

The Behavior Of Onesiphorus

Jared M. Ellis

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In my studies, I found that the Bible is filled with a vast number of peculiar characters. Lately, something I have found to be incredibly interesting is investigating these obscure characters who are only mentioned a couple of times or sometimes maybe even just once. The most interesting part to me is trying to understand why God decided these people needed to be mentioned at all.

Take someone like Shamgar, who is only mentioned in one verse in Judges 3: 31, and all it essentially says is there was Shamgar, who killed 600 Philistines with an ox goad, and then the next verse just jumps into something completely different, never mentioning him again. Like, can I get some backstory on that? But anyway, I bring this up to show you that there are people in the Bible mentioned with very little detail and very little background.

However, just because the Bible does not give much detail about them, does not mean that there are not important lessons that we can learn from them. Today we are going to look at one of these people. This individual is only referred to in the Scriptures twice, but I think the few verses where he is mentioned holds some powerful lessons that we as Christians in the modern day church ought to pay attention to.

Please turn with me to II Timothy 1, verse 15. We are first going to look at some side characters before we see our prime subject. Now keep in mind this was an especially scary time to be a Christian. One of the most cruel emperors in Rome, Nero, was at the height of his power and deepened the persecution of the first century church. Because of this, Paul found himself writing this letter to Timothy from a Roman prison. Let us break into the middle of one of Paul's thoughts in verse 15 here.

II Timothy 1:15 This you know, that all those in Asia have turned away from me, among whom are Phygellus and Hermogenes.

We are presented with two people and what Paul has to say about them is not very good. He starts this part of the letter with information that probably was not news to Timothy. I am sure Timothy had heard that all those in Asia had turned away from Paul.

But after this statement, Paul name-drops two individuals who walked away from him, Phygellus and Hermogenes. This is the only time these two are ever mentioned in the Bible, and Paul does not even tell us why they turned away from him. And even in my research of Jewish and early church traditions, I could not find anything substantial about these two people, and I even asked ChatGPT about it! Phygellus and Hermogenes remain shadowy figures.

Now, in verse 16, we meet our prime subject. Let us go ahead and read it.

II Timothy 1:16 The Lord grant mercy to the household of Onesiphorus, for he often refreshed me, and was not ashamed of my chain.

The introduction Paul gives to Onesiphorus is absolutely glowing. He starts by asking God to grant mercy to him and his household. Then he tells us why, "for he often refreshed me and was not ashamed of my chain."

Now I find the use of the word refreshed here to be especially intriguing. The Greek word Paul uses is *anapsuxis*. This is the only time this word appears in the entire Bible. But the literal translation of this word means to cool off or to have a recovery breath, or to refresh one's spirit. Before this, in verse 14, Paul was admonishing Timothy to,

II Timothy 1:14 . . . keep by the Holy Spirit [which] dwells in us.

In Scripture, the Holy Spirit is often described metaphorically as a breath or a life-giving breath. So I find it fascinating that right after mentioning the Holy Spirit, Paul uses a word that is not used anywhere else in the Bible, which means a recovery breath, or a cooling off. Brethren, in the same way that the Holy Spirit is a breath of life to us, Paul describes someone, Onesiphorus, as being a breath of recovery.

This really struck me. When I am dealing with the people in my life, am I a source of recovery for them? Am I someone who lifts up those around me?

Paul was definitely in a place where his spirit could have been crushed. Being in a Roman prison, especially at the height of the persecution against the church, would have been incredibly crushing to one's spirit. But God did not allow Paul's spirit to be crushed, because not only did Paul have God's Holy Spirit, but God also sent him someone, a person who became a recovery breath for him, a deep inhale and exhale when he needed it most.

Again, I ask, are we that for each other? When life is crazy and the world is in chaos, are we a breath of recovery for those around us?

It is important, brethren, especially now when we wait for the next holy day cycle, to become an ever-present aid for one another. To put it into Paul's words, we need to be an *anapsuxis* to each other.

Let us go ahead and reread verse 16 and pick up the second characteristic Paul reveals about Onesiphorus.

II Timothy 1:16 The Lord grant mercy to the household of Onesiphorus, for he often refreshed me and was not ashamed of my chain.

When Paul says that Onesiphorus was not ashamed of his chain, it is important to remember that Paul was not in prison because he had done anything wrong, but he was in prison because he preached the gospel of Jesus Christ. The hot thing to do in Roman politics at the time was to persecute Christians.

I recently read a book called *SPQR* by author Mary Beard. This book gives a synopsis of each Roman emperor, and in her book she describes a great fire that tore through Rome in 64 AD, which devastated a large portion of the city. How the fire started is a mystery, but there were substantial rumors that Nero himself had set the fire so he could rebuild the city to his liking. Because these rumors became so widespread, Nero issued an official declaration, blaming the fire on this fairly new religious group called Christians.

The Great Fire occurred in 64 AD and scholars estimate that Paul's second imprisonment was between 64 AD and 67 AD. This coincides with Paul's second arrest in which he writes this letter to Timothy.

At this point, being a Christian or even associating with Christians was extremely dangerous. And yet Paul tells us about the awesome attitude that Onesiphorus had. Onesiphorus was not ashamed to be seen or associated with Paul, and quite frankly, he was putting himself and his household at great risk associating with someone in prison, especially someone who might have been blamed for arson.

