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**Psalm 103:8–12 ESV**

- <sup>8</sup> *The LORD is merciful and gracious,  
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.*
- <sup>9</sup> *He will not always chide,  
nor will he keep his anger forever.*
- <sup>10</sup> *He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor  
repay us according to our iniquities.*
- <sup>11</sup> *For as high as the heavens are above the earth,  
so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him;*
- <sup>12</sup> *as far as the east is from the west,  
so far does he remove our transgressions from us.*

**Making it to Spain: *the Pickpocket*.**

Wendy and I have three kids, all grown, all very kind and gracious people. Before our third was born, we took a vacation to Spain and left our two little ones with Wendy's parents.

The kids were perfectly safe, of course, and Wendy's parents, who were truly loving and gentle people, took magnificent care of them. But while we were on that plane ride over the Atlantic, I nervously wondered if they would end up with their delicate hands on hot burners, their little legs flying in front of moving cars, or their tiny throats choking on whatever undersized objects Grandma and Grandpa happened to buy for them to play with. I managed to push most of my worries away and be calmed by the brief daily phone call back home. No cell phones back then. We did have an amazing time. I delivered an academic paper in Barcelona, but other than that we just relaxed. We wandered

through Barcelona and Madrid. I learned to love paella. People were talkative and friendly. I admit that we even went to a bullfight, which was, indeed gory. Average Spaniards are now turning against this tradition.

One incident, though, was rather unpleasant. We were in Madrid, in a marketplace called El Rastro, which is truly vast and perhaps the place where every tourist must spend a day. Vendors sell handbags, jewelry, fake bullfighter posters that they will print your name on (I have one), clothing, handmade toys, watercolor prints, etc., etc., and all of it with a Spanish flavor. We were wandering through the various stalls when I noticed that something was tugging gently on my right front pocket. I looked down, and there was a hand in my pocket! I was instantly enraged. I spun around and looked at him. I am not a big guy – but he was even smaller. The nerve of this man! My instantaneous thought was that I could pick this guy up and toss him onto his face. His eyes met mine – and they were not filled with regret or guilt or fear. His eyes burned. They challenged me. This man was dressed in ragged clothing. In America, I would have taken him for a transient. My father was apparently Portuguese, perhaps Brazilian, and I noted in the moment that this pickpocket looked a lot like me. I reached down with a claw-like hand and ripped his hand out of my pocket. My wallet came with his hand, and it fell to the ground. I did not let go of his hand. Instead, I did something that I have thought about many, many times over the years: I deliberately bent one of his fingers backwards until his face filled with a painful grimace. Then I let go. He ran. I picked up my

wallet. I'll come back to this with a long-term perspective on the Spanish pickpocket.

One of the long-standing mysteries in the Christian faith, one that has been debated for many hundreds of years is whether the great evangelist Paul ever made it to Spain. Here is a passage from Paul's most famous letter, written to the church in Rome. This is from Chapter 15, and I have abridged it for brevity:

*<sup>14</sup> I myself am satisfied about you, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge and able to instruct one another. <sup>15</sup> But on some points I have written to you very boldly by way of reminder, because of the grace given me by God <sup>16</sup> to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles in the priestly service of the gospel of God, so that the offering of the Gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit. <sup>17</sup> In Christ Jesus, then, I have reason to be proud of my work for God. <sup>18</sup> from Jerusalem and all the way around to Illyricum I have fulfilled the ministry of the gospel of Christ;*

*<sup>22</sup> I have so often been hindered from coming to you. <sup>23</sup> But now, since I no longer have any room for work in these regions, and since I have longed for many years to come to you, <sup>24</sup> I hope to see you in passing as I go to Spain, and to be helped on my journey there by you, once I have enjoyed your company for a while. <sup>25</sup> At present, however, I am going to Jerusalem bringing aid to the saints. <sup>28</sup> When therefore I have completed this and have delivered to them what has been collected, I will leave for Spain by way of you.*

Paul, who was of course a highly educated and literate Jew, and who studied under the famous Jewish teacher and Pharisee, Gamaliel, is underscoring a major focus of his missionary efforts: to bring the faith to the Gentiles. He is expressing a certain amount of what might seem to us as un-Christian-like pride in his work. He has covered a lot of territory; during his journeys he traveled about 10,000 miles by foot and ship. At this point, he still plans on covering a lot more. He's making it clear that he's the reason so many people have been brought to Christ. But there is a pragmatic reason behind his bragging: he needs financial help in carrying out his mission. This passage is famous,

though, for an idiosyncratic reason. He mentions that he wants to go to Spain. The curious issue is that we don't know if he ever made it there. He's saying that he wants to visit Rome. He has never been there, up to this point, and he did not personally establish the church in Rome. He says that after going to Rome, he will go on to Spain.

