

**“Mercy to the Merciful”**  
2 Timothy 1:15-18 (NRSV)

The ancient fable of **“The Two Travellers and the Bear”** describes a fearsome encounter with a huge bear. One traveller, in great fear, with no thought to his friend, shimmied up a nearby tree. The other, with no chance to escape anywhere else for the tree was too small to hold two people, remembered how bears often lose interest in the dead, and so he fell to the ground, feigning death. The bear came alongside him and nuzzled his prone body and sniffed at his face and ears. After a while, thinking the man to be dead, the beast ambled away. When the bear was gone the man up in the tree climbed down and asked his friend what the bear had whispered to him, “because,” he said, “I noticed that the bear was long at your ear.” The other said, as he stood up, dusting himself off, “It is no secret what he told me. What he said was that I should **be careful about keeping company with those, who when danger arises, leave their friends in the lurch!**”

Such a fable would probably have evoked a knowing smile from the old apostle Paul for he had also been abandoned by a number of fair-weather friends in Asia, among them, Phygelus and Hermogenes. But at the same time he’d experienced the merciful coming alongside of Onesiphorus, who cared for him in his need (2 Tim. 1:15-18).

The story, as he tells it briefly, is one of **desertion** and **encouragement**. Paul tells it to further steel his protégé, Timothy to stand tall and suffer with him for the gospel, as he’d just charged him in the previous sentences of this letter. In essence he says, “Do you remember Phygelus and Hermogenes? Don’t be like those tree-climbing deserters! Instead, remember Onesiphorus who refreshed me. Be like him.”

1. **Deserted** (2 Tim. 1:15).

Behind this text lies the fact that Paul was a lover of people and that he had an immense capacity for friendship. His **vast circle of friends** included **John Mark** who became extremely helpful after a period of estrangement (Acts 12:12, 25; 15:37-39; 2 Tim. 4:11); **Silas** who accompanied him on his second missionary journey (Acts 15:22, 40); **Onesimus**, the fugitive Asian slave converted in Rome (Phm. 10); **Epaphroditus**, the emissary of the Philippian church who came to see Paul in prison in Rome (Php. 2:25; 4:18); **Priscilla and Aquilas** who risked their lives to help him (Rom. 16:3-4a);

**Tychius**, a “dear brother” (Eph. 6:21); **Tertius**, his secretary (Rom. 16:2); **Ampliatius**, “beloved in the Lord” (Rom. 16:8), **Luke**, the beloved physician (Col. 4:14); and, of course, **Timothy**, his “beloved child” (2 Tim. 1:2).

If you had no information about Paul, you’d probably assume the massive, magisterial theology of his letter to the Romans must have come from some kind of **ivory-tower intellectual** with several doctorates who probably had no time for people. But in the final chapter of that letter, Paul’s closing greetings include thirty-three names of close family and friends, twenty-four of whom were in Rome. What makes this even more impressive is that by that time Paul had not yet even been to Rome! Most of the people he mentions had met him somewhere along the way on his journeys and had subsequently taken up residence in Rome. Paul’s magnanimous heart knew where each family member and friend was at geographically and spiritually. He remembered his friends and he prayed for his friends. Their ups and downs were his ups and downs. Making **relationships** and maintaining **friendships** took up a large part of the apostle Paul’s heart and time.

And, yet, as seen here again, during his second Roman imprisonment, it appears that **Paul was lonely**. The final chapter of this letter reveals that **only Luke was with him** (4:11). **Titus** and **Crescens** had gone away to work elsewhere (4:10); **Demas** had forsaken him (4:10), and **Alexander** had done him much harm (4:14). Paul’s situation here was different than his first Roman imprisonment, as he’d described it earlier in his letter to the Philippians. Granted, he’d been abused and double-crossed that time. He’d written, “Some proclaim Christ from envy and rivalry” (Php. 1:15). That is, some were using his incarceration to promote their own ministries. Yet, even then he didn’t feel completely abandoned. He wasn’t alone, for the faithful still surrounded him. But now, in this dungeon, he was isolated and alone. And, even if people wanted to see him, his cell was hard to find.

In reality, Paul had been **deserted by a substantial group of people**. He reminds Timothy, “You are aware that all who are in Asia have deserted me, including Phygelus and Hermogenes” (1 Tim. 1:15). Certainly, when he said “all [Christians] who are in Asia” he wasn’t strictly being literal, because Timothy, Onesiphorus and his household, and others like them were also residents of Asia, and they had stuck by him. But the defections were so staggering that it to Paul felt as if everyone had deserted him. I suppose it was an exaggeration typical of depression (J. N. D. Kelly, 1963, p.169).

