

The  
Gospel  
ON THE  
Ground

KRISTI MCLELLAND

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kristi McLelland is a speaker, teacher, and college professor. Since completing her Master of Arts in Christian Education at Dallas Theological Seminary, she has dedicated her life to discipleship, to teaching people how to study the Bible for themselves, and to writing about how God is better than we ever knew by explaining the Bible through a Middle Eastern lens. She has written another Bible study on Jesus's earthly ministry and His interactions with first-century women titled *Jesus and Women*. Her great desire for people to truly experience the love of God birthed a ministry in which she leads biblical study trips to Israel, Turkey, Greece, and Italy.

For more information about Kristi and what she's up to, visit: [newlensbiblicalstudies.com](http://newlensbiblicalstudies.com).

# INTRODUCTION

Every adventure begins in a moment, and the best ones come to us.

As we begin our study of *The Gospel on the Ground*, I want to share a bit about myself and my journey. In 2007, an adventure found me; the Lord opened the door for me to study the Bible in Egypt and Israel. During that time, I got to know the historical, cultural, linguistic, and geographical world of the Bible.

I was eating foods that Abraham ate, seeing stars in the sky that Jesus saw from earth when He looked up at night, and walking on ancient roads that Peter and Paul would have walked more than two thousand years ago. I learned to study and understand the Bible through the Middle Eastern lens (the way it would have been understood in Jesus's first-century world) rather than the Western lens that usually shapes the way we read God's Word in the United States today.

Studying the written Word of God in the living land of God where it all actually happened changed me forever. And here I am fourteen years later still talking about all I learned and all I continue to learn.

You may know that Jerusalem is considered the epicenter of the earth for the Jewish people. It's known as the city where God's name dwells. It's known as the city where God's temple stood during Solomon's reign and during the time of Jesus. *Yerushalayim*—the destination of all pilgrimage travel to the Holy Land for thousands of years.<sup>1</sup>

Jerusalem feels like home to me. I feel the most whole and centered when I am there. I feel God there—as I see the places where Jesus walked and as I occupy the incarnational spaces He once filled in His thirty-three years on earth.

As a Jewish man, Jesus would have visited Jerusalem a few times a year to observe the annual festivals according to the commands of God. In His adulthood, Jesus was known as a Galilean Rabbi because His family was from Galilee. He lived His whole life within the districts of Galilee, Samaria, and Judea. For the vast majority of His life, He never traveled outside of a one-hundred-mile radius from where He was born. Yet His name is spoken and known in every corner of the earth.

How can that be? How does a man who lived a relatively short life of just more than thirty years and who spent His time mostly within a one-hundred-mile radius change the entire world and the course of all of human history?

This “gospel on the ground” feast is the story of how this Jesus-centered, world transformation happened and how it is *still* happening in our world and in our lives today.

(If you’ve never studied the Bible with me before, you’ll learn that I call our study times together “feasts” because we don’t so much *read* the Word of God as we *eat* it. We take it in, and we let it do its work in us. More on that later.)

We’ve discussed how Jerusalem was important to the Jewish people during Jesus’s time on earth and it remains so to this day.

Jerusalem is also important to us as the New Testament church, even now. And here’s why: the church was birthed in Jerusalem—at God’s house, the temple—during one of the three main annual foot festivals, Pentecost.

We find our beginning here—in Jerusalem at God’s house. But the story of the Bible and the church doesn’t end in Jerusalem.

Something began that day at Pentecost—something that is still underway today, in this very moment.

Something Jesus had told them to look for, to wait for . . .

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you;  
and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and  
Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

**ACTS 1:8**

From Acts 1:8 on, the Bible tells the story of how God’s fledgling church became His witnesses in all the earth by the power of the Holy Spirit. The gospel started moving along the ground, moving out from Jerusalem and into Judea, Samaria, and even further into the heart of the greater Greco-Roman world at that time. The early believers in Jesus carried the story of Jesus with them wherever they went.

And by the end of Acts, we're told that the gospel of Jesus and the way of Jesus, embodied in His followers, had made its way to another important city—the imperial city of the Roman Empire—Rome.

