Onesiphorus and Paul's Prayer for the Dead

Does the Bible record St. Paul praying for a dead man? Does the New Testament relate an incident of prayer for the dead? It seems quite certain that it does.

Let's begin with Onesiphorus—a faithful Christian who cared for St. Paul while he was in prison and who took great personal risk to serve the apostle. He was such a good man that Paul writes, "*[Onesiphorus] often refreshed me; he was not ashamed of my chains*" and "*he searched for me eagerly and found me*" and "*you well know all the service he rendered at Ephesus*" (2 Tim 1:16-18).

But from all indications—certainly from the words Paul uses—Onesiphorus has died or been killed before Paul wrote Second Timothy. Almost all commentators concede that Onesiphorus had probably died—maybe even martyred during Nero's persecution. Paul speaks of him in the past tense and strangely asks for God's mercy on his "household" without mentioning him, as though he was no longer here. Because Onesiphorus had served so well and was no longer alive, Paul prays for God's blessing on his surviving family. All implications are that Onesiphorus has died.

But Paul prays for him! In 2 Timothy 1:18, while in prison awaiting his death, Paul prays for the dead man and it is recorded in the Bible. Here is what St. Paul writes, "May the Lord grant him to find mercy from the Lord on that Day." This is not just an expression of sentimental emotion—this is a prayer for a man who has died, it is prayer for the dead.

Paul, who was earlier known as Saul the Pharisee, was well immersed in the teaching and tradition of the Pharisaical Jews. The Jews prayed for the dead and Paul would not have seen the practice as egregious or unbiblical; rather, he would have viewed prayer for the dead as a proper practice for a Jew, and also now for a Christian who believes in the afterlife.

2 Maccabees 12:46 informs us of the current Jewish practice, not something novel but as something assumed by the Jewish people,

> "It is therefore a holy and wholesome thought to pray for the dead, that they may be loosed from sins."

Here is what the widely respected six-volume *Anchor Bible Dictionary* writes,

"2 Timothy also includes greetings to the household of Onesiphorus (4:19) and a prayer that the Lord might grant mercy to his household because of his service to Paul (1:16). Onesiphorus himself does not seem to be included, suggesting that he was either not envisioned as present among the (alleged) recipients of 2 Timothy, was with Paul, or was

already dead. The latter is most likely since the author of 2 Timothy writes: "May the Lord grant him to find mercy from the Lord on that Day" (1:18). If Onesiphorus had indeed died, then this prayer is the earliest one for the dead found in Christian literature. As such it has been cited as clear scriptural support (especially among Roman Catholics) for prayer for the dead. (Jewish precedent for such prayer is found in 2 Macc 12:43–45.)"

I could supply myriads of such passages, including Protestant scholars, who believe that the passage is written in such a way as to leave little doubt that Onesiphorus is no longer alive and that Paul "seems to be praying for him". Any attempts to interpret verses 16-18 differently are clumsy and tend to display a definite bias against prayer for the dead.

So here Scripture itself we most certainly have a case where the Apostle Paul prays for the dead, in harmony with his earlier Jewish practice. This practice is certainly in line with the practice of the very first Christians as testified to by the graffiti in the catacombs, in the writings of the Fathers, and in the general practice of the primitive Church.

Should we pray for the dead? Absolutely, we are in good company when we pray for those who have passed into the afterlife.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says, "This teaching is also based on the practice of prayer for the dead, already mentioned in Sacred Scripture: 'Therefore Judas Maccabeus made atonement for the dead, that they might be delivered from their sin.' From the beginning the Church has honored the memory of the dead and offered prayers in suffrage for them, above all the Eucharistic sacrifice, so that, thus purified, they may attain the beatific vision of God. The Church also commends almsgiving, indulgences, and works of penance undertaken on behalf of the dead: Let us help and commemorate them. If Job's sons were purified by their father's sacrifice, why would we doubt that our offerings for the dead bring them some consolation? Let us not hesitate to help those who have died and to offer our prayers for them" (1032). See also paragraphs 958, 1371.

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Several quotations and Notes from various Protestant and Catholic sources about this topic

The context [of 2 Tim 1:16-18] implies that Onesiphorus was separated from his family, probably that he was dead; cf. τῷ . . . οἴκῳ (16 and 4:19), ἐν ἐκείνῃ τῇ ἡμέρᾳ 18, and so would provide a sanction for prayer for the departed. This, in this simple form, is a natural instinct; it was practised by some later Jews, cf. 2 Mac 12:43–45, and is found in early Christian epitaphs and in the liturgies; cf. Plummer, *ad loc.*; Gayford, *The Future*

State, c. 4. Wohlenberg quotes the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, § 28, which is a prayer that a heathen may be transferred after death to the abode of the righteous.[1]

16. The Lord give mercy—even as Onesiphorus had abounded in works of *mercy.*
the house of Onesiphorus—He himself was then absent from Ephesus, which accounts for the form of expression (2Ti 4:19). His *household* would hardly retain his name after the master was dead [why this assumption? Seems like a false assumption based on a bias against prayer for the dead], as Bengel supposes him to have been. Nowhere has Paul prayers for the dead, which is fatal to the theory [unless of course this is the one case where Paul *does* pray for the dead; bias revealed by his statement], favored by Alford also, that he was dead. God blesses not only the righteous man himself, but all his household.[2]

Before we leave this passage we must note that in one particular connection it is a storm centre. Each one must form his own opinion, but there are many who feel that the implication is that Onesiphorus is dead. It is for his family that Paul first prays. Now if he was dead, this passage shows us Paul praying for the dead, for it shows him praying that Onesiphorus may find mercy on the last day.

