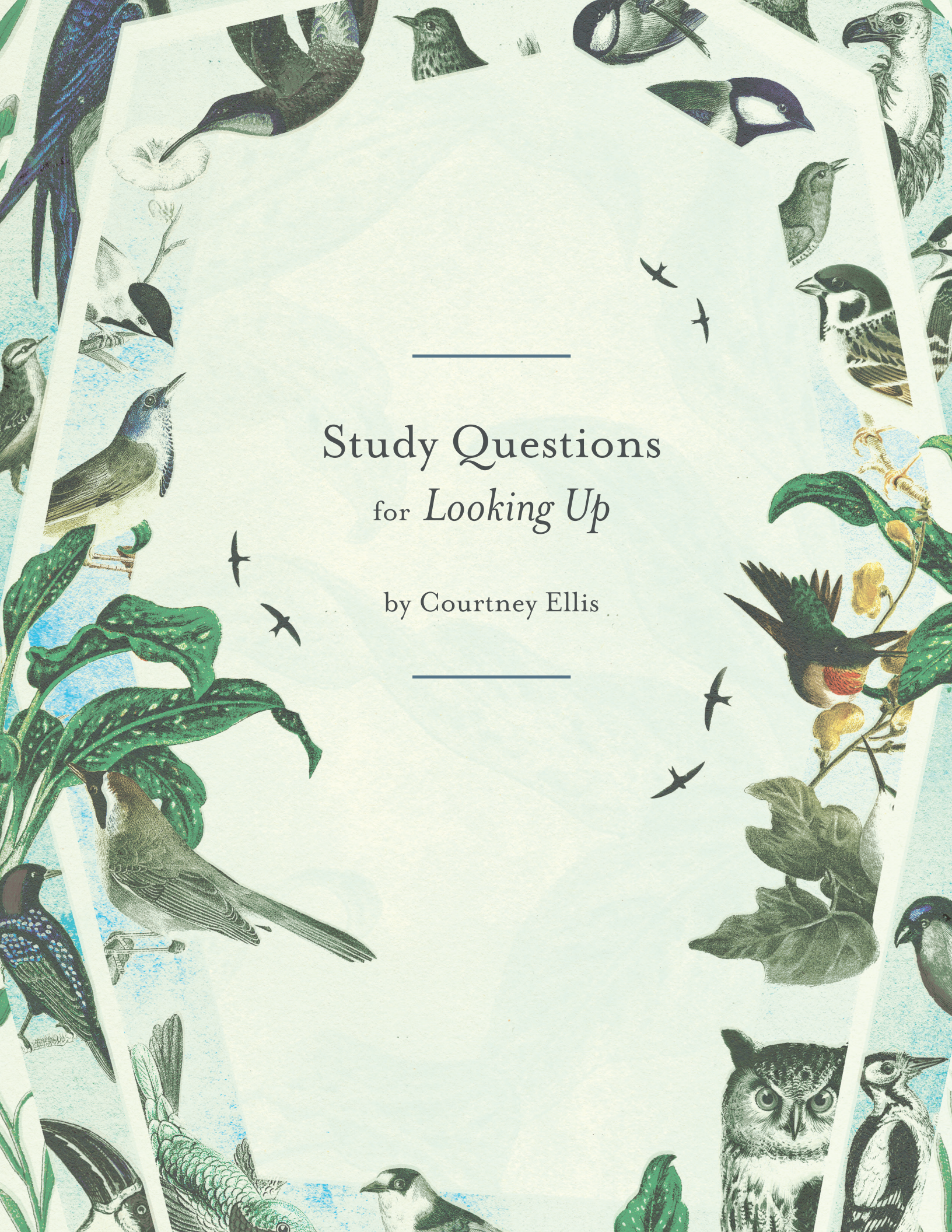


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Study Questions  
for *Looking Up*

by Courtney Ellis

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## *Looking Up: A Birder's Guide to Hope Through Grief*