The kingdom of God started invading the empire of this world. And let me tell you, the way of Jesus and the way of Caesar could not have been more different. The empires of the world had been anchored in acquisition. The world's philosophy could be summed up with the phrase “if you are strong enough to take it, it's yours.” When you consider the idea of empire, think of the power and glory of Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece, and Rome in the first century. The world of empire prizes strength and using that strength to stay on top.

In contrast, we find the kingdom of God to be anchored in relinquishment. The way of Jesus says the last will be first. Jesus says we are to lose our lives to gain them. The way of the kingdom of God is entirely upside-down to the way of the world and empire. Caesar will do anything to stay on top. Jesus says the way to flourish is to go low.

As we'll explore together in this biblical feast, the story of the book of Acts and the early church can be summed up in a series of subversively sanctified invasions—God's redemptive work of grace confronting some of the seemingly insurmountable institutions of the world.

The kingdom of celebration invading the empire of entertainment.

The kingdom of abundance invading the empire of scarcity.

The kingdom of togetherness invading the empire of separateness.

I love the way that C. S. Lewis put it:

Enemy-occupied territory—that is what this world is. Christianity is the story of how the rightful king has landed, you might say landed in disguise, and is calling us all to take part in a great campaign of sabotage.<sup>2</sup>

**C. S. LEWIS**

This story continues today with us. We are being drafted into the “great campaign of sabotage” to spread the way and the wisdom of the reign of the rightful and benevolent King.<sup>3</sup>

Even now, you and I are being invited into the movement of the New Testament church as it grows, reaching unto the ends of the earth.

The kingdom of God is still coming down to the ground. And we, as God’s people, are called to bring subversive celebration, abundance, and togetherness—light to a weary world that sometimes seems darker than anything else.

The witness of the women and men of the early church spoke to God’s all-sufficient worth. And the witness of our lives remains potent, speaking a word to the empires of today.

So what do you say?

Will you step into the adventure God is calling you to? Will you let Him use you in this chapter of the church’s story?

Our adventure can begin even at this moment.

Let’s take hold of it together.

All the best,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Krist V. McLeod". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned below the text "All the best,".

## HOW TO USE THIS STUDY

In our time together, we are going to glimpse some snapshots of the early church, mostly living in a Greco-Roman world. We are going to study God's Word in a way that might seem a bit different from what you've experienced in the past. We are going to strive to view the Bible with a Middle Eastern lens and, at the same time, study a few Bible passages in a traditionally Jewish way—the way the rabbis would have taught Jesus the Bible and the way some rabbis still teach the children in Israel today.

With that in mind, let's discuss a bit of the philosophical framework for our study:

### **WE APPROACH THE SCRIPTURES AS CHILDREN EXPECTING TO BE FED BY OUR FATHER.**

It can be easy to sit down with our Bibles and think something like, *OK, let me figure out some application from the passage I'm reading today.* I have good news for you—we are not spiritual orphans. We have a gracious heavenly Father who feeds us to the full with His Word; He gives abundantly. As we read the Word, we do our part by being open to what God will teach us. We posture ourselves to obey and to be gratefully fed by the living God through His Word and by the power of His Spirit. But God is in charge of feeding us.

### **WE'RE NOT LOOKING FOR THE "RIGHT" ANSWER.**

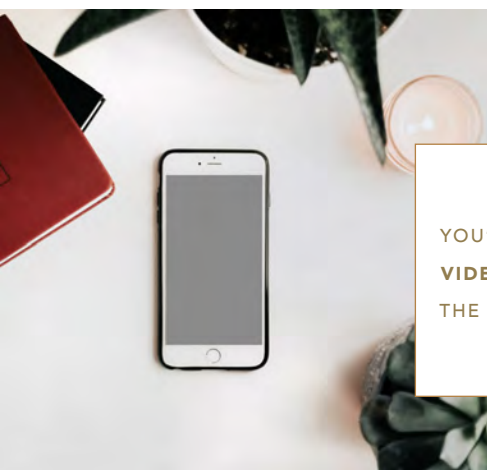
Though it may sound strange to our Western ears, in Judaism, the student with all of the good questions is better than the student with all of the right answers. We never just read the Bible; we interact with it, asking questions of the text. We want to know what a text teaches us about God before we ask what it teaches us about ourselves. In our time together, we're going to focus on interacting with the biblical text in community, and we're going to learn to be OK with questions that cannot be easily answered and even questions that may leave us scratching our heads with a bit of mystery.

