

Rick Suraci - Building Bridges

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Our final thoughts for today for this convention are on Building Bridges, and the question I want to ask you, nobody needs to answer, but have you ever been in a situation, especially amongst those that we are close to, that maybe you're over here and someone else is over there and it doesn't look like it's possible to find a place to meet? Has that ever happened? You're not alone. You're not alone.

Building Bridges is the inspiring story of Philemon and Onesimus. We're going to go through the story, the Book of Philemon, and in that letter we're going to see how the Apostle Paul builds a bridge. Paul wrote the unique book of Philemon while he was in prison with Timothy alongside of him, likely around AD 60. Now, it's not an epistle to the churches, rather it's a short, private, personal letter from a friend about a serious personal matter. Philemon was Paul's fellow disciple in Christ.

His slave, Onesimus had run away and had come to Paul while Paul was imprisoned. This created a massive problem on several levels between Philemon and Onesimus because these two men needed God's wisdom and grace. They would need God's wisdom and grace to solve it. So we're going to walk through this true account of these two men who in the days of the Roman Empire, lived on opposite ends of, of a significant social spectrum, and we're going to see how Paul helps them to, in Christ, build a bridge towards each other and work through the serious challenges before them to unite them.

And ultimately, in praise and honor to our Heavenly Father, we're simply going to go through the letter and pause and observe what the apostle does. You're going to turn to one page in Scripture. We're going to have other scriptural references, but just stay with me with the letter. Philemon, verses 1 through 3. Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus and Timothy, our brother to Philemon, our brother, beloved brother and fellow worker, and to Epiphea, our sister and Archippus, our fellow soldier.

And to the church in your house, grace to you in peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. First, let's start with Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus. He didn't say Paul, a prisoner of Rome, and that tells you where his heart and mind were. I'm a prisoner of Christ Jesus.

He is focusing on the why of his imprisonment, not the people who are shackling him. This gives you a sense of where his mind is. What about the other people mentioned in this greeting who are Pifa, an archippus? Well, Albert Barnes, Commentary says that this, our beloved Epipha, was probably the wife of Philemon, and Archippus, our fellow soldier, was likely his son.

Now we don't know that for sure, but it's likely that is the case. We're given hints as to the importance of Philemon's household in Paul's letter to the Colossians. So we just need to set the context of of who this brother is that he's writing to because there's a significant issue that needs to be handled. So when we look at Colossians chapter 4, verses 15 to 18, it's going to give us a little context around who Philemon is. Greet the brethren who are in Laodicea and also Nympha and the church that is in her house.

When this letter is read among you have it also read in the church of the Laodiceans, and you, for your part, read my letter that is coming from Laodicea. So it's very common for the apostle to send letters and for those letters to be passed around, and that's what happened with this letter to

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Philemon, say to Archippus. Now that's the individual that Paul greets in the beginning of Philemon, say to Archippus, take heed to the ministry which you have received in the Lord that you may fulfill it.

I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. Remember my imprisonment. Grace be with you. So dropping in on the book of Colossians gives us a few insights. We're assuming that Archippus is Philemon's son.

So this son of Philemon had an important ministry which needed his focused attention. That tells you about the passing on of the Gospel from generation to generation. This letter to the Colossians was requested to be circulated to Laodicean Church. So you've got this mission of Archippus being spread to other brethren. Paul never mentioned fellow disciples lightly.

When he mentioned someone's name as a fellow disciple, it was because they were a true fellow disciple, and this shows the influence of Philemon and his family. Paul's greeting in this letter to Philemon is very typical Apostle Paul. He lets his reader know his personal circumstances. I'm a prisoner, not of Rome, but of Christ.

He recognizes those who reside with his reader. He's acknowledging everyone around and he's quick to express their equality with him in Christ. He's quick to express their equality with him in Christ. Our fellow soldier, my beloved brother and fellow worker. He's saying, we are joined together.

The church was being served at the home of Philemon. So as we go through our comments this afternoon. We're just going to pause periodically and just give a bridge building point that the Apostle has made. So our first bridge building point is simple three words establish common ground. Paul is going to address a big problem.