### AUTHOR'S DISCUSSION GUIDE

## *1 – LOOKING UP: BIRDING*

1. Do you have a spark bird? (A particular species that first kindled your interest in birding?) Share the story of when you encountered it and why it gripped you. If birds aren't your thing, share the story of how another interest or passion began.
2. God tells Moses to take off his shoes, for the ground upon which he stands is holy. Have you ever felt like you were standing on holy ground? What about that encounter felt special to you?
3. On page 11 Courtney draws the parallel between God telling Abraham to look up (Genesis 15:1-6) at the stars and Jesus telling the crowd to look at the birds (Matthew 6:26). How might raising our gaze upward, to stars, birds, or other facets of God's good creation, affect our spirits?
4. What role has grief had in your life? What role does it have today?
5. Courtney writes that "To keep being alive is to hope." (Page 14) Do you agree or disagree? Elaborate upon your answer.
6. Where are you finding hope right now?

## *2 – DEATH: VULTURES*

1. How do you feel about vultures? Are there other animals you can think of that we might associate with death?
2. What was your first experience with death? What impression did it make upon you?
3. Courtney writes that "Nature regularly blurs the lines between beauty and mystery and comedy and horror. The end of life can do the same." (Page 24) Have you ever experienced any of these four descriptors of the end of life? Share the story.
4. Courtney makes the case that "we are all grieving." (Page 28). She lists small, temporary griefs like dropping an ice cream cone, failing to find a library book that's missing from the

stacks, or not receiving an invitation to a party. Then she lists bigger griefs—disillusionment, divorce, fearing for our safety, losing someone we love to death. What is one small thing that you are grieving today?

5. What big thing are you grieving? How has this grief shaped you?
6. If you were to choose one of the three Scripture passages Courtney lists on page 20 for your own funeral (Job 19:25, John 11:25, or Revelation 1:17-18) which would it be and why?

### 3 – *UNCERTAINTY: MOCKINGBIRDS*

1. According to Courtney mockingbirds are “very extra.” (Page 36) Do you relate to them at all? In what ways?
2. Have you ever struggled to listen to God “in the cacophony” of your “own soul,” as Courtney describes on page 33? Have you found any practices (spiritual, physical, or emotional) that help quiet that inner turmoil?
3. She writes that most of us don’t tolerate uncertainty very well. (Page 36) Is this true of you? In what ways does this show up in your life?
4. Courtney writes, “Uncertainty is painful. But sometimes it is also merciful.” Later she muses, “I wish there was a way to know what the future held. But if there was, could I bear it? Could any of us?” (Page 40 and 45) How might knowing exactly what will happen in the future be a burden rather than a blessing? (You may wish to read Matthew 24:32-36 for further discussion.)
5. Henri Nouwen once wrote that “much of praying is grieving.” Do you agree? How has grief shaped your prayer life?
6. Has there ever been a time in your life when you found God “handing [you] new sheet music, asking [you] to add an unexpected chorus to a concert program [you] thought was already filled”? (Page 50) How did you cope with the change in plans?

### 4 – *LIFE: SPARROWS*

1. At the airport, Courtney tells the gate agent about her tight connection and her dying grandfather, and he not only helps her solve her problem, but he also treats her with additional kindness. When have you experienced kindness in a time of need like this?
2. C. S. Lewis writes that “There are no ordinary people.” Lisa Sharon Harper calls us “Beloved dust.” What does it mean to you that God created each of us uniquely?
3. Sparrows are everywhere! Are you familiar with the types in your area? If so, which ones do you tend to see? If not, take a moment and look up common species in your area. (An easy way to see what birds are likely right where you live is to download the free Merlin App



from The Cornell Lab of Ornithology.) Are there more varieties than you expected?

