

## Forgotten Lives

### *Onesiphorus*

2 Timothy 1:15-18

May 31, 2026 am

HDBC

From my earliest memories in church I have loved the stories of the great heroes of the Bible. Men and women who faced overwhelming odds, yet triumphed through courage and faith in a God who could deliver.

Noah who ignored the chatter and built an ark.

Stephen who faced his executioners with stones in their hands.

Elijah who squared off against the prophets of Baal.

David who ran toward Goliath with a sling and a few stones.

Shadrach, Meshach, Abednego who stood firm before the fire.

Daniel who refused to stop praying, even in the face of certain death.

Paul who was stone, scourged, beaten, imprisoned and beheaded.

These stories created within me a desire to be like them. To be courageous and faithful to God regardless of the costs. And added to these, I've read the biographies of great servants of God during the post N.T. days. These too, have motivated me greatly.

We can all benefit from those heroes of the faith, both in the Bible and after the Bible times. But in my later years I've been drawn also to those who found themselves laboring in the shadows, often overlooked and forgotten. The Bible is filled with them. Men and women who were used of God, yet who remain obscure in the minds of most believers. In this series we are going to examine some of them. We can learn from those in the shadows, those *Forgotten Lives*.

Some will be positive examples to emulate. Others will be negative examples that we need to learn from. In many cases the ones we consider will have been overshadowed by a single other person. In other cases they will pop onto the scene for a brief moment, then fade back off the stage never to be referenced again. I hope this will be instructive, but more importantly, I want it to lead us to be more like Jesus.

We're going to start with a man named Onesiphorus. He is mentioned only in the book of 2 Timothy. Yet, we can learn enough in a few short verses to consider him a hidden hero who is quickly forgotten by most readers of the Bible. I don't want that to be true of us. When you get to Heaven and meet Onesiphorus I don't want you to be ignorant of who he is. I want you to walk up to him and tell him you know all about him and how his example made a difference in your life.

He is first mentioned in 2 Timothy 1:15-18, and then again in then again in 2 Timothy 4:19. Let's look at the first of those two and see what we can learn about this Forgotten Life. **Read 2 Timothy 1:15-18.**

There are four things he did for Paul that the great apostle never forgot. Four things that made a difference in the life of the great missionary. Four things that Onesiphorus likely thought unimportant at the time, but were used of God to assist Paul to the finish line of his life.

Let's look at the passage and make sure we understand the context. This is a **very personal section written by Paul about this faithful man who should not be a forgotten life**. He may be overshadowed by the champion of missions who he served, yet he was instrumental in Paul's life. To borrow an overused phrase he was like the wind beneath the wings of Paul, blowing silently and secretly, keeping the great man soaring. He was to Paul what Aaron and Hur were to Moses.

Note three things in the text.

### **1. The abandonment from Paul (15)**

This letter was written during the final days of Paul while he was incarcerated in the infamous Mamertine Dugeon in Rome. This was a dismal, dark and hopeless place where condemned prisoners were held awaiting execution. It is described by one historian as being a place where the stones were **black with age**. It was cold, damp and suffocating. No one Paul asked Timothy to **come before winter** and to bring his outer cloak.

Paul indicates that all who had been with him at the start at now fled, abandoning him in that difficult place. He even specifically names Phygelus and Hermogenes. What a horrible thing to be remembered for all eternity as one who abandoned Paul. Why would they do so?

It was hard to be a friend of Paul at that time. He was a prison on death-row. He was considered an enemy of Nero, who was a crazy emperor who had the power of life and death. Paul was not in a good place. It would be difficult to visit him, assist him, support him. It would take effort and be risky. And so . . . they left. Paul says that was true of ***all who were in Asia***. No one stuck with the faithful evangelist.

This must have been so hard for Paul. He was strong and had a deep faith in God but he also felt the sting of betrayal just as any of us would. **If you have ever been betrayed or abandoned you have tasted this bitter pill.**

## 2. **The prayer of Paul** (16a)

Against the backdrop of betrayal Paul presents a bright ray of light as he mentions his prayer for Onesiphorus. We can learn somethings from the prayer of Paul.

**Note first** that he prays for the ***household*** of Onesiphorus. We find a similar phrase at the end of the letter when Timothy is asked to greet the ***household*** of Onesiphorus. A couple of things to note.

### **First, Onesiphorus was part of a Christian family.**

When Paul listed the names of people he wanted to greet in his letters it was because they were fellow believers who were associated with Paul and his ministries. They were almost certainly converted in Ephesus under the ministry of Paul during his 3rd missionary journey.

It is a marvelous thing to be saved. Nothing is more important than that. But what a wonderful thing it is to also be part of a family of believers. What a blessing when mom and dad, brothers and sisters, aunts and

uncles, grandmom and granddad are all saved. What a powerful blessing to know that you have spiritual brothers and sisters right there in your own home.

