

Blessings, beloved family in Christ,

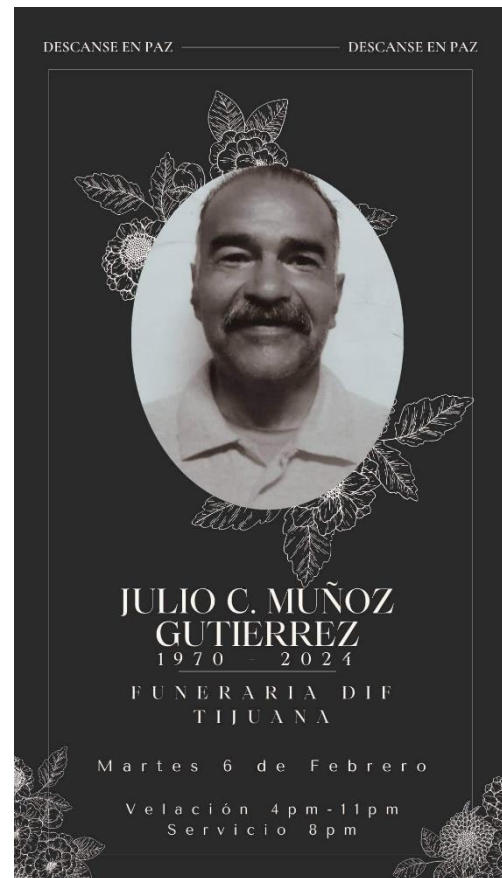
February was a time of contemplation about how many Christians have fought the good fight and have passed away. They have lovely but unknown testimonies about their faith in Christ. In the Bible, our Christian walk is compared to a war and us soldiers or as a race, and we are the athletes running it with the eye on the prize, which is Christ. It is encouraging. It makes us think about our reward more than our problems. At the end of his life, Paul wrote this to Timothy (2 Tim 4:7-8). How can we read this and not feel uplifted and encouraged to keep striving forward?

I have also seen some of the tiredness and discouragement that can creep in overtime when a person witnesses and pours out their life for friends and family without seeing true, lasting repentance. This has been on my mind since February. The reason is that I received the news that my beloved friend and brother in Christ passed away and was buried in February. His name was Julio C Munoz Gutierrez, and his life as a Christian is quite a story to tell.

Julio grew up in the Los Angeles area of California. His was a life of drugs, leading to 16 years in prison. He had a criminal mindset and paid the steep price for his sinful nature. Upon his release, he was deported to Mexico, where he continued his life of illegal activity and drugs. Julio pushed all his family away from his life because of his sinfulness. His situation was so bad that even his mother abandoned him.

This was Julio's life until 2009, when our children's lunch program was up and running at Ebenezer Bible Church. His grandchildren came for lunch, and through them, I met Julio. Julio and I began a friendship. After a while, Julio started congregating with the church and heard the gospel. My friendship with Julio continued to grow.

During this time, we were hit by a burglar who stole the church's tools and other materials that we had in storage. One day after church service, Julio asked if he could talk with me, so we talked. He confessed he said he was the thief. He said he was sorry for what he did. He had been hearing the gospel



through the messages and knew that stealing was wrong. He said he was grateful for us helping him and his family out and apologized for what he did.

I took this as an opportunity to share the gospel with him again and tell him we're all sinners, we break God's commandments, and I appreciate his confessing to his sin. I then told him to take this to the next step to see his transgressions against God. Ultimately, he didn't steal from us; he stole from God. He has offended the creator of the universe. His soul is far more important than the tools. I invited him to pray, ask God for forgiveness, and pray for salvation. Instead of embracing salvation, he evaded it. He said thank you, I will think about it and pray about it. He used spiritual words that he had been learning at church to avoid truly repenting. Then he left.

Julio tried to do things his way from there on forward. Some things were good. For example, he legally got married to Sandra, which is his wife's name. Sylvia and I were official witnesses of their marriage before the county. Julio attended all the church activities but at the same time was still using drugs, still trying to get over being dishonest. Living this hypocrisy, he soon found himself being confronted with his sin. I even witnessed him getting high behind this home after church service. Even though I caught him red-handed, he denied it and lied. In this and many other ways he demonstrated that he was not yet a Christian.

