



Please turn to 2 Timothy 1:15-18 (p. 935, pew Bible). Last Wednesday my wife did some reminiscing as that day marked the one-year anniversary of her mother's home-going. As difficult as it was to relive that day, Ruthie rejoiced knowing that their mom was with the Lord, free from pain and full of joy. Furthermore, Ruthie's mom made her exit from earth in the most peaceful way possible. After enjoying a hearty breakfast and a hot shower, she lay down for a mid-morning nap – and then woke up in glory!

My mom had a similar experience. She entered the Lord's presence as Dad and all five of us kids sat around her bed, singing her favorite hymns.

I thought about that as I considered Paul's final days on earth, "bound with chains as a criminal" (2 Tim. 2:9) in a Roman prison. Instead of being surrounded by loved ones, he is suffering almost entirely in solitude, away from family and friends.

Why is this the case? Because by this time, almost everybody had abandoned Paul. But there was one believer who was bent on encouraging him. Paul mentions him at the tail end of 2 Timothy 1. Please follow along as I read verses 15-18, where Paul writes to Timothy,

¹⁵ You are aware that all who are in Asia turned away from me, among whom are Phygelus and Hermogenes. ¹⁶ May the Lord grant mercy to the household of Onesiphorus, for he often refreshed me and was not ashamed of my chains, ¹⁷ but when he arrived in Rome he searched for me earnestly and found me – ¹⁸ may the Lord grant him to find mercy from the Lord on that day! – and you well know all the service he rendered at Ephesus.

- 2 Timothy 1:15-18

This portion of Paul's letter is strategically placed for a specific purpose. In the verses immediately preceding and following this paragraph (1:14; 2:1), Paul encourages Timothy to be faithful and strong. Paul is urging Timothy not to be ashamed of the gospel but to share in suffering for the gospel by proclaiming it with his lips as well as his life, and by protecting it from any contaminating influences that would twist or modify its message.

Amid these exhortations to Timothy, Paul reminds him *why* the gospel is worth suffering for. It's because it's the "good news" of God's endless kindness toward those who trust in Christ alone for salvation. Jesus is our heaven-sent hero who conquered sin and death on our behalf so that we could be forgiven of all our sin, have the entire burden of guilt removed, have the Holy Spirit poured into our lives, and have a new purpose in life – a life that is new and never-ending. These gospel blessings are for all who believe.

"That is why I am suffering here in prison," Paul says. "But I am not ashamed of it, for I know the one in whom I trust" (2 Tim. 1:12). So, Paul says to Timothy, "join with me in suffering for the gospel, by the power of God" (v. 8 NIV).

Now, to provide *further* motivation for Timothy, Paul points him to another example of which Timothy is aware. Onesiphorus was a mutual friend who was ever-faithful to the gospel message *and its messengers*. During the darkest season of Paul's life, Onesiphorus showed up to refresh him – not just once but repeatedly. His relentless devotion illustrates a vital truth that should motivate us to emulate his example. Here's the truth:

***Loyal Christian friends are rare,
remembered, and will be rewarded.***

Let's consider each of these components.

1. Loyal Christian friends are rare.

In verse 15, Paul tells Timothy something he already knows: "You are aware that all who are in Asia turned away from me, among whom are Phygelus and Hermogenes."

Asia was a major province in the Roman Empire. Its territory covered what is pretty much now modern-day Turkey, and Ephesus was the provincial capital. Paul spent nearly three years in Ephesus on his third missionary journey, evangelizing the entire region. The seven churches of Revelation were all located in Asia (Rev. 1:4).

Imagine how Paul must have felt to give himself so tirelessly to spreading the gospel in this region, only to have the bulk of believers turn away from him in his darkest hour. The Greek word for "turned away" (*apostrophō*) is used in the Pastoral Epistles to describe a decisive rejection God's word, a turning away from the truth (2 Tim. 4:4; Titus 1:14). But in *this* context, it's a willful disassociation from Paul – deliberate abandonment.

This makes me think about Uriah the Hittite. He was the husband of Bathsheba, with whom King David committed adultery while Uriah was off to war. A short time later, Bathsheba told David she was pregnant. So, David summoned Uriah from the battlefield to try to get him to sleep with his wife so that no one will be the wiser. But Uriah refused to enjoy the comforts of home and the pleasure of intimacy while his comrades were still at war. So, David sent Uriah back with a sealed letter in hand for Joab, the army commander. David instructed Joab to put Uriah on the frontline, where the battle was the fiercest, and then have the troops pull back so Uriah would be killed. And that's what happened.