## WE WANT GOD'S WORD TO BECOME A PART OF WHO WE ARE.

The Middle Eastern way of learning falls in line with more of an oral teaching tradition, less so the more formal learning style of our Western world. In our study together, we want these concepts in God's Word to get into our hearts and minds so much that they become a part of who we are, changing the way we see God and interact with the world. You'll notice we will revisit some of the same concepts each week; the study is intentionally crafted in this way. By the end of our time together, I hope these biblical concepts are so clear and familiar they are almost like second nature to you.

## LEARNING WILL BE A COMMUNITY ENDEAVOR IN OUR TIME TOGETHER.

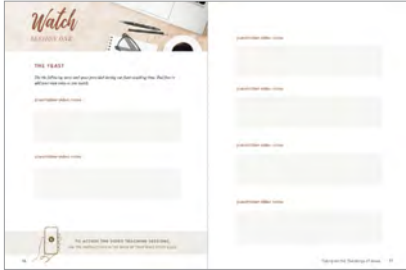
In the Middle Eastern way, learning is very communal. Here's what I mean: in a Middle Eastern context, it would be common to see rabbis teaching students as they walk down the road. This teaching tradition places significant value on students discussing an issue with one another. Rabbis often instruct their students to "go first" and discuss what they believe about a teaching before the teacher explains the concept to them. We're going to adopt some of those ideas in our time together. In many cases, I'll "go first" in our feast-teaching times. But you'll notice group discussion guides that I've crafted especially for you to use as you *yeshiva*, or discuss biblical texts together, after we begin unpacking them in our video teaching sessions.



YOU'LL FIND DETAILED INFORMATION FOR HOW TO **ACCESS THE VIDEO TEACHING SESSIONS** THAT ACCOMPANY THIS STUDY ON THE CARD INSERTED IN THE BACK OF YOUR BIBLE STUDY BOOK.

Each session, you'll find the following sections:

The **Watch** section



The **Discuss** section



The **Follow-Up** section



The **Look** section



The **Learn** section



The **Live** section



The “Watch” and “Discuss” times are meant to be completed with your small group. But the “Follow-up,” “Look,” “Learn,” and “Live” sections are for your personal study time. Instead of labeling them by days of study, we’ve labeled them by sections. Feel free to complete each between our weekly group times as you see fit throughout the week. Please note, terms in the text marked with **THIS STYLE** are explained in further detail in the glossary found on [lifeway.com/gospelontheground](http://lifeway.com/gospelontheground).

Taking on the  
*Teachings*  
*of Jesus*

THE RABBI-TALMID RELATIONSHIP

## SESSION ONE

I'm a professor. At the beginning of every class each semester, I usually tell my college students a few important things. I'll share one of them with you: *The Bible is not only the best story that's ever been told; it's also the truest story that's ever been told.*

The things we read about in the Word of God happened.

Remember, we do not just want to know the Word of God. We want to eat it. We want to take it in like a feast and let it do its work in us. We want it to become part of us so we can carry the Word with us wherever we go.

The Word of God is like great food. Great food is best experienced with great people. In Jesus's world, the Bible was experienced communally first and individually second. In calling His disciples and building His kingdom, Jesus was forming a new covenant people who would not only know what He knows, but be just like Him. Not just in word. But in word and deed.

This seven-session study is a feast to be eaten together as we take a journey through some of the book of Acts. The Word of God is living and active and so are we as God's children. When any believer sits down with a Bible, it is life with life. As we study His Word, the life that God has placed in us through His Holy Spirit interacts with the living Word of God to create more life

in us—abundant life, an overflow of life—because God is the Author of life.

The Word is on the move. The kingdom is on the move. As followers of Jesus, we can't help but be on the move too.

As we journey through the Bible, the book of Acts, and beyond, we will journey together. In antiquity, no one traveled alone. If you traveled alone in that world, you got jacked. You could easily be attacked. Jesus told a parable in Luke 10:30-37; we call it the parable of the good Samaritan. This parable follows a man who traveled alone, and as you may remember, he got jacked! In Jesus's time, you always traveled in a caravan. Usually many families traveled together, helping and aiding one another along the way to their destinations.