Then the pandemic happened. During this time, he just got deeper and deeper into sin, and when the church doors opened again, Julio had changed. His wife and grandchildren were still coming to church, but he wasn't. As a church we kept him in our prayers. He would pass by the church glaring at us and refusing to talk with us.

What we didn't know until late in 2022 that Julio had started hearing the sermons online and wanted to return to the church. He was tired of how life was and needed help.

In January of 2023, Julio had a heart attack that resulted in a blood clot in his brain. He was rushed to the hospital unconscious and close to death. His wife, Sandra, told us about his situation. The church lifted him in prayer all the more. We were in contact with Sandra and even came to help her take her to the hospital to see what she needed and be for their family.

Little by little he began to recover. Once he could finally utter a few words, I asked Sandra if I could see him. I was worried about his soul. I was worried about his repentance. I was worried about him going before God without Christ. She agreed, so I went.

When he saw me, he started crying. Tears would start wearing down his eyes. I encouraged Julio to repent. I told him I'm asking God to give you a

chance to live, but if not, if it's God's will for you to go with him, please repent and confess Christ. I prayed for Julio before leaving.

God lifted him up and by mid-January he was out of the hospital although he was still experiencing paralysis on the side of his face and slurred speech. Julio started coming to church with the help of a walker. In a surprisingly short time Julio recovered well, including his speech. Julio came to talk with Pastor Bruce and me to ask if he could come back to church formally and be a member of Ebenezer. He was shaken by what happened to him. He believed that it was by God's hand. More importantly, he believed Christ died for him. He confessed his sins and sought forgiveness not only from us, but he cried out to God for forgiveness.

This visit was in February, just before Sylvia and I were leaving for Costa Rica. I had less than a month with him to talk with him. We talked and prayed every other day. Clearly, Julio was different. In my heart, based on hearing and being with him, I could see that salvation was given to him. God changed his heart. It took a heart attack, but now he had a true heart made by God.

Upon our departure for Costa Rica, I told Julio to keep going forward, to be responsible with this family, to get a job, to ask God to help him, to keep being faithful to him, to keep learning, and to keep reading. I thanked God I could see the day Julio returned to church and be restored to fellowship. Being over here, we came to Costa Rica in February 2023, and

Occasionally, Sandra would send a message saying Julio is doing well. Julio and Sandra are now church members. Julio was very faithful and always repeated how grateful he was to God for the salvation he received. God blessed Julio. He got a good job with health benefits and life insurance at the Tijuana National Airport. He worked, talked well, was faithful to God on Sundays, and was fellowshiping.

I often asked Bruce about Julio. He reported that Julio was a different Julio; he was constantly talking to his neighbors and the men who were in the same walk and lifestyle as he had been about Christ. They saw the difference. Julio invited them to church. I can honestly say with faith in my heart that Julio was now a Christian man. And I thanked God that I lived to see the salvation of Julio.

This January Julio had another heart attack with another blood clot. This time he did not recover. Ebenezer had a service for him on February 6, 2023. When I asked Bruce how it went, Bruce said he was shocked. He said people came who had never stepped foot in Ebenezer's church. They heard the gospel at the funeral service. Julio's neighbors and friends came and were there on the following Sunday at the regular service. Bruce learned that Julio

was preaching the gospel, telling everyone that he had a place in heaven and that that place in heaven was given to him by Christ. Julio had made a positive impact on the Eagle's Nest neighborhood. His impact was harmful for most of his life, but he had a whole year to preach Christ, and he used all of it to plant the seed of the gospel in many people's minds.

For a year, God used Julio's past sinfulness to be light in the darkness. His race wasn't a marathon. It was a sprint and oh how he sprinted. I can wholeheartedly say that he fought the good fight, finished the race, and kept the faith. I am said to know that I won't see Julio in this lifetime, but I know I will see him in eternity because he died in Christ for God's glory.

This is a story of hope for us who have witnessed to family and friends for years, even decades, without seeing repentance. It is a reminder that salvation is the Lord's. He saves and has mercy upon whom he decides to have mercy. He is also sovereign over when he saves each of us. Our job is to continue praying for them, sharing the gospel, and telling them the dangers of not repenting. We must not stop hoping that God will bring salvation.

Thank God for saving Julio and thank God for the salvation he has given each of us. Let us share the gospel by all means necessary.

God bless all of you and thank you for hearing out my heart.

With Love in Christ,
Pastor Fernando Rocha