Paul felt let down. The defections must have depressed his otherwise happy and hearty spirit.

We wonder **what happened**. Why did so many of his erstwhile supporters abandon him? Most commentators believe it may have been Paul's arrest that drove them away. Perhaps they were worried that they might be next. The Roman courts would have never prosecuted Paul on a purely religious accusation. He would have been held on a political charge, such as sedition or endangering the peace. Nothing less would have made him – a Roman citizen, too -- a prisoner of the state, liable to execution.

Proverbs 17:17 says, “A **friend** loves at all times, and **kinsfolk** are born to share adversity.” Kinsfolk are more than mere blood relatives; they are what **Anne of Green Gables** called “**kindred spirits**.” Real friendship goes deep and a long way. Adversity separates the surface friendship from the substance of real friendship. The truth about his former friends had become apparent through Paul's difficulties.

As the Shadow once said to the Body: “Who is a friend like me? I will 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 or the moon shines upon me?” (Clarence Edward McCartney, 1955, p. 72-73)

Also some of Paul's detractors may have seized upon his arrest as *prima facie* evidence that God was no longer with him, claiming that if he possessed the blessing of God's Holy Spirit, he wouldn't be in trouble, he wouldn't be in prison. In any event Phylegus and Hermogenes had led the shameful and painful desertion.

I want you to notice that Paul, the great people-oriented person, the passionate lover of the church and its people, was **in pain**. You have to be in a real relationship with people for them to really hurt you. People you do not know cannot hurt you. Hurt comes when you have known them, loved them, and invested in them. **C. S. Lewis** said, “To love at all is to be vulnerable. If you don't want to be hurt, give yourself to no one. Not even a cat....” ([The Four Loves](#), 1960, p. 59). Paul had given them his heart, his whole life – everything. That's why broken relationships in the church matter and hurt as much as they do.

**John Calvin**, who experienced similar hurts when he was expelled from Geneva and was abandoned by onetime friends, remarked that such deserters invariably become accusers and that many of his former colleagues wandered through the France of his day trying “to establish their own innocence by directing against us all the accusations they can” (David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance, eds., 1<sup>st</sup> & 2<sup>nd</sup> Timothy, Calvin’s Commentaries, Vol. 10, 1964, p. 303).

Paul, having had such a great heart, had been deserted and slandered by people he loved. Consequently he was heartbroken. His implicit message to timothy was, “Don’t be like Phygelus and Hermogenes. Stand by me. Suffer with me. Keep the faith with me – even as I am in this dungeon where neither the sun nor the moon shines.”

## 2. **Refreshed** (2 Tim. 1:16-18).

A universe removed from desertion by some is Onesiphorus’s treatment of Paul. So he blesses him, “May the Lord grant mercy to the household of Onesiphorus, because **he often refreshed me** and was not ashamed of my chain; [on the contrary] when he arrived in Rome, **he eagerly searched for me and found me**” (1 Tim. 1:16-17).

There are a number of reasons why Onesiphorus must have found it **hard to locate Paul**. He’d never been in Rome and didn’t know his way around. Part of the city had been destroyed when Nero tried to burn it. For some time the location of Paul’s imprisonment had been kept from the Christians. Also, believers in Rome had been reduced in numbers due to persecutions, martyrdom and flight, and not all were eager to reveal to a stranger that they had any doings with the old apostle (William Hendricksen, 1957, p. 239).

But **Onesiphorus “searched hard”** (NIV), as he trod the ancient serpentine streets of Rome, knocked at doors, and asked in his provincial accent about his friend, Paul. Doors slammed shut, disapproving eyes watched as he continued his search, but he refused to desist. He asked dangerous questions. A lesser devoted person might have stopped the search or made no search at all. Others would have cooled their consciences with minimal effort, saying, “He simply couldn’t be found!” But not this man. Imagine the overwhelming joy that must have jolted Paul when Onesiphorus peered down the peep hole of his prison and said he’d come to bring succour and supplies!