How does he start? Dear Philemon, boy have you got trouble. Not what he says, not at all. He doesn't even get to the problem because the first thing he's going to do is establish common ground. Paul always established the common ground of Christ with the brotherhood, especially when he needed to confront serious challenges.

So in our circumstances, do we do the same? When there is an issue, do we first seek to establish common ground? If you want to build a bridge, we need to follow the Apostle Paul's example. This letter to Philemon is an extraordinary teaching tool for us. Paul's going to ask Philemon to alter a major part of his life for the sake of Christ.

Paul will lovingly engage tact, reasoning and godliness to give his letter his life altering request to the opportunity to unfold. So how does he do that? He establishes common ground and then he begins with a prayerful approach. In the letter he says verses 4 and 5. I thank my God, always making mention of you in my prayers because I hear of your love and of the faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and towards all the saints.

Paul is describing a faith that is the faith of a mature Christian. The fact that he mentions love and faith toward all the saints shows that Philemon's personal example is had been time tested. He respected his brother Philemon. So let's pause a couple of just simple verses, simple concept, bridge building concept. Prayerfully know the individual with whom you are speaking or are going to speak.

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Do we prayerfully know them? This is the ground that the Apostle Paul is laying out for us to understand. This is a teaching tool. How diligent are we to deeply observe and clearly remember? Our brother's true spirituality is expressed by those who know them when they have issues surrounding them.

How diligent are we to observe the good when there's a really tough situation? The Apostle Paul simply took his time, his prayerful time to make that observation. Let's move on to verse six, and I pray again, and I pray that the fellowship of your faith may become effective through the knowledge of every good thing which is in you.

For Christ's sake, I pray that the fellowship of your faith, that word for fellowship is a word that we have discussed as Bible students constantly. Koinonia there's that beautiful, beautiful connectivity, this partnership, this participation, this Social joining together, this koinonia fellowship. Paul uses this word not flippantly, but very, very seriously. The apostle is using this powerful word to describe the common participation he had with Philemon. As an example of this connection, let's consider what happened as a result of Pentecost and the apostle Peter's discourse to the multitudes.

We're going to be looking in Acts 2:41, 42 for just a moment, and as we look at those verses, we want to recognize that in these verses, after Pentecost or at Pentecost, that's the first time this word for fellowship is used in the New Testament. Think about that. It's only once the Spirit had come that this koinonia fellowship is introduced. This is important.

Acts 2:41, 42. So then those that received his word were baptized, and that day there were added about 3,000 souls. They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles teaching and to koinonia and to fellowship, to breaking of bread and to prayer. There was a new bond in the Spirit, and it was an important bond.

And it was the basis not only for Christianity, but the apostle, and Philemon is telling us it is one of the bases for building a bridge. That's the kind of fellowship we need to be seeking if we want to build a bridge. Two quick other examples of the power of this koinonia fellowship, and you know these verses, brethren.

First Corinthians 10:16 is not the cup of blessing which we bless. A koinonia, a sharing in the blood of Christ is not the bread which we break. A koinonia, a sharing in the body of Christ. That's the kind of fellowship we're looking at. Galatians 2:9, another verse.

And recognize the grace that had been given to me. James and Cephas and John, who were reputed to be pillars, gave to me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, the right hand of koinonia, so that we might go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised. Let's grasp the depth of what the word means. Paul uses that word to. To show the balance between them.

He said to him, I pray that the fellowship of your faith may become effective. It's a powerful, powerful introduction that the apostle is giving to Philemon. Jesus and his apostles were not described as having any of this koinonia before Pentecost. Now the latter part of those verses may become effective through the knowledge of every good thing which is in you for Christ's sake. Paul knew what drove Philemon, and he knew that his Spirituality was powerfully intact.

He knew that Philemon was a strong brother in Christ because he's talking to him on a very high, mature level, and he's talking about that through the knowledge, and that word is epinosis. It's knowledge towards something. Colossians 1:10 gives us a sense of what that knowledge needs to

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be towards.