Prayers for the dead are a much-disputed problem which we do not intend to discuss here. But one thing we can say—to the Jews prayers for the dead were by no means unknown. In the days of the Maccabaean wars there was a battle between the troops of Judas Maccabaeus and the army of Gorgias, the governor of Idumaea, which ended in a victory for Judas Maccabaeus. After the battle the Jews were gathering the bodies of those who had fallen in battle. On each one of them they found "things consecrated to the idols of the Jamnites, which is forbidden the Jews by the law." What is meant is that the dead Jewish soldiers were wearing heathen amulets in a superstitious attempt to protect their lives. The story goes on to say that every man who had been slain was wearing such an amulet and it was because of this that he was in fact slain. Seeing this, Judas and all the people prayed that the sin of these men "might be wholly put out of remembrance." Judas then collected money and made a sin-offering for those who had fallen, because they believed that, since there was a resurrection, it was not superfluous "to pray and offer sacrifices for the dead." The story ends with the saying of Judas Maccabaeus that "it was an holy and good thing to pray for the dead. Whereupon he made a reconciliation for the dead, that they might be delivered from sin" (2 Maccabees 12:39–45).

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[1]Lock, W. (1924). *A critical and exegetical commentary on the Pastoral epistles (I & II Timothy and Titus)* (90). Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark.

[2]Jamieson, R., Fausset, A. R., Fausset, A. R., Brown, D., & Brown, D. (1997). *A commentary, critical and explanatory, on the Old and New Testaments*. On spine: Critical and explanatory commentary. (2 Ti 1:16). Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

It is clear that Paul was brought up in a way of belief which saw in prayers for the dead, not a hateful, but a lovely thing. This is a subject on which there has been long and bitter dispute; but this one thing we can and must say—if we love a person with all our hearts, and if the remembrance of that person is never absent from our minds and memories, then, whatever the intellect of the theologian may say about it, the instinct of the heart is to remember such a one in prayer, whether he is in this or in any other world.[3]

Paul commends him to the Lord on the basis of such action and beseeches mercy in the judgment day for one who has shown mercy (v. 18a). Paul is hereby appealing to the evidence of Christ's mercy and grace in Onesiphorus's life as a basis for his being granted mercy (see Matt. 18:23–35). This verse would seem to imply that Onesiphorus is dead. Timothy is also aware of his many ways of helping Paul in Ephesus (v. 18b).[4]

.**16-17**. Here and in 4:19 Paul speaks of the "house of Onesiphorus." This expression. and the prayer in v. 18 seem to indicate that Onesiphorus had died before this letter was written. [5]

2 Timothy also includes greetings to the household of Onesiphorus (4:19) and a prayer that the Lord might grant mercy to his household because of his service to Paul (1:16). Onesiphorus himself does not seem to be included, suggesting that he was either not envisioned as present among the (alleged) recipients of 2 Timothy, was with Paul, or was already dead. The latter is most likely since the author of 2 Timothy writes: "May the Lord grant him to find mercy from the Lord on that Day" (1:18). If Onesiphorus had indeed died, then this prayer is the earliest one for the dead found in Christian literature. As such it has been cited as clear scriptural support (especially among Roman Catholics) for prayer for the dead. (Jewish precedent for such prayer is found in 2 Macc 12:43–45.) [6]

A puzzling fact is that Paul does not speak of Onesiphorus in the present tense but only in the phrase "the house [*oíkos*] of Onesiphorus" (1:16; 4:19). There are no personal greetings for Onesiphorus even in the context of such greetings (4:19–21). This, along with the tone of the prayer in 1:18, has led many scholars to conclude that Onesiphorus

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[3]*The letters to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*. 2000, c1975 (W. Barclay, lecturer in the University of Glasgow, Ed.). The Daily study Bible series, Rev. ed. (156). Philadelphia: The Westminster Press.

[4]Elwell, W. A. (1996, c1989). *Vol. 3*: *Evangelical commentary on the Bible*. Baker reference library (2 Ti 1:15). Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House.

[5]Brown, R. E., Fitzmyer, J. A., & Murphy, R. E. (1996, c1968). *The Jerome Biblical commentary* (2:358). Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall.

[6]Freedman, D. N. (1996, c1992). *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (5:22). New York: Doubleday.

was now dead (e.g., see J. N. D. Kelly, *Pastoral Epistles* [HNTC, 1963], pp. 169f.) Others suggest that he was absent from home or was to be included in the phrase "house of Onesiphorus" (see, e.g., E. K. Simpson, *Pastoral Epistles* [1954], p. 129). The evidence is inconclusive, but it is possible that Onesiphorus had died.

If Onesiphorus was dead, Paul's prayer in 1:18 is the earliest prayer for the dead in Christian literature, as well as the only one in the New Testament (cf. 1 Cor. 15:29). There was a Jewish precedent in 2 Macc. 12:43–45, and prayers on behalf of the dead did become a common practice in the early Church. If Paul is to be understood this way, it is a general prayer simply asking God for mercy for the deceased. No doctrine of prayer for the dead can be erected on this isolated passage, nor does it offer solid scriptural support for the practice.[7] [Typical Protestant response – it seems like Paul prayed for the dead but we don't believe in that so it must mean something else.]

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[7]Bromiley, G. W. (1988; 2002). *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, Revised* (3:605). Wm. B. Eerdmans.