4. Courtney writes that “it can be easy to despise what is familiar. We hunger for newness and novelty.” (Page 58) In what ways have you experienced the desire for newness in your own life?
5. According to Courtney, “Sparrows are also a reminder that God’s care is not dependent on our own transcendence or charisma or beauty...sparrows can blend in until we stop seeing them at all. God never does.” (Page 60) How might it free, inspire, or encourage you to remember that God’s care doesn’t depend on you?
6. In Isaiah 6:9, God tells Isaiah, “Go and tell this people, be ever hearing, but never understanding; be ever seeing, but never perceiving.” Courtney asserts that “Disobedience to God’s call dulls our senses and darkens our awareness. It is faithfulness that guides our steps toward wonder.” How might faithfulness open us up to awe and joy? How does unfaithfulness do the opposite?

## 5 – *END TIMES: OWLS*

1. At the time she wrote this book, Courtney had yet to find an owl in the wild. (Since, she’s seen several! Hooray!) Have you ever seen (or heard) an owl in the wild? Share the experience.
2. What comes to mind when you think about the end of the world? What emotions arise in you?
3. Courtney writes that the end times are when God “will one day say enough,” and that this is “not terror, but grace.” Do you agree? What do you think God will say enough to? (For further reading, check out Revelation 21:1-5)
4. According to Courtney, when it comes to the end of the world, the witness of Scripture teaches that “We are to be watchful, not paranoid. Awake, not anxious.” Do you agree? Why or why not?
5. After an anxious dream one night, Courtney wakes “wanting to crawl into the arms of Jesus, to turn off the news and take a few deep breaths and point all of us toward the trees. Look up, I’d say. Look at the birds.” (Page 74) How can the natural world be a balm in times of worry?
6. Courtney writes that two pitfalls we encounter when thinking about the end times are to ignore it altogether or to become obsessive about it. (Page 79) Which of these do you lean toward? What would a healthy center path look like for you?

## 6 – *DAILINESS: FINCHES*

1. Finches are common yard birds in much of the world. Do you have finches in your yard or near your workplace? If so, what kind? (If you aren't sure, perhaps today is a good day to go investigate!)
2. Briefly describe an ordinary day for you. What parts of it do you love? What parts feel like drudgery?
3. Courtney writes, "I wonder how much of the ordinary is quiet grace in disguise." Monastic orders tend to view the simple work of cooking, gardening, building, etc. as holy because it is these ordinary tasks that shape our souls over time. What are a few of the mundane tasks do you do on a given week?
4. Do you see God at work in your heart through any mundane tasks of your life?
5. In many denominations (Presbyterian, Lutheran, Methodist, Episcopalian, Catholic, etc.) green is the color given to Ordinary Time (the few weeks between Epiphany and Lent, and the many weeks between Pentecost and Advent). Why do you think "normal" seasons of the church year are given a color signifying growth, nature, and new life?
6. Courtney writes, "These are the true miracles—wiping the nose of the child for the hundredth time, forgiving the careless word even while knowing another is on its heels, showing up once more to the pew, kneeling down again and again and again, waiting for God to speak." (Page 90) What is miraculous about doing the good, ordinary thing time and time again?

## 7 – *BROKENNESS & SIN: HUMMINGBIRDS*

1. Courtney writes that "to become a birder is to have your heart broken again and again." (Page 94) If you're a birder, do you agree? If not, Is there a hobby, job, relationship, or cultural reality that has broken your heart time and time again? Share the story.
2. In what ways have humans "ravaged creation?" (Page 95.)
3. Do you agree that "broken hearts are tilled soil, fertile and ready for the seeds of repentance"? (Page 97) Why or why not? What happens when we allow our hearts to break over these painful things?
4. Courtney walks the line between frantic action and apathetic despair, writing that "We are summoned to take what action we can, while remembering all the while that the work—and hope—rest ultimately only with the Lord." (Page 97) What action have you felt called to take?
5. How might the beauty, tenacity, and resilience of hummingbirds—such small creatures who migrate such long distances!—help tether us to hope?

