

Sitting at the Feet of Rabbi Jesus

Study and Discussion Guide for Individuals or Groups

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Welcome to the study and discussion guide for *Sitting at the Feet of Rabbi Jesus*. Jesus loved to talk about God and God's Word with others. If you are reading the book in a group or with a prayer partner, we are excited that you are continuing that tradition of becoming *haverim* by digging into this book with other people. If you are reading the book alone, we pray that your experience will enrich your personal faith in new ways.

However you choose to use this study guide, be open to how God is directing your reading and study. Feel free to spend more time on questions that particularly resonate with you or your group. We trust that this chapter-by-chapter exploration of the book will help you take the next step toward understanding Jesus' Jewish world. As we have discovered, it is a never-ending, fascinating journey!

Introduction

Understanding more about the culture and language of Jesus' time helps us know more of Christ himself. When we honor the Jewish people by learning about their heritage, God blesses us with a deeper understanding of our Jewish Messiah.

1. Describe your experience with Jewish people, culture, and practices (if any).
2. The archaeologist Gabi Barkai once said, "Every day in Jerusalem is a day of discovery" (p.7). What do you want to discover through reading this book?

Chapter 1 : Joining Mary at the Feet of Jesus

Although we meet God through Scripture, sometimes the difference in culture, time, and language makes the Bible seem distant or confusing. Studying Jesus' Jewish culture helps us "fine-tune our hearing" (p.13) so we can know the same power, controversy, and spiritual meaning that Jesus' original listeners experienced.

1. Describe a time when you had difficulty communicating across a cultural or language barrier.

2. Rather than undermining our faith, "looking at the Jewish background of the Bible deepens our understanding of Jesus" (pp.18–19). What fears do you have, if any, about learning more about Jewish culture? How might a better understanding of Jesus' times deepen your faith?

3. Give an example of a passage, verse, or concept in the Gospels that you find especially confusing.

4. What is your first thought or emotion when you come across something Jesus said that you don't understand?

5. If you were literally sitting at Jesus' feet with Mary, what is the first thing you would ask him?

Chapter 2: Why a Jewish Rabbi?

As we learn more about the life of a rabbi, we can see why being a rabbi was a perfect vocation for Jesus. As the greatest of all rabbis, Jesus followed the rabbinic tradition of studying Scripture, using debate as a way of learning, teaching by telling parables, and raising up disciples. More than that, he was the promised Messiah, the Savior whom the oppressed Jewish people longed for.

1. When you were growing up, what was your image of Jesus?
2. In what ways do you personally identify with the excitement over biblical study that Lois describes (p.26)? In what ways do you struggle to engage with the Bible?
3. What does it mean on a practical level to “study the Bible with reverence” (pp.26–27)? In what ways does a sense of reverence motivate us to study the Bible more?
4. Debate was a significant part of learning in Jesus’ day (pp.28–29). When have you seen healthy debate foster greater understanding of a subject? How do people in today’s church debate issues?
5. The authors write that the mission of Jesus, as of those who follow him, was to “become a living example of what it means to apply God’s Word to one’s life” (p.33). Whom do you know who fulfills this call to be a living example of God’s Word? What impact does that person have on your faith?
6. In what ways does a greater appreciation of Jesus’ role as a rabbi help you understand his words and actions more? For example, how does knowing that rabbis used parables influence your reading of Jesus’ parables? How might an awareness of the rabbinic emphasis on debate, discipleship, and study change your perception of your relationships and daily priorities?

Chapter 3 : Stringing Pearls

Like other Jews of his day (and today), Jesus studied the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms. As Christians, we recognize these books as our Old Testament (note that Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches recognize additional books as part of the Old Testament canon in contrast to the smaller canon accepted by Protestant churches). Jesus used the Jewish love of Scripture to teach others about himself and to show how the Scriptures point to Jesus as their fulfillment. Today, some of Jesus' words may seem perplexing, but often they reflect a rabbi's way of communicating within the framework of Scripture. The more we understand the Old Testament, the more meaningful Jesus' words become.

