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Focus On Mission:
Transformative Christian
Leadership Series

CHALLENGES

KENT R. HUNTER

with TRACEE J. SWANK

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Scripture references in this book are from *The Message* version. Why? According to the brilliant translator, Eugene Peterson, it's not meant to be a scholarly study Bible. It's meant to be a life-learning, engaging Bible that helps you to appropriate God's teaching to everyday life. God's plan is to effectively change your life through the divine power of His Word.

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Contents

Introduction	1
Called to Serve: Embracing the Challenges of Ministry	4
From Discouragement to Confidence: Embracing God's Calling amid Challenges	6
Winning the Battle: Overcoming Church Conflict Through Faith and Prayer	8
The Power of Your Story: Simple Ways to Share God's Work in Your Life	10
Let Go, Let God: The Power of Spontaneous Prayer	12
Losing to Win: How Faith Transforms Struggles Into Victory	14
Faith in the Fire: How Hardships Bring Us Closer to God	16
Shaped by Scripture: How the Bible Prepares Us for Life	18
Beyond the Comfort Zone: Trusting God in Challenges	20
Overt and Covert: How the Enemy Adapts to a Shifting Spiritual Landscape	22
Wolves in Sheep's Clothing: Recognizing the Fruits of Persecution	24
Conclusion: Small Group Study	27
Questions for Discussion	29
About the Authors	35

Introduction

Ever meet a Christ-follower who acted as if being a Christian was like a “walk in the park”? That person might wonder why “bad things happen to ‘good’ people.” You could call them “problems.” It would be more helpful to look at them as challenges!

The earthly life of Jesus wasn’t all that easy. Think about that crucifixion He didn’t deserve. His disciples didn’t have an easy road to travel either. Those who follow Jesus understand two distinct realities: (1) Faith in Christ is the greatest undeserved, hope-filled, joyful, positive experience; and (2) the challenges of life on this earth are real!

When I was little, my dad didn’t go to church. His backstory, told by my mother, was that she would faithfully take me to church every Sunday. My dad would stay home and work around the house. When my sister was born, she had severe physical issues. As a little kid, I saw my dad kneel on the floor next to his bed and pray that my sister would live. After that, my father became the spiritual leader of our family.

During my second year of high school, I ended up in the hospital with knee surgery from a football injury. The other kid in my room had a severe lung issue and almost died. Naively, I had never considered that someone my age could die. That night, I felt led to become a pastor.

In my third year of college, my dad died from a massive heart attack. He would never see me ordained several years later. I learned an important lesson: No matter how dedicated to Jesus you are, there are still many challenges to life. I should have known that. It is in the Bible.

For Christians, it seems like life's troubles make you or break you. The difference is how you look at Jesus. He promises heaven, and that is a sure thing. But it's not heaven on earth. It wasn't for Him, and it won't be for His followers. It is tempting to ask, "Why does God allow these troubles?" Perhaps it is simply a reality of life. We live in a broken world. The Israelites had to deal with Pharaoh before they arrived in the Promised Land. Jesus met up with Satan in the wilderness. The Apostle Paul was jailed. Why should we be surprised when challenges occur?

Perhaps the more valuable approach is to ask, "What will God do with the challenges—the hardships we face?" Scripture says, "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose" (Romans 8:28 NIV). Rationally, that seems to make no sense. We only comprehend it through faith.

As a Christian, you worship God regularly. It's tempting to think *transactionally*: "I'm a church member. I love Jesus. I serve God—so everything should be smooth and without challenges." It's easy to believe that, "since I go to church, my life ought to be better." Spiritually, that is accurate.

However, we tend to forget that the enemy goes to your church as well: not to worship, but to corrupt, discourage, and undermine your faith. It's easy to think that everything about church is sacred or perfect—heaven on earth. The whole of the

New Testament demonstrates otherwise. And to believe that truth is *transformational*.

Scripture says, “And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Romans 12:2 NKJV). When you think from the spiritual perspective, you become the person God uses to change the world—one person at a time. Allow the Holy Spirit to transform your challenges into opportunities

Called to Serve: Embracing the Challenges of Ministry

Christian service—ministry—is tough! It is not for the faint of heart. If you serve in and through your church, you need to know: Working for Jesus is full of challenges. It has always been that way. It will always be that way!