Colossians 1:10 that you might walk worthy of the Lord unto all, pleasing, being fruitful in every good work, and increasing in the epinosis of God. So the apostle is talking to Philemon on a very high level of mutual respect. Bridge building point When I'm here and you're there and we need to find a way to build a foundation to get to one another, another important point that the apostle brings us is to build communication. Not because there's a problem, not because you're mad, not because they're wrong. Build communication on the foundation of the fellowship of our faith.

Build communication on the foundation of the fellowship of our faith. How clearly do we recognize our partnership with those who may be involved in challenging circumstances? How clearly do we recognize that? Do we think about that?

Do we recall their example? Is our recognition of them sincere enough to be able to put it in writing? The apostle Paul put it in writing and by putting it in writing he made it available again and again and again and again and again and again. Are we. When we have a situation that needs a bridge built, are we going to approach it with such conviction in our brother or sister in Christ that we are willing to even put it in writing?

That's what the apostle did.

Next verse, verse seven. For I've come to have much joy and comfort in your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you. Brother. I love this verse. It's a really simple, powerful point.

Paul recognizes that Philemon's heart is in the right place regarding the brethren and is sincerely reporting to Philemon that he is a strong disciple and he is worthy of being called his Christian brother. Think about the power of these words. He's about to ask him to do something completely unorthodox, and before he does, he establishes his connection. What power in these words?

You, Philemon, bring me Paul joy and comfort because you refresh our brethren. Because Paul sees Philemon as so genuinely mature, he is going to boldly now go on to the matter at hand. He has confidence in his brother. Building bridge point Acknowledge the positive influence of your brother on you before you go to deal with the problem, whatever it is, acknowledge their positive influence on you. That's what the Apostle Paul did.

How well do I prepare and carefully consider the breadth of my brother's character in Christ before I'm ready to pose any serious issue to him? Do I tell him about the inspiration that I received from him, or do I just want to cut to the chase and tell him what the problem is? You see how the Apostle Paul is step by step, preparing for a Philemon to be able to deal with something that would be very difficult in that culture. On to verse 8. Therefore, because of all this, though, I have enough confidence in Christ to order you to do what is proper.

Okay, that sounds like a little bit of a shift, doesn't it? I'm going to order you. Is that what he's saying? Hang on, hang on. Okay.

I have enough confidence to order you to do what is proper. This word for order is only used regarding those who wield great authority, and this is the only time it is used by Paul. He never uses this word in any other circumstance. Let me just give you one example of the power behind this word.

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You're going to recognize this situation after I read the Scripture to you. Luke 8:25, and he said, and Jesus said unto them, where is your face? And they, being afraid, wondered, saying to one another, what manner of man is this? For he commands.

He orders even the winds and the water, and they obey him. That's the power of that word. Jesus was able to command the storm to be still. Paul, as an apostle, knows what authority has in Christ. He knows, and yet he's not going to use it.

He's going to remind Philemon who he is, because he has reminded Philemon who Philemon is. He's saying, here I am. I am standing before you in writing. Let's go to verse nine. Yet.

So in verse eight he said, I have enough confidence in Christ to order you to do what's proper. Yet verse nine, for love's sake, I rather appeal to you. Since I am such a person as Paul the aged and now also a prisoner of Christ. The word for appeal gonna sound pretty familiar. It's parakaleo.

Parakletos. We'll get to that in a moment. It means to call near, to invite, to invoke. I rather I have chosen to approach you and to appeal to you. I am drawing you to me.

And when you look at this, what we see is a big issue, and such a tender loving care by the apostle, such confidence in his own calling and in Philemon himself. First, John 2:1 uses a slightly different form of this word. The Word that we're usually familiar with First John 2:1. My little children, these things I write unto you that you sin not.

And if any man sin, we have an advocate, a Parakletos with our Father, with Jesus, Jesus Christ the righteous. We have a parakletos. Paul is actually walking the talk of a true Christian character here. He's assuming an advocating role for the challenge of his new brother Onesimus, which he has not yet mentioned in this letter. Incidentally, this letter is being delivered by Onesimus, okay, But he has not yet mentioned.

We're nine verses in. He hasn't mentioned him once. But he's preparing Philemon so that he can be advocating to Philemon so that Onesimus can be recognized by him. What is Paul doing here? He's being Christlike.

