

# LIFE IN THE NEW TESTAMENT WORLD

Understanding Professions,  
Practices, and Politics

Armin J. Panning

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Cover illustrations: Lars Justinen; GoodSalt, Inc.  
Art Director: Karen Knutson  
Designer: Pamela Dunn

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## PREFACE

In keeping with the general intent of the Bible Discovery series, this volume is a nontechnical treatment intended for the average Bible reader. It is intended to help the reader understand life in New Testament times. It is neither comprehensive nor exhaustive, but rather a collection of items, loosely arranged by subject. Basically it aims to reflect conditions in the Greco-Roman world of the first century A.D. Hopefully increased insight into these matters—cultural, political, geographical—will enhance your reading of God’s Word and increase your understanding and appreciation of how God ordered all things so as to bring about the impressive growth and extension of the early Christian church. Or to use our Savior’s picture, we see glimpses of the “mustard plant” extending its branches into the entire then-known world.



## Farming

Even a casual reading of Scripture shows that New Testament people gained their livelihoods in various ways. Despite that diversity, it's safe to say that in general people of that time lived closer to the land than most of us do today. Israel was largely an agricultural society. People themselves were engaged in growing their own food or could easily observe those doing so. Hence, without any fear of losing his readers, James could say:

*Be patient, then, brothers, until the Lord's coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop and how patient he is for the autumn and spring rains. You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near. (James 5:7,8)*

We of the 21st century, often in our urban settings, don't "see" the farmer. Hence, we may need a bit of help to grasp the connection between the Jewish farmer's need for patience in awaiting a crop and the Christian's need for patience in coping with spiritual matters. It will help if we understand the Mediterranean climate with which the farmer of James' day had to cope.

During the four hottest months of the year (June to September), it is virtually certain that Palestine will receive no rain at all. The soil becomes bone-dry and baked hard, leaving no chance for preparing the soil. Softening the soil so that it can be worked up and seeded happens when the "autumn . . . rains" (literally, the "early . . . rains") begin to fall in October or November. Their arrival is erratic but eagerly sought by the farmer.

The winter months (December to February) are the wettest times of the year and bring most of Palestine's modest rainfall. The long-term average in Jerusalem, for example, is 26 inches annually, with a maximum of 40 inches and a minimum of 12 inches. Winter is the main growing season. But very important for the heads of grain

to fill out properly are the “spring rains” (literally, the “*latter rains*”) that are expected in April and May. These are essential for determining whether it will be a bumper crop, an average crop, or perhaps only a very limited one.

The farmer is dependent on the annual rainfall. He cannot control it, but he is confident that it will come. James is urging his readers not to become discouraged. Everything will be set right at the proper time. The farmer may not know *when* the rain is coming, but he is confident *that it will come*. Also for us, the present is often dark and the future unknown, but by pointing us to the example of the Jewish farmer, James directs us to God’s promises and urges us, “You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord’s coming is near” (James 5:8).

Living close to the land often gave rural people an advantage in catching the point of the agricultural illustrations Jesus was fond of using in his teaching. Still, those who are acquainted with the marvelous farmland the Lord has provided in the broad heartlands of the U.S. may have trouble with a parable such as the one Jesus told about a sower sowing seed on four kinds of soil:

*Then [Jesus] told them many things in parables, saying: “A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants. Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop—a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. He who has ears, let him hear.” (Matthew 13:3-9)*

It would be a mistake to think here of large, rectangular grain fields or long, straight lines of row crops. Except for a few instances of such fields in the gently sloping valleys of Galilee, there are no large, geometric fields in Palestine. Small, irregular patches of tillable soil grubbed out between rocky outcroppings are the norm. Even today, using field machinery is largely impractical. Farmers still go out and scatter seed by hand, much as we might do to fix bare patches in our lawn. Obviously, this is not a precise operation.



If the tillable patches are separated by where people walk, there will be a path through the field. Some of the scattered seed will fall on the path, to be immediately “harvested” by the birds. Other seed that falls on the thin top soil covering the underlying rock will sprout quickly but just as quickly get burned up by the blazing Mediterranean sun. And thorns and thistles have been the farmer’s nemesis ever since the fall into sin. Fortunately, however, there is also the deep soil that produces a bountiful crop.

