

Church of the Small Things

STUDY GUIDE

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Church of the Small Things

Sparkly Green Earrings

The Antelope in the Living Room

Nobody's Cuter than You

Church of the Small Things

Making a Difference Right Where You Are

STUDY GUIDE

SIX SESSIONS

Melanie Shamke

With Karen Lee-Thorp



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Melanie Shankle is represented by Lisa Jackson, Alive Literary Agency, 7680 Goddard Street, Suite 200, Colorado Springs, Colorado 80920, www.aliveliteraryagency.com.

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Session One

Being Faithful in the Small Things

Live in me. Make your home in me just as I do in you. . . .
I am the Vine, you are the branches. When you're joined
with me and I with you, the relation intimate and organic,
the harvest is sure to be abundant.

John 15:4-5 MSG



Getting Settled

The following paragraphs will orient you to what's coming in this session. Have a group member read them aloud.

When we read the Bible, we can get the impression that life is all about the big moments when God communicates audibly and dramatically with someone and changes his or her life forever. Like when God told Abraham to leave his country and go to a land that God promised to give to Abraham's descendants. Or when God told Abraham he was going to have a son named Isaac the following year.

What we often fail to notice is the long stretches of time that passed between these big moments. Abraham was seventy-five years old when he finally left his country to go to the Promised Land. Seventy-five! What had his life been about all those years before then? He hadn't been raising a family—he was childless. He had been raising sheep and goats, keeping them from tumbling into ravines or getting eaten by wolves (sheep are stupid and helpless). He had been on the move constantly to find water and grazing land for his herds. He had been doing the small daily things of a herdsman.

Abraham was ninety-nine years old when he got the huge news about Isaac. What went on in his life for twenty-four years between Genesis 12:4 and 17:1? A few big moments, including a really dumb decision to have a child with his wife's maid, but mostly a lot of caring for sheep and goats.

Few of us will have the kind of dramatic moments with God that Abraham had. Instead, we will know God—or fail to notice him—in the mundane work of herding sheep or goats or children or office colleagues.

Our life is full of small moments and small wonders that God is using in such a big way. And I think the small moments in our lives are no less holy than the big moments. Maybe it's the small moments that are even more holy, because those are the million little pieces of our lives that God uses to make a difference right where we are.

—Melanie

In this first session, we're going to think about the small things in our lives that shape the people we are becoming. We're going to look for the small ways we make a difference in others' lives—not despite our daily routine but in the midst of it. We're going on a treasure hunt through our very ordinary lives. Your life matters far more than you think.

Checking In

Give each group member one minute to share an answer to this icebreaker question. Your group leader can go first.

What was one small thing you did today for someone else?

Video Notes

Watch the video teaching segment for session 1. Use the outline below to fill in your thoughts about what you get out of the video.

Round Top, Texas

“There are many of us that are willing to do great things for the Lord, but few of us are willing to do little things.” —Dwight L. Moody

The feeding of the five thousand

God’s will

The possibilities are endless

Vine and branches

In the grocery store

Kicking It Around

Discuss the following questions in your group. If there are more than twelve of you, consider dividing into smaller groups for discussion. Or select those questions that seem most compelling to you.

1. Which of Melanie's thoughts from this session's video resonated most with you, and why?

When Jesus looked up and saw a great crowd coming toward him, he said to Philip, “Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?” He asked this only to test him, for he already had in mind what he was going to do.

Philip answered him, “It would take more than half a year’s wages to buy enough bread for each one to have a bite!”

Another of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, spoke up, “Here is a boy with five small barley loaves and two small fish, but how far will they go among so many?”

Jesus said, “Have the people sit down.” There was plenty of grass in that place, and they sat down (about five thousand men were there). Jesus then took the loaves, gave thanks, and distributed to those who were seated as much as they wanted. He did the same with the fish.

(John 6:5–11)

2. Think about John 6:5–11. What if the person who packed the boy’s lunch never learned that five thousand people were miraculously fed by that lunch? How is this like or unlike the situation you find yourself in most days?

3. Do people tend to thank you for the small things you do during your day? Why do you suppose that’s the case? How does that affect you?

