
Church History

Onesiphorus: The Model of a Spirit-Filled Man

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During the final days of his life, Paul found himself a prisoner of the Roman Empire. He underwent a trial in Rome for being a Christian, and though sentence was not immediately passed—possibly his being a Roman citizen helped him—he knew that the final sentence would be execution by the sword. You can see these details in 2 Timothy 4, which Paul wrote to his close friend, Timothy, who was far away in Ephesus.

In 2 Timothy 1, Paul urged Timothy not to be ashamed of the Gospel and stated that he himself, solely because of grace and the Spirit's power (2 Timothy 1:9), is not ashamed of Christ and his Gospel (2 Timothy 1:12). And to further encourage Timothy to trust in the Spirit's power he gave him

the example of Onesiphorus, a Christian brother from Ephesus, whom Timothy knew well. Unlike two elders from the churches in Asia Minor (what is now Turkey), whose names were Phygelus and Hermogenes and who were ashamed to be associated with Paul the "criminal" (2 Timothy 1:15; 2:9), Onesiphorus "was not ashamed of [Paul's] chains." Unlike an earlier imprisonment in Rome, when Paul lived under house arrest in a locale known to many (Acts 28:30), Paul appears to have been imprisoned in a cell that was not easily found, for Onesiphorus had to expend much energy in the search for the whereabouts of the Apostle (2 Timothy 1:17).

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And when he found Paul, he was not content with a single visit. He visited Paul again and again. And each time he did so, Onesiphorus risked arrest and imprisonment with the Christian leader.

But Onesiphorus was "not ashamed" to befriend Paul (2 Timothy 1:16). Why? If we look at 2 Timothy 1:7, which tells us that the Holy Spirit who indwells believers is a Spirit of "power and love and self-control," one can only conclude that Onesiphorus'

courageous love for the Apostle Paul was because of the power of the indwelling Spirit. Onesiphorus stands as a model of the Spirit-filled, Spirit-empowered believer.

Moreover, Paul is not ashamed to own that Onesiphorus refreshed him. At a basic level, such refreshment would have involved food and other means of practical help. But at a deeper level it would have entailed the Spirit-given joys of Christian fellowship and Christian love. As the German Christian author, Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–45) has rightly noted: “The physical presence of other Christians is a source of incomparable joy and strength to the believer.”

All that we know about Onesiphorus can be found in a few verses in 2 Timothy, but he stands as a fabulous example of the Spirit-filled believer.