It's not a perfect analogy, but you see some parallels, don't you? Paul is fighting the good fight of faith on the front lines of gospel advancement. The enemy is coming hard against him. It's at this point, when the battle is most oppressive, that Paul's friends forsake him.

But the best analogy, the ultimate real-life illustration, is when Paul's Savior and ours, the Lord Jesus, was in great agony in Gethsemane on the eve of his crucifixion. Jesus told his disciples, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death.... Stay here and keep watch" (Mark 14:34 NIV). When the soldiers came to arrest Jesus, "everyone deserted him and fled" (Mark 14:50 NIV). An old hymn reminds us,

*He took my sins and my sorrows / He made them His very own;
He bore the burden on Calv'ry / And suffered and died alone.*

Jesus suffered in a unique way, for he alone was the sinless Son of God who willingly laid down his life as a wrath-bearing sacrifice for our sin. Jesus was forsaken not only by his disciples, but by God the Father himself. The disciples forsook Jesus out of fear, but the Father forsook Jesus as punishment for our sin, which Jesus bore in his body on the cross. Last week in a published article, one of my pastor-friends wrote,

Because Jesus was abandoned, we will never be abandoned. ... Because God turned His face from His Son, He will never turn His face from us. God has set His steadfast love on His people before the foundation of the world because in Gethsemane Jesus would accept the Cup — and at the Cross, He would drain the Cup. Indeed, this is glorious, good news for sinners destined for wrath!¹

“Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (John 15:13 NIV). When it comes to friends, Jesus is in a class all by himself. And Christian friends who are loyal to the gospel message and its messengers are rare.

Paul knew that all too well. Now, when he says, “All who in Asia turned away from me,” he’s being slightly hyperbolic. After all, Timothy had not turned away from Paul. Onesiphorus had not turned away from Paul. He’s exaggerating just a bit to make a point. We do this all the time. For instance, an exhausted person might say, “I’m so tired, I can’t move a muscle.” Yet making that statement requires the use of a hundred muscles. But we know what a person means when he says that. And Timothy knew what Paul meant.

Just about everybody had abandoned Paul, including Phygelus and Hermogenes. They are not mentioned anywhere else in Scripture. All we know is that deserted Paul in his darkest hour. Perhaps Paul mentions them because of their negative influence on others. Maybe at one time they had been close companions of Paul. Evidently, these men were friends through thick and thin. When things thickened up, they thinned out!

In their commentary on this passage, Kent Hughes and Bryan Chappell point out, “Adversity separates the chaff of surface friendship from the substance of real friendship.”²

As the Shadow once said to the Body: “Who is a friend like me? I follow you wherever you go. In sunlight or moonlight I never forsake you.”
“True,” said the Body. “You go with me in sunlight and moonlight. But where are you when neither the sun nor the moon shines upon me?”³

Paul’s implicit message to Timothy was, ‘Don’t be like Phygelus and Hermogenes. Stand with me. Suffer with me ... in the dark of this dungeon where neither the sun nor the moon shines.’⁴ Suffering for the gospel is hard, which is why loyal Christian friends are rare.

¹ Godwin Sathianathan, “Forsakenness: A Brief Theology of the Cup,” *Christ Over All*, 24 April 2024 [online]. Retrieved on 27 April 2024 from <https://christoverall.com/article/concise/foresakenness-a-brief-theology-of-the-cup/>.

² R. Kent Hughes and Bryan Chapell, *1-2 Timothy and Titus: To Guard the Deposit*. Preaching the Word, edited by R. Kent Hughes (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), 201.

³ Clarence Edward Macartney, *The Women of Tekoah and Other Sermons on Bible Characters* (New York: Abingdon, 1955), 64-65. Cited in Hughes and Chapell, 201.

⁴ Hughes and Chapell, 202.

2. Loyal Christian friends are *remembered*.

You know this from experience. “A friend in need is a friend indeed.” Friends that are there for you in difficult times are never forgotten, especially when they show up during the darkest season of your life.

As Paul reflects on the kindness of his friend Onesiphorus, Paul writes to Timothy,

He often refreshed me and was not ashamed of my chains, but when he arrived in Rome he searched for me earnestly and found me –
... and you well know all the service he rendered at Ephesus.