There is a long history of God's servants who have suffered for the cause of Christ. Think of the disciples. After Jesus' resurrection, they served the young Christian churches. Every one of them, those we know about, were faced with grave difficulties most of the time. Many died at the hands of persecutors. Think about Jesus Himself: betrayed, persecuted, and nailed to a cross. Do you see the pattern?

Sadly, sometimes those who serve the cause of Christ are surprised by challenges. They quit their service, their ministries. What went wrong? Forget the individual circumstances. They were perhaps not properly trained for ministry. Likely, they were not warned: Ministry is hard!

Honestly, most pastors quit at least once each year—at least in their minds, temporarily. Whether you are on staff at a church or a member who serves in ministry, you should know: Ministry is challenging. It goes with the territory. Why? If you are doing good for God, the Enemy of Christ has put a target on your back! However, you should know this: The power of God will not let you fail. You will face challenges, and God will give you

the strength to overcome. And, in the process, you will grow. You will become spiritually stronger.

In the Revelation of John, chapters 2 and 3, the Lord gives direction to John to write to the seven churches in Asia province. He focuses on two issues that apply to you and me. First, the Lord is aware of your service, your ministry, and the challenges from the Enemy. Second, don't quit—don't ever give up. That is the Lord's message to each of the seven churches addressed in Revelation. It is His message for you—and your church—as well.

There are great guidelines in Scripture for anyone who serves the Lord. (1) Ministry is tough for everyone—it always has been. (2) You can't do this without the power of the Holy Spirit. (3) The challenges you face are great learning opportunities—growth events for you to rely, even more, on the Lord. (4) It makes a world of difference if you are serving where God wants you. In other words, you are in the middle of God's will—*for you*. (5) The Holy Spirit has given you a unique spiritual gift mix. If you have discovered your gifts and are involved in a ministry that requires those gifts, you will receive affirmation from others. (6) When you work for God, you don't have a job. You have a *calling*. (7) You have been “ordained” through your baptism into a “royal priesthood.” You work for the ruler of the universe. (8) That ruler, Jesus, encourages you supernaturally: Never give up. Don't quit. Look to the Lord for His strength and power. You can count on that!

From Discouragement to Confidence: Embracing God's Calling amid Challenges

Some churches face many problems. At Church Doctor Ministries, we have banned the word “problems.” We focus on “challenges.”

To be clear, God's calling is filled with challenges. But using the concept of “problems” sounds like God is mean. That is just not so. In fact, real “problems” come from an enemy, the devil. In 1 Thessalonians 3:1-13, Paul calls him the “Tempter” who tries to “tear down” everything in the church.

Years ago, we were invited to a church in a suburb of Nashville. They asked one of us to preach and, after a noon meal, we talked about how churches can be more effective. Then there was a period for questions. One of the responses was surprising: “You mentioned the devil in your sermon. We haven't heard that word around here in this church for twenty years.” We didn't quite know how to take that surprise!

If we ignore biblical realities (what we Christians call “Truth”), your church is susceptible to spiritual anemia. And that church near Nashville had it. So do many others. If you won't talk about spiritual warfare in your church, get ready—you're going to have it! Oddly, if you're enthusiastic about reaching others for Jesus, you'll also have it! Spiritual warfare is real!

In 1 Thessalonians 3:3-5, Paul says "...troubles shouldn't come as any surprise to you. You've always known that we're in for this kind of thing. It's part of our calling. When we were with you, we made it quite clear that there was trouble ahead. And now that it's happened, you know what it's like."

Have you ever met a "church hopper"? Have you ever been one? At the first sign of church challenges, church hoppers move to another church. Some of them have been hopping from one church to another for years. They are delusional! They are expecting heaven on earth. If you are struggling with "imperfections at your church," read your Bible. You will realize that perfection is in heaven. Someone once said, "If you think you've found the perfect church, leave it quickly and help make it perfect." Of course, that never happens this side of eternity.

For those looking for perfection, follow Paul's instruction in 1 Thessalonians 3:11-13: Ask "the Master [to] pour on the love so it fills your lives and splashes over on everyone around you." The apostle says to be "filled with confidence." Confidence literally means "with faith."

Don't be surprised—or discouraged—when church gets tough. *Expect* challenges. The more effective you are, the more challenges you'll have. In truth? The Enemy lets sleeping churches sleep. Also sleeping Christians. They may be so heavenly minded, they are no earthly good!

