

## Discussion Guide

# **Under the Overpass: A Journey of Faith on the Streets of America**

Updated and Expanded Edition

By Mike Yankoski

Reader,

Thank you for caring enough about the message of *Under the Overpass* to want to think and talk about it. May the Lord bless your questions, curiosities, and courage for great things in your future!

The following questions will take you section by section through the book. Read the section summaries, look up the Bible passages, share your ideas. Along the way, feel free to add to or adapt the questions in whatever way works best for your discussion group. The main thing is that you tangle authentically with the issues. They matter—a lot—for every committed follower of Jesus.

And by the way, if you want still more help to wrestle personally with these ideas, I recommend the related book, *My 30 Days Under the Overpass*. Its subtitle—*Not Your Ordinary Devotional*—says it all. For more information about this and everything else “overpass,” go to [undertheoverpass.com](http://undertheoverpass.com).

Grace and peace to you in the matchless name of Jesus,  
Mike

### **Section 1: Twenty Minutes Past the World**

Sitting in church one day, Mike Yankoski had a thought like a flash of lightning: *What if I stepped out of my comfortable life with nothing but God and put my faith to the test alongside of those who live with nothing every day?* Over the concerns of his family and his own doubts, Mike laid a plan to live among the homeless in six cities across America with his friend Sam Purvis. That’s how a five-month journey into the meaning of God’s grace for the needy began. . . .

1. What inspired you to read *Under the Overpass*?
- \* 2. Is there a disconnect between what you say you believe and how you live your life? If so, describe it.
- \* 3. Are you more concerned about what other people think of you than what the Lord is calling you to do? What are some ways this could change?
- \* 4. What was your reaction to the description of the fight in Golden Gate Park? Talk about your experiences around street culture in urban areas.
5. What were your thoughts and feelings as you read about Mike and Sam’s decision to follow Christ into homelessness?
6. What did Mike and Sam do to provide a safety net for their over-the-edge idea? What would you have done differently if you had been one of them?
- \* 7. Read Matthew 16:24-25. What do you think it means for you to take up your cross and follow Jesus?

## Section 2: Denver

Mike and Sam spent some time at the Denver Rescue mission to help them make the transition from their normal lives to life on the street. There Mike saw how much work, prayer, and grace it takes for addicts to recover—and how often the addicts suffer setbacks. He also learned important lessons about living with people on the bottom rung of society, such as ways of phrasing questions, ways of cracking jokes, ways of showing respect and appreciation. At the end of the time, he was ready to hit the streets.

- \* 1. Talk about a time when you were *way* outside your comfort zone. What was it like? What did you feel like after you made it through? What did you learn?
2. What assumptions that you had about alcoholics and addicts changed after you read of Mike's experience at the Denver Rescue Mission?
3. What part do the Christians in Denver have to play in helping Peter stay clean after his graduation?
- \* 4. Read Matthew 25:31-46. How does this parable affect your thinking about the consequences of Christians choosing to either get involved or not get involved at places like the Denver Rescue Mission?
- \* 5. Read the following excerpt and talk about your reaction to it: "If we are the body of Christ—and Christ came not for the healthy but the sick—we need to be fully present in the places where people are most broken. And it has to be more than just a financial presence. That helps, of course. But too often money is insulation—it conveniently keeps us from ever having to come face-to-face with a man or woman whose life is in tatters" (page 36).
6. What is a place near your home that has a lot of broken, lonely, outcast people? Does your church or your youth group have a presence there? What would it look like to be involved there?
- \* 7. What obstacles do you, personally, need to overcome to get involved in the lives of some of this world's down-and-out? What do you need to learn to become more effective with them?

## Section 3: Washington, D.C.

Sam and Mike began their first real stretch of living homeless in the nation's capital. They went through their first experiments in panhandling. Their first nights sleeping on the ground. Their first times eating at rescue missions and eating leftover food. They had their first experiences with rejection as well as with mercy from the nonhomeless, their first experiences with friends as well as frauds among the homeless. Along the way they met people they'd never forget—Pamela, whom they sang to sleep; Tiffany, who bought them lunch; a tourist who treated them as part of the urban scenery.

