

WEEK 3: September 20–26, 2026

Reading: Phil. 3–4; Col. 1–4; 1 Thess. 1

Principal Chapter: Philippians 4

Spiritual Practice: See

Core Emphasis: Joy and Peace in Christ

Read a CHAPTER a Day

SMALL GROUP LEADERS' GUIDE

Leader Preparation Checklist

- ☐ **Read Philippians 3–4, Colossians 1–4, and 1 Thessalonians 1.** Mark repeated words and images such as *joy, peace, prayer, thanksgiving, perseverance, contentment, fullness, hope, faith, love, and the gospel*.
- ☐ **Prioritize the themes of joy and peace in Christ.** Do not try to teach every theological theme in Philippians, Colossians, and 1 Thessalonians in one hour. Let Philippians 4 guide the session's center of gravity.
- ☐ **Review the historical notes below.** Prepare to speak honestly about Paul's imprisonment without romanticizing suffering. Joy in Philippians is not denial of pain; it is confidence in Christ amid hardship.
- ☐ **Prepare the spiritual practice: See.** Practice guiding the group through Philippians 4:4–9. Notice repeated words, commands, contrasts, images, and connections among rejoicing, gentleness, prayer, gratitude, peace, and thought.
- ☐ **Prepare the meeting space.** Have paper and pens available for participants who wish to write observations from the passage. If meeting online, display Philippians 4:4–9 on screen.
- ☐ **Pray for each participant by name.** Ask the Holy Spirit to help the group receive Christ's joy and peace amid the particular burdens they carry.

Historical Notes on Philippians, Colossians, and 1 Thessalonians:

Background: Philippians is a deeply affectionate letter Paul wrote to a congregation that supported him in his ministry. Paul writes from prison, yet the letter repeatedly speaks of joy, confidence, partnership in the gospel, and a life worthy of Christ. Philippians 3 calls believers to find their ultimate identity and confidence in Christ rather than in human accomplishment, religious status, or personal success. Philippians 4 turns toward practical encouragement: rejoice in the Lord, practice gentleness, bring every concern to God in prayer, give thanks, and set the mind on what is true and life-giving.

Colossians proclaims the supremacy of Christ. Christ is before all things, holds all things together, and reconciles all things through the cross. Believers are invited to set their minds on things above and to put on compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, forgiveness, and love.

First Thessalonians 1 celebrates a community whose faith, love, and hope have become visible to others. Together, these readings remind us that joy and peace are rooted not in ideal circumstances but in Christ's steadfast presence and sufficiency.

Interpretive Care: Paul's invitation to rejoice and not be anxious should never be used to shame people who experience anxiety, grief, depression, trauma, or other forms of suffering. Philippians 4 is not a command to suppress emotion or pretend that hardship is not real. Rather, it invites believers to bring their concerns to God in prayer and to receive God's peace amid circumstances that may remain difficult. Paul's words about joy and peace are written from prison, not from an easy life. He does not tell us to deny pain or feel cheerful at all times. Instead, he invites us to bring our concerns to God and receive the peace of Christ in the midst of life as it is.

Philippians 4 may raise sensitive concerns related to anxiety, grief, depression, trauma, chronic illness, financial stress, contentment, or spiritual pressure to appear joyful. Do not present Paul's instruction, "Do not worry about anything," as a reason to shame people for anxiety or mental-health struggles. Encourage participants to pray, seek appropriate support, and receive help from trusted professionals, pastors, family members, or friends.

If conversation becomes difficult, you may say, "The peace of God is not a demand that we stop feeling pain or anxiety. It is God's promise to meet us in the midst of what we carry. We can bring our whole selves before God and one another with honesty and care."

Opening (10 min)

Welcome & Check-In

Welcome participants by name. Briefly remind the group that the gathering is a place to share honestly, listen attentively, and receive God's Word together.

Check-in Question: Where have you experienced a moment of joy, peace, gratitude, or encouragement this week?

Opening Prayer

God of joy and peace, you are near to us in every season. Quiet our distracted hearts as we listen to your Word. Teach us to rejoice in you, bring our concerns to you in prayer, and receive the peace that guards our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Transition to Scripture

This week, we read Philippians 3–4, Colossians 1–4, and 1 Thessalonians 1. These passages remind us that Christ is sufficient, Christ is present, and Christ forms in us a life of joy, gratitude, peace, hope, and love.

