

FOREWORD BY FRANCIS CHAN

# UNDER THE OVERPASS

A JOURNEY OF FAITH  
ON THE STREETS  
OF AMERICA



**MIKE YANKOSKI**

UPDATED AND EXPANDED EDITION

Excerpted from **Under the Overpass** by Mike Yankoski  
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**Praise for**  
***Under the Overpass***

“The Scriptures are filled with images of a God who is casting down the mighty and lifting up the lowly, of the last becoming first and the first last. In relentless nonconformity to the patterns of our culture, the Christian call is not to move away from suffering but to move toward it, so that we can bear some of the burdens carried by our brothers and sisters. Here is one story of the downward mobility of the Kingdom. It is a story that dares you to move closer to the margins, to the suffering, to the pain...and to meet Jesus there—in His many disguises.”

—SHANE CLAIBORNE, best-selling author, activist, and  
recovering sinner

“Under the Overpass is a captivating, terrifying, encouraging, motivating, saddening, amazing account of a young man who died to self with the assurance that God knows best. Rarely does a book move me this much. Mike Yankoski doesn’t have a little liquid fire in his heart; he is consumed by it. Let his book ignite your heart and soul.”

—RYAN DOBSON, best-selling author of *Be Intolerant* and  
*To Die For*

“Every once in a while a book comes along that is so raw and revealing it proves to be a catalyst for cognizance and conviction for multiple generations. Under the Overpass is such a book. Mike and Sam’s five-month journey through the underbelly of America was not a brazen stunt by bored college students but a quest born out of guilt and curiosity that

became a Christ-fueled passion for the poor and dispossessed. I know Mike and am inspired by the fact that his zeal has intensified over time. He lives what he learned on the streets. Be careful as you read this timely book; it could radically change your perceptions and maybe even your calling.”

—JOHN ASHMEN, president, Association of Gospel  
Rescue Missions

“Often it’s hard to understand why God calls us to do difficult things. But when we’re willing to answer His call, our lives are forever changed. Mike and Sam were willing to say, ‘Here I am, Lord,’ and I have no doubt that their story will change you too!”

—BRAD MEULL, president, Denver Rescue Mission

“Everyone with a beating heart will benefit from reading this book. Leading through example, Mike Yankoski takes readers on his amazing journey through the forgotten streets of America. Into the darkest places where most choose not to look, Mike chose to go. This book is so deeply moving that emotion is soon overrun with an honest desire to make a difference for what our dear Lord calls ‘the least of these.’”

—KIM MEEDER, best-selling author of *Hope Rising*

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# FOREWORD

## TO THE UPDATED AND EXPANDED EDITION

by Francis Chan

I would like to write a few words about Mike Yankoski, and then I'll give some thoughts about his book... I am a very skeptical person, and I struggle with cynicism. Like most people, I have heard so many lies that now I have a hard time trusting. I even struggle when reading a good book, because in the back of my mind I'm wondering if the person who wrote it is for real.

So what is it about Mike that inclines me to trust him? The sacrifices he has made.

Sacrifice promotes believability.

The apostle Paul defended his ministry in 2 Corinthians 11 with a list of hardships he endured. It was his suffering for the sake of the gospel that gave credence to his message. Paul showed that he genuinely believed what he taught. Why else would he suffer as he did? His argument in 1 Corinthians 15 is similar as he explains the foolishness of his lifestyle if the gospel isn't true.

While there are many who say they live for eternity, Mike and his wife, Danae, are among the few I actually believe. Their actions have shown me that I can trust them. You can too.

Now about the book...

I was warned when entering seminary that if I was not careful, a dangerous habit could form: I could learn to read the Bible and *do* nothing in response. I still remember our seminary president warning us that study to the neglect of action becomes easier and easier with each occurrence. We should be terrified if we have mastered the art of becoming convicted and doing nothing in response. Don't read Mike's book if you're not willing to change your attitude and actions toward the homeless.

As a person who considers himself sensitive to the needs of the rejected in our country, I learned from this book that I still have a ways to go. I look forward to seeing the changes God will bring about in my life because of it.

