

SIGNS OF *life*

Stephanie Lobdell

Study/Discussion Guide by: Shannon Greene



Introduction

1. On page 13, the question is posed, “Is the resurrection enough? Is the resurrection enough to find a way forward?” In your life, how often do you talk or think about Jesus’ resurrection? In what settings or contexts do we generally talk about resurrection?
2. The author opens this book by sharing a story her own failure in the church she and her husband pastored. Why do you think it is difficult for us to share about our failings?
3. How would you describe or define an “ordinary loss”? What are some examples of ordinary losses we face in our lives?
4. Why do we tend to diminish or downplay the power of these ordinary, everyday losses? What might it look like to truly grieve these ordinary losses?
5. What ordinary losses have you had in the past? What ordinary losses are you dealing with currently?



Chapter 1 - Death of Zeal

1. What have been some of the “mountaintop spiritual highs” (20) in your life? Share about a time when you were “on fire” for God.
2. Define what you think “zeal” means. Is zeal generally considered to be good, or bad, or neutral?
3. On page 24, the author writes, “The fire of zeal, which had been a source of heat, comfort, and camaraderie, was increasing in heat. My zeal was sending sparks outside the boundary of its kindled purpose.” How does healthy zeal turn into unhealthy zeal?
4. Like in the object lesson with Mandy and Max, as Christians we often hear the message, “Avoid the world. It will pull you down” (26). What potential problems arise when we avoid the world at all costs?
5. Have you ever found yourself in the tension between avoiding the world and evangelizing this world we are supposed to avoid? Did this paradox lead you to making certain choices or sacrifices (such as choosing Bible quizzing over cheerleading)?
6. How did Saul allow his zeal to become unhealthy? What happened when he was blinded by his zeal?
7. What steps can we take when we feel the levels of our zeal burning too high and toward an unhealthy level?
8. The author shares about the lifecycle of a certain type of pine tree that requires forest fires in order to reproduce and grow (38). After the flames of our zeal in our lives burn out, what new fruit can take root and grow?

Chapter 2 - Death of Future

1. As a child, what did you want to be or do when you grew up? What future did you picture for yourself when you were younger?
2. Throughout this chapter (and the book as a whole), the author uses images of floods and rising waters to describe her story, such as the picture of running laps in a filling swimming pool (41). Do you connect with this metaphor? How so?
3. David experienced the death of his imagined future when the jealous King Saul threatened his life and sent him into hiding. How did David respond in the face of this discouragement and disorientation? What can we learn from his experience?
4. Were mental illnesses such as depression or anxiety discussed in your home growing up? How is mental health talked about in your church or Christian community?
5. What does the author mean when she talks about “means of grace” (49)? What is currently a means of grace from God to you?
6. In Genesis, Hagar has the unique privilege of naming God; the name she gives God is “El-roi,” or “the God who sees” (52). What name of God has been particularly meaningful to you? What name would you want to give to God?
7. Have you ever had to let go of parts of a future that you had previously imagined for yourself? How did you deal with the grief of that ordinary loss?
8. The Bible contains many “psalms of disorientation.” This week, either on your own or as a group, read through Psalm 69. What words or images from this psalm resonate with you? How does the psalmist’s attitude change throughout the psalm?



Chapter 3 - Death of Plans

1. When you hear the word “missionary,” what comes to mind? In your imagination, how does a missionary look, talk, dress, and behave?
2. Were you familiar with the story of Anna in Luke 2 before reading this chapter? How do you usually picture Anna? Had you ever imagined her as a young woman or new wife?
3. Share about a time in your life when things did not go according to plan.
4. The author writes about how she experienced God’s grace through other people, including her parents, her husband, and her professors. When you have you felt God’s grace through someone else? How can you be a source of grace to those around you?
5. For the author, preaching became a pastoral task that enlivened her spirit (70). What tasks or activities enliven your spirit? What can you do to make more space to participate in these enlivening practices?
6. The previous chapter was titled “Death of Future,” but this one is called “Death of Plans.” What is the difference between the death of a certain future and the death of plans?
7. The chapter concludes with these words, “I pray that my small yeses might be a testimony of God’s empowering grace and faithfulness. I pray that my small yeses might illuminate the path of another as Anna’s faithfulness has illuminated mine” (75). How have your “small yeses” led you to where you are today? Was there someone in your life whose obedience through “small yeses” illuminated your own path?
8. What “small yes” could God be calling you to right now?

