

Dr. Daniel K. Darko, Prison Epistles, Session 17, Philemon

Resources from NotebookLM

1) Abstract, 2) Audio podcast, 3) Briefing Document, 4) Study Guide, and 5) FAQs

1. Abstract of Darko, Prison Epistles, Session 17, Philemon, Biblicalelearning.org, BeL

Dr. Daniel Darko's lecture, Session 17 of his "Prison Epistles" series, focuses on Paul's letter to Philemon. The lecture begins by establishing the undisputed Pauline authorship and likely Roman origin of the letter, connecting it closely with the book of Colossians through shared authorship, greetings, and the figure of Onesimus. **Darko explores various scholarly interpretations surrounding Onesimus, including the traditional view of him as a runaway slave seeking reconciliation.** He also addresses and largely dismisses a more recent theory suggesting a background of sexual exploitation. **The lecture then examines Paul's persuasive strategy in the letter, noting his appeal based on their shared faith, his personal relationship with both Philemon and Onesimus, and the pressure exerted by addressing the church in Philemon's home.** Ultimately, Darko emphasizes the letter's themes of forgiveness and reconciliation, urging listeners to further study and even preach on this often-overlooked biblical text.

**2. 13 - minute Audio Podcast Created on the basis of
Dr. Darko, Prison Epistles, Session 17 – Double click icon to
play in Windows media player or go to the
Biblicalelearning.org [BeL] Site and click the audio podcast link
there (New Testament → Pauline Epistles → Prison Epistles).**



**Darko_PrisonEp_Se
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3. Briefing Document: Darko, Prison Epistles, Session 17, Philemon

Briefing Document: Dr. Daniel Darko on Paul's Letter to Philemon (Session 17, Prison Epistles)

Overview: This briefing document summarizes the key themes, arguments, and facts presented by Dr. Daniel Darko in his lecture on Paul's Letter to Philemon, the 17th session in his series on the Prison Epistles. Darko emphasizes the undisputed Pauline authorship of Philemon, its close relationship with Colossians, the complexities surrounding the identity and situation of Onesimus, and Paul's strategic and persuasive appeal to Philemon. He also addresses and largely dismisses a modern scholarly argument regarding the potential sexual exploitation of Onesimus by Philemon.

Main Themes and Important Ideas/Facts:

1. Introduction and Initial Considerations:

- Philemon is a short but "very interesting book" consisting of only one chapter, often overlooked in personal study and sermons.
- The lecture series focuses on the Prison Epistles (Colossians, Ephesians, Philippians, and Philemon).
- While the authorship of Colossians and Ephesians is debated by some scholars, Philippians and **Philemon are "undisputed in the Prison Epistles collection that we look at in this study series."** Darko establishes Paul as the author of Philemon.
- The dating of Philemon, likely written from Rome during Paul's imprisonment, is placed between **61 and 63 AD (CE)**, aligning with the general timeframe of New Testament writings (50-100 AD).

2. Relationship with Colossians:

- Philemon was most likely written to Colossae, to a specific individual (Philemon) and "a church at his home in Colossae."
- There is a strong internal relationship between Philemon and Colossians:
- Both were written from prison.
- Both list Paul and Timothy as authors/co-authors.

- The greetings in both letters share overlapping individuals: **"Epaphras, Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke also appear in Philemon, as you find in Colossians."**
- **"And interestingly, the slave in the account of Philemon, Onesimus, is also mentioned in Colossians 4, verses 7-9."**
- Darko argues that the close parallels undermine the argument against Pauline authorship of Colossians: **"If these close parallels are evident, then how can you say Paul actually wrote one, but Paul didn't write the other? Is the church so dumb that they can have one that is written by a fictitious figure pretending like Paul... and have them sit back and say, Oh yeah, we believe that probably Paul wrote it. Paul didn't write it."**
- Early Christian churches met in house churches, likely accommodating no more than 50 people.

3. Who is Philemon?

- Philemon was likely a **"rich person"** belonging to the upper class in Colossae.
- He owned a large house where a church met, suggesting he was probably the **"leader of the church in his home."**
- He owned slaves. While not solely indicative of wealth, other evidence suggests his economic stability.
- Paul led Philemon to Christ, a point Paul uses as leverage in his appeal.
- Philemon was a **"fellow worker and a partner"** with Paul in ministry (Philemon 1, 17).

