

Man of Sorrows: Onesiphorus, Who Refreshed Me

LaGrave Christian Reformed Church

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Reverend Kristy Manion

2 Timothy 1:15-18, 4:9-13, 19-22

You've all seen the title of this morning's sermon in the bulletin: Onesiphorus, Who Refreshed Me. This week in the church office as we were getting ready for this service, I double and triple checked the spelling of this strange name. And then I asked Lindsey VanDyk, who edits the bulletin, to check again. There are a lot of vowels in there; where do they all go? And who, exactly, is Onesiphorus? Have you ever heard a sermon about him? I'm not sure I have.

Onesiphorus isn't a well-known figure even for dedicated Bible students. He might not make the Who's Who in the New Testament Church list. He shows up only in 2nd Timothy, and only in the verses we read together just now. But nevertheless, he stands out for the Apostle Paul. Why?

Well, for one thing, Onesiphorus comes to see Paul in desperate times. Paul's life and ministry career have rarely been easy, but things are especially difficult at the writing of 2 Timothy. Paul is imprisoned and powerless to secure his own freedom. He's in a place where nearly all other friends besides Luke are gone. Some have deserted him. Others are sick. Still others he has sent to serve the church in other places.

To add to the stress of imprisonment, Paul expects he's nearing the end of his life. In chapter 4 he says, "I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time has come for my departure. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith." (4:6-7).

So in this letter we find Paul's last will and testament; his final instructions, drafted from Rome, sent to Timothy, a fellow missionary and a man he affectionately calls his "dear son" (1:2). Timothy is a thousand miles across the Mediterranean in Ephesus, where he's been stationed by Paul to model and preach the gospel in the face of false teachings and practices that are filtering through the church.

Paul has very little control over his life right now. But the agency he has he uses: He lets people know what's happening. He asks others who love him and love Christ for their help and their continued faithfulness to the gospel. He asks Timothy to come to see him, quickly, before the winter. He wants Timothy to make a stop in Troas to pick up the cloak Paul left behind there, because the seasons will change. It's going to get cold.

And in that request to Timothy, Paul also sends greetings to the family of Onesiphorus, who is known to Timothy for the "many ways he helped" Paul in Ephesus (1:18). By highlighting Onesiphorus's ministry and the genuine help it offered, Paul is asking Timothy to come and do the same thing:

Timothy, please, won't you come and visit me too? I need your help now. I needed your company...like, yesterday. Tychicus is coming to Ephesus; so you can be freed up to come here. Please, come to Rome and see me soon.

Until Timothy can come, Paul is hanging onto the memory of Onesiphorus's visit. "He often refreshed me", Paul writes, "and was not ashamed of my chains. On the contrary, when he was in Rome, he searched hard for me until he found me." When Onesiphorus arrived in Rome, he wore out the pavement. He knocked on every door, asked every bystander. His love for Paul overpowered whatever natural fear of suspicion he might have of being associated with someone who was imprisoned.

"Yes, I'm looking for Paul, Paul originally of Tarsus. Yes, he's been arrested. We understand he's under guard. Yes, yes. I'll leave my contact information. It's really important that I find him" And once Onesiphorus had followed up every lead and finally found the right house, he greeted Paul with relief and concern.

He gave Paul a squinty-eyed once-over. Had Paul lost weight? And look at the bags under his eyes—how in the world was Paul getting any sleep chained to that guard? Did that dirty tray in the corner represent all the food in the house? Onesiphorus would find out. And then he would go to the market.

When he got back he'd look Paul over again, this time with different eyes. How was Paul's spirit? Did Paul know not everyone in the province of Asia had deserted him? Did Paul need to hear and experience again the message that he had preached and lived for others – Christ had died, Christ was risen, and Christ was coming again?

In Onesiphorus's visits we see a few qualities of care that are worth emulating ourselves. I'll highlight three. First, Onesiphorus's help is characteristic of him: Paul says that Onesiphorus refreshed him not just once

or twice, but “often.” His companionship to Paul in Rome seems to have been completely consistent with how people experienced him in Ephesus. Onesiphorus isn’t the kind of person who comes around only when there’s a crisis to fret about or manage. He just faithfully shows up when there’s something he might be able to do. When Timothy hears that it’s Onesiphorus who has sought Paul out, we could imagine Timothy nodding over Paul’s letter and saying, “Oh, of course Onesiphorus came to find you. Anyone who knows him might expect Onesiphorus to do just that.”

Second, Onesiphorus’s help honors Paul: And while he recognizes the seriousness of Paul’s imprisonment, he isn’t ashamed of it, nor is he afraid of being tarnished by association with Paul. He honors Paul’s humanity and ministry through his diligent searching and company.

Third, Onesiphorus’s help is soul-restoring, even though it could do very little to change Paul’s current circumstances.

It could be possible for Onesiphorus or anyone else to look at the problem of Paul’s imprisonment and throw up their hands. What good could one friend do when Paul was chained to a Roman guard? Onesiphorus was as powerless as Paul in the situation. He wasn’t going to stage a jailbreak. He couldn’t represent Paul at trial or appeal to Caesar for Paul’s release. And yet, despite a total inability to effect change in Paul’s outward circumstances, Paul says that Onesiphorus’s ministry still truly refreshed him.