That's what he's doing. That's what he's doing. The bridge building concept here. Compassionately draw your brother towards their difficult challenge. Compassionately draw them towards that difficult challenge.

They need to face it. We can drag them or we can compassionately draw them after we recognize the things we've discussed, the things the apostle has taught us when facing the task of challenging one of the brotherhood to step up higher. The Apostle Paul modeled Jesus by displaying truthful confidence in Philemon's spirituality. Truthful confidence. What Paul wrote, Paul meant.

He wasn't buttering him up. He was reflecting his attachment to this beautiful brother in Christ. Here's our question. Do we have that same humble and yet bold approach when faced with hard brotherhood issues? Do we?

This is what the Apostle is teaching us. Paul is teaching us to put first things first. He has meticulously and sincerely stated his heart and truth connections with, with Philemon and now will carefully, carefully build on that foundation. The challenge will be great, but God's grace will be greater. Now let's pause for a moment and just get a little bit of context here.

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In the Apostles Day there was no middle class or working class who got paid a specific wage. There were day laborers. But if you needed a consistent job, you were an indentured servant. If you were captured in war or born into slavery, you became a slave. That's just the way culture was.

Each culture determined the severity of that servitude, and Roman culture had a harsh and severe rules in relation to this servitude. The owner, according to Roman law, had the power of life and death over their slaves. Now the Jews had a profoundly different rules that were far more humane. We're not going to touch on that today.

That's just an interesting Perspective. A quick look at the legal ramifications of the whole dilemma that the Apostle Paul found himself in the middle of because Onesimus was a runaway slave, and where did he go? He went to Paul. So now he's in Paul's company.

From thebibleeffect.com the The Roman laws for slavery saw slaves as the property of the master, and they came down very harshly on anything that could come across as a slavery rebellion. If a slave ran away, the owner could have them tortured or even branded, and if the slave was a continuous problem, the owner could have them crucified. If someone showed hospitality to a runaway slave, they could be held liable for any financial loss caused while the slave was away. The apostle showed hospitality to a runaway slave.

And technically, from a legal perspective, the apostle is now in jeopardy because of that hospitality. Now, Paul knows this. This is a big problem. Nine verses into the letter, Paul begins to address the challenging issue with Onesimus, and how does he do it?

With good news. He starts with the best possible news. He begins by focusing on Onesimus himself. Philemon, verse 10. I appeal to you from my child Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my imprisonment.

Interestingly, Onesimus means profitable. That's interesting. What better news could there have been than Onesimus coming to Christ? Now, a gut reaction to this might be, yeah, right, he's just playing the game so that he can get away with something. That could be a gut reaction.

But consider, consider, brethren, the Apostle Paul, this man who is driven by God's spirit in every way, is proclaiming it to be so. He is saying, I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus. Okay? And that word appeal is that same word that paracleo that he talked about appealing to Philemon earlier. He is my child.

I have begotten him in my imprisonment. Onesimus, he is saying, is now one of the family. He is now one of our family. The runaway slave has now become a follower of Christ. Verse 11.

Onesimus, who formerly was useless to you, but now is useful both to you and to me. This very next statement here is very, very powerful as well. Onesimus is now essentially living up to his name. Useful. That's what the Apostle is describing.

He in some ways resembles the newly open door to Gentile Christians. The door to Gentile Christians. First Peter, chapter 2, verse 10. For you were once not a people, but now you are the people of God. You had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

Onesimus, Paul is saying, is now become useful. Okay, okay, so what do we have? Onesimus is valuable. But he's still a runaway slave who in more than one way likely stole from Philemon. He stole from him for not being where he was supposed to be and doing the work he was supposed to

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do.

And we don't know what other pieces there were there. So what do you do? Are you just going to forget all of the wrongdoing? Is about the Apostle Paul saying, hey, just forget about everything? Is that what he's saying?

Let's hold on and see how he unfolds this. Verses 12 to 13 I have sent him back to you in person. That is.

It just this just it just it touches me. I have sent him back to you in person. That is sending my very heart, whom I wished to keep with me, so that on your behalf he might minister to me in my imprisonment for the Gospel.