And once Onesiphorus found Paul, **he kept returning**. “He often refreshed me,” wrote the apostle. The refreshment must have been more than material. It was emphatically spiritual – **soul refreshment** – because the root of the Greek word translated “refreshed” is the word for “soul.” “The meaning is, not that Onesiphorus helped the Apostle ... materially or with practical services, but that he braced his morale with his fellowship.” (J. N. D. Kelly, p. 170). Whereas others might have recoiled from Paul’s chains, Onesiphorus apparently considered it an honour to return again and again to visit him. Onesiphorus was there for Paul, when neither the sun nor the moon shone on him.

In Onesiphorus’s repeated visits to Paul we see **the living out of the mercy** which Jesus said will be so grandly rewarded in this life and the life to come. “Blessed are the merciful for they will receive mercy” (Matt. 5:7). “Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me’” (Matt. 24:34-36).

The **connection between Christ and his people** is like that of brother to brother and brother to sister, and vice versa. Because Christ was so intimately identified with Paul, when Onesiphorus “refreshed” Paul, he refreshed Christ! Think about that. Someday, Onesiphorus in utter self-forgetting humility may say something like, “When did I see you in prison?” And Jesus Christ will say, “I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me” (Matt. 24:40). “What you did for Paul in the dark of the dungeon, you did for me.”

Paul was obviously moved as he retold this incident and therefore he breaks off the account and goes on to voice his appreciation for Onesiphorus again by expressing a powerful wish for him, “-- may the Lord grant that he will find mercy from the Lord on that day!” “And,” he adds, “you know very well how much service he rendered in Ephesus [as well]” (1:18).

Some commentators think this wish, and the similar wish for mercy which Paul had expressed in verse 16, indicates **Onesiphorus may have died** by the time he was writing this letter.

In support of this thesis, they cite that Paul wished that the Lord would now “grant mercy to **the household** of Onesiphorus” (1:16), but he doesn’t mention the good man himself. And they conclude that in verse 18, Paul’s second wish that he may “find mercy from the Lord on that day” refers to the Second Advent and the final judgment that awaits Onesiphorus and all people who have died (Gordon D. Fee, 1984, p. 237).

If this is so, **the wish is extremely poignant**. Onesiphorus may have died while engaged in the service of caring for Paul. Perhaps it was due to the rigours of life in the demoralized, partly destroyed city of Rome – think only of the hardships faced by those who sought to survive in the bombed out cities of the Second World War. Or perhaps Onesiphorus had met some foul play in the Roman labyrinth.

Others argue that while these are possible conclusions, the wishes expressed for Onesiphorus’s household and his ultimate salvation may be due to the simple fact that Onesiphorus and his household were obviously separated while he was in Rome. The evidence is inconclusive. That Onesiphorus was still alive and separated from his family while Paul was writing this letter to Timothy is as possible as that he was dead (George W. Knight, 1992, p. 386).

In any case this was **not a prayer for the dead**, as some have argued. Paul’s wish was not directed as a prayer to God. Paul was merely expressing his good will regarding this excellent man – “May he find mercy.”

**Did Onesiphorus find mercy?** I’m sure he did. He lived out our Lord’s beatitude, “Blessed are the merciful for they will receive mercy” (Matt. 5:7). This spiritual axiom was practiced and realized by Paul’s good friend, **Dietrich Bonhoeffer**, the Second World War German martyr wrote, “... [the merciful] will be found consorting with publicans and sinners, careless of the shame they incur thereby. In order that they may be merciful, they cast away the most priceless treasure of human life, their personal dignity and honour. For the only honour and dignity they know is their Lord’s mercy, to which alone they owe their very lives” (The Cost of Discipleship).

**And did Onesiphorus receive his reward?** Well, in his practice of mercy, he actually refreshed our Lord. Therefore, I have no doubt that he received the Lord's approval. Furthermore, I'm sure he could be sure of God's mercy at the end. For the apostle James wrote, "Whoever acts without mercy will be judged without mercy, but mercy can afford to laugh at judgment" (2:13, New Jerusalem Bible).

**Paul**, that lover of souls, that amazing lover of people, whose very heart rate rose and fell with the church – the man who always kept on "praying for all the saints" (Eph. 6:18). – this man sat isolated and alone in a Roman dungeon for the sake of the gospel. He would only exit the cell when he was led to his death.

And how did **the Christian church** respond? Tragically, most of the believers in Asia – the result of his own missionary work – deserted him out of their fears. Two of them we know by name.

But **Timothy**, and we, must not be like them! Rather we must stand tall, suffer and keep the faith, and show mercy whenever we can – like **Onesiphorus** who risked his life to find Paul, then refreshed him again and again and again.

Amen

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