Winning the Battle: Overcoming Church Conflict Through Faith and Prayer

Did you know your enemy, the devil, attends your church? Not to worship, but to disrupt. Most of the stress for Christians does not come from outside persecution. It comes from the inside misbehavior of fellow Christians!

“Isn’t that a shame?” you might be thinking. It’s tempting to say, “Christians ought to know better.” Yet, the real challenge is the Enemy, who works hard at self-destruction and discouragement. And that is supernatural interference.

This does not give us an excuse, like, “The devil made me do it.” Why? Because He—Jesus—who is in you is greater than he—the Enemy—who is in the world. However, this enemy is strategic. His favorite strategic approach is to capitalize on our weaknesses, *especially* when it comes to our relationships at church.

How can this occur? There are a couple of reasons. (1) Your faith is located within you, very close to the seat of your emotions. Consequently, well-meaning Christ-followers often become unglued and hurt one another. Their hearts get sideways, and their mouths spew disruption. Your strategic enemy is a master at pulling your trigger. (2) The second issue is that the devil subtly encourages you to drift: from your relationship with Jesus *and* from God’s Word, the Bible.

The Bible is soul food—it feeds your faith. It nourishes your spiritual “confidence.” That subtle work of the enemy nudges you to misbehave strategically in your church!

The upside of church troubles is that they are proof you are at war with an enemy—and that enemy is actually verifying that you and your church have great potential! In 2 Thessalonians 1:5-12, Paul tells Christians—like you and me: “All this trouble is a clear sign God has decided to make you fit for the kingdom.” He adds, “You’re suffering now, but justice is on the way.” His point? Jesus is coming back, and He’ll heal your hurts on the one hand and deal decisively with your enemy—once and for all—on the other.

Here’s what the Apostle Paul would say: Keep your relationship strong with God and obey His message, the good news of the Gospel. Become an expert by continually and consistently feeding on God’s Word, the Bible. And when Jesus comes back, He will punish those who do not get it, those who are ruled by the Enemy.

Another key element in this text is prayer. Ask for it. Do it. And pray for others. Pray God will make you fit—even if it means you become a target for the Enemy or those directed by the Enemy. Here is the promise: God will guide you by His own power—if you let Him.

The Power of Your Story: Simple Ways to Share God's Work in Your Life

Is it part of your culture to ban the word “problems”? It might simply be semantics to some people, but consider calling problems “challenges.” The change of words signifies that God works everything for good—even “challenges.”

It seems this might have been an attitude adjustment for the Apostle Paul as well. He shared it in his second letter to the congregation at Corinth. This letter was then circulated throughout the province of Achaia.

The Kingdom of God impacts us with a different culture—the culture of God's Kingdom. It changes our attitudes and our worldviews about *everything*. In verses 3-11 of the first chapter of 2 Corinthians, Paul talks about hard times. His message? When we face challenges, God is with us. When others face challenges, we can be there for them. We can be a divine conduit through which God brings healing and salvation.

This is God's way of providing a helping hand, an encouraging word. Tough times can teach anyone to trust in God rather than rely on their own strength. Paul makes this point: God can help! After all, He has the power to raise the dead!

This is personal for every Christian. God turns challenges into faith-strengthening experiences. God also works *through*

Christians like you to reach others who are far from Him. When an unbeliever in your social network has a challenge and shares it with you, what do you do?

Do you “scroll” your history as a believer to see if you’ve had a similar experience? If you do, did your faith in God provide a connection for God to help that person? Do you share your story—your God story—with that person?

If you do, you are *witnessing*. You don’t have to quote the Bible. You don’t need to be an evangelist or a theologian. Just relate how you believe God helped you. Keep it simple.

You know what? If everyone in your church learned to do that together, you would become God’s platform for a revival. Don’t make sharing your faith so difficult. Just be there for others and share what God has done in your life.

Let Go, Let God: The Power of Spontaneous Prayer

Have you ever met someone who shared a challenge or difficulty they are experiencing? Did you say, “I’ll pray for you,” and then you go on your way? Have you ever had the experience where, a few days later, something reminds you about that person, and you realize you never did pray for them?

There’s a remedy for that awful feeling of unintentional neglect! Pray for them on the spot. In public? Yes! Where you might be heard? Absolutely!

You don’t have to yell. If someone overhears or notices, so what? It’s not a crime to pray in public—at least in most countries!