The Apostle is profoundly attached to this runaway slave who has now become a follower of Christ. Paul is here accentuating his attachment to and the value of Onesimus and crediting much of that to Philemon. Paul reveals two significant things here. First, he is recognizing the propriety of sending Onesimus back to his rightful and legal owner by Roman law. He is doing the right thing.

I have sent him back to you, and second, he is freely acknowledging Onesimus conversion as genuine. So he's doing the right thing after he has done the right thing with Onesimus. Let's just look at just a reminder of the context here. First Corinthians 6, 10, 11 in relation to Onesimus.

Nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. Such were some of you, but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and in the spirit of our God. You were changed from what you once were. This had happened for Onesimus in the presence of Paul, and now he's sending this new man back to his owner. So what's the bridge building concept here?

Address the challenge with completeness, with honesty and integrity. Paul did the right thing on every level. Paul carefully and honestly stated the whole truth of the matter and absolutely acted by the highest legal standard, while plainly displaying the heart of the matter. You had the facts of the matter and you had the heart of the matter, and he's putting all of that into the hands of Philemon. Paul advocated for Onesimus with great wisdom and compassion.

Our question when we have an issue, how wise, truthful and humble are we when we must present such challenges? Do we take the time and the consecrated effort to put things in such order.

After focusing on Onesimus, Paul now focuses on Philemon. Paul clearly respects Philemon's position as the one who was wrong wronged. He respects it absolutely. Paul's respect is confident in Philemon's spiritual maturity. He's going to respect what was done to him in the context of who Philemon is as his brother.

Philippians. I'm sorry, Philippians Philemon¹⁴ but without your consent, I did not want to do anything so that your goodness would not be in effect by compulsion, but of your own free will, sending him back to you so you can make a decision now the apostle is going to influence that. But he did exactly the right thing. Paul leaves the door of Christian liberty wide open for Philemon. He's relying on Philemon's spiritual conscience to guide him.

He's not relying on Philemon as a slave owner. He's relying on him as a brother in Christ, a true yoke fellow in true koinonia fellowship with him. Romans 12, 9, 10. Let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor that which is evil, cling to that which is good.

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Be devoted to one another in brotherly love, giving preference to one another. That's the attitude that the Apostle Paul is displaying and urging. Paul now looks to God's providence in Philemon's life as a way to help Philemon understand the several unlikely events that he's experienced. This is a shock to Philemon. Let's face it, okay, he couldn't text him ahead of time and say guess what?

All right, the God Onesimus shows up at his doorstep. Verses 15 and 16. For perhaps he was for this reason separated from you for a while, that you would have him back forever. No longer as a slave, but more than a slave, a beloved brother, especially to me. But how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.

Separated for a time to be joined with you as a disciple of Jesus for the coming ages of time. That's what the apostle is telling him. Look at the miracle that has happened from this very difficult circumstance. Romans 12. Let's go to verses 11 to 13.

Not lagging behind in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord, rejoicing in hope, persevering in tribulation, devoted to prayer, contributing to the needs of the saints, practicing hospitality. These are the things that the apostle is doing and he's encouraging Philemon to do as well. Our bridge building principle. Appeal to the best of both parties to find answers to their dilemma. Appeal to the best of Both parties to find the answers.

Bringing those together who are at odds begins with recognizing the facts of the matter, progresses into recognizing the heart of the matter, and ends with appealing to the best of both parties. How clear, compassionate and spiritually based is our thinking when we are faced with such challenges, brethren, do we leave sarcasm, judgment and preconceived notions out of the picture? That's what the Apostle Paul did. He left them out. He will conclude his letter with his usual combination of strength and sensitivity.

He will finish addressing every detail of what is important and will at the same time leave the doors wide, wide open for future fellowship and future co laboring. He will let everyone know, everyone know how important they all are to him. Verse 17. If then you regard me a partner, accept him as you would me. Partner is the root word for partnership that we had previously talked about.

A partner in Christ. Paul extends his faith in Philemon to the point of equalizing Onesimus with himself. Accept him as you would me. Matthew 10:40 he who receives you receives me, and he who receives me receives him who sent me.