Paul did make it to Rome, where he was imprisoned, and it is well documented in Scripture. There is no Biblical evidence that he left Rome after his imprisonment and made his way west to Spain. Spain was an amazing place at the time, home of Lucan, the great epic poet, Quintilian, the famous teacher of oratory, and Seneca, the great philosopher. It was a center of learning. It was part of the Roman Empire. Spain, which at the time consisted of the entire Spanish peninsula, including what is today Portugal, was also at the end of Paul's known world. To get to Spain would have meant getting to the western edge of civilization for him. Paul would have seen it as the ultimate missionary destination. It wasn't a place filled with people unaware of the outside world. It was a place of art, science, and engineering. But did Paul ever get there? The last we know of the story of Paul's life is the end of Acts, written by Luke, the Gospel author, and it has Paul in prison in Rome. Many non-biblical documents say he was eventually martyred.

We only have a few pieces of evidence that Paul might have made it to Spain. First, there are Spanish traditions that for many centuries have claimed that Paul did indeed visit Spain. Many consider this to be rather thin evidence. A second piece of

evidence, also very inconclusive, is that the church in Spain grew rapidly and was quite large by the time the third century was underway, and so this might suggest that someone very influential, like Paul, evangelized the area in the early days of the faith.

A third piece of evidence relates to this quote:

*Because of jealousy and strife, Paul, by his example, pointed out the way to the prize for patient endurance. After he had been seven times in chains, had been driven into exile, had been stoned and had preached in the East and in the West, he won the genuine glory for his faith, having taught righteousness to the whole world and having reached the farthest limits of the West. Finally, when he had given his testimony before the rulers, he suffered martyrdom under the prefects, and went to the holy place, having become an outstanding example of patient endurance.*

This is not Scripture. This passage says that Paul made it to “*the farthest limits of the West*” – which would indeed have been considered Spain by anyone in Rome or to the west of Rome, at that time. Then it says he delivered the Gospel to rulers of the land, and for his reward, he was executed and went to be with God. It was written by someone named Clement, who is considered one of the early Church “Fathers”. He was a Bishop in Rome, and it’s believed that this passage, from a letter he wrote, dates to the year 96 A.D. That is only a couple of decades after Paul would have died. To make things more intriguing, many scholars believe that this Clement, who wrote this letter, is the much younger Clement that Paul refers to in his letter to the Philippians, in Chapter 4:1-3:

*Therefore, my brothers, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm thus in the Lord, my beloved. <sup>2</sup> I entreat Euodia and I entreat Syntyche to agree in the Lord. <sup>3</sup> Yes, I ask you also, true companion, help these women, who have labored side by side with me in the gospel together with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life.*

In this passage, Paul is trying to resolve some sort of conflict between two women in the church, both of whom are leaders. Paul can't have infighting get in the way of spreading the faith. Paul happens to also mention that they have worked side by side with him and someone named Clement. Did Paul work with this very influential church leader who later became a Catholic saint? It would sure lend a lot of credence to this passage where Clement seems to say that Paul made it to Spain, if Clement was indeed a personal associate of Paul's. The truth is that unless some other contemporaneous historical documents are someday unearthed, we will probably never know if these two Clements are indeed the same person.

There are other historical references to Paul making it to Spain. This is by John Chrysostom, another so-called Church Father, who lived in the third century A.D., and who was an archbishop in Constantinople. But keep in mind that this is long after Paul would have died:

*"For after he (Paul) had been in Rome, he returned to Spain, but whether he came thence again into these parts, we know not."*

I won't quote it here, but Jerome, an early Christian theologian who lived a couple of decades later than Chrysostom, also wrote that Paul made it to Spain.