Chapter 4 - Death of Expectations

1. Are you usually an optimist, a realist, or a pessimist? Or, to put it another way, do you tend to have high expectations, no expectations, or low expectations?
2. Have you ever considered that you have been “invited into partnership with God in the world”? (78) How does knowing that God wants to partner with you change the way you think about God or yourself?
3. Besides the “profound disorder in gender relationships” (81), in what other areas has the fall disordered God’s creation or caused a break in relationships?
4. What does it mean to “live backward” (83)? Where do you see people in your church, your family, or your community living backward (such as at a high school reunion)?
5. What expectations do you set for yourself? If you evaluate those expectations honestly, are they realistic expectations or are they unfair or unrealistic expectations?
6. What expectations have been placed on you by others? Are any of those unfair or unrealistic expectations?
7. On page 90, the author writes that many expectations we have for ourselves are “idolatry, false gods to which I have turned for redemption, for evidence that I am worthy of love and inclusion.” What are some false gods do people turn to for redemption, love, and inclusion?
8. Do you know your church or denomination’s position regarding women in ministry? If not, do some research on your own or as a group to figure out your church’s views on this area. Is their stance one that you agree with or disagree with?



Chapter 5 - Death of Hope

1. In this chapter, the author tells the story of the stray Mama Dog. How have pets or animals been a source of comfort or encouragement to you?
2. The author writes, “Hope. They say it’s the one thing you cannot live without” (97). Do you think this statement is true?
3. What was the hope or promise given to Abraham and Sarah? What did they do to take this promise into their own hands?
4. Part of the risk of hope means having to give up control to something or someone else. Do you tend to want to be in control, or are you comfortable giving up control?
5. The author shares, “Mama Dog was the incarnation of hoping against hope. She was a symbol of resurrection in a world of death” (106). Do you have any similar symbols of hope and resurrection in your life?
6. Do you ever find yourself leaning toward cynicism or skepticism? During which times or circumstances do you feel the most cynical?
7. Why is the lie of hopelessness easier to believe than the promise of resurrection?
8. How has God kept God’s promises to you? What practical things can you do to remind yourself of God’s promises?

Chapter 6 - Death of Revival

1. In this chapter, the author talks about staying present in the moment. Why is staying present so difficult within our society and culture? What distracts you from being present in the moment (email inboxes, for example)?
2. Stress often manifests itself through physical symptoms: upset stomachs, headaches, tension, and bodily soreness. In what physical ways does your body tell you things are not all right?
3. The author writes, “Like most young pastors, I came into my first assignment with sky-high optimism and an understanding of the church’s identity that danced among the clouds” (112). Take a moment to imagine the “perfect church.” What ideals (realistic or not) do you have for the church—both your local congregation and the greater body of Christian believers?
4. Have you considered the idea of the church being a dwelling place for God? Do you think this is an accurate analogy to use for the church?
5. Has there ever been a time when you did everything right, and yet nothing seems to be working out? How do you react in those situations?
6. What is the difference between *revival* and *resurrection*? How do we confuse the two?
7. Read through Philippians 2:5-8 (found on page 124). What are attitudes that churches or individuals need to “put to death” in order to have the same mind and attitude of Christ?
8. “To live, some things needed to die” (127). Sometimes the release from a painful situation can be a form of resurrection. Have you ever found release within an ordinary death? How can we know when to allow something to die, and when to fight to keep it alive?