Even if we don’t have the same conditions in our backyards, if we understand Jesus’ picture, the parable makes perfect sense for illustrating the truth that Jesus himself indicates as the point of his lesson. In Matthew 13:18-23 Jesus informs his disciples, and us, that the “seed” is the Word and that the four kinds of “soil” illustrate the response (or lack of response) the Word receives in human hearts. Jesus graphically illustrates the situation and adds the sober warning, “He who has ears, let him hear.” What Jesus taught in picture language, the writer to the Hebrews repeats in literal form, citing Psalm 95, “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts” (Hebrews 3:7,8).

## Growing Grapes

It would be hard to overestimate the important role wine played in the lives of Jewish people living in New Testament times. Wine had a religious function, being used as a drink offering with some of the Levitical sacrifices. It was used to celebrate festive occasions. Recall the water Jesus turned into wine at the wedding in Cana. “Wine that gladdens the heart” (Psalm 104:15) was used also on sad occasions, for example, to cheer mourners. It was assumed to have antiseptic qualities, which is how it was used by the good Samaritan who poured wine into the wounds of the traveler mugged on his way to Jericho (Luke 10:30-37). Paul attests to wine’s medicinal qualities when he urges its moderate use to remedy a stomach problem that afflicted Timothy (1 Timothy 5:23).

But by far wine’s most prominent feature was its daily use at the dining table. Even if families didn’t have their own grape arbors, they

would certainly be acquainted with the large, commercial operations that flourished in Palestine, whose soil and climate is so well suited for growing grapevines.

These larger commercial operations serve as the basis for Jesus' parable, teaching an important lesson to people who were rejecting John the Baptist's call to "look, the Lamb of God" (John 1:29). Jesus said:

*"John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him.*

*"Listen to another parable: There was a landowner who planted a vineyard. He put a wall around it, dug a winepress in it and built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and went away on a journey. When the harvest time approached, he sent his servants to the tenants to collect his fruit.*

*"The tenants seized his servants; they beat one, killed another, and stoned a third. Then he sent other servants to them, more than the first time, and the tenants treated them the same way. Last of all, he sent his son to them. 'They will respect my son,' he said.*

*"But when the tenants saw the son, they said to each other, 'This is the heir. Come, let's kill him and take his inheritance.' So they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him.*

*"Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?"*

*"He will bring those wretches to a wretched end," they replied, "and he will rent the vineyard to other tenants, who will give him his share of the crop at harvest time." (Matthew 21:32-41)*

The landowner who planted the vineyard took all the necessary precautions to protect his investment. He built a wall around it to keep out predators and thieves. He even added a security system by building a watchtower. But the centerpiece of the project was the winepress. Forget about any kind of hydraulic system to press the grapes. The New Testament winepress consisted of a pit into which barefooted workers descended and trampled the clusters of ripe grapes. The extracted juice flowed into adjoining catch basins

from which the liquid could be dipped for filtering and fermenting into wine.

Just how big were such winepresses? Obviously they varied in size, but one example may be of interest and serve as an illustration. A number of years ago, Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary entered into an arrangement to cooperate with the University of Tel Aviv on a five-week “dig” at a *tel* (a mound indicating the presence of an ancient city) outside of Tel Aviv. That expedition uncovered what at the time was described as the second-largest winepress to have been excavated in modern Israel. The floor of the pit where the grapes were trampled measured 5 meters by 5 meters (16' x 16'), with two somewhat smaller holding tanks, or settling basins, next to it.

Almost always, parables contain some elements that are merely the framework of the story. As such they are not essential for understanding the lesson being taught in the parable. Here the size of the winepress is not important. Rather, it is the press' centrality to the operation and its value to both the owner and tenants that is the focus of our attention.

The winepress signals the fact that something very important is at stake here. In fact, it involves the eternal fate of the hearers of the parable. The owner (God the Father) has prepared his plan of salvation, but the tenants (the Jewish nation) have not only rejected the commissioned servants (the prophets and Jesus' forerunner, John), but they even have designs on killing the Son (Christ).

The parable issues an earnest warning to those who reject God's salvation in Christ. Even Christ's enemies who heard the parable had to admit: Such people will come to a “wretched end.” But the parable also extends a glorious ray of hope, as Jesus' enemies inadvertently taught in their answer: “. . . and he will rent the vineyard to other tenants.”

Who are those “other tenants”? They are the same people the Good Shepherd speaks of when, using a different picture, he says, “I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also” (John 10:16). Obviously he is speaking of the inclusion of Gentiles into the New Testament church, which is consistent with God's plan from the beginning as spelled out in his promise to Abraham: Through his offspring, *all* the nations of the earth would be blessed.