

By the Rivers of Babylon: A Call from Peter the Apostle

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Introduction

Come with me for a short trip “Back to Baghdad.” “Back to Baghdad,” you cry in protest. You say, “I have watched the bombs of shock and awe falling on Saddam Hussein’s palaces; I have seen General Tommy Frank’s Third Infantry’s tanks rumble into Baghdad; and I have seen so much of the war in Iraq that I can almost smell the gunsmoke in my living room!”

Well, have no fear. Our imaginary journey into Baghdad takes place, not in 2003 AD, but 65 AD, or thereabouts. Then the ancient city of Babylon was flourishing. It stood between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in the vicinity of modern Baghdad. Then the Roman emperor Nero ruled Iraq, not Saddam Hussein.

As we cross the river and enter the city we find that the aging apostle, Simon Peter, is visiting the assembly here. He is busily writing letters to the scattered Christian Jews. MacDonald tells us that they were located in “... the eastern provinces of what is now Turkey.”¹ Let us look over his shoulder and see what he is writing. But first let us reflect on the distinguished life of this apostle. We will first reflect on Simon Peter the man before turning our attentions to his mandate.

1 William MacDonald, *Believer’s Bible Commentary*, New Testament, p. 1065,

1. Simon Peter The Man

What a colorful career Simon Peter has had! Andrew, his brother, comes home with the announcement; “We have found the Messiah.” Peter readily responded and was brought to Jesus (John 1:41, 42).

Soon we find him fishing on the shores of Galilee. The Savior issued the call, “Come after me and I will make you fishers of men.” Peter responded by giving up his nets, his boats, forsaking all and following Christ (Mark 1:16-18).

On the Sea of Galilee Peter is overwhelmed by the miraculous catch of fish and falls “down at Jesus’ knees.” There he paid homage to Christ’s divine glory and omnipotence and confessed his own unworthiness (Luke 5:8).

Years later that loyalty to Christ flashes forth in the Garden of Gethsemane. The Lord’s life is drawing to a close as Judas and his band arrive to arrest Him. Peter defended his Master by drawing a sword and whacking away at the mob (John 18:10). His aim was bad: he only cut off an ear.

But now the clouds of his approaching martyrdom appear on the horizon. He frankly tells his readers that “...shortly I must put off this my tabernacle, even as our Lord Jesus Christ has shewed me” (2 Peter 1:14). That execution by Nero took place about three years later as best we can tell.

So these letters that follow, written from the banks of the rivers of Babylon, are both somber in their setting

and urgent in their appeal. Let us turn our attention to these writings.

2. Simon Peter's Mandate

Seeing ye have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit unto unfeigned love of the brethren, see that ye love one another with a pure heart fervently. (1 Peter 1:22)

In his letters Peter the Apostle reaches out to the Christians scattered by the persecutions of Nero; he calls upon the elders to feed the flock; and he calls upon you and me to be vigilant in view of the Lord's coming. Out of these many subjects I would like to take up his urgent call for us to love one another. This comes early in his letters. It seems to be a mandate for action.

It is interesting to notice Peter the Apostle's use of words to set forth his urgent call. He chooses the Greek word *ektenos* (*ektenos*) to describe the intensity that should characterize our love for one another. This word has a narrow usage but in each instance it graphically describes the fervent spirit seen in some major figures of the New Testament. Let us study some of the uses of this highly descriptive word.

a.) The Stretched Out Hand Of The Savior To Peter In The Sea "And immediately Jesus stretched forth (*ektenos*) his hand, and caught him..." (Matthew 14:31)

Gerhard Kittel, the German authority of the original Greek New Testament, tells us that "In the New Testament...the term is always used of stretching out the hand... The graphic significance is also plain in Matthew 14:22ff., where the hand of Jesus reaches out and catches Peter... *ektenes*, *ektenestron* means 'tense,' 'resolute,' 'eager.' It occurs in the New Testament only

in Acts 12:5; 1 Peter 1:22; 4:8; Luke 22:44”(Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, p. 219).

b.) The Stretched Out Body Of The Lord Jesus In The Garden Of Gethsemane (Luke 22:44)

And being in an agony he prayed more earnestly (ekteos): and his sweat was as it were great drops of blood falling down to the ground.

Come with me now to that hallowed spot, the Garden of Gethsemane. As we go out of the gate of Jerusalem and wend our way to that secluded spot, many things along the way seem to cry out to us about the Lord’s suffering in the garden. We hear the roaring torrents of the Brook Kidron as we cross it. Its very name, ominous, mourning, carries a somber suggestion. The root for Kidron “denotes...darkness and sorrow”² F.F. Bruce writes about the Lord’s arrival here in Gethsemane:

Mark tells us how ‘horror and dismay came over him’ there and He said to the three disciples who accompanied him: ‘My heart is ready to break with grief; stop here and stay awake.’ Then he went forward a little, threw himself on the ground, and prayed that, if it were possible, this hour might pass him by...