Mike shows much grace in pointing out weaknesses our churches may have in caring for the poor. It is embarrassing to admit, but I have often struggled with pride when encountering the homeless. I can't say that I usually see them as having equal worth with me, much less consider them as "better" than myself (Philippians 2:3). Like many, I have found myself at times working to avoid rather than seeking to engage.

Far from condemning, this book actually causes me to look forward to my next encounter with those living on the streets. I believe it will do the same for you. As I followed Mike's journey and tried to put myself in his shoes, it caused me to love Jesus more. As I thought of what a struggle it would be for me to leave my comforts, it stirred a greater adoration toward my Savior, who emptied Himself to dwell with us.

This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth. (1 John 3:16–18)

I pray that the story of Mike and Sam's five-month journey causes you to eagerly anticipate your next encounter with a homeless man or woman, created in the image of God.

—FRANCIS CHAN





## NOTE TO THE READER

**B**efore you take the first step on this journey, I need to tell you something. Common street lingo isn't pretty. People can pack more expletives and profanities into one sentence than you'd think possible. Vulgarities and crude insults become part of everyday conversation, even between friends. But out of respect for our readers and the standards of this publisher, this element of street life is not present in the pages you're about to read.





## TWENTY MINUTES PAST THE WORLD

**R**eal punches aren't as sharp and clean as Hollywood makes them out to be. They're much deeper, thicker. If you happen to hear them from close-up, the sound doesn't give you a rush of adrenaline. It makes your stomach sink.

The punches, screams, cursing, and kicking we witnessed that night in the park were real. The blood was real, too. It was another cold night in San Francisco...

### PAYBACK

I had walked against the wind over to where Sam was sitting, his back up to the concrete and brick wall that circles the planter at the Haight Street entrance to Golden Gate Park. All I'd had to eat that day was a ninety-nine-cent hamburger, and it sat uncomfortably in my stomach. I groaned, stretched, and sat down next to Sam, rubbing my hands together to try to get some feeling back in my fingers.

"You know you're cold when your fingers are too stiff to play the guitar," Sam said.

He had laid his guitar carefully across some dead flowers in the planter behind us. Fog billowed high above us, and every now and then, a cold gust pushed trash and dust into our faces. The air was rank with the stench of alcohol, cigarettes, body odor, and joints. Even with the wind it was sickening.

Nearby, six street people played quarters, a game in which the person throwing a quarter closest to the wall but not touching it took everyone else's quarters. It was a good way to pass the time and make a little cash.

One of the girls threw a quarter that clanked sharply against the wall. A horrible throw. She let out a string of curses, then ambled over to a heavily tattooed guy leaning against a cast iron fence and smoking a joint. She kissed him, not seeming to notice that she was interrupting his conversation with the man next to him.

2 "Can I have a quarter, baby?" she pleaded, looking into his eyes.

"Sure," he growled. He reached into his pocket and pulled out two dirty quarters.

The girl snatched them and ran back to the game, ready for the next round.

"You'll pay me back later," he yelled after her.

"You bet I will," the girl said with a wry smile in his direction.

A fresh gust of wet wind pushed me further into my filthy sweatshirt. San Francisco cold is weird—heavy and penetrating. Two months earlier on the streets of Washington, D.C., Sam and I couldn't do enough to escape the heat.

Sam was talking. "There is this mountain back home we used to hike up early in the mornings just to watch the sunrise. One time we wanted to play worship music up there, so we carried a guitar all the way to the top. But when we got

there, no one could play it because we were all so cold.”

Sam looked deeper into Golden Gate Park, stretching away from us for two miles to the Pacific Ocean. “Man. Seems like such a long time ago.”

“Yep, sure does,” I said, my own thoughts turning back to take comfort in familiar wonderings: My family would probably be sitting down to eat dinner together, while my friends back at school might be heading out to watch a movie.

“It sure does,” I said again.

That’s when the chaos hit.

“Who you think you are? You piece of...!” Marco, the undisputed leader of the gang at the mouth of the park, was screaming at a guy in front of him. Then with all eyes on him, Marco slammed both fists into the guy’s chest, forcing all the air out of the man with a sickening whoosh and knocking him down.

Instantly the park erupted with screams and profanity as everyone seemingly rushed to join the fight. The coin tossers next to us ran to join in, too, the last throw spinning unheeded until it clinked to a stop.