4. The Identity and Situation of Onesimus:

- Modern scholarship presents various interpretations of Onesimus:
- **Runaway slave (Fugivitus):** Onesimus fled his master, Philemon, and encountered Paul in prison, where he became a Christian.
- **Runaway slave seeking intercession (Amicus Domini):** Onesimus ran away not permanently, but to find someone (Paul) who could mediate with Philemon on his behalf due to mistreatment.

- **Slave sent by Philemon:** Philemon sent Onesimus to assist Paul in prison, and Paul is now sending him back with a thank-you letter and a request for favorable treatment.
- Darko favors the first interpretation (runaway slave), suggesting that Philemon would not know Onesimus's intentions. He highlights the fear Onesimus would likely experience returning home.
- He acknowledges that reading Colossians first by the church in Philemon's house might have prepared the ground for Onesimus's return by mentioning him favorably.

5. Paul's Appeal for Onesimus:

- Regardless of the precise circumstances of Onesimus's departure, Paul is appealing to Philemon on his behalf.
- Paul highlights the transformation of Onesimus: **"Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me."** (Philemon 11)
- Paul expresses his desire to keep Onesimus but chooses not to without Philemon's consent, emphasizing voluntary favor: **"I would have liked to keep him with me so that he could take your place in helping me while I am in chains for the gospel. But I did not want to do anything without your consent so that any favor you do would not seem forced but would be voluntary."** (Philemon 13-14)
- Paul suggests a potential shift in their relationship: **"Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back forever. No longer as a slave... but better than a slave, as a dear brother."** (Philemon 15-16) Darko acknowledges that some scholars interpret this as a call for manumission but finds it not explicitly stated.
- Paul strategically leverages his relationship with both Onesimus (spiritual father) and Philemon (fellow worker, spiritual son, partner). He emphasizes their shared brotherhood in Christ.
- Paul uses **"purpose and pressure"** in his appeal:
- He asks Philemon to receive Onesimus as he would receive Paul: **"If you consider me your partner, receive Onesimus as you would receive me."** (Philemon 17)

- He offers to cover any financial wrongdoings by Onesimus: **"If he has wronged you at all or owes you anything, charge that to my account. I, Paul, write this with my own hand. I will repay it."** (Philemon 18-19)
- He subtly reminds Philemon of his own spiritual debt to Paul: **"To say nothing of your owing me, even your own self."** (Philemon 19)
- He expresses his desire for Philemon's positive response: **"Yes, brother, I want some benefit from you in the Lord, so refresh my heart in Christ."** (Philemon 20)
- He implies Philemon's obedience and anticipates him going above and beyond his request: **"Confident of your obedience... I write to you knowing that you will do even more than I say."** (Philemon 21)
- He requests a guest room, hinting at a future visit to observe the situation: **"At the same time, prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping that through your prayers, I will be graciously given to you."** (Philemon 22)
- The letter is addressed not only to Philemon but also to **"Aphia, our sister, and Archippus, our fellow soldier, and the church in your house,"** which Darko interprets as a form of pressure and accountability.

6. Dismissal of the Sexual Exploitation Argument:

- Darko addresses the modern scholarly argument that Onesimus might have been sent to Paul or ran away from Philemon due to sexual abuse as a homosexual partner.
- He acknowledges that slave masters in the ancient world had the right and often did use their slaves sexually. He cites historical examples and a recent article by Joseph A. Markle in the *Journal of Biblical Literature* that suggests this context could add nuance to the interpretation of Philemon.
- However, Darko largely dismisses this argument as lacking sufficient evidence within the letter itself: **"I am suggesting to you in our treatment of this letter that is far from being brought into the discussion to make any reasonable conjecture."**
- He suggests that sometimes scholars may be tempted to project contemporary concerns onto scripture without adequate basis. He affirms the importance of loving all neighbors, including homosexual individuals, but distinguishes this from retroactively inserting related issues into biblical texts where there is no direct

reference. **"It is another thing, though, to try to push this back into the scriptures and make where there is no reference a related issue."**

7. Conclusion and Application:

- Paul's appeal aims for Philemon to receive Onesimus as a brother in a spirit of unity, forgiveness, and reconciliation.
- Darko hopes that Onesimus was indeed embraced with love and accepted back into the Christian community.
- He encourages listeners to read and preach from Philemon, highlighting its important lessons on forgiveness and reconciliation.