(Mark 4:33b-36, NEB).³ Yet it is Dr. Luke, not St. Mark, who best describes the Savior’s suffering in the garden. He reaches into his medical bag and draws out a term qrmbo (thrombo). The doctor goes on to describe the medical effect of the Savior’s deep supplications: “...his sweat was as it were great drops (thrombo) of blood falling down to the ground” (Luke 22:44). Additionally, Luke alone of all the evangelists uses the word ektenos—ektenos (“stretched out”) to tell us about the Savior’s intense suffering.

Peter was an eyewitness of the fervent spirit of the Lord Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. Years have gone by since that memorable occasion. But the apostle has never forgotten that the Lord Jesus was stretched out in intensity there. He chooses to use the same verb when he calls upon us to love one another.

c.) The Stretched Out Prayer Of The Early Church In Jerusalem (Acts 12:5)

Peter therefore was kept in prison: but prayer was made without ceasing (ektenos) of the church unto God for him.

Let us now leave the Garden of Gethsemane, retrace our steps across the Brook Kidron, and enter the city of Jerusalem. We will drop in at the house of Mary the mother of John, “whose surname is Mark.” The local church is holding a prayer meeting.

Recent events in Jerusalem had numbed the spirits of the believers in the local church. The ruthless king, Herod, has taken James the Apostle from their midst and executed him, and he plans to carry this political ploy to greater extremes, seeing it pleased the apostate Jews. He seized Peter the Apostle and imprisoned him in chains. The political announcement was already being circulated that Peter would meet the same fate as James as soon as Passover came.

These events brought the church in Jerusalem together for earnest prayer in Peter’s behalf. Dr. Luke uses the grammatical word *ektenos* (*ektenos*) to describe the meeting. He tells us that the believers were “stretched out” in fervent prayer for their imprisoned member. They treated this crisis as no light matter, rising to some

of the intensity of the Savior in the garden. What a lovely model for prayer in the local church.

The fervent spirit of the church in Jerusalem was well known to the Apostle Peter. He was the subject of that intense outpouring of prayer. He picks up this same verb when he asks you and me to be that fervent in our love for one another—"stretched out"

D.) The Stretched Out Spirit Of Paul The Apostle In Prison (Philippians 3:10, 13, 14)

That I may know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable unto his death.

But this one thing I do...reaching forth (ektenos) unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark of the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.

Come with me now to the prison in Rome. Caesar has imprisoned the indefatigable Paul the Apostle. Yet as we approach the cell we fail to detect any of the gloom that normally overwhelms the emperor's prisoners. Paul is rejoicing! A recent visit by Epaphroditus delivered a sacrificial gift to him from the believers at Philippi. Carried away with ecstasy of the moment, Paul picks up his pen and acknowledges the generosity of his friends at Philippi.

The epistle to the Philippians begins with Paul's appreciation of the constant concern the Philippians had for him: "...because ye have me in your hearts" (Chapter 1:7—J.N. Darby). And it concludes with his evaluation of their generous gift sent by Epaphroditus: "...an odour of a sweet smell, a sacrifice acceptable, wellpleasing to God" (4:18). Between these two outbursts of joy, the

apostle calls to mind the race that is set before them. He shares with them his own fervent pursuit. The Philippians could appreciate Paul's analogy of the race, for, as Mr. Grant points out, The very name here, Philippians, agrees with this. 'Philippians' means fond of horses,' of the race-course...the Christian race...with Christ as the goal and prize of it.⁴ Paul the Apostle describes to the Philippians his personal fervent spirit in this race: "...reaching forth (epekteiw'omenos—from ektenos, "stretched out") unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus (chapter 3:13). As the galloping steed races down the final stretch, it instinctively stretches forth its neck to cross the finish line. What a lovely analogy left behind for the Philippians and for you and me.

The Apostle Peter in his letters pays tribute to his fellow laborer, Paul, telling his readers that "our beloved brother Paul...hath written to you." Perhaps he had in mind Paul's intensity in the racecourse when he calls upon us to love one another with the same "stretched out" spirit.

2 Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1980) Volume 1, p. 786 3 F.F. Bruce, The New International Commentary of the New Testament, The Epistle to the Hebrews (Grand Rapids, MI: 1954) p. 98, 99 4 F.W. Grant, Numerical Bible, (New York, NY: Loizeaux Brothers, 1932). Volume 6, p. 382

Summary

We must now take our leave of Baghdad. As we now leave the apostle by the Rivers of Babylon, we, too, can see the clouds of his approaching martyrdom on the horizon. We can imagine that the words of the Lord Jesus must be ringing in his ears. On the shores of Galilee Peter had heard the Master say to him that when he grows old "...another shall gird thee and stretch out your hands." There the Lord uses the same word for "stretched out" to describe Peter's death as the apostle uses to call upon you and me to love one another fervently.

If the lukewarm love of the church at Laodicia failed to satisfy the Lord Jesus what makes us think that our brothers and sisters in Christ will like it. They, like the Savior, will want to vomit it from their mouth.

May we have an ear for the poignant call of this beloved servant of Christ.