The word “refreshed” here literally means to raise or resurrect the soul. The refreshment Onesiphorus brought was like a cool breeze on a hot day. It was like water flowing over parched earth. Like a home-cooked meal plus dessert when you haven’t eaten all day. It was like life to a man on death row. It isn’t too strong to say that Onesiphorus was a godsend to Paul. The refreshment he brought to that prison house was nothing less than the help of God.

The kind of help Onesiphorus gives Paul is like the help of those who encouraged a seminarian named Roger Nelson. As a seminary student in the 1980s, Roger Nelson worked at Roseland Christian Ministries on the south side of Chicago. On this day, March 17, thirty-nine years ago, Roger’s parents met him and his wife-to-be at the church where he had been serving and staffing a shelter for Chicagoans who were unhoused.

As the Nelsons left worship, they were stopped by a man with a gun and ordered into their car. He was looking for money to fund a drug addiction. Roger’s knowledge and experience in the neighborhood helped him respond calmly and skillfully. But just when the family thought that the situation was settling down, a shot rang out. Roger’s father Ron was killed that day.

After his dad’s funeral, Roger returned to the seminary in a fog. Author Jeff Munroe writes, “[Roger would] often sit in class feeling dazed, with tears in his eyes. He does recall being helped by two of his professors. One, who had recently lost a son to suicide, simply moved toward Roger empathically. The professor’s own loss was too recent and he couldn’t find words to speak, but Roger felt the comfort of his caring presence, and he felt this man knew what Roger was feeling.

The second professor had slowly and agonizingly lost a 20-year-old son to cancer a few years earlier. That professor stopped Roger in the hall to express his sympathy. [He] then told Roger that at the time of his son’s death, he thought that even if God himself were to appear and write down the reasons for the professor’s son’s death on a piece of paper he would crumple the paper ...no explanation could make what happened seem right.” (Telling Stories in the Dark, 23)

At one point the pastor of the church where the Nelson family had belonged earlier in life made a two-and-a-half-hour drive to visit Roger. “We walked along the pier at Lake Michigan,” Roger said. “I don’t remember what we talked about; I just remember that he cared. He was present and he made an effort to see me. I thought ‘This is what it means to be a pastor,’ and I knew what I wanted to do.”

Roger did go on to become a pastor. In fact, he’s still a pastor at a Christian Reformed Church in Oak Forest, Illinois. During that season, so many people were “Onesiphorus” to Roger, doing what they could, offering what they had. No one could change his circumstances. No one could bring his father back; no one could spare Roger the pain of processing that day over and over, but they could show up.

What might have happened if those who came alongside Roger Nelson had stayed away? What might have happened if the professors processing their own pain had ignored his? What if those around Roger thought that whatever they had to offer simply wasn’t enough in such a situation? Roger would have walked his painful journey alone. His soul may have shriveled. But he didn’t walk alone. And his soul didn’t shrivel.

Instead, one professor came along and poured his cup of empathy on Roger's soul. The other professor's honest God-questions about loss shone sunlight on dry ground. The pier walk with Roger's former pastor sent a refreshing breeze over drooping greenery. And the Holy Spirit tended the garden of Roger's soul. Slowly, gently, by these and a thousand other nameless acts of love, Roger knew the care of his God. And over a period of time, his soul was refreshed.

Dr. Daniel Rooks (no relation, as far as I know, to Dean and Tina) is a psychologist who has worked with people who have gone through the criminal justice system. Jeff Monroe interviewed him about the effect of the Christian community's care for Roger. Dan said, "The people who expressed empathy to Roger saved him... I know that's a strong statement. They saved him from where the pain may have taken him otherwise.... When someone else steps into our pain and suffering, when they aren't afraid and come into it with care that's huge. Care is less about saying the right thing and more about just showing up..."

Who has stepped into your suffering? Who has shown up as an Onesiphorus for you? On Christian education Sunday, maybe the faces of teachers or coaches or mentors flash across your mind. Or maybe you picture siblings or parents; friends or neighbors. Or other church members with whom you've bravely shared challenges; everyday angst as well as the very real times of crises that divide life into time frames of before and after.

I suspect that in the drama of life, many of us would rather be cast as Onesiphorus who shows up to help than as Paul whose soul needs that help. But someone like the Apostle Paul, who spread the gospel to the whole known world of his time, who suffered greatly as he served Jesus—if that Paul can acknowledge weakness and limitations the way he does, we can share our suffering with others too.

What if it were usual for us in the Christian church to be equally at home in both of the roles in this scene in Paul's prison house: Paul, claiming his need for refreshment; and Onesiphorus, who refreshed him? How would our relationships with each other be affected?

When we neither glory in nor deny our needs and vulnerabilities, we get a front-row seat to watch God's Spirit at work. When we're Paul, our flagging bodies and spirits receive strength for the day. When we're Onesiphorus, we look like our life-giving Lord, who breathes life into our weary souls.

Jesus himself has come into the dark and cold of this world. He has come to inhabit the pains and vulnerabilities of the body. He sits with the anguished soul under the shadow of desertion, hears the lonely prayers in the dark; knows the anxiety of arrest and trial. And then he takes a road that no one else can walk. He goes all the way to the cross, through the shadow of death, bearing the consequences of creatures in rebellion against God. And after three days he rises in glory, proof positive of the guarantee that all who trust in him will one day come out of their graves, raised and restored for a life that is really life. Thanks be to God.

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