“But,” you say, “I’m not good at spontaneous prayer. I have to have time to think about it, to prepare.” No! That is not your obstacle. Your obstacle is your lack of faith. You think it’s all about you: your mind, your intellect. You need to “let go and let God.”

In other words, you need to get out of God’s way. Get your fear, self-conscious feelings, and intellectual focus out of the way—for what the Holy Spirit wants to do through you.

You’ll never experience this until you do it. Once you do it, you’ll have a new awareness of God’s presence and power. If you

never do it, you'll never know! Let go—let God. Take the leap of faith!

There is a true story about the young pastor just out of seminary. He had never prayed before a large group of seasoned church people. At his first church, he was asked to attend a luncheon for the senior citizens—about eighty people. It never occurred to him that they would ask him to pray without advance warning. When they did, he felt like he was thrown off a cliff! He discovered that God rescues people who jump in faith!

In Romans 15:30-33, Paul asked the Roman Christians if they would pray for him. He was headed for Judea, a hotbed of Jewish leaders who wanted to kill him. He asked for prayer that God would keep him safe.

Did they pray for him? It is very likely, but we honestly don't know.

When you are challenged in your level of faith, let go, let God, and pray!

Losing to Win: How Faith Transforms Struggles Into Victory

Life is hard. It gets harder when you become a believer in Christ. It also gets easier. Sounds like a riddle, right? It's not. It's the two sides of faith life—the life of a believer.

For those who were part of the early Christian community in Rome, life wasn't easy. Persecution was an everyday threat. So, what did the Apostle Paul write to the Romans?

In Romans 8:31-39, Paul makes his case—God's case. If God's on our side, we can't lose. The word "lose" takes in a lot. As a believer, you can lose friends, lose your job, lose popularity, and still today, you could lose your life. Paul's rationale is this: God went all the way for us. Jesus became a human, in diapers and on the cross. Paul says: If God would do that, is there anything He wouldn't do for you?

The act of sending His Son is proof of His promise for your welfare, right? From God's perspective, 100 percent right. From ours? Not so much, not in everything, not all the time. Unless—unless we see life, pain, loss, death, and persecution through the lens of faith. If you are sold out to God, God's love, God's Jesus, God's grace, God's forgiveness—all those challenges pale by comparison. Even the untimely death of your friend or parent at such an early age? Yes!

You can focus on the doughnut, or you can focus on the hole—for everything in life. A parent's death, from the hole, seems, well—maybe even cruel. Looking at the doughnut, you count the blessings of life. Focus on the death, and you get stuck on the donut hole. Focus on the life, the love, and the faith of one who followed Jesus—you focus on the donut. Your faith in the goodness of God changes everything—always. Yeah, that's the doughnut.

Paul's point in Romans 8? No one can protect you from the crap of this sinful world—and God chooses not to. But nothing, not trouble, hard times, hatred, hunger, homelessness, bullies, betrayal, or death—nothing keeps you away from God's love in Jesus. Nothing!

Faith in the Fire:

How Hardships Bring Us Closer to God

Why do bad things happen to good people? Why do disasters come to churches? Congregations sometimes have financial challenges. You hear of church splits due to a major disagreement. Occasionally you see a church devastated by the bad behavior of the leadership. And you wonder: “Why would God allow that?”

That was likely on the mind of the Apostle Paul. He reports the disaster in 2 Corinthians 12, verse 7 and following. He doesn’t give the particulars but says, “...I was given the gift of a handicap.” That is an unusual choice of words: “a gift.”

It is normal to react negatively to a setback or challenge. It is understandable to question God. It was after the processing that the apostle looked at the issue—in the backdrop of his relationship with the Lord. Paul reflects and confesses, “Three times I begged the Lord to make this suffering go away” (2 Corinthians 12:8 CEV). Whatever it was, God got his attention!

Paul reports that God told him, “My grace is enough; it’s all you need. My strength comes into its own in your weakness.” Tough challenges always seem to give us an opportunity to see God’s power more clearly.

Paul’s response? Once he looked at it in the context of his relationship with God, Paul saw it as a benefit! While

unbelievers would call that “insane,” Christ-followers really believe: “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him” (Romans 8:28 NIV).

You don’t have to understand it or make sense of it. You just believe it. Paul’s response? “...I was glad to let it happen” (1 Corinthians 12:9).

What is Paul saying? His response indicates that he had grown to a new level of faith and trust in God. He says, “...these limitations that cut me down to size.... I just let Christ take over!” (2 Corinthians 12:7-10).