We're in God's will when we wake up every day with a willingness to say, "God, I'm going to go where you lead me to go today. What do you have for me today? Where can I be faithful to you today? This family that you've given me, this job that you've given me, this life that you've given me—where can I show up and be faithful today?" It may not be the glamorous thing, but it's the faithful thing.

—Melanie

4. What was the faithful thing for you to do today?

5. What helps you notice and do the faithful thing? What gets in the way?

We can spend so much time wondering and worrying if we're fulfilling God's primary will for our lives. Yet, ultimately, God's will isn't about the things we achieve; it's about the people we become.

—Church of the Small Things, page 12

6. What kind of person do you want to become?

How does someone become that kind of person? What role might small actions play?

Trying It Out

Pair up with a partner. Take five minutes to talk about your day, and let your partner help you see where God was at work in the small things. Then switch and spend five minutes talking about your partner's day. Your leader will keep track of time.

Below are some discussion starters. Use any of them that are helpful.

The main things I remember about my day were _____.

God may have been at work when _____.

One of the challenges I faced today was _____.

God helped me through that by _____.

On Your Own

Session One

If you really want to get somewhere in this study, take some time before the next group session to work through these solo exercises.

Listen to Your Life

“I am the true vine. . . . Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.”

(John 15:1, 4)

Think about these John 15 verses. What do you think it means to “remain” in Jesus? (Other translations use the words “abide in” or “live in”—what does that mean?) How do you go about staying connected to the Source that gives you the ability to bear fruit?

Which of these sounds most like you?

- ☐ I try very hard to bear fruit.
- ☐ I try very hard to remain in Jesus and leave the worries about fruit-bearing to him.
- ☐ I'm desperately trying to keep my head above water with all the things I have to do, so I don't try very hard to do either of these things.
- ☐ Something else (describe yourself):

What is something you want to do, or stop doing, in light of what you have learned so far about small things and bearing fruit?

Listen to your life. See it for the fathomless mystery it is. In the boredom and pain of it, no less than in the excitement and gladness: touch, taste, smell your way to the holy and hidden heart of it, because in the last analysis all moments are key moments, and life itself is grace.

—Frederick Buechner, Now and Then

Most of us do a lot for other people that we don't think of as "ministry" or "servanthood." We think of it as mothering or doing the job that pays the mortgage. But we need to become aware of the dignity attached to these things that we do.

Write down ten things you've done this week to make someone else's life better. These can be very small things like washing your children's underwear or creating a clear and accurate spreadsheet or collecting a neighbor's mail while she is out of town.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____
8. _____
9. _____
10. _____

What themes do you see running through these great or small acts of generosity? Maybe your first reaction is, *Oh yeah, isn't it great to be an underpaid (or unpaid) drudge! My life is about as exciting as watching ice cream melt.* Have a laugh or a cry about it. But then cycle back around and think about what you've written. Or maybe your work is highly fulfilling and important, but until now you haven't thought of the things you do as helping other people.

What do you notice? For instance, who do you care for? Do you tend to do these things with an attitude of boredom or frustration or flat-out anger? Or do you do them with some other attitude? Are you aware of any moments of joy in these small things? (If the answer is no, that's fine. This is only session 1!)

Think about one of the actions you've listed above. How did it possibly make a difference in someone's life, even if the person wasn't aware of it or didn't thank you?

Nothing is wasted when we view it through the lens of what God has for us in whatever life brings our way. It's all a part of who we are and who he is making us to be. For some, that may be a public role on a big stage, but for the vast majority of us, it's about being faithful in the small stuff: going to the grocery store, volunteering in our kid's classroom, befriending the new girl, coaching a Little League team, showing up for work every day, being kind to our neighbors.

— Church of the Small Things, page 25

On pages 22–23, create a timeline of your life, from birth until now. Mark it with the big moments like “graduated from high school,” “graduated from college,” “landed first job doing _____,” “got engaged,” and so on. (Draw a picture or two if you'd like!) Then see if you can also mark it with at least three moments or stretches of time when you learned something significant that has affected you for good or ill since then.

Describe those three life lessons here, along with the moments or stretches of time that went with them:

Lesson #1

Lesson #2

Lesson #3

Sometimes we get caught up in thinking that the thing God has for us is something huge but hidden, and we either have to work really hard to figure it all out or wait until he drops that thing in our laps like manna from heaven.