Within seconds, about twenty guys were throwing punches, kicking, yelling, cursing, and tearing wildly at each other. Dogs barked and snarled. And thirty or so other park people, many of them drunk and staggering, gathered around to cheer.

In the center of it all, Marco was pulling on one end of his victim while the man’s friends were pulling from the other. Allies of Marco saw their opportunity and set about to pound the defenseless man’s face or plant steel-toed boots in his gut.

When blood started dripping onto the cement, the brawl seemed to get more feverish. “Take him in! Take him in!”

someone yelled. They wanted to drag their prey deeper into the park, away from the cops or any passerby who might try to spoil their fun.

By now, Sam and I were standing, looking around for a squad car—for any sign that this wouldn't end with a dead man in Golden Gate Park. Nothing.

"We probably need to get out of here," I mumbled. Sam agreed.

As we picked up our stuff and shuffled off, the brawl shifted further into the park. All I could think to do was pray—and wonder again what Sam and I had been thinking when we decided to step out of our comfortable world... and into this.

## A FLICKER OF LIGHTNING

The idea had dropped into my brain one Sunday morning while I sat in church. The pastor was delivering a powerful sermon about living the Christian life. The gist of it was, "Be the Christian you say you are."

Suddenly I was shocked to realize that I had just driven twenty minutes past the world that needed me to be the Christian I say I am, in order to hear a sermon entitled "Be the Christian you say you are." Soon I would drive back past that same world to the privilege of my comfortable life on campus at a Christian college.

Thinking ahead to my next week, I knew several things would happen. I knew I'd hear more lectures about being a caring Christian or living a godly life. I'd read more books about who God is and about what the world needs now. I'd spend more time late at night down at a coffee shop with my

friends kicking around ultimate questions and finely delivered opinions about the world.

Then I'd jump into my warm bed and turn out the light. Another day gone.

But we were created to be and to do, not merely to discuss. The hypocrisy in my life troubled me. No, I wasn't in the grip of rampant sin, but at the same time, for the life of me I couldn't find a connecting thread of radical, living obedience between what I *said* about my world and how I *lived* in it. Sure, I claimed that Christ was my stronghold, my peace, my sustenance, my joy. But I did all that from the safety of my comfortable upper-middle-class life. I never really had to put my claims to the test.

I sat there in church struggling to remember a time when I'd actually needed to lean fully on Christ rather than on my own abilities. Not much came to mind. What was Paul's statement in Philippians? "I have learned what it means to be content in all circumstances, whether with everything or with nothing" (Philippians 4:11–12).

With nothing?

The idea came instantly—like the flash of a camera or a flicker of lightning. It left me breathless, and it changed my life. *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?*

The picture that came with that question was of me homeless and hungry on the streets of an American city.

Hard on the heels of the idea came the questions: What if I didn't actually believe the things I argued with so much certainty? What, for example, if I didn't truly believe that Christ is my identity, my strength, my hope? Or worse, what

if I leaped in faith, but God didn't catch me? My mind reeled.

And then there were the practical questions. Could I survive on the streets? How much did I really want to learn to be content *always* with *nothing*? What would my friends think? What would my parents think? My pastors? My professors? Would I be okay? What if I got sick? What if I starved? What if I got beat up? What if I froze?

*What if I'm wrong?*

*Am I crazy?*

*Will I die?*

But already, I had decided. I walked out of church that morning seized by a big idea, assaulted by dozens of questions, and sure that I had heard deep in my heart a still, small voice saying, "Follow Me."

6

## "WHY WOULD YOU WANT TO DO THAT?"

Of course, what my idea might actually require took a while to sink in. I would have to put the rest of my life on hold, leave school, and sign up for months of risk, rejection, and plain old misery. There aren't too many brochures for that kind of thing.

I started with my family. When I called to give them my long, excited ramble, I heard only silence on the other end. Then a few expressions of stunned disbelief.

"Why would you want to do *that*?" my dad asked.

Determined to hear him out, I asked him to explain what he meant.