The end result? Paul was closer to the Lord, greater in trust, stronger in faith. When you face calamities in life, before you curse God, just ask, “I wonder what my Lord will do with this?”

Shaped by Scripture: How the Bible Prepares Us for Life

There is an overused saying: “If all else fails, read the directions.” If you ask most Christians if they read Scripture regularly, only fifty percent say they read the Bible “at least once a week.” Only a small percentage of believers read God’s Word more often.

In Paul’s second letter to Timothy, the third chapter, the apostle begins with a laundry list of bad behavior associated with “difficult times” (2 Timothy 3:1-5). As you think about that, do you believe we live in a “difficult” time in history? Is this a hard time to be a Christian?

Here is the Apostle Paul’s description of the general population in hard times. He says that many people will be “...self-absorbed, money-hungry, self-promoting, stuck-up, profane, contemptuous of parents, crude, coarse, dog-eat-dog, unbending, slanderers, impulsively wild, savage, cynical, treacherous, ruthless, bloated windbags, addicted to lust, and allergic to God” (2 Timothy 3:2-4).

I don’t know about you, but it sounds to me like Paul was having a really bad day—or was he describing a week’s worth of your favorite television newscasts?

In a complete turn of perspective, Paul shares with Timothy, “You’ve been a good apprentice to me” (3:10). Here, he’s

talking about discipling. He describes the discipleship process: “You’ve been ... a part of my teaching, my manner of life, direction, faith, steadiness, love, patience, troubles, sufferings...” (3:10).

Based on that description, who has *discipled* you? Who have you discipled? Who *are* you discipling now?

This is a major challenge. Jesus modeled discipling. So did the disciples. It is like apprenticing. The Lord’s Great Commission is clear: “Make disciples” (Matthew 28:19 NIV). It is a one-on-one process. And it goes hand in hand with lifelong regular Bible reading.

The Bible is the Christian’s only manual. Perhaps that is why Paul follows up, saying, “There’s nothing like the written Word of God for showing you the way to salvation through faith in Christ Jesus” (3:15).

Paul continues, “Every part of Scripture is God-breathed and useful one way or another—showing us truth, exposing our rebellion, correcting our mistakes, training us to live God’s way” (3:16). Paul summarizes: “Through the Word we are put together and shaped up for the tasks God has for us” (3:17).

Is daily Bible reading a part of your lifestyle every day? Or your weekly Bible reading? With all the modern translations at such inexpensive prices—and Bible apps for free!—why do you think most Christians don’t read God’s Word regularly? What impact does that have on your church? What does that mean for your nation? Your world? Your family? Our future? *Your* future?

Beyond the Comfort Zone: Trusting God in Challenges

Ministry isn't always smooth sailing. However, sometimes the rough waters are opportunities for God to demonstrate who He is.

In fact, some Christians have never had a major "God experience" because they are risk-averse. They spend most of their existence in the realm of the world, where those without faith operate. You won't find "play-it-safe" Christianity in the New Testament.

Some churches have intellectually put away enough money to operate their church for six to eight months. It's OK to be prepared, but for some large churches, that is a huge amount of money. What if Jesus returned and asked, "Why didn't you reach the lost people within a mile of your church with that money?" Are you really going to say, "We wanted to spend some money on outreach, but we needed it for our 'rainy day' fund"?

In Acts 27, Paul is on his way to share Jesus with the Roman emperor. Some will say, "That is not a story of someone willing to risk. He was under house arrest."

Not so! Paul had been tried by King Agrippa and found innocent of the charges trumped up by the Jewish religious leaders. Paul chose to appeal to the high court in Rome.

On the way, the ship carrying Paul—and many others—was under siege by a storm near the island called Cauda, in the Mediterranean Sea. No smooth sailing there! Yet, in the danger and risk of losing their lives, God acted. Paul got a visit from God's angel saying, "Don't give up, Paul. You're going to stand before Caesar yet—and everyone sailing with you is also going to make it" (Acts 27:24). You can't sail and get anywhere unless you're willing to leave sight of the shore. Trust God and move out beyond your comfort zone!