—Church of the Small Things, page 24

Which of these are true of you?

- ☐ I have been working really hard to figure out what huge thing God has for me.
- ☐ I have been waiting for God to drop a huge thing (a calling) into my lap.
- ☐ I have a huge calling, and I have been following where it leads.
- ☐ I look for small callings in the daily ordinariness of life.
- ☐ I have been pursuing a huge calling, but it hasn't worked out the way I expected.
- ☐ None of the above.

The Timeline of My Life



The Timeline of My Life



Is there anything more you want to say about your experience of calling or lack thereof?

Listen to the Word

The book of Ruth is four short chapters about two women named Ruth and Naomi. At the beginning of the story, Naomi and her husband leave the Promised Land and move to the neighboring pagan country of Moab because of a famine in their part of Israel (Judah). Leaving the Promised Land shows a lack of faith—it equals saying that the Lord, the God of Israel, won't provide for them in the land he gave them. Sure enough, bad things happen to Naomi in Moab: her husband and both sons die.

Ruth is one of Naomi's Moabite daughters-in-law. Israelites aren't supposed to marry Moabites because of the temptation to worship Moabite gods. Ruth knows nothing about Naomi's God other than what Naomi and her family have told her. She does know that she's likely to be unwelcome back in Judah—a foreigner from a pagan nation.

Over the course of this study guide we will read the book of Ruth to see what it can tell us about living in the Church of the Small Things.

Read Ruth 1.

What does Ruth do in this first chapter?

Would you say what she does is a big thing or a small thing? Why?

What appears to be Ruth's motivation for doing what she does?

Where is God in this story so far? Would you say his role is obvious or hidden in this chapter? Why?

What in this chapter of Ruth is relevant to you as you seek to discern God in the small things of your life?

A life isn't made from one thing, one big moment, or one huge success. It's created moment by moment, often with pieces that don't look like anything beautiful on their own but are the very fabric of who God meant for us to become as we pack lunches, raise kids, love our neighbors, and simply be who he created us to be; nothing more, nothing less.

— Church of the Small Things, page 15

Respond to God

Hopefully, all of this listening has gotten your mind and heart whirring in gear and ready to respond. God wants you to offer to him the honest thoughts and feelings that have arisen in you. See if you can put them into words in a letter to God.

Dear God,

Thank you for the small things in my life. Most specifically, thank you for

I am grateful for these because

What I've learned so far from listening to my life is

I still wonder about

I'm hoping that by the end of this study I will

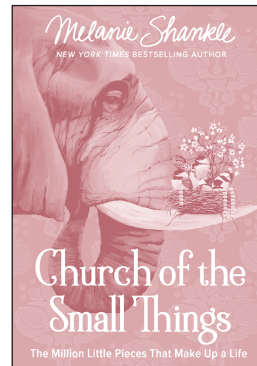
I also want to tell you that

Much love,

Church of the Small Things

The Million Little Pieces That Make Up a Life

Melanie Shankle



Is my ordinary, everyday life actually significant? Is it okay to be fulfilled by the simple acts of raising kids, working in an office, and cooking chicken for dinner?

It's been said, "Life is not measured by the number of breaths we take, but by the number of moments that take our breath away." The pressure of that can be staggering as we spend our days looking for that big thing that promises to take our breath away. Meanwhile, we lose sight of the small significance of fully living with every breath we take.

Melanie Shankle, *New York Times* bestselling author and writer at *The Big Mama Blog* tackles these questions head on in her fourth book, *Church of the Small Things*. Easygoing and relatable, she speaks directly to the heart of women of all ages who are longing to find significance and meaning in the normal, sometimes mundane world of driving carpool to soccer practice, attending class on their college campus, cooking meals for their family, or taking care of a sick loved one.

The million little pieces that make a life aren't necessarily glamorous or far-reaching. But God uses some of the smallest, most ordinary acts of faithfulness—and sometimes they look a whole lot like packing lunch.

Through humorous stories told in her signature style, full of Frito pie, best friends, the love of her Me-Ma and Pa-Pa, the unexpected grace that comes when we quit trying to measure up, and a little of the best TV has to offer, Melanie helps women embrace what it means to live a simple, yet incredibly meaningful life and how to find all the beauty and laughter that lies right beneath the surface of every moment.