This lecture by Dr. Darko provides a comprehensive overview of the historical context, literary features, and theological implications of Paul's Letter to Philemon, while also engaging with and critically assessing contemporary scholarly interpretations.

4. Study Guide: Darko, Prison Epistles, Session 17, Philemon

Philemon: A Study Guide

Quiz

1. What are the two undisputed Prison Epistles according to the lecture? Briefly explain why the undisputed nature of Philemon's authorship is relevant to discussions about Colossians.
2. What is the generally accepted timeframe for the writing of New Testament books? Within this timeframe, what is the more specific dating proposed for the letter to Philemon, and from where was it likely written?
3. Describe the relationship between the letter to Philemon and the letter to the Colossians. Provide at least two specific examples of internal evidence that suggests a close connection between these two letters.
4. Based on the letter, what can be inferred about Philemon's social and economic status in Colossae? What evidence from the text supports these inferences?
5. Summarize the first scholarly argument presented regarding the identity and actions of Onesimus. What was Onesimus's potential motivation in this scenario?
6. Explain the second scholarly argument concerning Onesimus, using the Latin phrase provided. How does this perspective differ from the first view regarding Onesimus's intentions?
7. Describe the third scholarly interpretation of Onesimus's role. In this view, what was Philemon's motivation for Onesimus's absence, and how would Onesimus likely feel upon returning?
8. According to the lecturer, how does Paul strategically appeal to Philemon on behalf of Onesimus in the letter? Mention at least two different aspects of Paul's appeal.
9. What specific request does Paul make of Philemon regarding Onesimus in verses 17-21? What does Paul offer to do personally in relation to any potential wrongdoing by Onesimus?
10. How does Paul use the mention of the church in Philemon's house as part of his persuasive strategy? What implication does this have for Philemon's response?

Answer Key

1. The two undisputed Prison Epistles are Philippians and Philemon. The undisputed authorship of Philemon strengthens the case for Pauline authorship of Colossians due to the significant internal parallels in terms of co-authors, greetings, and individuals mentioned in both letters. If Philemon is genuinely Pauline, it makes it harder to dismiss Paul's authorship of the closely related Colossians.
2. New Testament books are generally dated between 50 and 100 CE. The letter to Philemon is more specifically placed between 60 and 63 CE and was likely written by Paul from his imprisonment in Rome.
3. The letter to Philemon and Colossians are closely related as they were likely written around the same time, from the same location (Paul's imprisonment), and likely delivered together to Colossae. Internal evidence includes the shared co-author Timothy and the overlap in individuals mentioned in the greetings of both letters, such as Epaphras, Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke. Additionally, Onesimus, the subject of Philemon, is also mentioned in Colossians.
4. Philemon was likely a wealthy individual belonging to the upper class in Colossae. This is suggested by the fact that he owned a house large enough to host a church meeting and that he owned slaves, although the latter is not solely indicative of great wealth in that era.
5. The first argument suggests Onesimus was a runaway slave (*fugitivus*) who fled from Philemon. His potential motivation was to escape his master's authority and mistreatment, acting as a rebellious slave.
6. The second argument, *amicus domini*, posits that Onesimus was a runaway slave but intended to seek out someone respected by his master, like Paul, to intercede on his behalf. This view suggests Onesimus was not running away permanently but seeking a better situation through mediation.
7. The third reading suggests Onesimus was not a runaway but was sent by Philemon to assist Paul during his imprisonment. In this scenario, Philemon would be seen as loyal and helpful to Paul, and Onesimus would likely return with some confidence, expecting a positive reception.
8. Paul strategically appeals to Philemon by highlighting their shared Christian faith and his own close relationship with both Philemon (as his spiritual mentor and fellow worker) and Onesimus (as his convert and "son"). He also uses the pressure of the church knowing about his appeal and subtly reminds Philemon of his own sacrifices as a prisoner.

9. Paul urges Philemon to receive Onesimus as he would receive Paul himself, considering him a partner. He asks Philemon to charge any wrongdoings or debts of Onesimus to Paul's own account, stating he will repay them.
10. By addressing the letter not only to Philemon but also to Apphia, Archippus, and the church in Philemon's house, Paul creates a sense of public accountability. Philemon's response to Paul's appeal would be known to the community, potentially influencing him to act in a way that reflects positively on his Christian leadership.

