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### **Philippians 4:1-3, English Standard Version.**

*4 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.*

### **Romans 15:14–32, edited for brevity, English Standard Version.**

*<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, 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> For I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me to bring the Gentiles to obedience—by word and deed, <sup>19</sup> by the power of signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God—so that from Jerusalem and all the way around to Illyricum I have fulfilled the ministry of the gospel of Christ; <sup>20</sup> and thus I make it my ambition to preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named, lest I build on someone else's foundation.*

*<sup>23</sup> But now, 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>26</sup> For Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make some contribution for the poor among the saints at Jerusalem. <sup>27</sup> For they were pleased to do it, and indeed they owe it to them. For if the Gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessings, they ought also to be of service to them in material blessings. <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. <sup>29</sup>*

*<sup>30</sup> I appeal to you, brothers, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to strive together with me in your prayers to God on my behalf, <sup>31</sup> that I may be delivered from the unbelievers in Judea, and that my service for Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints, <sup>32</sup> so that by God's will I may come to you with.*

1st letter of **Clement** to the Corinthians, 5:5-7, written in approx. the 70's, A.D.

*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.*

### **Welcome to Spain.**

I've done it again – made a non-Scriptural reference one of our readings. It's from someone named Clement. But let's start with our first quote. Philippians is a letter written by Paul the evangelist to a church he had founded. According to the Book of Acts, he did this on his second missionary journey, around the year 50. Philippi was an important city in Macedonia and was either built or rebuilt around the middle of the fourth century B.C. It was part of the Roman Empire and located in a fertile area with nearby gold and silver mines. The population was mixed: Romans, Greeks, and Jews, and correspondingly, many different religions were practiced there, with a tiny Christian church. Since the letter is choppy, some scholars believe that it is a blend of two or three separate letters written by Paul.

The purpose of the letter was to give the Christians in the city advice on how to deal with growing persecution, how to manage dissent among the members of the Church, and how to help that church mature spiritually.

The truth is that I included this passage just to make the sermon a little more fun. I included it because of the reference to Clement: *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 a conflict between two women in the church, both of them leaders; their conflict threatens the integrity of the church as a whole. Paul happens to also mention that they have worked side by side with him and someone named Clement. Who is Clement? I'll get back to this.

Let's move to our second reading, which is actually the focus of this sermon. It's from Romans, arguably the most important of Paul's letters and the most important Book of the New Testament, after the four Gospels. This letter, the only one Paul wrote to a church that he did NOT found, has, from the early days of the Christian church, defined much of what we believe. While our basic beliefs about how we should act as Christians, with respect to empathy, forgiveness, regeneration, and kindness, comes from the words of Christ, our more formal beliefs are largely derived from Romans. This letter has been used to differentiate

true Christian theology from derivations of Christianity, like Gnosticism, that have, over the centuries, threatened to draw us away from the teachings of Christ. There is so much to say about Romans that I want to start out by saying that we will only barely touch on it today, and we will return to Romans many times in the future.

The church in Rome was made up of both Jewish and Gentile converts. Our passage is from the end of Romans, where Paul talks about his future plans. He starts out with words of affirmation for the Christians in Rome, saying they are true believers who support one another. Paul goes on to say that he teaches only what Jesus has taught us. Paul then tells us what he wants to do in the future, and that is to first bring money to the desperately poor Christians in Jerusalem, and then to bring the Christian faith all the way to Spain: *At present, however, I am going to Jerusalem bringing aid to the saints. <sup>26</sup>For Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make some contribution for the poor among the saints at Jerusalem. <sup>27</sup>For they were pleased to do it, and indeed they owe it to them. For if the Gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessings, they ought also to be of service to them in material blessings. <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 says that he is going to visit Rome on his way to Spain. Paul did make it to Rome, where he was imprisoned. 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. Very importantly, Spain also rested at what was considered the very edge of the western-most end of the civilized world. It consisted of the entire Spanish peninsula, including what is today both Spain and Portugal. It was ruled by Rome and had a significant Jewish population. 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 and science and engineering. It would have been incredible if Paul had been able to bring the faith there. We only have three pieces of evidence that Paul ever made this trip. First, there are Spanish traditions that Paul made it there. This is of course very thin evidence. The second is that the size and complex organization of the church in Spain by the third century suggests that someone got there early on.

