

# Former drug smuggler discovers hope and new life in Christ

February 2, 2011

DEL RIO—Cold water swirls around Julio Gonzales' legs as he stands in the baptistry. He laughs quickly, nervously—and who can blame him? It isn't everyday a person stands at the intersection of two disparate lives—the one he seeks to leave behind and the new one he feels God calling him to live.

He prays he will find the freedom that has eluded him for 16 years.



Bearing the unmistakable marks of a hard life, former drug smuggler Julio Gonzales talks to young people during a seminar at First Baptist Church in Del Rio, urging them to avoid the kind of bad choices he made that led to time in prison. (PHOTO/John Hall/BGCT)

Gonzales, 32, has spent the last half of his life in and out of the criminal system, including four stints in prison on charges that include conspiracy to murder and smuggling drugs. He carries the outer scars—a plethora of tattoos on his arms, back, chest, face and head—and inner burdens of a hard life.

He is four months from being off parole and out of the criminal justice system for the first time since he was a teenager. He credits his progress to the support of several people, including Jeff Johnson, pastor of [First Baptist Church](#), and Moises Reyes, the church's missions pastor, who reached out

to him with a caring spirit and the hope of Christ. Through a relationship with God, Gonzales sees an opportunity to change his life and be a better father to his 9-year-old daughter.

“It’s a new start, doing something different,” he said in an interview before he was baptized during the [Texas Baptist River Ministry](#) Conference at First Baptist Church Jan. 28. “God’s going to pull me and my family through.”

He knows starting anew won’t be easy. He’s reminded of it nearly every day. Federal authorities have given him permission to live across the border from Del Rio in Acuña, so he can care for his wife and daughter. Life there is harder than any other he’s experienced, he said—a significant statement from a man who was stabbed seven times.

Gonzales hasn’t found steady employment since he was released from prison 19 months ago, and has supported his family by picking up occasional day jobs. The water to his home was turned off a couple of weeks ago because he couldn’t pay for it. He recently received the electric bill and cannot afford to pay it. His family is “lucky” to have balogna and milk in his refrigerator, he said.



Julio Gonzales, an ex-convict and former drug smuggler, is baptized at First Baptist Church in Del Rio by missions pastor Moises Reyes.  
(PHOTO/John Hall/BGCT)

Gonzales faces constant temptation to turn back to his old lifestyle to earn money. He recognizes opportunities to make quick money smuggling drugs,

but he knows that's not the lifestyle God is calling him to lead. God will provide for his family, Gonzales said, not drugs or other criminal activities.

"The money's good, but you don't live in peace," he said. "There's no peace. Now I'm happy with myself."

Andrea Huffman, First Baptist Church's community minister, is working with Gonzales to help him put his skills to use in micro-enterprise to provide self-sustaining income.

Overcoming temptation marks just one aspect of Gonzales' new faith. In many ways, he's like so many other new Christians who struggle to discover what having a relationship with God means in daily life.

"I still have a lot to work on. I ain't no angel," said Gonzales, who has the phrase "forgive me for my crazy life" tattooed above his eyebrows and on his collarbone.

Johnson helps encourage Gonzales in his relationship with God, calling him twice a week to see how he is doing and how the church can help.

"Julio coming to know Christ is a classic example of planting, watering, and God giving the increase," Johnson said. "From the prison ministry, mission partnerships, advocacy/care, prayer walking to personal evangelism—all God used. We are happy to be part of God's plan for Julio."

Despite the temptation that surrounds him, Gonzales believes he's going to make it—to get off probation and be a better father. He can't make up for years lost in prison, but can do the best he can to be the man God is calling him to be, he noted. He's not sure where that will lead, but he hopes God will call him to help young people avoid the pitfalls in which he fell. He's already trying to help the young men who live around him.

"I know I'm going to make it," he said. "It's tough, but I'm going to make

it.”