The name *Onesiphorus* means “profit-bearing” or “beneficial.” He sure was a profitable friend to Paul. Paul says, “he often refreshed me.” The word “refreshed” (*anapsýxō*) is an intensified form of a Greek term that means “to cool by blowing.” Figuratively, it means to “bring much-needed (much-welcomed) relief, ‘causing someone to recover a state of cheer or encouragement after a time of anxiety and trouble.’”⁵ To put it in the vernacular, Onesiphorus was a constant “breath of fresh air” to Paul.

Instead of abandoning Paul in his darkest hour, Onesiphorus diligently searched for him. The language suggests that he searched with the singular intent of finding Paul. It would have taken Onesiphorus a few weeks to travel by land and sea to Rome, assuming that the winds were favorable. Imagine what it would have been like for a traveler to arrive in Rome, the capital of the empire, with all its incredible monuments and buildings, public baths, chariot races and gladiator games, plus all sorts of food and entertainment. But Onesiphorus by-passed all these attractions, put on hold any business he was there to conduct, and made a diligent search for Paul, who was probably not at all easy to find.

That’s because Paul’s present imprisonment was far worse than the one described near the end of the book of Acts (28:23, 30-31). Luke, the author of Acts, indicates that Paul was in some sort of house-prison, where he was afforded a good measure of freedom. For two years he lived in a rented house. Large numbers of people came to see him, and Paul welcomed them all, teaching them from morning till night about the kingdom of God and the gospel of Jesus Christ.

But now Paul was confined to a dungeon, chained like a criminal. Perhaps the Roman officials were less sympathetic and didn’t want Paul receiving any help. Maybe they didn’t want the hassle of the crowds. Whatever the reason, Paul was not easy to find, which is why Onesiphorus “searched for [him] earnestly.” The word “implies zeal, determination, [and] persistence.”⁶ Onesiphorus sacrificed his time, energy, and resources, and risked his own life to stand with Paul, encourage him, and assist him.

This was on top of “all the service he rendered at Ephesus,” of which Timothy was well aware. Onesiphorus was a faithful friend who would never be forgotten.

⁵ “404. anapsuchó.” HELPS Word studies, *Bible Hub*. Retrieved on 27 April 2024 from <https://biblehub.com/greek/404.htm>.

⁶ Robert W. Yarbrough, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus. The Pillar New Testament Commentary*, edited by D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018), 368.

His example points us once again to the ultimate Friend, our Lord Jesus, “who came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). Don’t we sing about this as a congregation?

Here is love, vast as the ocean,
lovingkindness as the flood:
when the Prince of Life, our Ransom,
shed for us His precious blood.

Who His love will not remember?

Who can cease to sing His praise?

He can never be forgotten

throughout heav'n's eternal days.

We also partake of the Lord’s Supper “in remembrance of” him. When we render Christ-like, sacrificial service to others, we honor the ultimate Servant who loved us and gave himself for us.

3. Loyal Christian friends will be *rewarded*.

Paul’s remembrance of Onesiphorus is incorporated into Paul’s expressed wish for Onesiphorus and his household. In verse 16, Paul says, “May the Lord grant mercy [show special kindness, NLT] to the household of Onesiphorus,” and in verse 18 Paul says, “may the Lord grant him [Onesiphorus] to find mercy from the Lord on that day!”

Some believe, based on what Paul says here, that Onesiphorus had died by the time Paul wrote this letter. They claim in verse 16, Paul wishes for the Lord to show present kindness to Onesiphorus’ household without mentioning the good man himself, and in verse 18, Paul wishes for the Lord to show future mercy to Onesiphorus at the final judgment, when Christ returns.

It may be possible that Onesiphorus perished during his journey and care for Paul. Maybe he was arrested and executed. More likely, Onesiphorus had left Paul but had not yet arrived safely home to his family. So Paul expresses his wish that they would be well in his absence, just as Paul expresses his wish that Onesiphorus would find mercy from the Lord at the Second Coming of Christ.

Whether Onesiphorus was dead by this point or still alive and separated from his family is inconclusive. What *is* conclusive is that Paul is not uttering a prayer for the dead. This is a false doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church which believes that our prayers can help to purify the souls of those who are still in purgatory, so that they can more quickly enter into Heaven. The Bible teaches no such thing. There is no purgatory, and there is no justification in Scripture to pray for the dead. Here in these verses, Paul is “merely expressing his good will regarding this excellent man – ‘May he find mercy.’”⁷

⁷ Hughes and Chapell, 203.

