-zone church. His powerful preaching prompted the guerrillas to call him for a meeting, and he feared he might be killed.



tithing out of fear. “You have to work and I have to work,” he told them. Days later, the guerrillas destroyed the yucca, corn, potatoes and rice that he grows and sells to help provide for his family.

Andres, Juanita and their children all have been affected by the continual stress of living and working among the FARC and their frequent threats. One or two guerrillas show up at the church every other week, and Juanita said she shakes with fear when they appear. “I get nervous,” she said. “At the beginning I said, ‘That’s it; we are dead.’ But with time I have actually started to feel more comfort from God.” And Andres

said he fears for his life at least once a month and often struggles to maintain a sense of peace. To relieve their fear and anxiety, he and Juanita pray and read the Bible. “I maintain everything through prayer and pray that we may stay strong in Him,” Juanita said.

The couple’s children, who live at home and are now in their late teens and early 20s, also have had trouble overcoming their fear since moving to the region. “Many times they see the threats and see what is going on,” Andres said.

More than 20 years after warning him that he would likely be killed if he tried to minister in the dangerous red zone,

Andres’s parents have accepted his work, acknowledging that God has protected him so far. “They got used to it,” Andres said. “I told them if I want to give my life for Christ and that is what God wills, I will give it. They have found peace.”

VOM supports Andres and Juanita as they continue to serve in the red zone and also provides them with Bibles to distribute among people living in the area.

Andres requested prayer for his family, specifically for their refreshment, protection and the ability to reach people freely with the Gospel. He also asked that we pray for a new church he hopes to plant in a nearby area.

“My desire is to take the Gospel to the difficult areas where nobody else wants to go,” he said. “That is where God has called me. That is where my heart is. I have studied the material of the martyrs, and I realize that they gave their lives for Christ. I can give my life, too.”



◀ The church where Andres serves as pastor is heavily restricted by the FARC, who impose curfews, monitor sermons and disrupt services.



Rebel groups have recently forced some churches in red zones to close, locking their doors and threatening anyone involved in worship or corporate prayer. Those who try to remove the locks are shot. (below) A church meeting in a town in the red zones.



A man and a young child are walking away from the camera, away from a large warehouse or storage area. They are walking on a concrete floor. The man is on the left, holding the child's hand. The child is on the right. In the background, there are stacks of cardboard boxes, a motorcycle, and a body of water. The scene is lit from behind, creating silhouettes of the man and child.

Three Hours to Leave

▲ Guerrillas threatened to kill Luis's family and all Christians in the village if they didn't leave within three hours. Luis was the last one to go.

Three Hours to Leave

Guerrilla fighters forced Luis and Sofia to change their ministry plans, but the couple ultimately look to God for their next move in Colombia's red zones.

In 2017, after years of ministry work in Colombia's dangerous, rebel-controlled "red zones," Pastor Luis and his wife, Sofia, returned to their hometown to plant a church.

Although they knew the mountainous jungle region was occupied by members of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), a Marxist guerrilla group, they still believed they could effectively reach the 600 people in the town with the Gospel. As the church grew to 70 members, however, they heard rumours that the FARC considered them a threat.

"They fear Christians because we have principles," Luis said. "We

don't lie. They think Christians will say things about them that they don't want people to know. We also are hard to recruit, and we won't grow coca plants for cocaine."

The FARC gradually tried to take control of the church, telling Luis how he could and couldn't spend the church's tithes and offerings. And he and Sofia soon realized that some of their church members were serving as spies for the guerrillas.

The couple admit that they struggle with fear as they lead the church. But in the end, they are reminded that they serve a sovereign God. "You trust in God," Sofia said. "It becomes a way of life."

Caught in the Crossfire

As Luis was doing chores outside on the morning of 21 March 2021, he was startled by the sound of gunfire. After quickly gathering his family, they ran to his cousin's house to hide.

A group of fighters who had separated from the FARC had arrived in the village in hope of taking over some of the FARC's territory. And at one point, the shooting was only 100 meters from the home where Luis and his family had taken shelter.

After a bloody battle that left six guerrillas dead, the FARC defeated the splinter group and maintained control of the village. Then, about



30 minutes after the gunfire ended, members of the FARC called everyone in the town outside. “Sofia thought we were going to die,” Luis said, “but that is when they informed us that two women from the church had been killed.”

Luis went to the house where a group of women from the church had gathered and found the bodies of the two women who had been killed. The guerrillas tried to stop him, but he ignored them. “At that moment, I didn’t feel any fear,” he said. “I just wanted to go see them. I didn’t feel fear because they were part of the church that I pastor.”

The women had been shot in the face. It is unclear whether they were intentionally targeted or merely caught in the crossfire.

Luis helped lower their bodies down from the second floor of the house. And the FARC then forced him and other Believers to dig graves in the village cemetery for the two women as well as six fighters from both sides of the battle.

“That broke me, broke my soul,” Luis said. “I have no words to say what I felt at that moment.”

Luis said that as he began to scoop out shovelfuls of dirt, he wondered if he would be forced to dig an extra grave.

“Sometimes they make you dig your own grave,” he said, referring to how other pastors had been killed. “They will shoot you and throw you in.”

The Last to Leave

The next day, the FARC further exerted their control over the villagers by announcing a mandatory lockdown. Anyone seen on the streets would be shot.

The guerrillas went door to door, terrorizing families and stealing their possessions. “They had specific people they were targeting ... and they were Christians,” Luis said. “They knew who they were looking for.”