Paul is simply being Christlike. Bridge building concept re establish the value and importance of both parties. Bringing together those who are at odds requires deep faith in both struggling parties. The Apostle modeled this kind of faith as he advocated for Onesimus with Philemon. The question is, are we paying attention to the principles that are being set out here?

Now Paul deals with what could have been the 800 pound gorilla in the room. Okay, what is that? What about the legal issue that Onesimus had opened up by his wrongdoing? Onesimus was wrong on every level. He was wrong.

Here's what the apostle says. Verses 18 through 20 through 20. But if he has wronged you in any way and he did or owes you anything, and he did, charge that to me. Charge that to my account. I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand.

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I am signing my name to this instruction for handling the legal issue here I am writing this with my own hand. I will repay, not to mention to you, that you owe me, even your own self as well.

And you know, is he trying to soften him? He is trying to focus him. Is he talking to Philemon the man or Philemon the new creature? He's talking to the new creature and he wants him to recognize what that means. Yes, brother.

Verse 20. Let me benefit from you in the Lord, refresh my heart in Christ. Why would Paul be willing to cover the cost of Onesimus Wrong? Why would he do that? Well, first we know Paul was legally liable, so he was doing the right thing.

And while it's important, it's of, it's minimal compared to the grace that Paul himself was shown in his own conversion. Remember Saul of Tarsus? He was an angry Christian persecutor and responsible for the deaths of some, and yet Jesus gave him grace and strength to be an apostle. Paul knew what it was like to have an impossible debt forgiven and he's simply passing that on to Philemon.

I know of what God's grace is. Can you work with that? With our new brother? Ephesians 4:31,32. Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you along with all malice.

Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ has forgiven you. Bridge building Focus everyone on God's unmerited grace to us all. Recognizing the power of the grace that we have received as we navigate the challenges of others who are at odds is of paramount importance. Remember brethren, none of us deserves any of this. Just remember who you are.

Remember who you were. That's what the apostles is pointing us towards.

Paul is modeling Christ likeness. The question is, are we ready to follow Paul as he follows Christ? Verse 21 having the same confidence in your obedience, I write to you since I know that you will do even more than what I say. I know you, brother. I know who you are.

I know you. Bridge building concept Here confidently trust in your brother's spirituality.

Trust it. Paul was persuaded of Philemon's godly response. Why? He knew him well as a brother and a co laborer in Christ. Our question do we sincerely know our brethren well enough to have this kind of confidence in them when tensions are high?

Are we willing to have that kind of confidence when there's a lot of tension?

Having appropriately displayed a disciple, the babe in Christ and a mature man in Christ, Paul now wraps up with hopefulness and faith, and brother, just two more minutes.

Philemon. Verses 22 through 24 at the same time also prepare for me a lodging for I hope that you, through your prayers I will be given to you. Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus greets you as do Mark, Aristarchus, demons, Luke, my fellow workers, the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirits, and that's how he ends. By the way, prepare lodging for me because I want to come to see you.

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I'm leaving this situation in your hands. I want to come to see you. I leave it up to you. Paul's continued faith in Onesimus is reflected In Colossians, we look at Colossians 4, verses 7 through 9. It says, as to all my affairs.

Tychicus, our beloved brother and faithful servant and fellow Bonser, and the Lord will bring you information. For I have sent unto you for this very purpose, that you may know about our circumstances and that he may encourage your hearts. So he's talking about these brethren, saying, okay, they're serving, they're doing the important things, and then he says, and with him, with him, Onesimus, our faithful and beloved brother, who is one of your number.

Our faithful and beloved brother. That's who Onesimus became. They will inform you about the whole situation here. Our final bridge building focus, brethren, is respond to all with a transformed heart and mind. That's where the convention started and that's where we want to end.

Respond to all with a transformed heart and mind. Galatians, chapter 3, verse 28. There is neither Jew nor Greek. There is neither slave nor free man. There's neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

Learning to live these words, brethren, transforms your everyday life. Just ask Philemon and Anissimus. We can have problems. The Scriptures give us ways to work through them. The question is, are we listening?

With a transformed heart and mind, it'll lord out his blessing.