Overt and Covert: How the Enemy Adapts to a Shifting Spiritual Landscape

As culture deteriorates toward secularism, the Enemy's strategy changes. Missionaries around the world for centuries already know this reality! The Enemy operates overtly and covertly. In areas that are not Christian, the strategic approach is overt. If you're in a culture where Christianity is present, the strategy of the Enemy approach is covert—under the radar. As Christianity is marginalized, the Enemy's approach becomes more overt.

I saw this in Russia when Communism was falling and Christianity was rising very rapidly. There were people who were demonized or oppressed by demons. This is also true in many places in Africa. I also found it true as we began to effectively reach out and make disciples in the ministry I served in Detroit.

When there are Christians present in the culture and not much of a strong push for mission, the Enemy operates more covertly. In this kind of setting, the primary defense mechanism of the Enemy is control. This is rampant in churches that don't focus on mission. However, when a church becomes active in mission, the Enemy moves to a secondary defense: persecution. This is what happens to most churches when they are mission-focused.

Look at Acts 4:23-5:10. There is a boldness around Christians. They are sharing all their possessions. The control of the Enemy is demolished. In Acts 5:12-16, there is a breakthrough. In Acts 5:17-18, the apostles are put in jail. The cycle moves to persecution.

Wolves in Sheep's Clothing: Recognizing the Fruits of Persecution

Have you ever been persecuted for your faith in Jesus? By persecuted, I don't mean, necessarily, beaten, jailed, or run out of town—yet persecution can reach these extremes.

Persecution is part of life in the work of God's Kingdom. In Acts 24, Paul was accused by the chief priest in Jerusalem, Ananias. Ananias got a trial lawyer, Tertullus, to present a case to the governor, Felix. There was really no case against Paul. But as the process dragged on, Paul spent two years in jail. Two years of Paul's life on false charges!

When you attempt great things for God, expect persecution. Watch for what Jesus called "wolves" in "sheep's clothing" (Matthew 7:15 NIV). How do you know them? "By their fruit you will recognize them" (7:16 NIV).

Yes, the Scripture says that "in all things God works for the good of those who love him" (Romans 8:28 NIV), whether you know it or not.

Ever have a non-Christian (or maybe even a believer), ask you, "If there is a God, why do bad things happen to good people?" Without the forgiveness of Christ, there are no "good" people in God's eyes.

The better question would be, “Why do bad things happen to forgiven believers?” This is what happened to Paul—for two years: imprisoned by false accusations!

But there is more to this story in Acts 25. Governor Felix was replaced by Governor Festus. Festus made a trip from Caesarea to Jerusalem to get in good with the Jews. There he ran into the high priest and his mob of leaders who were out to get Paul killed for betraying their religion and preaching Christ as the Savior.

Festus returned to Caesarea. The Jewish leaders were still after Paul to get him killed.

The Jewish leaders came to the court to get Paul prosecuted. They thought that, perhaps, this governor would help them get Paul executed. In their persistence, the high priest and synagogue leaders asked Festus if the trial could be moved to Jerusalem. Their real reason was that on the way to Jerusalem, they would set an ambush and kill Paul (Acts 25:3).

Festus, trying to get on the good side of the Jews, asked Paul in 25:9, “How would you like to go up to Jerusalem, and let me conduct your trial there?” Paul knew about the plot and played his Roman citizenship card: “I appeal to Caesar” (25:11). Festus was glad to get this nonsense off his agenda and declared in 25:12, “You’ve appealed to Caesar; you’ll go to Caesar!”

Paul would finally get the chance to present the Gospel to the ruler of the Roman Empire. Paul wouldn’t live to see it, but many years later, under Constantine, the pagan empire would be proclaimed as Christian. It all started with something “bad” and undeserved against Paul. God always has a plan: “...all things

work together for good” (Romans 8:28 NKJV). It’s just that sometimes you don’t see it in the heat of the moment!

Conclusion: Small Group Study

As you look across the full sweep of these chapters, a clear pattern emerges: Challenges shape disciples, form healthy churches, and advance God's mission. Whether the hardship appears as discouragement, conflict, persecution, drift, spiritual warfare, or seasons of discomfort, Scripture consistently teaches that God uses these pressures to strengthen His people and position them for greater impact. The early church understood this well. They did not hide from trials. They leaned into the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, trusting that God was forming them into people who could withstand pressure, recognize the Enemy's tactics, and courageously witness to Jesus in any circumstance. Your group stands in that same lineage today.

