

GOING DEEPER STUDY NOTES (December 17, 2023)

FOR PERSONAL OR GROUP STUDY

Our daughter is uber-pregnant. She and her husband are expecting their second, due Christmas day. For me there is always a measure of apprehension prior to the birth of a child ... they are so fragile. Two years ago, in early December, Kathaleen and I were waiting for the birth of our first grandchild. Soon after Hezekiah's birth we arrived to celebrate, and to hold him for the first time. Any prior concerns gave way to **Joy**. I understand that is not always the case ... but it is what we always pray for, leaning on God no matter the outcome. On this third Sunday of Advent (the fourth in Advent is Christmas Eve) we celebrate the God given gift of "**Joy**". How would you define **Joy**? How have you experienced **Joy**? Think of a moment when **Joy** overwhelmed you. Where were you? What was happening? **Joy** surprises us. Christmas surprises us. I believe God intends for there to be a close connection between Christmas and **Joy**. **Joy** sneaks up on us. In some sense God did too.

We would not have expected God to enter our world, and our lives, the way He did that first Christmas. God's people were not there to welcome Him. Kings and queens, pastors and priests, were absent. A few shepherds made their way over to greet Him, but only after a startling, and miraculous, visit first from one angel, and then a host of angels. Visitors from the east arrived and brought gifts; but that was likely weeks, months, or years, after His birth.

We cannot earn **Joy**. We cannot plan for **Joy**. We cannot pay for **Joy**. It is a gift from God. When we experience **Joy** our response is often laughter, tears, or silence. Peace is **Joy**'s regular companion, along with awe and appreciation. This Christmas may we be surprised again by God's arrival, and may we experience **Joy**.

Do You Know What I Know? Joy (Galatians 3:23 – 4:7) ESV

^{4:3:23} Now before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed. ²⁴ So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. ²⁵ But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, ²⁶ for in Christ Jesus you are all sons/daughters of God, through faith. ²⁷ For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. ²⁸ There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. ²⁹ And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.

^{4:1} I mean that the heir, as long as he/she is a child, is no different from a slave, though he/she is the owner of everything, ² but he/she is under guardians and managers until the date set by his/her father. ³ In the same way we also, when we were children, were enslaved to the elementary principles of the world. ⁴ **But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son**, born of woman, born under the law, ⁵ to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive **adoption** as sons/daughters. ⁶ And because you are sons/daughters, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" ⁷ So you are no longer a slave, but a son/daughter, and if His child, then an heir through God."

WHAT DOES IT SAY?

1. What does this passage say about our life before "faith"? 3:23
2. What does it mean, "when the fullness of time had come"?
3. How does Paul (the writer of this letter to the Galatians) describe our current relationship with God? vv.26 and 29

WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

4. What does it mean to be "in Christ"? v.26
5. What does it mean that those who have been "baptized into Christ have put on Christ"? v.27
6. What does it mean, "there is neither Jew nor Greek ... slave nor free ... male nor female ... you are all one in Christ Jesus"?

WHAT IS GOD SAYING TO YOU?

7. What would a relationship with God look like now if God had not come that first Christmas? Discuss.
8. Religiously, is it easier for you to follow rules, or live by faith?
9. How would you describe your current relationship with God?
10. Does this passage change your understanding of equality?
11. Do you believe you are an actual "child" of God? Explain.
12. How important is it to you that you can call God, "Abba! Father" and that you are not a slave but His child, an heir?

As you spend time praying, remember that prayer is meant to be the most natural part of your day. Prayer is a conversation: talking to God, and listening to God. Reflect on a time you experienced deep joy. Thank God for the times you've experienced joy. Ask God to help you live with thankfulness and awe. Ask God to help you to be joy-filled, regardless of what's happening around you. Jesus surprised us that first Christmas ... He will surprise us again, because He loves us.