1. If you had to choose a favorite book of the Bible, which one would it be? Why?
2. What is your experience with the Old Testament? Do you identify with Lois's surprise over learning how important the Old Testament is to understanding the New Testament? Why or why not?
3. The study of Scripture was vitally important in Jesus' day and is still considered a high form of worship for Jewish people. Would you say the Christian church today (and your local church in particular) has a similar reverence for God's Word? Why or why not?
4. Can you identify with Ben Azzai's words about Scripture passages coming together so perfectly that the words "burst into flames" (p.43)? Describe a time when a biblical passage came to life for you.
5. What images come to mind when you think of a shepherd? How might the image of Jesus as shepherd be meaningful in your life right now?
6. Why was it important for Jesus to tell his followers—including us—that he was the Son of Man?

Chapter 4 : Following the Rabbi

In Jesus' day, a rabbi's disciples learned not only from what a rabbi said in times of teaching but also from what he did in everyday life. Just as Elisha learned from Elijah, so a disciple's task was to become as much like the rabbi as possible. This was a long yet fulfilling process. Our goal as disciples of Jesus is the same today: to become transformed into the likeness of Christ.

1. How did you learn your current vocation? Have you ever experienced a formal apprenticeship, as Ange Sabin Peter did? What was the experience like?

2. The master craftsman told Ange, "You cannot separate life from work" (p.52). In what ways does today's Western culture reflect the opposite belief?

3. Why do you think our culture places more emphasis on information than on transformation?

4. Describe a specific sacrifice you've made to follow Jesus. Was the fulfillment in such a choice worth the cost? Why or why not?

5. What is one "ugly habit" (p.56) in your life right now that you would like Jesus to heal? What fears or discouragements do you have as you wait for God's inner transformation?

6. Describe a time when your spiritual life deepened because you were absorbing truth from someone around you—perhaps attending to someone as Elisha attended Elijah or simply watching someone's daily life. In what ways did the person you were following serve you? In what ways did you need to be obedient and humble in order to learn?

7. Who is learning from you by watching your life right now? In what ways can you serve that person? In what ways might you be tempted to be self-important in your leadership? Does living transparently come easily to you, or is it a struggle?

Chapter 5 : Get Yourself Some Haverim

Following his Jewish tradition, Jesus considered it vital to learn about God in the presence of other people. His instructions to his disciples and his own daily life affirmed his followers' need for community. As Christians, we can honor this tradition of haverim through intentional relationships with others and an awareness of our connectedness with the Jewish community in the Bible. God calls us to learn, love, study, forgive, and encourage others in community, just as Jesus did.

1. When have you learned something more deeply because you were studying or working with someone else?

2. Consider the story of Passover (see p.70). How does your understanding or appreciation of this pivotal event in Jewish history change when you think of the Jewish people as your spiritual ancestors?

3. Briefly describe your past experience with spiritual community and spiritual solitude. Do you usually get emotional energy from being with people or from being alone? How does this influence your spiritual life?

4. How do you usually handle conflict or disagreement in relationships?

5. Do you view evangelism as something that happens mainly at the "fence" to get people into the pasture (p.76)? Why or why not?

6. Though many of us have a circle of friends, few of us have anyone who really pushes us in our spiritual life or energizes us to study the Bible more. Do you have a spiritual "jogging partner" (p.74), who challenges you to grapple with the Bible and helps to refine you? Describe how that relationship developed. If you don't have that kind of influence in your life, what is one practical thing you could do to develop a havruta relationship with someone or with a group of people?

Chapter 6 : Rabbi, Teach Us to Pray

The Jewish customs of the day, including the rich customs of Jewish prayer, were a significant part of Jesus' everyday experience. In the Lord's Prayer, Jesus relied on classic Jewish themes to illustrate what the essence of prayer, then and now, should be. Jesus is the ultimate model for us of kavanah, a sense of the presence of God.