He did. "Why would you want to leave school, leave your friends, leave your family, leave your life, and do this? Why

would you put your mother and me through the stress, confusion, and worry? Why would you jeopardize all that you've worked so hard for, all that we've paid for, all that you have to look forward to—for *this*?"

Each of his questions hit home. I thought for a moment. "Well," I said finally, "that's sort of complicated. I believe I must. I don't know for certain yet that I will do this, I still have a lot of people to talk with. But I believe that it is something I must do."

I would be heading home for the summer in a couple of months at which time my parents said we could discuss this crazy idea a little more. We agreed to talk about it face-to-face. It would be a hard conversation.

I plunged into researching homelessness on the streets of America. I read firsthand accounts, sociological studies, autobiographies of people who had given their lives to work with the homeless and addicted.

Even at first glance, the scope of homelessness in America was much worse than I'd imagined. According to the National Coalition for the Homeless, in the United States, more than 3.5 million people experience homelessness during any given year. That means that more than one percent of our population this year will be eating out of trash cans and sleeping under bridges.

Soon I was meeting every month with the director of the Santa Barbara Rescue Mission. Then I began volunteering at the mission twice a week to learn more about the men and women who came through its doors.

Over the next year, I probably looked like any other college student—studying hard, playing hard, juggling classes and work. But all the while I kept pushing on my crazy idea. To

my surprise, at every turn and with every conversation, the idea was only confirmed. Even people who should have been telling me no encouraged me to press on.

## THE COUNSEL OF FRIENDS

One day I sat in the office of the president of the Denver Rescue Mission, laying out my thoughts. I figured if anyone would know enough to tell me to turn back, he'd be the one. But after he thought for a while, he looked up at me, puzzled by what he was about to say.

"I can't believe I'm saying this," he said, "but I think your idea is a good one. And I have a feeling that it is very important for you to do this. It will be dangerous, of course, and there are no guarantees. But if you plan well, you can succeed. And you certainly won't come back the same person."

I walked out of his office convinced for the first time that what I wanted to happen actually *would* happen. And something else—an invitation to begin my journey by checking in to his facility just like any other transient off the street.

About this time I also became convinced that I needed some kind of advisory group that would give me guidance and hold me accountable. Proverbs 15:22 says, "Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers they succeed." I wanted to be wise, and to succeed, and more than that, I wanted to bring glory to the Lord in everything this idea entailed. So I began praying that God would lead me to the right men.

It didn't take long to develop a list of men who had been, and still were, having a significant impact on my life as a Christian: my campus pastor, my youth pastor, two rescue mis-



sion presidents, a close friend from Oregon, and a professor. Each man I talked to responded positively to my proposal and agreed to mentor and advise me.

With their help, I began putting a travel plan together. After considering a lot of alternatives, we settled on six cities: Denver; Washington, D.C.; Portland; San Francisco; Phoenix; and San Diego. These cities seemed representative of the American urban homeless scene as well as being places where I would have a backup personal contact of some kind in case of emergency.

My advisers also helped me fine-tune my overall purpose. We boiled it down to three objectives:

1. To better understand the life of the homeless in America, and to see firsthand how the church is responding to their needs.
2. To encourage others to “live out loud” for Christ in whatever ways God is asking them to.
3. To learn personally what it means to depend on Christ for my daily physical needs, and to experience contentment and confidence in Him.

## ENTER SAM

Then there was the issue of companionship. Jesus sent His disciples out two-by-two—a model that seemed right for my new undertaking as well. Besides, I *wanted* a traveling partner. I pictured long, lonely nights huddled in a stairwell. I worried about attacks. Another person would make everything easier.

But a traveling partner turned out to be hard to come by.

Some friends I approached didn't catch the vision. Others couldn't take time off from school or work. Three months before I was to depart on the streets, it looked as though I would be going alone. And then I met Sam Purvis.

At six-foot-three or so, Sam was big—about the same size as me, which was an added bonus. Two big guys are much less likely to get messed with on the streets. He was easygoing and he needed a haircut. Right away, I saw possibilities.

Sam had gone to the University of Oklahoma for a semester but was taking a semester off. He happened to be on my campus, and heard through the grapevine about my proposed journey. The more we talked, the more interested he became in joining me. I was encouraged by Sam's excitement about the trip and passion for serving the Lord. Although we only had a few conversations, I felt a real connection and unity in our hearts and vision.