We will travel the pages of the Bible together. We will welcome the adventure that is upon us, to live it out—together. So in our own way, we are a caravan.





As we begin our feast and our journey, take a few moments to answer the following questions before you watch the video teaching.

---

**Why did you say yes to this feast and journey?**

**What are you asking the Lord to do in your life through this seven-session feast and journey?**

**Finish the following sentence:**

**"I am here because my heart needs  
\_\_\_\_\_."**

**Who is in your caravan? Who are you feasting with and journeying with through this seven-session adventure?**

# Watch

## SESSION ONE



### THE FEAST

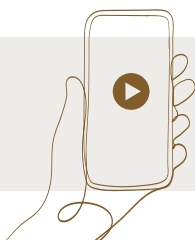
*Use the following notes and space provided during our feast-teaching time. Feel free to add your own notes as you watch.*

Jesus spent the vast majority of His life within a one-hundred-mile radius of where He was born. Yet His name is spoken and known in every corner of the earth. This is the story of how it happened—and is still happening.

**The Greeks loved knowledge. The Romans loved power. The Hebrews have always loved the light.**

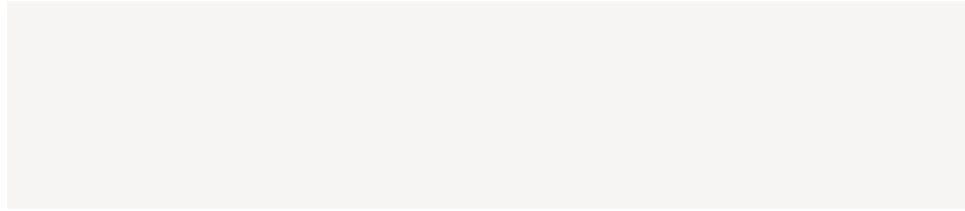
A large, empty rectangular box for taking notes.

**The kingdom of God faces outward. The kingdom of God is on the move.**

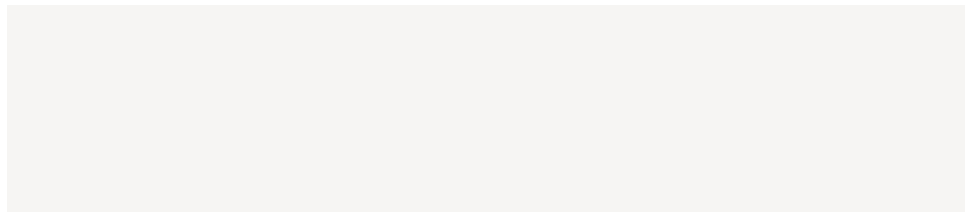
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USE THE INSTRUCTIONS IN THE BACK OF YOUR BIBLE STUDY BOOK.**

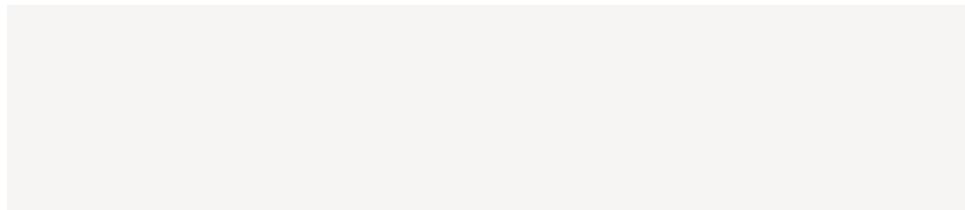
Education and stages of life in a typical Jewish male:



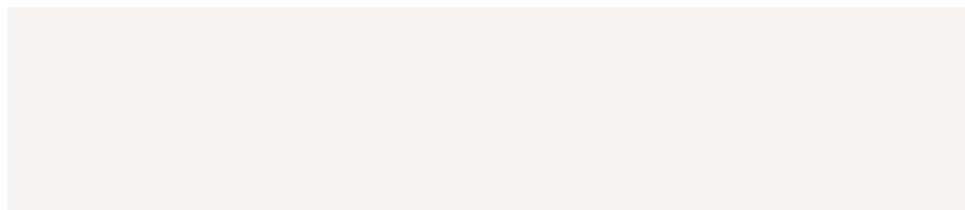
In the first-century Jewish world, people chose their rabbis. Jesus came on the scene and started choosing His disciples.