1. Consider the Jewish practices, such as wearing phylacteries and prayer shawls, that Ann encountered on her flight to Tel Aviv. What rituals do Christians use to study the Bible, pray, and worship God? What spiritual practice or tradition is especially meaningful to you?

2. What is your current experience with prayer? Would you say that, for you, prayer is usually a time of joy? Confusion? Guilt? Encouragement? Answers?

3. What does it look like to approach God with reverence but also as a trusting child?

4. Why do you think prayers such as the Shema and the Amidah (pp.80–81) involve so much repetition? What does Jesus' use of such prayers suggest about our need to remember our commitment to God?

5. The "daily bread" of the Lord's Prayer is a reference to God's sustenance as a whole. What is one thing you would like to ask God to provide for you this week as a way of sustaining you spiritually, physically, or emotionally?

6. The Jewish theologian Abraham Heschel describes kavanah as being able to "sense the preciousness of being able to pray, to be perceptive of the supreme significance of worshiping God" (p.88). How would a deeper sense of the preciousness of prayer, and God's presence with you when you pray, affect the way you relate to God?

7. Think of a task you do every day. What is one way in which your increased understanding of the Jewish view of prayer might change the way you do that task?

Chapter 7 : For Everything a Blessing

Jesus modeled the Jewish tradition of blessing God for events, small and large, throughout the day. This habit of blessing God can transform our spiritual lives as we continually acknowledge his presence with us.

1. What is the first thing you thought about when you woke up this morning?
2. When has intentionally developing a habit changed your actions or thoughts permanently, even though you simply went through the motions of the habit at first?
3. Describe a time when your attitude toward a situation changed as you expressed thanks. Describe a time when you realized you'd forgotten God's involvement in your life because you had forgotten to thank him for being with you.
4. What does it mean to "give thanks in all circumstances" (1 Thessalonians 5:17–18)?
5. Loving God with all our hearts means loving him not just with "the part of our heart that is happy, but with the angry, sad, mourning part of our heart as well" (p.93). What would it look like to love God with all your heart—including all your anger, grief, and questions—right now? When is it most difficult for you to express your emotions to God?
6. Describe a recent time when you were filled with a desire to bless God.

Chapter 8: A Passover Discovery

Passover—the most important Jewish feast—is a time to remember how God brought his people out of Egypt and how he will redeem his people again. Learning about Passover and two coinciding spring feasts, Unleavened Bread and Firstfruits, yields insights into Jesus’ final week on earth.

1. What family stories do you talk about with your children or at a family gathering? Why do you think such stories get passed around in your family?

2. The Jewish people celebrated Passover as a way of remembering God’s provision during a time of change. Why is it important to commemorate past events? In what ways can such celebrations bring us closer to God?

3. Do you think we should memorialize times of past suffering as well as joy? Why or why not? How can we allow pain to have a positive influence in our spiritual lives?

4. Passover is a time of expectation as well as a time of remembrance for the Jewish people. When has living with hopeful expectation changed the way you act or think?

5. What difference does it make to you spiritually to consider that God knew about Jesus’ redemption when he brought the Israelites out of Egypt?

6. Think about a time of difficulty in your life, a time of dramatic change, or a time when you saw God’s deliverance. What could you do to commemorate that time? What would it look like to consider that commemoration a reminder of God’s “invincible hope” (p.109)?

Chapter 9: Discovering Jesus in the Jewish Feasts

The seven biblical feasts of Leviticus 23 were observed in Jesus' time and are still celebrated today. Rich in significance, they point to the redemption of Christ; Jesus used their imagery to highlight his role as the Messiah. The feasts were tangible symbols of God's faithfulness and reminders of how God led the Israelites into the Promised Land. Today, feasts are a way to celebrate the past, to acknowledge God's provision in the present, and to hope for the future. Through feasts and traditions, we can get a glimpse of God's plan for eternity.

1. What is the most joyful celebration you remember, either as an adult or as a child? What made it such a joyful experience?