Key Themes (10 min)

As you read Philippians 3–4, Colossians 1–4, and 1 Thessalonians 1 this week, what words, images, or ideas stood out?

These readings offer many rich themes. Today, we'll focus on three that shape Philippians 4 and connect with the rest of the week: joy rooted in Christ, peace through prayer and gratitude, and a Christ-centered way of thinking and living.

Joy Rooted in Christ: Paul repeatedly calls the Philippians to rejoice, even though he writes from prison. Christian joy is not shallow optimism or a refusal to acknowledge hardship. It is a deep confidence in Christ's presence, faithfulness, and worthiness of trust.

- Key passages: Philippians 3:7–11; 4:4–5; 1 Thessalonians 1:2–6.
- What is the difference between Christian joy and simply feeling happy because circumstances are going well?

Peace through Prayer and Gratitude: Paul invites believers to bring every concern to God with prayer, petition, and thanksgiving. The promise is not that every difficulty will disappear immediately, but that the peace of God will guard hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

- Key passage: Philippians 4:6–7.
- What do you notice about the connection between prayer, thanksgiving, and peace in these verses?

Christ-Centered Thinking and Living: Philippians 4 calls believers to focus on what is true, honorable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable, excellent, and worthy of praise. Colossians likewise calls the church to set its mind on things above and to clothe itself with the character of Christ.

- Key passages: Philippians 4:8–9; Colossians 3:1–17.
- What might it mean to set our minds on what is true and worthy of praise in a world full of distraction, fear, and conflict?

Philippians and Colossians teach us that joy and peace do not depend on perfect circumstances. They are rooted in Christ's presence, strengthened through prayer and gratitude, and expressed through the ways we think, speak, and live.

Historical Context (8 min)

Who Is Writing? The apostle Paul writes Philippians, Colossians, and 1 Thessalonians, sometimes with co-workers named alongside him. These letters address different congregations, but each reflects Paul's pastoral concern that believers remain faithful to Christ and grow in love.

To Whom? Paul writes Philippians to the church in Philippi, a Roman colony in Macedonia. The community had supported Paul's ministry and shared a close relationship with him. Colossians is addressed to the church in Colossae, in Asia Minor. The letter emphasizes the fullness and supremacy of Christ. First Thessalonians is addressed to the church in Thessalonica, a community that had experienced opposition and needed encouragement to continue in faith, hope, and love.

What Is Happening? Paul writes Philippians while imprisoned. His circumstances are restricted, but he remains joyful because the gospel continues to advance and because Christ is present with him. The Philippian church faces pressures that could threaten its unity and confidence. Paul encourages them to stand firm, to practice humility, and to set their minds on Christ.

- Colossians emphasizes that believers do not need to seek spiritual fullness anywhere apart from Christ. First Thessalonians affirms a church whose faith, love, and hope have become visible to others.

Why Does This Matter? These letters teach that Christian joy and peace are not based on ease, success, or the absence of struggle. They grow from confidence in Christ, prayerful dependence on God, gratitude, mutual encouragement, and a community shaped by faith, love, and hope.

Leader Note: Paul writes Philippians from prison, yet joy appears throughout the letter. This does not mean Paul ignores suffering or pretends that everything is easy. Rather, his joy is rooted in Christ's faithfulness and in the shared life of the church. Philippians 4 invites believers to bring their concerns to God with prayer and thanksgiving, trusting that God's peace will guard them. Colossians and 1 Thessalonians reinforce this message by pointing us to Christ's sufficiency and to a community marked by faith, love, and hope.

- How does it change your reading of Philippians 4 to remember that Paul writes from prison?
- What question or response does this historical context raise?

Reflection on Personal Practice (10 min)

Invite participants to reflect on their experience of reading Philippians, Colossians, and 1 Thessalonians during the week. Remind the group that the purpose of Read a Chapter a Day is not simply to complete readings or collect information, but to become more attentive to God's presence and voice through scripture.

- What has been easiest or most challenging about reading one chapter a day this week?
- Where did you experience God speaking, comforting, challenging, or surprising you through Philippians, Colossians, or 1 Thessalonians?