Essay Format Questions

1. Analyze the various scholarly interpretations of Onesimus's identity and actions in the letter to Philemon. Discuss the strengths and weaknesses of at least two of these perspectives and explain which interpretation you find most convincing, providing textual support for your reasoning.
2. Explore the rhetorical strategies employed by Paul in his letter to Philemon. How does Paul use his personal relationship with Philemon and Onesimus, his status as a prisoner, and the involvement of the local church to persuade Philemon to reconcile with his slave?
3. Discuss the social and cultural context of slavery in the first-century Roman Empire and how this context informs our understanding of the letter to Philemon. How does Paul's appeal challenge or work within the existing social structures of his time?
4. Examine the significance of the letter to Philemon within the broader context of Paul's Prison Epistles. How do the themes and messages of Philemon relate to the other letters written during Paul's imprisonment, such as Colossians and Philippians?
5. Consider the enduring relevance of the letter to Philemon for contemporary Christian ethics. What principles of forgiveness, reconciliation, and social justice can be derived from this short personal letter, and how might these principles be applied to modern issues?

Glossary of Key Terms

- **Prison Epistles:** A collection of letters in the New Testament traditionally attributed to the Apostle Paul and believed to have been written during one or more of his imprisonments. This collection typically includes Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon.
- **Authorship (Biblical):** The question of who wrote a particular book of the Bible. In the context of the Prison Epistles, scholarly debate exists regarding the Pauline authorship of some of these letters, particularly Ephesians and Colossians.
- **Dating (Biblical):** The process of determining the approximate time period in which a biblical text was written. This often involves analyzing historical references, linguistic features, and archaeological evidence.
- **Internal Evidence:** Clues and information found within the text itself that can be used to support arguments about authorship, dating, audience, and purpose.
- **House Church:** Small gatherings of early Christians who met for worship, teaching, and fellowship in the private homes of believers, rather than in dedicated church buildings.
- **Manumission:** The act of a slave owner freeing their slave. This was a practice in the ancient world, allowing enslaved individuals to gain their freedom through various means.
- **Fugitivus (Latin):** A Latin term meaning "runaway slave." This refers to the first scholarly interpretation of Onesimus's actions as fleeing his master, Philemon.
- **Amicus Domini (Latin):** A Latin phrase meaning "friend of the master." This refers to the second scholarly interpretation of Onesimus as a runaway slave seeking an intermediary.
- **Appeal:** A formal request or plea, often made with persuasive language. Paul's letter to Philemon is primarily an appeal on behalf of Onesimus.
- **Reconciliation:** The restoration of friendly relations between two or more parties after a period of conflict or separation. Paul's aim in the letter is the reconciliation between Philemon and Onesimus.

5. FAQs on Darko, Prison Epistles, Session 17, Philemon, Biblicalelearning.org (BeL)

Frequently Asked Questions on the Book of Philemon

1. What is the general context and significance of Paul's letter to Philemon?

Paul's letter to Philemon is a brief but significant text within the Prison Epistles. It is a personal letter, yet it touches upon important social and theological themes related to relationships, forgiveness, and the implications of Christian brotherhood. Unlike other letters addressing broader church issues, Philemon focuses on a specific situation involving a slave, Onesimus, who had run away from his master, Philemon, and subsequently encountered Paul and become a Christian. The letter serves as a powerful example of how Christian principles should influence personal interactions, particularly in complex social dynamics like slavery in the ancient world. It also highlights Paul's persuasive rhetorical skills and his emphasis on reconciliation within the Christian community.

2. Who are the key individuals involved in the letter of Philemon, and what are their relationships?

The primary individuals are Paul, Philemon, and Onesimus. Paul, the apostle, is writing from prison. Philemon is the recipient of the letter, a presumably wealthy Christian living in Colossae who hosts a church in his home and owns slaves. Onesimus is Philemon's slave who had run away and encountered Paul, leading to his conversion. The letter also mentions Apphia (likely Philemon's wife or sister), Archippus (referred to as a fellow soldier, possibly Philemon's son and a minister), and several of Paul's companions who send greetings. Paul has a spiritual father-son relationship with both Philemon (having led him to Christ) and Onesimus (having led him to faith while in prison). Philemon and Onesimus now have a complex relationship as master and runaway slave, which Paul seeks to transform into one of brothers in Christ.