We agreed to take two weeks to think and pray about it, and for Sam to meet with his mentor and pastor back in his Oregon hometown. Two Saturdays later, during a two-hour telephone conversation, Sam and I struck a deal.

## TRAVELING PAPERS

Sam and I decided we would be gone for five months. We would begin at the rescue mission in Denver, then travel to and live on the streets of Washington, D.C.; Portland; San Francisco; Phoenix; and San Diego.

From the start, Sam and I understood that we would not actually *be* homeless. We'd only be travelers through this underworld of need—privileged visitors, really, because any time we wished, we could leave the streets and come home.

Most people on the streets have no such option.

Yet, as truly as we could, Sam and I wanted to *experience* homelessness. That meant, among other things, that we'd carry only the bare essentials, taking no cell phones, credit cards, or extra clothes. We would survive as most other men and women on the streets do—panhandling for money, eating at rescue missions or out of garbage cans, and sleeping outside or in shelters.

We would take only what we could carry. Our clothing for the five months would consist of a pair of boxers, a pair of shorts, a pair of jeans, a T-shirt, and a sweatshirt. Add books and journals, and a couple of battered guitars to support our panhandling, and that was it.

We would keep our background and purpose a secret because if a person or an organization knew we were *choosing* to be homeless, their response to us would be different. As much as possible, we wanted to experience the real thing.

We'd travel by Greyhound Bus, using our panhandling earnings to buy fare between cities. But because we wanted to spend our time homeless in the cities rather than stuck on a bus for two weeks crossing the country, we made two exceptions: we would fly between Denver and Washington, D.C., and between D.C. and Portland.

To stay in contact with our families, our advisers, and those who were praying for us, we'd use e-mail at local libraries plus an occasional phone call. In case one of us got stabbed or needed to make an immediate trip to the hospital, we took enough cash for a one-way cab ride, praying we wouldn't ever use it (we didn't).

That left two major purchases for our new life on the streets. A few days before we left, Sam I went down to a local

thrift store and bought two sleeping bags (at three dollars apiece) and two backpacks (at four dollars).

Seven dollars each.

We were ready.

## INVITATION TO THE JOURNEY

On May 27 we stepped out of our old lives. From then until November 2, Sam and I slept out in the open or in shelters or under bridges. We ate out of trash cans and feeding kitchens. We looked disgusting, smelled disgusting, were disgusting. We were shunned and forgotten and ignored by most people who walked past us—good, acceptable people who looked just like Sam and I used to look, and maybe just like you.

12 Although our journey took us to many destinations that were challenging, cold, and even brutal—like the night in Golden Gate Park—by God’s grace we did what we set out to do, and learned a lot along the way. For example: that faith is much more than just an “amen” at the end of the sermon on Sunday mornings; that the comfort and security we strive so hard to create for ourselves doesn’t even come close to the “life in the full” that Christ promises; and that God is faithful and good, even when we’re not.

Perhaps you, too, have felt a nudging toward a life on the edge—some place or task in your life where, as Frederick Buechner put it, “God’s great mercy and the world’s great hunger meet.” If you haven’t yet, is your heart open to that moment when it comes?

Either way, I invite you to take this journey with Sam and me through the everyday world of the hundreds of thousands of men, women, and children who make up America’s home-

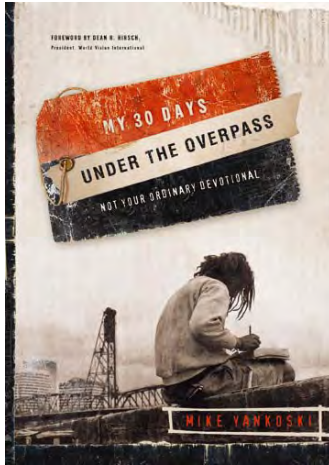
less population. We decided to go past the edge with God. One day soon, I pray you will, too. And when you do, I think you'll find what we did...

A bigger world, and more reason to care for it.

More forgotten, ruined, beautiful people than we ever imagined existed, and more reason to hope in their redemption.

A greater God, and more reason to journey with Him anywhere.

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