2. We all have different beliefs about what it means to be "Spirit-filled." What does that phrase mean to you? How have you seen the Holy Spirit at work in your life recently?

3. How does our knowledge of Jesus' life and death affect how we confess our sins to God? Describe a time when asking for God's forgiveness freed your mind and heart. (Note: If you are in a group, be respectful of those who would prefer to think about this question in silence.) Is it ever hard for you to accept God's forgiveness? Why or why not?

4. In what ways does our culture teach us to forget "that life is finite and that everyone must be prepared to stand before the Lord at the time of death" (p.120)? How can the Jewish understanding of mortality and God's judgment enrich our spiritual lives?

5. What is your experience with fasting? Have you ever considered making it a part of your spiritual disciplines? Why or why not?

6. Would you rather receive two hours of free time or twenty dollars? Why? How does keeping space in our lives for Sabbath turn our focus away from time and money and toward God?

7. Taste, hunger, sight, clothing, and other sensory experiences are important parts of Jewish commemorations. What are some things Christians do to make prayers, worship, and church experience encompass all of the senses? What could you do to bring more sensory experiences into your spiritual life?

Chapter 10 : At Table with the Rabbi

Since ancient times, the Jewish people have considered the table a place of community, worship, joy, and reconciliation. A deeper understanding of this biblical tradition of table fellowship and hospitality can strengthen our own relationship with God and others. (Note: If you are reading this book as a group, consider discussing this chapter around a meal.)

1. What were meals like at your home when you grew up? What are most meals like at your home today?

2. Hospitality was often a matter of life and death in Israel. How might our Western self-sufficiency, geography, and typical work life affect our attitude toward welcoming others? What rewards are there for a culture, church, or family that places an emphasis on hospitality? Would you say hospitality is a strength or a challenge for you?

3. Why is sharing a meal together a sign of mutual vulnerability?

4. In what ways has taking Communion enriched your life spiritually? Have you ever intentionally reconciled with someone before taking Communion? If you have never taken Communion, what are your thoughts on this idea of “sitting down to dinner” with God (p.140)?

5. When have you seen a meal bring people closer together? On a more personal level, have you ever found yourself more willing to accept or forgive someone after sharing food with that person?

6. Why was it significant for Jesus’ Jewish disciples to share a meal with him? What would your first response be if Jesus asked you to have dinner with him tonight?

7. Considering Jesus’ emphasis on sharing food with us, how does a deeper understanding of what “table” means in Jewish culture draw you closer to God?

Chapter 11 : Touching the Rabbi's Fringe

God provided the law, or Torah, to the Israelites to guide them in the best way to live. We see Christ's love in these Jewish laws—laws that honor human life, offer patience to wayward followers, and call God's people to stand out as his children. When we view God's commandments in light of his love, even when we don't completely understand them, we know the joy of obeying him.

1. When have you seen a seemingly small choice to do good make a big difference in a relationship, a business decision, or your spiritual life?

2. What is one spiritual rule or commandment that you have a particularly hard time following? How might it change your perspective to consider that commandment as a reflection of God's love rather than as a guilt-inducing trap or limitation?

3. Why do you think Jewish people consider performing a mitzvah—a good deed—to be a joy rather than a burden?

4. When have you asked someone to do something even though the person did not understand your intent?

5. Have you ever obeyed God while not knowing why he was asking you to do something? If so, did you find out later why he wanted you to obey—that "hidden wisdom that will only later be revealed" (p.149)? If not, are you still glad you obeyed? Why or why not?

6. By instructing his people to wear tassels, God was encouraging them to be obvious about their spiritual commitment. What makes you stand out as a Christian—whether at home, in the workplace, or at a grocery store?

7. Jesus told his followers to stand out but also criticized those who exaggerated their piety. On a practical level, what makes the difference between standing out because you follow God and standing out because you judge people who don't follow God?