1. What would have gone through your head if you had been standing on the sidewalk in Washington, D.C., realizing that you were going to be homeless for the next twenty-eight days? What would strike you as priorities for the next few hours?
- \* 2. Read Matthew 8:19-20. What kind of realism does this passage speak into your life about what it means to follow Jesus?
3. What emotions does the small boy in the section "Like a Child" evoke in you? What would you ask or tell the boy if you could speak to him face to face?
4. How about the con man—how does he make you feel, and why?
- \* 5. What were your thoughts or emotions as you read the following scene? "The priest moved quietly around the circle, leaning down to each person. 'This is the body of Christ, which was broken for you,' she said, looking each in the eye. Then she came around again with the cup. 'This is the blood of Christ, which was shed for you.' The white of her cloak shone brilliantly against our filth" (page 58).
- \* 6. Does the prayer "Thy will be done" seem genuine when you pray it? What do you think we have to consider about ourselves as we pray this prayer?

7. What people in your life do you perhaps think of as merely “scenery”? Where does that come from? What can you do about it?

### **Section 4: Portland**

In Portland, Sam and Mike found the living easier in some ways. But in other ways it was as hard as ever. The rain became a problem, for example. But when they decided to buy burritos for some other homeless people, they had the joy of meeting Sugar Man—an outspoken Christian who also happened to do drugs. They had to deal with the dehumanizing struggle to find food, bathrooms, and opportunities to clean up. They also had their one and only big argument of their five-month experiment, followed (thankfully) by a reconciliation.

- \* 1. How does Sugar Man—addict, dealer, Christian—affect your definition of who is a follower of Jesus?
- \* 2. Read Mark 2:13-17. What would it look like if we tried to be the same kind of “doctor” that Jesus was?
- \* 3. Have you ever had a conversation with someone about your faith in Christ that was sparked because of the life you were living? What does St. Francis of Assisi’s comment “Preach the Gospel always. If necessary use words” mean to you?
- 4. Have you ever felt like your dignity had been stripped from you? What happened? How did you get your dignity back? What are some ways we can treat others with dignity?
- 5. Imagine scenario 1: You—sparkling clean and wearing your stylish new clothes—rush into an establishment and ask to use the bathroom. Then imagine scenario 2: You—dirty, smelly, and ragged—rush into an establishment and ask to use the bathroom. What happens next in each scenario? Why?
- 6. When was the last time you were at odds with someone close to you? How was it resolved? How should Paul’s statement in 1 Corinthians 10:17 that “we, who are many, are one body” affect us in the midst of our misunderstandings and frustrations with others?
- \* 7. As you think about Mike listening to the trumpeter playing “Amazing Grace,” what ways can you think of that God has sent reminders to you of His goodness at strategic moments in your life?

### **Section 5: San Francisco**

The month that Mike and Sam spent in the City by the Bay was physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually draining. Cold, wet, windy, foggy nights; hours of panhandling without earning a dime; standing in long lines at feeding kitchens; interracial hatred. Here they saw violence, were kicked out of a park, and were woken up at 3:00 a.m. by water being spewed from a hose. They saw the frightening effects of mental illness when staying near St. Mary’s Hospital. They received no help from one church but were helped greatly by another.

- \* 1. Why do you think we as humans so dislike coming to the end of ourselves? What benefit do you think might come from having your own resources and abilities proved less sufficient than you had thought?
- 2. What would it feel like to have your hopes for a safe place to sleep tonight wrenched from you?
- \* 3. Have some cities or other places ever struck you as spiritually dark and oppressive? Do you think the feeling is just that, or is there a reality at work as well?
- 4. What is Jesus’ response to people who suffer from mental challenges, similar to Henry’s?
- \* 5. What is your reaction to Mike’s statement “God answered our prayers for provision, but we still had to ask these guys for it. We still had to ‘pick up the manna’ ” (page 136)?
- 6. Think about the difference between the two churches in Berkeley. Is one more “Christian” than the other? Which is your church more like?
- \* 7. Read James 2:14-18. What does it teach you about the quality of your faith?