We can be sure that Onesiphorus will find mercy from the Lord on the day when Christ returns to judge the living and the dead. For Jesus said, “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy” (Matt. 5:7). Remember what the King will say to his sheep at the final judgment: “Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the creation of the world! When you fed the hungry, gave a drink to the thirsty, cared for the sick, and visited those in prison, you were doing it to me.”

By refreshing Paul, Onesiphorus was refreshing Jesus Christ. Imagine that. Imagine his reward. Who better than Jesus can appreciate such a thing?

Because of the joy awaiting him, he endured the cross, disregarding its shame.
Now he is seated in the place of honor beside God’s throne.

- Hebrews 12:2 NLT

Romans 8:17 says, “If we share in his suffering we shall certainly share in his glory” (PHILLIPS). What a Friend we have in Jesus! – *What kind of friend are you?*

Conclusion

Thomas Cranmer served as the first Protestant archbishop of Canterbury in the mid-1500s. He was a pastor whom God used to bring reform to the Church of England. Cranmer emphasized the authority of Scripture and justification by faith alone in Christ alone. Many regard Cranmer as “the most important figure for the English Reformation of the 16th century, [who] paved the way for the Puritan movement of the 17th century.”⁸

But when the Catholic queen, Mary I, took the throne, Cranmer’s influence and reforms were immediately halted. Queen Mary was known as “Bloody Mary” because of her intense persecution of Protestants. As the oppression escalated,

Cranmer was imprisoned with his friends Hugh Latimer and Nichols Ridley. The three were condemned for treason. Latimer and Ridley were taken immediately for execution; Cranmer was forced to watch their burning. ...⁹

As he did so, he beheld two Christian brothers join in suffering for the gospel. Ridley, the younger of the two, was the first to strengthen his friend, saying, “Be of good heart, brother, for God will either assuage the fury of the flame, or else strengthen us to abide it.” As the bundle of sticks caught fire beneath them, Latimer had his turn to embolden his younger friend. Raising his voice, he cried, “Be of good comfort, Master Ridley, and play the man! We shall this day light such a candle by God’s grace in England, as I trust shall never be put out.”

Despite witnessing the courage of his two friends who were faithful unto death, Cranmer caved into the fear of man and fear of the flames. He recanted his beliefs and reaffirmed the authority of the pope. He did so privately, but the queen and cardinal required that Cranmer do so publicly from the pulpit of University Church in Oxford.

⁸ John Starke, “Thomas Cranmer’s Complicated Death.” *TGC*, 20 March 2012 [online]. Retrieved on 27 April 2024 from <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/thomas-cranmers-complicated-death/?amp;> Internet.

⁹ *Ibid.*

But then, to everyone's surprise, Cranmer recanted his recantation and once again denied papal authority. Knowing that he would now be executed, Cranmer declared that he would punish the hand that originally signed the recantations by burning it first.

Pulled from the pulpit, Cranmer was tied to the stake where his companions Latimer and Ridley died just five months earlier. Fulfilling his words, he stuck his hand in the fire first, crying out as he died, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit ... I see the heavens open and Jesus standing at the right hand of God."¹⁰

John Starke writes,

Cranmer's death is complicated. He didn't die abandoning his faith, but his behavior in the months before his death doesn't exactly neatly identify him as a hero. Martyrdom without previous recantations is a much easier, more inspiring story to tell. We wish the story worked out differently, and I'm sure Cranmer felt the same way. ...

But Cranmer's death resembles many ordinary stories where Christian leaders needed to stiffen their backbones but didn't. We wish we had taken a stronger stance, not capitulated so much, been a bit clearer without so much back-tracking. It's likely that none of us will have entire reformations pending upon our decisions. But all Christian leaders must be courageous and ambitious, looking to Christ for our security and humbly admitting when we're wrong.¹¹

The church needs more believers like Onesiphorus, Hugh Latimer, and Nicholas Ridley – Christian friends who demonstrate unflagging devotion to the gospel message and its messengers.

What about you? Will you be like Phygelus and Hermoneges, who were ashamed of the gospel and abandoned the Lord's servants? Or will you be like Onesiphorus, who joined in suffering for the gospel and worked hard to refresh others?

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.