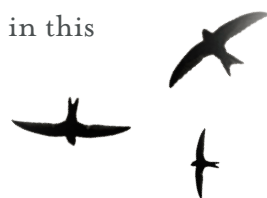
6. Read I Corinthians 15:26, 42, and 52-57. Courtney's grandfather proclaims that "this all" (pain, his hospital stay, and—we might presume—death itself) "is bulls\*\*\*\*." (Page 100.) How does his coarse comment point to a deeper truth?

## 8 – *DELIGHT: WARBLERS*

1. When did you last experience delight?
2. Courtney writes, "It is getting in touch with our own mortality that first alerts many of us to the delight of birding. Feeling the shortness of years, the finitude of our lives, the limits of our strength or health or abilities begins to slow us down enough to pause in beauty, noticing the gifts present in common things." (Page 109). If you're a birder, when did you begin? What about it delights you? If you aren't a birder, what is a regular practice that brings you delight?
3. Each Lent, Courtney practices #aBirdFromTheLord, waiting in quiet stillness for ten minutes, alert and ready for what winged delights God may bring to her yard. Poet Ross Gay worked to develop a "delight radar," learning to notice small, simple joys. Read Psalm 37:1-4. Do you have any unusual spiritual practices that help you experience God-given delight?
4. Do you have any warblers in your area right now? What about during migration season? If so, what kind is your favorite?
5. How might tuning in more regularly to the wonders of the natural world help us train ourselves in delight?
6. Courtney shares the story of when her sister gave her grandfather—a diabetic—Pepsi in the hours before his death. (His nurse said it was okay!) This small pleasure unites her family in the joy of being able to offer a small comfort to a dying man. How can simple pleasures bring us together?

## 9 – *GRIEF: ALBATROSSES*

1. Have you ever seen an albatross? If not, take a moment and look up a video of one in flight. What do you notice about its size? Its wingspan? Its coloring and behavior? How might an albatross around the neck, from Coleridge's poem "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" be an apt metaphor for grief?
2. Have you ever been at the bedside of a dying man or woman? Share the story, if you're comfortable.
3. Courtney writes that she wants to offer some final comfort, but there is nothing left to do. "That, too, is part of the grief," she writes. "We all want to help, to save everyone in this



room from the anguish that is to come, but there is nothing more anyone can do. Being present in the pain is all we have.” (Page 122) Why can it be valuable to be present in the pain, rather than running or distracting ourselves away from it?

4. According to Courtney, “In grief we require tenderness and time, but we live in a world of brutality and hurry.” (Page 123) Have you ever felt pushed or rushed through your grief? Share the story.
5. At the tomb of Lazarus, Jesus weeps (John 11:17-36). Why do you think Jesus was crying, even though he was about to raise Lazarus from the dead? What permissions does it give us when we see Jesus weeping over the loss of his dear friend?
6. What has most comforted you in your grief? What was least helpful?

## 10 – *PARTNERSHIP: WRENS*

1. Courtney shares the story of telling her children about the death of their great-grandfather. (Page 134-135) Have you ever had to deliver difficult news? Share the story.
2. Name a person who partners with you in life. This may be a spouse, friend, family member, or colleague. What does their partnership mean to you? How does it help?
3. In *The Genius of Birds*, Jennifer Ackerman writes that some wrens interweave their songs so seamlessly “it sounds like a single bird singing alone.” (Page 137) Have you ever experienced a relationship so close you could finish one another’s sentences? Share the story.
4. Courtney writes of the staggering statistics on modern loneliness, attributing it not primarily to busyness or exhaustion but because we’ve become “afraid of knowing and being known.” (Page 138). Do you agree or disagree? Elaborate upon your answer.
5. After the death of Courtney’s grandfather, her friend Anna tells her to be very gentle with herself. (Page 141) Do you find it difficult to treat yourself with gentleness? Why or why not? What does it mean to you that Jesus described himself as gentle (Matthew 11:29)?
6. How might God be inviting you to be gentle with yourself this week?