3. What are the main arguments surrounding the authorship and dating of Philemon?

The authorship of Philemon is generally undisputed among scholars, unlike some other Prison Epistles like Colossians and Ephesians. Paul explicitly claims authorship in the letter itself (verses 1, 9, and 19). The dating of Philemon is closely tied to the dating of Paul's imprisonment in Rome, which is typically placed between 60 and 63 AD/CE. Some scholars have proposed other locations for Paul's imprisonment (like Caesarea or

Ephesus), which might slightly alter the dating, but the consensus remains within the mid to late first century, likely concurrent with the writing of Colossians.

4. What is the connection between the letter of Philemon and the letter to the Colossians?

Philemon and Colossians are closely linked by several factors. Both letters were likely written by Paul from the same imprisonment (most likely Rome) and around the same time. Timothy is mentioned as a co-author in the greetings of both letters, and several individuals (Epaphras, Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke) are mentioned in the greetings of both. Furthermore, Onesimus, the slave in Philemon, is also mentioned in Colossians 4:7-9, where he is described as a "faithful and dear brother" who is being sent with Tychicus to Colossae. This overlap strongly suggests that the letters were intended for the same general audience and context, with Philemon addressing a personal matter within the broader Colossian church community.

5. What are the different scholarly views on the identity and actions of Onesimus?

There are several interpretations of Onesimus's situation. The traditional view is that he was a runaway slave (*fugitivus*) who may have also stolen from Philemon. Another view suggests he was a runaway (*amicus domini*) but with the intention of seeking Paul's intervention and reconciliation with Philemon. A third view proposes that Onesimus was actually sent by Philemon to assist Paul in prison and was now being sent back with Paul's commendation. A more controversial interpretation, largely dismissed by most scholars, suggests that the context of the letter involves the sexual exploitation of slaves, possibly with implications for the relationship between Philemon and Onesimus, or even Paul and Onesimus. The view adopted significantly influences the interpretation of Paul's appeal and the dynamics between the individuals involved.

6. What is the core of Paul's appeal to Philemon regarding Onesimus?

Paul's central appeal is for Philemon to receive Onesimus back not merely as a slave, but as a beloved brother in Christ. He uses a variety of persuasive strategies, including reminding Philemon of their shared faith and partnership in ministry, appealing to his love and faith (which Paul has heard of), and leveraging his own position as an older man and a prisoner for Christ. Paul acknowledges Onesimus's past uselessness but emphasizes his newfound usefulness both to Paul and potentially to Philemon. He suggests that Onesimus's separation from Philemon might have been providentially ordained so that Philemon could have him back forever, in a new spiritual relationship. Paul even offers to repay any debt or wrong that Onesimus may have committed against Philemon.

7. What rhetorical strategies does Paul employ in his letter to Philemon?

Paul skillfully uses several rhetorical strategies to persuade Philemon. He begins with a warm greeting that includes not only Philemon but also his household and the church that meets there, creating a sense of communal accountability. He offers sincere thanksgiving for Philemon's love and faith, establishing a positive tone. Instead of directly commanding Philemon based on his apostolic authority (which he pointedly omits in his self-introduction), Paul appeals on the basis of love, his age, and his imprisonment, evoking sympathy. He highlights the transformative power of the gospel in Onesimus's life and emphasizes the new brotherly relationship they now share in Christ. Paul also subtly applies pressure by mentioning the church's awareness of the situation and expressing confidence that Philemon will do even more than he asks. His offer to repay any debt acts as a powerful gesture of solidarity and commitment.

8. What are some of the enduring lessons and applications of the letter to Philemon for Christians today?

Despite its specific historical context, Philemon offers several timeless lessons. It underscores the transformative power of the gospel to change individuals and their relationships. It highlights the importance of forgiveness and reconciliation within the Christian community, even in situations involving significant wrongdoing. The letter challenges believers to view one another as brothers and sisters in Christ, transcending social hierarchies and past grievances. Paul's appeal encourages Christians to extend grace and love, and to consider the spiritual transformation of individuals when addressing interpersonal conflicts. Philemon also demonstrates how Christian principles should impact social ethics and personal conduct, prompting reflection on how faith should inform our interactions in complex social structures.