My heart goes out to those believers who are alone in their own families. At best they are misunderstood and at worst they are persecuted. Onesiphorus did not have that problem. He was blessed.

**Second, it could indicate that Onesiphorus had already died.**

This would explain the focus on the household rather than on the individual. There is also some speculation that he later died as a martyr under the emperor Domitian. This could also simply mean that Paul was praying for a blessing on the entire household because of the actions of one.

**Second,** it was a prayer for mercy for this family. Could this mean that the family was under attack or persecution as a result of Onesiphorus' connections with Paul? We don't know. But any prayer for mercy would likely reveal some potential harm or trouble brewing.

And that bring us to his ministry to Paul. Just what did he do for Paul?

**3. The ministry to Paul (16b-17)**

Four things revealed in Paul's brief paragraph about his friend.

**1) He served Paul in Ephesus. (18)**

*You know what services he rendered at Ephesus.* This tells me that Onesiphorus understood the importance of serving Christ and serving others from the very beginning of his walk with Jesus. He did not wait until he had reached a prescribed level of maturity to begin to serve. He just jumped in and did it.

We are not told what kinds of things he did for Paul in Ephesus.

Perhaps he served as a **scribe**.

Perhaps he helped Paul **household chores**.

Perhaps he assisted Paul with the **logistics of a growing church**.

Perhaps he traveled with Paul on **evangelistic trips** outside the city.  
Perhaps he **helped with children** as Paul taught adults.  
Perhaps he assisted Paul with **health issues**.

**You are never too young in Christ to serve.**

**You are never too old in Christ to serve.**

**2) He made it his mission to find Paul. (17)**

We are not told how Onesiphorus learned of Paul's imprisonment, but Paul makes it clear that when he did find out he made it his personal mission to come and find him. BTW, that would have meant a 1000-mile trip from Ephesus to Rome. It would have been expensive, time-consuming, and dangerous. Yet he would not be deterred.

I could imagine him walking down street after street in Rome, asking everyone he saw if they knew a man named Paul who have been imprisoned by Nero. I can also imagine one after another person refusing to even consider answering the question for fear of being perceived as acting in a treasonous way against the insane emperor. Day after day and possibly month after month Onesiphorus continued on his quest. He would not be stopped until he found the battered apostle.

What kept him going? Love, unselfishness, commitment, loyalty.

**3) He stood with Paul when all others ran and hid. (16)**

*And was not ashamed of my chains.*

This phrase should not be understood in our modern waying understanding shame. More likely it reflected his courage to be seen with Paul when it would have been extremely dangerous. Paul as held by the state and condemned to die. Anyone associated with him would have been in danger of being arrested to face the same fate. But this loyal, courageous friend refused to let that stop him.

Again and again he came to Paul's side, not caring who saw or who knew. He was willing to stand tall when everyone else had run.

It's easy to stand with the one who is powerful, popular and strong. But how much more difficult it is to stand with the weak, condemned and imprisoned.

#### 4) He encouraged Paul when he needed it the most. (16)

*For he often refreshed me.*

What an interesting phrase for Paul to use. **Refreshed.**

*Refreshed* - to blow upon or to cool off. Like a mom blowing on a scrape after applying the medicine. Or like cool breeze on a hot day. And notice that he added the word **often**. This was not a one-time thing. He came back again and again. With each visit Paul's spirits were lifted. Each visit eased his suffering and encouraged Paul.

The Living Bible paraphrase captures it well. *He visited me and encouraged me often. His visits revived me like a breath of fresh air.*

Who do you know who is in a dark dungeon and needs to be refreshed? Maybe it's a dark dungeon of . . .

Discouragement	Depression	Despair
Physical sickness	Financial	Spiritual
Marriage	Parenting	Work Problem

You may be the one God is calling to be their Onesiphorus.

#### TAKEAWAYS:

Onesiphorus is forgotten by most, but was a hero to Paul. You and I can be heroes to others as we learn from this **forgotten life**. There are some things we can discern from Paul's description that caused him to **refresh** or **encourage** Paul during those dark last days of his life. I see four.

### **1. Unselfish attitude**

He served early and often. He had served Paul in Ephesus but did not assume that he had completed his responsibilities. He served early and late. Don't let your age or the longevity of your ministry be the cause for failing to step in. Be unselfish.

### **2. Determined mind**

He was intentional about finding Paul. He didn't wait to see if someone else was going to step in. He saw the need and took ownership. It did not matter what anyone else did.

### **3. Courageous spirit**

He went to Paul even when it was dangerous. He was willing to risk his own freedom, health and life. He was not concerned about his reputation with others. He did not care what others thought.

**He stepped up and stepped in.**

### **4. Unbreakable loyalty**

He was present, even when no one else was. Never underestimate the power of just being in the room, just being with the person in need. Your presence is more powerful than any gift you might bring or any words you might say. Just be there!

If you want to be one who refreshes others, be like Onesiphorus.