The rebels destroyed Luis and Sofia’s church building, and over the next several days the fighting resumed. Gunfire from automatic weapons erupted randomly all around them, and occasionally they heard explosions in the distance. As the fighting continued, the couple ran low on food for their five children.

On the morning of the eighth day, as the fighting seemed to subside, the guerrillas told the Christians they had three hours to leave the village or they would be killed. All other civilians were allowed to stay.

The village’s 70 Believers rushed to canoes and motorboats, filling them to capacity. Some of the boats were packed with dozens of people as they pulled away from shore, and Sofia said one boat was so full that it started to sink.

Luis and Sofia made sure every member of the church had made it out before they left. “It was my responsibility, my ministry,” Luis said. “It was a responsibility that God had given me. You have to take care of the flock.”

By noon, all of the church members had been evacuated. And out of fear for their lives, several non-Christians had fled, too. Luis had sent four of his children ahead on another boat, while he, Sofia and their youngest child remained behind.

With no boats left, they waited anxiously for a ride as the three-hour deadline approached. “I was crying and praying,” Sofia recalled. “God had control, though. Finally, somebody came and took us. God provided a small boat.”

As they climbed into the boat, one of the guerrillas tried to intimidate them one last time. “You know,” he said, “the Gospel is worthless.”



The couple ignored the guerrilla, got in the boat and began a three-hour ride to their new home that another pastor had arranged for them. There, they would again wait on God's guidance.

Beginning Again

When they arrived in the new town, Luis and Sofia had nothing. They had been so busy helping people get into boats that they hadn't had time to grab basic necessities like clothes, food and toiletries.

They were grateful, therefore, for the help they received from local Christians, including a family who welcomed them into their home. "Thank God that a brother in that town gave us clothes and they let us stay," Sofia said.

The rest of the church members stayed in makeshift tents in a school gymnasium, and Luis continued to lead worship services for them. The non-

"I was crying and praying. God had control, though. Finally, somebody came and took us. God provided a small boat."

Christians who had left the village soon joined the Christian congregation, and one woman placed her faith in Christ immediately after fleeing the village. "She went to church and said that God saved her for a reason," Sofia said with a smile.

Luis and Sofia said the experience has only increased their faith and made them bolder. Now they want to go deeper — deeper into the jungle with God's Word and deeper into their relationship with Him. "It makes everything that has happened worth it," Luis said. "God has taken care of so much."

The couple request prayer for wisdom as they continue to lead Christians and share the Gospel in their new location. "Pray that He opens doors for us to be able to do projects that we have not been able to do," Luis said. "I want to go back to the missions work. I like being a missionary in the field, and I want to be a pastor. I want to do both."



Prayer Diary

February/March 2022

FEBRUARY

S 20 PHILIPPINES
M 21 PAKISTAN
T 22 KUWAIT
W 23 EGYPT
T 24 MALI
F 25 UZBEKISTAN
S 26 BAHRAIN
S 27 TURKEY
M 28 ETHIOPIA

Pray that cross-cultural workers will reach out fearlessly to those in dangerous, unreached areas.
Pray for the protection of Christian young women against kidnapping and forced marriage to Muslims.
Pray that Kuwaitis who hear the Good News of Jesus Christ will put their faith in Him.
Pray for the encouragement and growth of those who receive Bibles throughout the country.
Pray that churches in the north will shine the light of Christ while being marginalized and mistreated.
Pray that house-churches will be established throughout the country.
Pray for Ghaleb who is ostracized by his family and harassed at work for placing his faith in Christ.
Pray that efforts to reach university teachers and students will be fruitful.
Pray for pastors in Tigray who are suffering during the conflict.

MARCH

T 01 SYRIA
W 02 VIETNAM
T 03 BHUTAN
F 04 AFGHANISTAN
S 05 TAJIKISTAN
S 06 MAURITANIA
M 07 BRUNEI
T 08 BURKINA FASO
W 09 CHINA
T 10 CAMEROON
F 11 ERITREA
S 12 KYRGYZSTAN
S 13 MALDIVES
M 14 MEXICO
T 15 UZBEKISTAN
W 16 TUNISIA
T 17 BAHRAIN
F 18 YEMEN
S 19 QATAR

Pray for the few Christians living in the Kurdish Qamishli area.
Pray that church leaders will minister well and remain strong in faith.
Pray that God will continue to raise up more women for ministry.
Pray for Believers who gather in small groups for prayer, encouragement, training and worship.
Pray for the courage and protection of those translating the Bible into local languages.
Pray that persecuted Christians will persevere and retain their eternal hope in Christ.
Pray that underground churches will grow in boldness as they share the Gospel.
Pray for stability in the region so pastors can continue to reach out and serve their churches.
Pray for the wisdom of Believers confronted by police.
Pray for Christians among the Hdi tribe whose villages in the north are routinely attacked.
Pray for the availability of more Christian resources in the Tigrinya language.
Pray for President Sadyr Japarov and the government.
Pray for creative ways to minister in this hard-to-reach country.
Pray for the protection of workers in areas of Marxist influence in southern Mexico.
Pray that those who lost employment because of their faith in Christ will find new jobs.
Pray for the unity and collaboration of Tunisian churches.
Pray for those who received a strict Muslim education and are now persecuting Believers.
Pray for Ahmed and his family as they seek asylum in a foreign country because of persecution.
Pray for more Christian workers to share the Gospel with Qataris.

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