Affirm a range of experiences. Some participants may find joy and peace immediately comforting, while others may struggle to connect these words to their present circumstances. You might say, "Thank you for sharing honestly. Scripture does not ask us to hide our difficulties. It invites us to bring our lives before God. We can hold joy and grief, peace and uncertainty, gratitude and longing together in the presence of Christ."

Spiritual Practice: See (7 min)

This week's spiritual practice is **See**. See invites us to slow down and carefully observe what is present in the text.

Instruction: Before rushing to interpretation or application, notice repeated words, contrasts, commands, images, and surprising details.

Scripture Reading: For this practice, focus on displaying or reading Philippians 4:4–9. Invite participants to read the passage silently once. Then read it aloud slowly a second time.

- Ask participants to notice, without trying to explain, repeated words or ideas, commands or invitations, contrasts, images, connections between sentences, or a word or phrase that surprises them.

Response: If participants have paper or journals, invite them to write down three observations.

Seeing comes before explaining. When we slow down, we often notice that scripture has already begun to shape our attention. Philippians 4 invites us to see the nearness of the Lord, the practice of prayer, the gift of peace, and the kinds of things that form our minds and hearts.

Application & Discussion Questions (10 min)

Discussion Questions

- **Joy in Christ:** Paul says, “Rejoice in the Lord always” (Philippians 4:4). How can this invitation be meaningful without minimizing grief, stress, or suffering?
- **Prayer & Peace:** What do you notice about Paul’s instruction to pray “with thanksgiving” when we are anxious?
- **The Nearness of the Lord:** Paul says, “The Lord is near” (Philippians 4:5). How might that truth shape the way we respond to conflict, uncertainty, or fear?
- **Forming the Mind:** What shapes your attention during the week? How might Philippians 4:8–9 guide you in choosing what you dwell on?
- **Contentment:** What does Paul’s testimony of contentment in Philippians 4:10–13 teach us about relying on Christ in changing circumstances?
- **Faith, Love & Hope:** Where do you see faith, love, and hope becoming visible in your congregation or community?

Leader Note: If discussion becomes abstract, return to the text: “Where do you see that in Philippians 4? Which word or phrase helps us hear Paul’s message more clearly?”

If time allows, connect Philippians 4 with John Wesley’s understanding of grace:

- *Prevenient grace:* God is near and at work before we recognize or respond.
- *Justifying grace:* In Christ, we are received by grace through faith.
- *Sanctifying grace:* God continues to shape our desires, thoughts, practices, and relationships in love.

Emphasize that Christian peace is not something we produce alone; it is God’s gift and ongoing work in us.

Application/Invitation/Call to Action

Allow a brief silence, then ask one or both questions:

- What is one concern you need to bring to God with prayer and thanksgiving this week?
- What is one true, honorable, just, pure, pleasing, or praiseworthy thing you can intentionally set before your mind this week?

Examples may include beginning each day with a brief prayer of gratitude, limiting a source of anxiety or harmful comparison, reaching out to encourage someone, practicing contentment, or memorizing Philippians 4:6–7.

Prayer & Sending (5 min)

Shared Prayer

Invite two or three participants to name brief prayer concerns:

- A personal need
- A source of anxiety, grief, or uncertainty
- A thanksgiving
- A concern for the church or world

You may say, “As we prepare to pray, you may name a concern you are carrying, a place where you long for God’s peace, a thanksgiving, or a need in the church or world.”

Closing Prayer

God of joy and peace, you are near to us in every season. Receive the concerns we have spoken and the burdens we carry silently. Teach us to bring everything to you through prayer, petition, and thanksgiving. Guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Shape our thoughts toward what is true, honorable, just, pure, pleasing, and worthy of praise. Give us joy that is deeper than circumstance, peace that is stronger than fear, and love that becomes visible in the way we serve one another. Through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Reminders

Before participants leave, make sure they know to:

- Continue the daily reading rhythm with next week’s assigned readings: 1 Thessalonians 2–5 and 2 Thessalonians 1–3. Look at the chart that includes the focus scripture for daily readings.
- Join the next weekly Read a Chapter a Day small-group gathering.
- Look for encouragement and conversation through the Read a Chapter a Day Facebook group and weekly email.

Leader Notes & Reflection

For Next Week

- Which question or activity generated the most meaningful conversation?
- Where did the group need more time, clarity, or pastoral care?
- What change would help next week's session be more hospitable and fruitful?

Notes

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.