8. God provided dietary laws to keep his people separate from the cultures around them. How can you be separate in your actions and words this week but still reach out to people who need to know God?

Chapter 12: Jesus and the Torah

Jesus had no intention of weakening the Torah that had shaped generations of Jewish people. In fact, he came to perfectly obey and perfectly fulfill the Torah. But Rabbi Jesus taught that we are not to follow rules for the sake of following rules but rather to obey them out of a desire to model our lives on the character of God. All his actions and words were directed toward getting at the heart of God's laws—the one most important commandment that the Jewish people were seeking. As Jesus modeled, God's love frees us from legalism and invites us to love him with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength and to love our neighbors as ourselves.

1. We usually think of laws as limiting. When have you seen laws or boundaries as freeing?
2. Describe (a) a time when a decision to resist a small temptation kept you from falling into sin, or (b) a time when giving in to a small temptation led to a greater sin.
3. After reading this chapter, are you surprised at how much Jesus' words reflected the teachings of the Pharisees? Why was it important for Jesus to use the speaking styles of the Jewish people and rabbinic traditions? What does this suggest about how we talk to others about God?
4. Jesus spoke with authority about the mind of God because he was God. When have you seen an author, painter, musician, or other artist speak more passionately about the work he or she created than others could?
5. What does it mean to "go beyond the minimum" (p.174) in loving God? With this in mind, what would loving God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength look like in your life today?
6. What does it mean to "go beyond the minimum" in loving your neighbor? With this in mind, what would loving your neighbor as yourself look like in your life today?
7. Why is love "the best interpretation of the law" (p.178)?
8. In light of this chapter, why would you say the Torah matters to Christians?

Chapter 13: The Mysterious Kingdom of God

The kingdom of God was at the heart of Jesus' mission on earth. This kingdom—or reign—of God is based on forgiveness and atonement. Many Jews of Jesus' day were uncomfortable with this merciful view of God, but Jesus' life and ministry remind us that God's mercy is greater than his wrath. Through the sacrifice of Jesus, we can enthrone God right now in the kingdom of God within us.

1. Jesus fulfilled God's mission in a different way from what people expected. When has God surprised you with how he delivered you from a situation or answered a prayer?

2. The Jewish people had a passionate desire for the entire world to worship God. How does a desire for others to follow God influence your life? What triggers that desire more than anything else?

3. Why would building a kingdom on forgiveness and atonement result in "pure-hearted followers" (p.191)?

4. Jesus revealed a compassionate God rather than a wrathful God. When have you seen compassion change someone's attitude or actions? Why is compassion powerful?

5. Why is it hard to forgive someone who has wronged you? Why is it hard to accept someone's forgiveness?

6. How do you respond to the idea that "Jesus' kingdom is a living dynamic reality ... Our obedience is vital because it is a catalyst for the Spirit's work" (p.195)? In other words, what does it mean to you right now that "the kingdom of God is within you" (p.193)?

Chapter 14 : Becoming True Disciples of Our Jewish Lord

When we approach Scripture and reputable historical information with humility, we can discover remarkable connections between Jesus, the Old Testament, and the rich Jewish culture. As Rabbi Jesus taught, we are called to be in daily, living relationship with him and then live our lives in such a way that others want to be his disciples as well.

1. What has surprised you the most about Rabbi Jesus as you read *Sitting at the Feet of Rabbi Jesus*?

2. In what ways, if any, do you think you have been judgmental, elitist, or apathetic in your view of the Jewish people? How do you feel about the idea that as Christians “we are but branches grafted into a Jewish tree” (p. 201)?

3. Why does humility influence the way we learn?

4. In what ways has *Sitting at the Feet of Rabbi Jesus* made you more curious about the Jewish roots of Jesus’ words?

5. How has the book changed the way you read the Bible?

6. In what ways has the book strengthened your faith as you discovered more about the connections among Jesus, the Old Testament, and God’s timeless plan for his children? How has the book enlarged your understanding of who God is and what he thinks of you?