

Who was Onesiphorus in the Bible?

The name Onesiphorus may not have caught on like other Bible names such as Matthew, Mark, and Mary, but that's not because of any negative connotation the name carries. More likely, it's the five-syllable pronunciation or the problems the spelling would cause. Onesiphorus the man was a personal friend of Paul's and a great blessing to him. Onesiphorus lived up to his name, which means "bringing profit."

Onesiphorus is only mentioned twice in the Bible, both times in the epistle of 2 Timothy. Early in the epistle, Paul writes a prayer of blessing upon Onesiphorus: "May the Lord show mercy to the household of Onesiphorus, because he often refreshed me and was not ashamed of my chains. On the contrary, when he was in Rome, he searched hard for me until he found me. May the Lord grant that he will find mercy from the Lord on that day! You know very well in how many ways he helped me in Ephesus" (2 Timothy 1:16-18). At the end of the letter, Paul sends greetings to "the household of Onesiphorus" (2 Timothy 4:19).

These two passages convey all we know about Onesiphorus's background: 1) he was from Ephesus, where Paul had founded a church (Acts 19:1-10); 2) his whole family were believers; and 3) in Ephesus, he had helped Paul "in many ways."

Paul wrote 2 Timothy from a Roman prison cell. It was a difficult time for the apostle, made more difficult by trusted friends who abandoned him in his hour of need. "You know that everyone in the province of Asia has deserted me, including Phygelus and Hermogenes" (2 Timothy 1:15). In stark contrast to these deserters was Onesiphorus, who stayed with Paul through thick and thin. In fact, Onesiphorus went out of his way to track Paul down and visit him in prison. In doing so, Onesiphorus showed great personal

courage—it was dangerous to be called a Christian in Rome in those days—and compassion for the apostle.

Probably, Onesiphorus considered that he owed Paul a great debt. The church in Ephesus was a product of Paul's third missionary journey. If not for Paul's faithfulness in preaching the Word of God, Onesiphorus would not have heard the gospel. In gratitude to the one who first told him of Christ, Onesiphorus determined to be a blessing to Paul. He "often refreshed" the imprisoned missionary and never balked at being known as an inmate's friend. Any physical or emotional blessing Onesiphorus could impart would still fall far short of the spiritual blessings he had received through the apostle.

Because of the mercy Onesiphorus showed, Paul prays for mercy to be shown to him. Paul's prayer was no doubt grounded in Jesus' promise in Matthew 5:7, "Blessed are the merciful, / for they will be shown mercy."