

## NOTES AND QUESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL OR GROUP STUDY OF THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW – PART TWENTY-THREE

In the previous chapter the King had finally made His ultimate intention clear, to take over His rightful kingdom. For the present this would not be by force, as some of His followers had assumed, but as a gentle Saviour asking to be allowed to enter the lives of His people to be their King from within. Yet He had no hesitation in using force to reclaim His house, the temple, from the traders who had conducted a 'home invasion' with the commercial values of the world outside. He had told a parable about vine-growers who had taken over the vineyard for their own benefit. His audience had no doubt about whom He was talking, and planned at the right moment to arrest Him.

In chapter twenty-two Jesus changed His illustration from a grape harvest to a wedding feast but His message was the same. The central point of each story was the son, first of the owner of the vineyard, now of the king. A frequently used way of presenting the purpose of the gospel in the Bible was that of conducting a wedding in which the bridegroom was Jesus, the Son of God, and the bride was the church, all of us who truly love Him.(Eph.5:22-33; Rev.21:2) As His followers we were to play two roles in the wedding, both as the bride and as the wedding guests. The guests were supposed to be supporters of the happy couple as those who are workers for the gospel should be seeking to bring the romance of the church with Jesus to a happy consummation.

Two problems had arisen with the guests to this particular wedding. First the invited guests ignored the invitation because they were interested only in their own careers and finances as the religious leaders of Jesus' time were in their positions for their own advantage. Some even went to the extent of ill-treating or killing the king's messengers, as prophets like Jeremiah had been persecuted in the Old Testament, and were now doing to Jesus. These guests were subject to the judgement of the king as self interested religious leaders will one day be subject to God's judgement. The second problem was the guest who turned up for the feast ignoring the custom of wearing the special wedding clothes provided by the host. To be part of God's celebration of people being joined to Jesus Christ we can only come clothed not in our own best efforts but in the life of Jesus, the 'new clothes' which He provided for us at the cross.(Eph.4:21-24) They too would be facing God's judgement. We are all 'called', invited to the wedding, but only a few will accept God's invitation on His terms thus being 'chosen'.(22:1-14)

Three different groupings of leaders now challenged Jesus in turn. First there was a hypocritical alliance of Pharisees, who claimed to serve God, not Rome, and Herodians who were a political party putting Rome before God. Their question about taxes was designed to get Jesus into trouble with one group or the other according to His answer. The coin Jesus held had the image of Caesar on it. If the government want your money, Jesus said, give it to them. At the same time our lives are meant to bear the image of Jesus Christ and should belong only to Him. His response left both groups speechless at His wisdom.(22:15-22)

The next attack came from the Sadducees who did not care much about the Bible or the government as long as they kept control of the temple and its money. They came up with a far-fetched story about a woman who outlived 7 husbands in turn, as a way

of ridiculing the idea of resurrection. Jesus pointed out first that they did not understand how much better heaven would be than earth and secondly that the root of their problem was their embarrassing ignorance of scripture. To illustrate His point He reminded them how God told Moses, in the present tense, that He was the God of long dead ancestors, who must therefore be alive. Ordinary people were deeply impressed demonstrating that they had more understanding of truth than the experts.(22:23-33)

The Pharisees now gave up on their partnership with the Herodians, and having enjoyed the defeat in debate of their rivals the Sadducees, came back with a more genuine question. Faced with a huge list of laws in the Old Testament they struggled to know where to start. Jesus cut through the whole system of regulation to two simple principles, love of God and love of neighbour, of which every other law was only an extension.(22:34-40)

For a few minutes Jesus had a captive audience as they thought through the implications of the new way of looking at the Bible that He had given them. He seized the opportunity to ask them a question about the Messiah, the Christ. They understood the Christ only as the 'son of David', a phrase used in the New Testament of Jesus some 29 times. David in Psalm 110:1 acknowledged the Messiah as his Lord and the Son of God. He was both son of David and Son of God. This was a new idea that left them stunned!(22:41-46)

In chapter twenty-three Jesus delivered a devastating exposure of the attitudes and actions of religious leaders.

23:1-12 Q.1 What is the fundamental problem of all those who place themselves above those they claim to lead? What examples did Jesus use to illustrate this behaviour? What titles did He warn them against accepting from those they led? What attitude needed to replace such titles? What modern day examples do you know of such mistakes? How can we too avoid the same dangers?

23:13-30 Q.2 What word did Jesus use repeatedly to describe the condition of those He was speaking about? What was always their underlying problem? How did these warnings contrast with the 'blesseds' of Matt.5:3-11? List the reasons He gave each time for His statements. Now list the consequences of such behaviour. Next add modern examples of such attitudes and behaviour. Think first about your own life rather than that of someone else. Each time ask the question, how can God change this?

23:31-36 Q.3 How does God get this message across to all of us? Will it work if I rebuke leaders I think are hypocritical? In what ways would the atrocities of the Old Testament be repeated in the New and throughout Christian history?

23:37-39 Q.4 For whom was Jesus so concerned in this last section? What tragic consequences had followed the failure of leadership in this city? Does God give up on those who are badly led?