## 11 - *PEACE: DOVES*

1. At his memorial service, the funeral director calls Courtney’s grandfather the wrong name. (Page 146) Have you ever experienced a small indignity like this during a difficult time? What was it like?
2. Have you been to a funeral or memorial service lately? Who was it for, and what do you remember about it?
3. The prophet Jeremiah warns those who speak of good times when discord or disaster is the

order of the day. Read Jeremiah 8:11. Why is it important to be honest about how deep our injury goes?

4. Courtney writes, “The peace spoken of in Scripture, borne in the body of Jesus on the cross, is stronger than any weapon we can fashion, more powerful than hatred, destruction, wickedness, or violence. Its power is love and love, Scripture tells us, never fails.” (Page 152) Have you experienced this peace?
5. “In times of despair,” writes Courtney “the birds point me back to God. ‘The story isn’t over yet,’ they remind me, as they keep building nests.” (Page 153) In what ways have you experienced the natural world bringing peace to your heart? To others?
6. Courtney writes that no one is certain about her grandfather’s final destiny, but she is sure of one thing: that God loved him. (Page 156) How can we rest in the love of God when we don’t have all the answers we seek?

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## 12 - *LOVE: PELICANS*

1. Why was the pelican a Medieval symbol for Jesus? (Page 160) Are there other cultural symbols that we associate with Christ? What about biblical symbols? (For two examples, check out John 1:29 and Revelation 5:5.)
2. Courtney always wanted to learn to surf, but when her friend took her out on the waves, she learns that it isn’t her thing. Have you ever tried something new and realized quickly that it wasn’t for you?
3. How did people’s love for eagles and other large birds help save them from the brink of extinction? (Page 167)
4. According to Courtney, “There is a sensitivity borne from suffering.” Do you agree? Are there any ways that suffering in your own life has made you more sensitive toward your neighbors? Toward creation? Toward the whispers of the Holy Spirit?
5. Eugene Peterson writes about learning to love birds, in part, by learning their names. (Page 169-170) How does learning more about something help us to love it more deeply? Can you think of an example from your own life?
6. Courtney writes that “death opens up new paths to love.” Have you ever experienced new facets of your love for someone after their death?

## 13 - *TRUTH & BEAUTY: CORVIDS*

1. How do you feel about crows? Why do you think this is the case?
2. Courtney writes that some people really don’t like Blue Jays, calling them “mean.” But she



makes the case that they aren't being unkind, they're simply "really good at being Blue Jays." (Page 178) Do you agree that there's a certain beauty in a creature being fully itself?

3. Read Romans 1:20. According to Courtney, "Natural theology teaches that God can be known, at least in part, from creation." Are there any ways you have discovered more about who God is through the natural world?
4. While looking at photographs after her grandfather's memorial service, Courtney writes, "I realize in this moment that my grandfather was a beautiful person. I realize, maybe for the first time, that there isn't any other kind." (Page 185) Have you ever been surprised to discover beauty in a person or thing where you didn't expect it?
5. After sharing a story about a difficult dental visit, Courtney writes, "The truth can be a shock, but it's also the only path to healing." (Page 187) Have you ever been shocked by a necessary but painful truth? How did new knowledge of that truth affect you?
6. Courtney writes that, "Part of grieving my grandfather is making peace with the ways I disappointed him." (Page 191) Have you ever had to grapple with disappointing someone, even after their death? Share the story.
7. This chapter concludes with a strong proclamation. "Here is our hope," writes Courtney. "It is in and through and with Christ." How does Jesus center our hope?