## Section 6: Phoenix

Phoenix, the next stop, was tough. It was hot, difficult, and often just plain boring. Mike and Sam did, however, have some interesting experiences with the local churches. They slept outside one church building hoping to get some handouts. Nothing. Another time they were kicked off the grounds of a church, only to receive a heartfelt apology later. On the streets they met the belligerent Karl and the victimized Nikki. With money in their pocket from tearing down equipment at a carnival, they couldn't get out of town soon enough.

- \* 1. If we don't go to church, but instead *are* the church, how does that affect what you think the church should do?
2. What is a time in your life when you missed the opportunity to reach out to someone? How long did it take you to realize it? Could you remedy the situation? What do you think is a way to reach out to people more?
- \* 3. What kinds of people in your community are put off by big churches with first-rate facilities, technology, and programs? Do you think cultural exclusion is at work, intentionally or otherwise?
- \* 4. Read James 2:1-9. What are the sources of the "evil thoughts" (verse 4) that lead to discrimination against the poor in favor of the rich?
5. What did you think of Mr. White Polo Shirt's apology? Why are apologies often so powerful . . . and so hard to give?
- \* 6. Talk about Mike's practical guidelines for giving—or not giving—to panhandlers in the section "On Begging." Do you agree with him? Give your reasons.
7. Where do you encounter homeless men or women begging? What restaurant or coffee shop close by would allow you to purchase gift certificates?

## Section 7: San Diego

Mike and Sam were glad to be back near the ocean for their last stop. They spent most of their time in the Ocean Beach district, where they made a lot of friends and acquaintances. There was Bob, who shuffled around town with toes that needed to be amputated. There was Andrew, a talented musician whose life was being ruined by drugs. There was Doug, a homeless drunk who agonized over why God wouldn't instantly remove his alcoholism. There was Rings, a homeless man who used his government check to feed other homeless.

1. Talk about Bob's longing for home in the section "Shuffling Home." When have you felt the most homesick? What was it like?
- \* 2. What is something that you've longed for? How does longing for something affect how we think of our faith in Christ?
- \* 3. In the section "Old Yellers," Mike writes, "Yes, God is alive and well on the streets of America, but so is Satan." Do you agree with him? What evidences do you see for both sides of that statement in your school or community?
4. What hope is there for someone like Andrew? How could his life be redeemed?
5. What is the most difficult transition you've ever gone through? What things about the transition did you find helpful?
- \* 6. How do you think of sin in your life? Does it frustrate you, break you as much as Doug's did? Do you ever pray for forgiveness and deliverance without being willing to reach out and take it as it is offered?
- \* 7. Read Romans 7:7-25. How do you relate to it?

## Section 8: Coming Back to Normal

At first it felt *great* for Mike and Sam to be done with their homeless experiment! But quickly they noticed an odd thing—they wanted to buy stuff just because they could. That's the curse of material blessing: it can easily make you selfish, overly acquisitive. Mike and Sam want to continue having compassion and helping the down-and-out. They've learned that real faith always results in action. And do you know what? Even though not everybody is called to live among the homeless, as these young men did, *every* Christian is called to take *some* kind of risk of faith.

- \* 1. What is a change that you would like to see in your relationship with God?
- \* 2. What are the areas of personal consumption (clothes, toys, cars, or other things) that you think may need to change the most if you want to live a life pleasing to Christ? For people who don't have much in the way of things, are there other kinds of greed or self-centeredness that they should watch for?
3. Read Deuteronomy 8:7-11. This is the passage that showed Mike how he was slipping back into selfishness. What sermon does it preach to you?
4. "In a very real sense, the problem of homelessness is overwhelming," Mike writes (page 213). What other challenges do we face in our world that seem just too big to deal with? Pick one "overwhelming" challenge and talk about how Christ would have dealt with it. Then try to imagine ways that you, or your faith community, could begin to take steps to live for Christ with that challenge in mind.
- \* 5. Read Matthew 22:34-36. How are you growing in love God and love for other people?
- \* 6. What part of *Under the Overpass* do you think is going to stick with you the longest, and why?
7. Is God calling you to journey with Him into a new and different place, one that requires you to fall down before Him and depend completely on Him? What is it? Will you go?