The main point I want to bring out is that Onesiphorus did not just sit with Paul during the easy times. He did not flinch when the flames got hot, no pun intended. The loyalty that Onesiphorus showed to Paul is one we need to take to heart. No matter what we are going through as family members in the faith, we have to stick by each other in times of peace and prosperity, and in times when persecution comes.

We are absolutely blessed to live in an age where we do not have someone like Nero in power, but that is not outside the realm of possibility in the future. How important is it that we remember the incredible actions of Onesiphorus? Love and loyalty to each other, no matter how shameful the chains that shackle us are.

Let us look at verse 17.

II Timothy 1:17 But when he arrived in Rome, he sought me out very zealously and found me.

Something to note that seriously puts this verse into perspective is the fact that Onesiphorus was not from Rome. He was from Ephesus. That means this journey he made to get to Paul spanned over 1,500 miles. Through my research, the most plausible route that he likely took was incredibly grueling. This route had Onesiphorus sailing 1,000 miles across the Aegean and Adriatic Seas, and then walking 500 miles from southeast Italy all the way to Rome. This trip, *at the very least*, would have taken him six weeks to complete.

Not only was the journey itself dangerous, but we need to remember who was in power at the time. Nero was having Christians executed for merely professing Christ as their Savior. A man arriving from Asia Minor and asking about a condemned Christian leader probably attracted some suspicion.

The bottom line is that Onesiphorus risked harassment, persecution, arrest, and the death penalty, all to find Paul.

This brings me to the second part of the verse. "He sought me out very zealously and found me." Locating Paul was also not an easy task. This was not like Paul's first arrest in which he was put under house arrest. Onesiphorus did not have an address he could just waltz up to.

Paul was most likely in a big city prison, possibly the famous Mamertine prison in Rome. The Mamertine prison was cramped, underground, dark, damp, and made Alcatraz look like the Ritz-Carlton. Onesiphorus would have had to completely start from scratch with zero information on Paul's whereabouts.

He had to figure out what district Paul was in, what prison he was in, and what specific cell he was in. Moreover, he would have needed to find the safest routes to travel and the right time when the guards would actually allow visitors. And to cap it all off, all this effort could have been in vain if they had decided to transfer Paul to another prison or execute him before Onesiphorus got there.

When Paul mentions the zeal of Onesiphorus, this is what he is talking about. He diligently, courageously, and zealously sought out Paul, so that Paul

would know that he was not alone and someone was there for him. Not only did Onesiphorus zealously seek Paul, but he found him.

I cannot imagine the emotions that Paul felt when the light shined through the iron bars and he looked up and saw Onesiphorus. And I cannot imagine the relief that Onesiphorus must have felt, seeing that Paul was still alive, and that his zealous searching had resulted in a reunion with his brother in the faith.

Do we seek each other? When we see a family member in the church in crisis, do we search them out with zeal? Notice that Onesiphorus was not trying to solve the problem for Paul. He was not diligently seeking him to break him out of prison or to find a way to get him released. He sought him out to minister to him, to help him, and to be there for him. Sometimes our brothers and sisters are going to go through trials that we cannot fix or solve. But what we can do is be there for them, encourage them, and help them.

My manly instincts whenever I see someone going through a hard time, is to try my best to solve whatever problem they are facing. And sometimes arrogantly, I think I can solve every problem that I see people going through. But not every problem I encounter is one I am even half capable of solving. But what can be done is providing a loving, outstretched arm to be present for them, even if it is just a phone call or text.

Brethren, there is not much in the Bible about Onesiphorus. There are really no details about him as a person or anything that he actually said, and I used to wonder why Paul never gave any details about Onesiphorus as a person, but then I realized he did. Behavior is a language. Paul never wrote anything that Onesiphorus said. He only mentions what Onesiphorus did.

We tell each other things by our behavior and how we act. Paul does not give many details about Phygellus and Hermogenes other than that they turned away from him, but the details were not important. Their behavior was a language. By turning their backs on Paul, they were saying that they did not care about him. They did not want to risk their lives to be there to help him, and if he was executed because of his beliefs, well, better him than me. The only thing they are remembered for is their stark disloyalty to Paul.

But Paul gives us the beautiful contrast, literally in the scripture right, after by telling us about the behavior of a true Christian. Details are not needed about Onesiphorus because his behavior and his actions speak for themselves.

Brethren, our behavior is also a language, and I think it is important to ask ourselves every single day, what are we telling others through our actions? Are we telling them what Onesiphorus told Paul, or are we telling them what Phygellus and Hermogenes told Paul?

Let us conclude by reading verses 15 through 18, but this time I took a page from Dr. Maas' book and I am going to read it from the Amplified Bible. Verse 15.

II Timothy 1:15-18 (AMP) You are aware of the fact that all who are in [the province of] Asia turned away and deserted me, Phygellus and Hermogenes among them. The Lord grant mercy to the family of Onesiphorus, because he often refreshed me and shown me kindness [comforting and reviving me like fresh air] and was not ashamed of my chains [for Christ's sake]; but [instead] when he reached Rome, he zealously searched for me and found me—the Lord grant to him that he may find mercy from the Lord on that great day. You know very well how many things he did for me and what a help he was at Ephesus [you know better than I can tell you].

Onesiphorus did not make this journey to Paul on a whim. He had an established pattern of behavior. He had been ministering to Paul and refreshing him long before he came to him in Rome.

I hope and I pray that all of us establish that same pattern of behavior and that we too may be granted the mercy that Onesiphorus is.