Every church that seeks to reach new people will encounter resistance. Some of it will be internal, stirred by emotional reactions, spiritual immaturity, or covert spiritual interference. Other times it will be more overt, surfacing through persecution, relational tension, or cultural opposition. Yet Scripture and these readings remind us that none of this is surprising. Challenges are confirmations that a church is on the front line of Gospel movement. The question is not whether challenges will come. The question is whether we will respond with biblical discernment, Spirit-filled boldness, and missional imagination. When your group reads Scripture daily, shares stories of God's work, steps beyond comfort zones, and prays boldly, you are

learning to discern the Enemy's strategies and lean fully into God's strength.

This is where missional and entrepreneurial thinking becomes essential. What if the persecution, pressure, or discomfort your group is experiencing is not a setback but a signal? What if this season is meant to birth new outreach expressions, deeper discipleship rhythms, innovative ministry ideas, or stronger spiritual foundations? Scripture shows that movements grow when ordinary believers take risks, trust God more than their comfort, and follow the Spirit into unfamiliar territory. You do not need perfect conditions or perfect leaders. You need willingness, humility, prayerfulness, and a shared commitment to obey God where He is leading.

As you move forward, discuss together what next steps you sense God inviting you to take as a group. Identify one or two practical shifts such as spontaneous prayer, new outreach experiments, deeper Scripture habits, or relationship building with those far from faith. Then commit to continuing this journey by reading the rest of the *Focus On Mission* series together. Each chapter will sharpen your ability to think creatively, act courageously, and live as a missional people who discern spiritual realities, confront challenges with confidence, and join God's work in your community.

Questions for Discussion

Which specific challenge such as discouragement, conflict, persecution, spiritual drift, or spiritual warfare mirrors a current situation in your life or church, and what might God be forming in you through it?

Where do you see signs of overt or covert spiritual interference in your church? How might those signs actually confirm that your church is becoming more mission-focused?

In what ways has comfort shaped your ministry decisions, and where might God be calling you to take a faith-filled risk that extends beyond what feels safe or familiar?

How could your group cultivate a stronger culture of daily Scripture reading so that your decisions, responses, and outreach efforts are shaped more by God's Word than by circumstances?

What everyday stories of God's faithfulness could you begin sharing with unchurched friends, coworkers, or neighbors? How might those simple testimonies spark new spiritual conversations?

How will your group recognize wolves in sheep's clothing, and what protective or redemptive steps can you take together when those situations arise?

What entrepreneurial outreach ideas could emerge from the challenges your church currently faces, and which one could you pilot in the next thirty days?

How can your group practice bold, spontaneous prayer as a normal rhythm of ministry and relationship building?

What systems, attitudes, or traditions in your church reflect control rather than mission, and how might the Holy Spirit be calling your church to release control and move outward?

What one practical next step will your group commit to before next week to live more missionally, prayerfully, and courageously?



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that your church
isn't growing?

Is it starting to feel
less like a ministry
and more like a
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Do you feel like all
your efforts yield
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①

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What is God's vision
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②

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Identify the ceilings and roadblocks
that are holding you or
your church back.

③

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④

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About the Authors



Dr. Kent R. Hunter is the founder of Church Doctor Ministries. He believes that God has called him to help Christians and their churches become more effective for the Great Commission, to reach unbelievers and to make them disciples of Jesus Christ. Dr. Hunter is the author of more than 40 books. He has consulted more than 1,800 churches from 80 denominations, as well as nondenominational and independent churches. He developed the SEND Movement, which trains congregational members to become missionaries to those who are unchurched in their social networks. Kent writes the bimonthly Church Doctor Report, found on www.churchdoctor.org. Kent lives on a tree farm in northeast Indiana with his wife, Janet. Kent and Janet have two grown children, Laura and Jon.



Dr. Tracee J. Swank leads Church Doctor Ministries. She is a certified church consultant, Christian leadership coach, StoryBrand Guide, and Business Made Simple Coach. She works with pastors, ministry leaders, and Christian entrepreneurs to help them fulfill their God-given vision and mission in the Kingdom. Tracee holds a master's degree in theological studies and a Doctor of Ministry in Kingdom entrepreneurship. She enjoys speaking at conferences, leading ministry immersion trips, and mentoring leaders in creative, Kingdom-focused projects. When not traveling for ministry, she resides in northwest Ohio with her husband, Matt, and their black Lab, Beckett. She enjoys gardening, cooking, and cheering for Ohio State University. (Go Bucks!)