But we do need to keep in mind that by the time Paul was returned to Rome at the end of a missionary journey, Nero had burned Rome to the ground. That was July of 64 A.D. The outcry among Romans was so vehement that Nero deflected the blame by

claiming that Christians had started the fires. This kicked off a massive wave of persecution. It would have made sense that they would have executed Paul right then and there, and that he therefore would not have gone on to Spain. But if Paul went to Spain, he probably founded a major, very large and important church, one that had a huge influence on the expansion of Christianity.

Well, I made it to Spain, and I have a fake bull fighter's poster to prove it, one that says clearly that Buzz King is the famous "Espartaco", and I look very elegant in my elaborate, tight blue and silver suit, along with the innocent creature of God that I am about to maim, torment, and kill. But more seriously, I made it all the way to Spain - and all I managed to do was possibly dislocate the finger of a poor man who was trying to survive by pickpocketing. I wish I could step into the Time Tunnel (remember that goofy TV show from the 60's?), go back to that moment in time, and instead of mangling his hand, pick my wallet up off the ground, grab a couple of twenties out of it, and give them to him. I would also like to have had the chance to tell him that although I do forgive him, he doesn't need my forgiveness. I am an American who has been stunningly blessed. I know that the vast majority of people on this world struggle to survive day-to-day. I have no idea what kind of life this man led up to the point where we encountered each other. I have no idea what happened to him. Perhaps he died, poor and sick and lonely.

When we encounter someone whom we feel has harmed us, the first thing we must do is look into the future. We see ourselves growing older, growing kinder, growing more

thoughtful. We must see the day when we wish we could go back in time and return that insult or injury with a blessing. The person who harms us might not be so obviously worthy of kindness as the man who tried to steal from me. That person might be wealthy and powerful. That person might be in the position of controlling one's life. But still, we must envision a person who is perhaps hurting in some deep and hidden way - and transforming that life with grace. Most importantly, we need to ask ourselves, as Christians, which way would we feel better, being in the future looking back at having gotten revenge or has having acted like Christ – who would have given him his entire wallet, along with his fanny pack, passport, and iPhone.

Here's one more historical tidbit. I listed pieces of not-so-solid evidence that Paul made it to Spain. First, that written tradition in Spain that says he went there, second that the church in Spain grew rapidly just after Paul would have been there, and third that Clement and Chrysostom and Jerome wrote that he went there. But there's a fourth sort of evidence. No, it's not very solid, either. The Book of Acts has 28 chapters in it, but there are those who believe that a 29<sup>th</sup> chapter was found – and it clearly describes Paul making it to Spain. This document was found in the archives of Constantinople – which is now Istanbul. It was written in Greek and translated in the early 1800's. But – many people consider this a fake. Still, suppose it's true. If Paul made it to Spain by foot and spread the faith, can't we, who travel by electric bike, car and plane, make it to Spain and touch just one life? Imagine the many millions that have been impacted by Paul.



Let's end with a Bible passage for today, taken from Psalm 103, which tells us of the great quality of God's forgiveness:

- <sup>8</sup> *The LORD is merciful and gracious,  
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.*
- <sup>9</sup> *He will not always chide,  
nor will he keep his anger forever.*
- <sup>10</sup> *He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor  
repay us according to our iniquities.*
- <sup>11</sup> *For as high as the heavens are above the earth,  
so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him;*
- <sup>12</sup> *as far as the east is from the west,  
so far does he remove our transgressions from us.*

Psalm 103 is considered not just an important Psalm, but a world class piece of literature in itself. It is a beautiful poem about thanksgiving. It is attributed to David, but we don't know if he really wrote it. The passage we just listened to tells of the serenity and the peace that we receive knowing that God's forgiveness is as vast as the heavens above the earth and that it stretches from infinitely east to infinitely west. It does challenge us to ask ourselves this question: How much more can we be uplifted and filled with joy by showing the same level of forgiveness to others?

Here is one last bit of Scripture, written by Paul in his letter to the church in Rome, the same letter where he says that he hopes to make it to Spain. In it, Paul references Psalm 32.

- <sup>7</sup> *"Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven,  
and whose sins are covered;*
- <sup>8</sup> *blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin."*

This says that we are blessed because God is forgiving and does not hold our sins against us. This is a great blessing, to have a creator who is so forgiving. It would be God's way if all of us, especially today, when forgiveness is so frequently withheld and people respond with vengeance, would be forgiving with those who wish to harm us.