

Philemon

The overlap of names and circumstances between Colossians and Philemon are a strong indicator that the 2 letters were written at the same time by Paul with Timothy from Rome in 60-62 AD. Paul expressed some optimism that prayers would soon result in his freedom to travel again (Philemon 1:20).

The letter was sent to Philemon, “beloved fellow worker” and to his household, apparently his wife and perhaps his son, “our fellow soldier.” The contents are personal, but no private.

Paul somewhat set the stage for this letter by sending Onesimus (1:10) as a letter carrier along with Tychicus to Colossae (Col 4:7, 9).

After commending Philemon as a fellow worker who was active in faith, and active in sharing the faith and encouraging the brethren (including Paul, 1-7), Paul got down to the meat of the matter, that he wanted Philemon to graciously receive Onesimus back into his household. Apparently Onesimus had run away, and perhaps stolen property as well (1:16-17) and then ended up with Paul, whether by intention or providential coincidence we don't know. Onesimus had changed, in Christ, and Paul urgently interceded for him to be accepted without recrimination by Philemon. This letter provides additional insight into the Lord's perspective on slavery and its excesses, as well as a strong example of the Lord's teaching on forgiveness in real world terms. This had to be hard for Philemon, and Paul knew it, but he called for the right outcome anyway.

v21 is the right spin on Christian obedience. All that and more besides.