## 14 – *REST: QUAIL*

1. Have you ever gotten yourself stuck, like Courtney in the rowboat? Share the story.
2. Quail are communal birds, raising their young and looking out for predators together. How does living in community make things easier for us? How does it make things harder?
3. Courtney describes how healing her sabbatical was after carrying the grief of a pandemic and the death of a family member. (Page 197-198) Have you ever gotten an extended rest like this, either by choice or by necessity? What was it like?
4. Read Numbers 11:4-6, 18-20, and 31-34. What do you make of this bizarre story? Where do you see God's judgment? His mercy?
5. Of her grandfather's death, Courtney writes, "It was all too much to bear alone. So we did it together." (Page 203) Have you ever grieved with others in community? How did it affect your experience?
6. "To be alive is to grieve," writes Courtney. Do you agree? What are you grieving today?

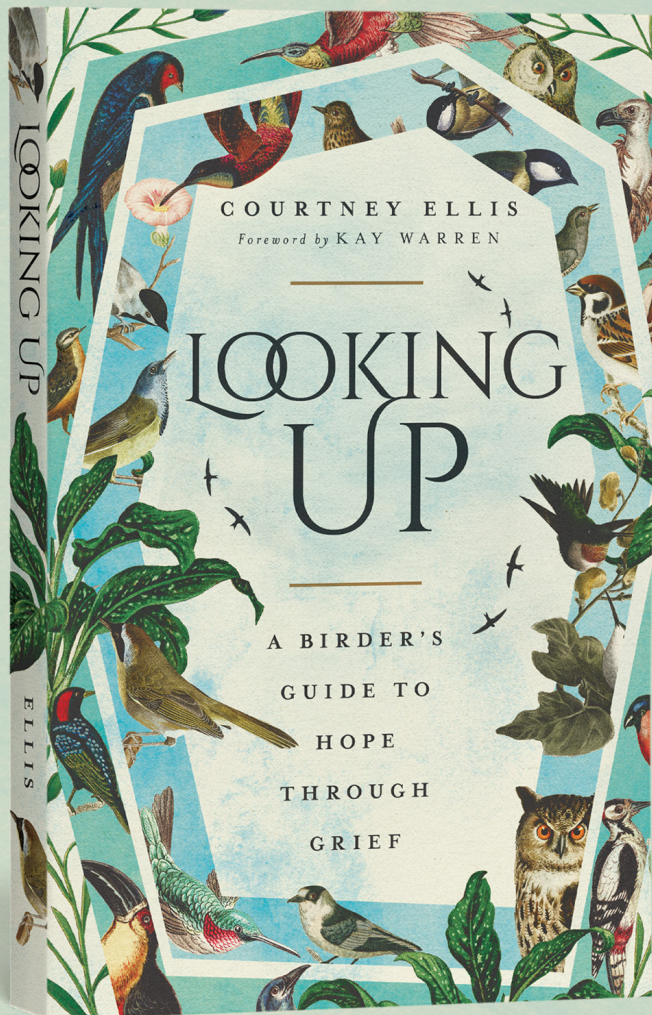
## 15 – *HOPE: BIRDS*

1. Fresh grief can be triggered by a seasonal reminder of a person's death. Has this ever hap-

pened to you? Share the story.

2. Courtney writes that, upon the anniversary of her grandfather's death, she doesn't call her grandmother, "afraid of adding her pain to my own. Grief can turn us inward, and I can't tell whether it's selfishness or survival. Maybe it's both." (Page 209) Have you ever been turned inward by grief?
3. A Cooper's Hawk kills a mockingbird in Courtney's backyard. She, her husband, and her kids watch it devour a mockingbird feeling "awestruck by beauty and horror." (Page 210) Have you ever seen a hawk make a kill? What was it like?
4. "Keep looking up," Courtney writes, "There's almost always someone there." How does birding help remind her that God is near?
5. Read Isaiah 43:1-3a. How does God remind us of his presence in Scripture? In the natural world?
6. Courtney writes that "God offers no promise of ease and few explanations to us this side of eternity. What we do receive is presence. And therein lies the promise—not of certainty or ease or simplicity or overcoming but of the God who was and is and will be God-with-us." (Page 214-215) How does this promise feel to you? How might it help you keep looking up?





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