Chapter 7 - Death of Beauty

1. What standards of beauty does our society have for people (and for women in particular)?
2. The author begins this chapter by sharing the story of reading the nutrition label of a Ranch dressing bottle at the age of 10 (131). At what age did you become conscious or aware of your body image?
3. The author writes that there was a conflict between what she knew in her head about appropriate weight gain and what she experienced in her heart about feeling fat (134). Have you ever experienced a similar “head vs. heart” conflict?
4. As we see in the story of Rachel and Leah, physical appearances have been a fixation of people since the ancient days of the Bible. Why do you think we as humans focus so much on outward beauty?
5. Were you previously aware of the concept of dualism? How does the author define dualism on pages 141-142?
6. What potential problems arise when we have the mentality, “body = bad; soul = good”?
7. How does belief in Jesus’ bodily resurrection challenge the notion that bodies are bad? What message of hope does Jesus’ bodily resurrection give to you?
8. On your own this week, spend a few minutes looking at your reflection in a full-length mirror and ask the following questions: What do you see? What do you like about your body? What features or characteristics make you beautiful, both on the outside and the inside? How do you think God views your physical body? Then, take some time to thank God for “fearfully and wonderfully” creating you (Psalm 139:14). Pray for healed vision so that you may see yourself as God sees you.

Chapter 8 - Death of Invincibility

1. “The world does not stop for an upset stomach!” (152) Share about an experience when you pushed through physical pain or illness to complete a task or assignment.
2. How can sickness or physical discomfort be a reminder for us to slow down?
3. Does our culture perpetuate the lie that people are invincible? In what ways?
4. Had you previously heard the story of Naaman? What lessons can we learn from his account?
5. Naaman attempted to repay the prophet Elisha for healing him, but Elisha refused, “forcing Naaman to receive God’s resurrection power as a gift” (161). Do you like receiving gifts, or do you find it difficult to accept free gifts from others?
6. Respond to the statement, “Resurrection is free, but it is costly. It costs us our pride” (162). How do you feel about this statement? Have you found it to be true in your own life?
7. What do you think it means to accept our mortality as a gift to be embraced, not a curse to be overcome?
8. Are you currently living life at an unsustainable pace? What can you do this week to take time to pause and slow down?



Chapter 9 - Death of Image

1. In school, what kind of student were you? Were you a high achiever, like the author's description of herself? Were you the class clown? The jock? The pretty one? Something else?
2. How would you describe the image of the "ideal man" or the "perfect woman" based on society's expectations? What traits or skills are respected and highly valued in your social circles?
3. Pop culture and media love a good failure story. Give some examples of celebrities or famous figures that have failed publicly or fallen from grace.
4. "The ideal image comes at a price" (165). What prices are people willing to pay in their attempt to acquire the perfect image?
5. On page 167, the author writes that to get to the top you must "Avoid. Protect yourself" from people who would hinder you or cause failure. What other coping strategies do we employ to maintain a perfect image?
6. The Jewish patriarch Jacob was plagued by a "hunger to win" (168) and his "need to achieve" (169). In what ways did his drive for the perfect image damage relationships with his family?
7. How might pursuing a successful image potentially damage our relationship with others? How does it interfere with our relationship with God?
8. What old labels, twisted lies, or flawed images is God calling you to leave behind? What new name or title has God given to you? How do you need to extend grace to yourself today?

Epilogue - Signs of Life

1. What "season" is it in your life right now? Are you experiencing the re-birth and new growth of spring? Or are you facing the cold and darkness of winter?
2. On page 186, the author writes, "Through Christ's life, death, and resurrection, the kingdom of God has broken into creation, promising the arrival of an eternal spring." What is one thing you are looking forward to when the kingdom of God is fully revealed?
3. What signs of life and resurrection do you see in the world around you right now?
4. How would you summarize the major theme(s) of this book?
5. Which chapter or "death" resonated with you the most?
6. What is one quote or thought that you would like to take away from this book?

Study guide writer bio:

Shannon Greene is an ordained elder in the Church of the Nazarene and serves on staff at the United Methodist Church of the Resurrection as the Director of Confirmation. She has a passion for youth and young adults and loves to see women being empowered for ministry in the Church. She resides in Kansas City, Missouri, along with her husband Randy and their dog Oscar.