As a great one (rabbi), He reached for people, invited them to follow Him. In choosing His disciples, Jesus was not saying, "I think you can learn what I know." He was saying, "I think you can be just like me."



We come into this world looking for a face. Discipleship, then and now, is Jesus looking us in our faces and inviting us to follow Him.





*LET'S YESHIVA!*

Both learning and travel were done best in community in the biblical world. We want to practice **YESHIVA** together—discussing, workshopping, and brainstorming around what we heard in this session's video teaching.

As we already briefly discussed, safe travel in antiquity was done in caravans. Families would walk together during the day and stop for rest and sleep at night on the way. As they settled in for the night, they would usually share stories by firelight and eat their food, resting from the long day's journey. Storytelling was the main source of entertainment in the biblical world. They told famous stories, funny stories, sad stories, real stories—their stories. They got to know each other as they journeyed and ate together.

Now that we have feasted on our first video teaching, take some time to discuss the following questions with your group. We're going to learn from each other by journeying together and sharing some of our own stories during this seven-session feast.

**What did you just hear or see in our feast together that you want to remember?**

**What's the most encouraging thing that you learned this week about the rabbi-disciple relationship in the first-century world of Jesus?**

**We come into this world looking for a face. What was your first thought when you heard that statement during the teaching?**





## **WHOM DOES THE LIVING GOD CHOOSE?**

Jesus was highly unusual in His first-century Jewish world as a “great one” (**RABBI**) who went out and chose His disciples. In a world where it was the highest honor to be able to come under the yoke of a rabbi and walk with him, Jesus, the “great one” (rabbi), did the work of seeing, choosing, and inviting people to follow Him and learn to be just like Him. He knew that while He would live most of His earthly life within a one-hundred-mile radius of where He was born, His disciples would be the ones to carry the gospel to the very ends of the earth. He knew *we* would *still* be carrying it to this day.

### *Shalom*

A place of wholeness, flourishing, harmony, and delight.

In choosing His disciples, Jesus was acting like His heavenly Father.

At the very beginning of the biblical story, there was another choosing—all the way back to the *genesis* (meaning *beginning*). The living God created Eden as a place of *shalom*—a place of wholeness, flourishing, harmony, and delight. Sin entered the story in Genesis 3 and *shalom* was lost, fractured, darkened, and marred. The living God would begin the ancient and ever work of bringing deep salvation, restoration, renewal, and redemption to the broken world. *But whom would He choose to partner with Him in this great restoration work?*

**READ GENESIS 12:1-4 AND 15:1-6.**

**What did God promise to Abram?**

**List any information we’re given about Abram’s life in these passages.**

**GOD CHOSE  
ABRAM AND TOLD  
HIM THAT HE  
WOULD MAKE HIM  
INTO ABRAHAM—  
AN EXALTED  
FATHER OF  
A MULTITUDE.**

In the ancient world of patriarchy, males with strength and numbers ruled from the top. Men with lots of children were prized, honored, exalted, and valued. Impotence and barrenness were both considered curses.

We would expect the Lord to pick a “great father” to partner with Him. But He chose a seventy-five-year-old man with zero children (Gen. 12:1-4). He chose Abram. Being a seventy-five-year-old childless male in the ancient world would have been laughable. Abram would have been seen as the epitome of weakness. He was like a blank slate in society’s eyes. No one in that world would have chosen Abram. But the living God did. God chose Abram and told him that He would make him into Abraham—an exalted father of a multitude.

The living God wasn’t done choosing yet.

In the ancient world, the firstborn male was of supreme significance, highly desired, and favored. According to Torah Law, the firstborn received a double-portion of the inheritance (Deut. 21:15-17). The firstborn was seen as the picture of strength, power, and virility—everything prized in that world. The picture we get of Cain, Ishmael, and Esau in the book of Genesis points to strength.

But when we read Genesis, the living God kept choosing the second-born sons, not the firstborn sons.

