Yesterday, September 17th, 2024, I was teaching English to a group of Hispanics here in Florida, and for some reason I began telling them about a movie called El Norte, a movie which told of the years of violence and civil war in Guatemala. Discussing that movie led me to ask them if they knew about the war in Guatemala. None of them did. So I began telling them about an experience I had in Guatemala in August of ’98, shortly after I’d graduated from Southeastern University.

After graduating, I was hired to work for a short-term missionary organization called Teams Commissioned for Christ International, based, of all things, out of a boat factory in Orlando, Florida. One of the assignments I was given shortly after joining that organization was to fly to Guatemala to serve as a guide and interpreter for a group of young people from England. I was happy to take this assignment, so I flew down alone, but joined up with the team at the airport in the capital of the country, Antigua. We were picked up by my friends Bart and Pam Biddle, who were TCCI missionaries there. We got to know one another at their house, ate together, and spent our first night there.

The following morning, we loaded up a large van and started our journey to the more rural areas of the country, where we were to do outreach. After a couple of full days of driving, we arrived at a small town where we met a pastor who was to be our host. He took us to his home by the church building, and that night, we slept on the floor of the church. Being the only Spanish speaker, I conversed with the pastor and his family, explaining about our group and what we planned on doing the next day. The team was there, setting up their inflatable mattresses and sleeping bags all around us, as the pastor and I talked. Something or other in our conversation moved him to tell of the times of violence in the fairly recent past. He told me of one occasion when he had come in from working his fields, and as he passed through the central plaza of the town, he saw bodies laid out there, and a policeman waved him over. Knowing he was a pastor, the policeman asked if he recognized any of the bodies as members of his congregation. He told me that indeed, some of them were members. He told me there were about 40 dead bodies there that evening, victims of violence that was rampant at the time.

The team members didn’t understand the Spanish conversation of course, but did overhear bits and pieces and picked up a few of the main points.

The next morning, we all had breakfast together at the pastor’s house. As we were eating and I was speaking again with the pastor, one of the English team members asked if I could get him to tell the whole group what he was telling me the night before, and have me interpret, so they could all hear. The pastor said sure, and began repeating what he’d said the night before. I interpreted, phrase by phrase. Before this, everyone had been sort of light-heartedly bantering and enjoying their breakfast. But as the pastor spoke and I interpreted, all became silent and listened intently. The mood became very serious as the pastor told of the horrors of that time, how guerilla warfare was a constant in their lives and one never knew when violence and death might visit them.

As the pastor continued telling the story, we saw a young man pass by at one of the windows, and then enter by the door. The pastor explained that this was a son-in-law, and he spoke to the young man to come and sit with us. “I want to have him tell you his story,” the pastor told us, “because it will help you understand more what life was like during those years.” With that, he gestured to the young man, and said, “Go ahead, tell them about it.”

This shy young Guatemalan, obviously of Indian descent, looked down at the table, gathered his courage, and began to speak. Again, I was the interpreter, and we went phrase by phrase, telling his personal story. He told us how that, at about the age of 12, he had been working in the family’s “milpa” an indigenous word for the plot of land each family worked to grow agricultural products to eat and sell. In the evening, he returned to the family’s tiny shack of a home, only to find a sight of overwhelming horror he would never forget. Their small home had been burned to the ground, apparently by whoever the force was that viewed the people of their town as disloyal or hostile to their cause. But not only was the home burned, but there, in the midst of the ashes and debris, this young man saw his own father, a charred cadaver. His hands had been bound with wire to a metal bed frame when the house had been torched, so that he could not escape the flames. But not only was the father dead, but around him were the small bodies of his other children, the brothers and sisters of the young man telling us this story. In this way, he learned the horrendous truth that he was left an orphan and had lost, in one terribly sad incident, his only parent and his entire family.

After this, he explained, he was forced to wander and try to find sustenance and help wherever he could. For long periods of time, he went hungry, only eating what he could find or whatever kind neighbors might give him. Eventually, he found his way to a relative’s house, an aunt, and she allowed him to stay there. But in a heart-wrenching confession, he said to us, “the love of a relative isn’t the same as the love of a father.” The aunt could hardly afford to care for her own family and needs, much less take on yet another mouth to feed. The boy was forced out eventually. Somehow, he survived day to day, but as he grew older without any love or relationship of meaning in his life, he eventually turned to alcohol whenever he could get his hands on it. He became a vagabond and a drunk. He felt great emptiness inside – no one loved him, no one cared, and life had very little hope for him. There was no future he could see for himself.

Somehow, in the midst of his pain, his life crossed paths with the pastor’s, and he heard about the love of God, the heavenly Father. The pastor eventually took him in and over time, led him to Christ. The boy became his son, and more than that, he fell in love with one of the pastor’s daughters and became his son-in-law. At that time, the pastor said, taking over the story again, the young man was helping him by serving in the church. So thank God, the story had a happy ending.

But I have to tell you, there wasn’t a dry eye in that place as we all heard this story. I found myself sobbing off and on as I tried to interpret, and sometimes could barely get out the words! We sure needed a happy ending that morning!

I thought I should share this story, since it came up yesterday in my class. I guess it teaches us that, no matter how bad we may think things are in our lives, there are always many in this world who have had worse experiences. Suffering is sure a prominent part of life in this world.

But it also speaks to me of the verse that says God takes care, even of the sparrows, so how much more will He care for us? This boy suffered a terrible loss, and was without anyone in this world, in a poor, troubled, and seemingly forgotten corner of this earth.

“But God.” God, who is rich in mercy, when we were without hope, lost in sin, with no one caring for our souls, gave us life and hope in Christ. God had sent missionaries with the message of His Son to that land many years before. God had reached that pastor and enabled him to plant and pastor a church in that region.

Then, at the right time, God brought that young man across the pastor’s path, the pastor could tell him about the love of the Savior, and also demonstrate that love in a very practical way. Scripture says God puts the solitary in families. He adopts us into His family in Christ. There in that poor country, we all got to hear a story of adoption and restoration. It was truly heart-warming. God puts the solitary in families. God cares for orphans, widows, and for every one of us. Even in the brokenness of this world, He is at work!

I’ve heard and experienced so many personal stories like this, of how God changes peoples’ outlooks and lives. Every Christian has a personal story that is unique. They’re all woven together by God’s wisdom into a great tapestry that displays His work in this world.

I was able to share it as a means of teaching English, isn’t that interesting? I wonder if maybe my sharing of the story of a poor Guatemalan’s encounter with God might be a means He uses to reach the Venezuelans, Colombians, and Puerto Ricans in my class? I wonder if God opened that door for me to teach English and Spanish, so I could also share with my students about how He saves people? You never know, but I do have “a hunch”…