It’s not Cain. It’s Abel.

It’s not Ishmael. It’s Isaac.

It’s not Esau. It’s Jacob.

The living God was not afraid to choose a seventy-five-year-old impotent male, and He was not afraid to choose second-born sons in a world where firstborn sons held all the strength and preeminence.

The living God still wasn’t done choosing.

For women in antiquity, barrenness was considered a type of curse. It was shameful to be unable to bring forth children into the world, to add to the family, the clan, and the tribe. As a woman in antiquity, you would rather be anything but barren. Being barren was figuratively considered the bottom of the barrel. We would expect the living God to choose fertile women, with babies popping out here, there, and everywhere.

But when we read Genesis, the living God kept choosing barren women to be the wives of the patriarchs! *Whaaaaaaat?*

Abraham's wife Sarah was barren.

Isaac's wife Rebekah was barren.

Jacob's wife Rachel was barren.

When the living God was choosing whom He wanted to partner with to change the world, He chose impotent men, second-born sons, and barren women. Three times over He chose those no one else would have ever chosen.

The Bible was given to us so that we might know who the living God is—what He's like and what it is to walk with Him.

The biblical record tells us that you don't have to be powerful in plenty, strong in might, or fertile in production for the living God to choose you. Jesus knew this, and He chose like His heavenly Father did.

Jesus chose simple fishermen, "sons of thunder" (Mark 3:17), tax collectors, zealots, and others to be His followers. And Jesus chooses you.

**If you are a follower of Jesus, do you really believe Jesus has chosen you? Explain.**

**How would you act differently if you walked every day of your life with a full sense of God's choosing you?**



\* Temple at Capernaum as it appears today

## *LEARNING IN THE TEMPLE*

**READ LUKE 2:41-52.**

**In this story, what is happening?**

**Remember from our earlier discussions—what was in Jerusalem during Jesus’s time on earth?**

**How do you think Joseph and Mary could have missed Jesus in their travels? Take a guess if you’re not sure.**

This story brings several things to light about Jesus in His first-century Jewish world. Growing up in Nazareth (in the region of Galilee), His family would have traveled to Jerusalem (in the region of Judea) annually for Passover, and they would have traveled in a caravan. They would have likely planned to take the journey with family and friends from Nazareth and perhaps surrounding villages.

The Bible tells us that this annual trip was their custom. The particular year that this story took place, the Bible lets us know Jesus was twelve years old.

After the Passover festival, the caravan set its sights on Nazareth and headed north. A day of travel into the trip home, Joseph and Mary noticed Jesus was not with them. How do you lose the Son of God? Well, as you may have guessed in your previous response, in caravan travel, Mary and Joseph probably just assumed that Jesus was with His cousins, aunts, uncles, or even other friends from Nazareth. Can you imagine that moment? I wonder how Joseph and Mary felt.

They returned to Jerusalem to look for Jesus and found Him at the temple, sitting with the teachers, listening to them, and asking them questions. What was Jesus doing at this moment? Why was any twelve-year-old sitting with religious teachers at the temple, listening, and asking questions?

We envision Jesus sitting on the southern rabbinic teaching steps. This is where teaching happened at the temple two thousand years ago. They didn't teach inside the temple. That space was set aside for prayer and worship and sacrifice. Instead, religious teachers would meet with their disciples on the southern steps, teaching their **TALMIDIM** and explaining the Scriptures.

Please note, terms in the text marked with **THIS STYLE** are explained in further detail in the glossary found at [lifeway.com/gospelontheground](http://lifeway.com/gospelontheground).

So Jews became the only people in history to predicate their very survival on education. The most sacred duty of the parents was to teach their children. Pesach [Passover] itself became an ongoing seminar in the handing on of memory. Judaism became the religion whose heroes were teachers and whose passion was study and the life of the mind. The Mesopotamians built ziggurats. The Egyptians built pyramids. The Greeks built the Parthenon. The Romans built the Coliseum. Jews built schools.<sup>1</sup>

#### RABBI JONATHAN SACKS

We see twelve-year-old Jesus sitting right in the middle of this moment and these men, interacting with them about the Scriptures. I really love this story because it shows Jesus's aptitude for the biblical text, as One who would become a Rabbi.