The third piece of evidence relates to our third 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 says that Paul made it to the farthest limits of the West – which would indeed have been Spain at the 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.

But wait. Who wrote this? Someone named Clement, who is considered one of the early Church Fathers, whom we discussed recently. Well, there are those who believe that this Clement, who wrote this letter, is the Clement that we read about in our first passage where Paul said: “...*help these women, who have labored side by side with me in the gospel together with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers...*”. Is it true that the Clement who traveled with Paul is also Clement of Rome, who wrote a letter that seems to clearly say that Paul made it to Spain and established a major Christian church? There are many who believe that this same man was a personal companion and co-evangelist of Paul, that he wrote that letter, and that he was martyred by being thrown into the sea with an anchor around his neck. Who knows if this is all correct? However, I’m not here today to nail down historical facts that, at this point in time, no one can prove are factual or fictional.

But we, too, can bring the word to Spain. You know, I listed three pieces of not-so-solid evidence that Paul made it to Spain, but there’s a fourth piece 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. So, I won't even bother to quote it.

Here's my point. Much has been written about Paul going to Spain, and it is all leveraged off a very brief reference to Spain made by Paul in one of his letters. From there, people have woven together, out of multiple pieces of questionable evidence, the story of Paul fulfilling this mission. Why? Because Paul, after Jesus Christ himself, is the second most important person in Christianity. We have looked at his letters from the New Testament already, and we will look at his work many more times. We will look at his letter to the Romans, which is considered massively fundamental to our faith. Of course, people have imagined what he did after the Book of Acts concludes so mysteriously, with us not knowing what happened to Paul. We've wanted to know where he went, how he died. We wish we had more letters of his. Our imaginations can't let go of Paul the evangelist who did so much to spread the faith to Europe, the part of the world from which our faith culture descends. If it hadn't been for Paul, perhaps we wouldn't be Christians. If nothing else, if it weren't for Paul, who knows how far our beliefs would have strayed from

the original teachings of Jesus Christ. So, that's the point. Paul is a cornerstone of our faith, so we want to know what he did, where he went, how he died. But we don't know. And we want to envision him making it all the way to Spain.

Think about where Paul was headed, where he hoped to go. To the end of the known, civilized world. That's where we are. The truth is that the U.S. is on the edge of chaos. We have massive problems with violence, drugs, crime, and the concentration of wealth in the hands of a few. We are extremely divided, with some people thanking first responders for the risks they take, and others seeing first responders as an invading army. We are involved in a two-decade-long war with people overseas who would love to see this entire country burn. But what are Americans doing right now? People devote their lives to accumulating computers and smart phones and giant TVs and fancy cars. We seem to need WIFI and cable TV to survive. We want Amazon to deliver our stuff to us in one day, not two days. We spend less and less time with other people. One of reasons I like this church so much is that this church still believes in family, friendship, and Christian fellowship. But the U.S. is, in many ways, on the edge of civilization. I personally believe that the loss of faith in this country is a key indicator of just how bad things are.

However, we are all evangelists. And, we don't have to travel thousands of miles by foot, like Paul did, to make a difference. We are already here. We can



show the world around us what it means to live like Jesus. Let people know that your faith is a key aspect of your life. Invite them to come here some Sunday. There's no need to walk to Spain. Just walk across the street, talk to the people around you. Dream like Paul did. See yourself teaching others to be kindhearted, forgiving, supportive, and generous, and to know that God wants the best for them.

Paul, in our quote from Romans, says that he wants to evangelize in places where no one else has been, in particular among the Gentiles of Europe. He says that these people owe something to the much poorer, Jewish converts back in Jerusalem. These Gentiles were educated, well off people, who, for the most part, had what they needed in life. But the one thing they did not have was God. As you know, I retired early as a computer science prof. I had spent decades in the world of high tech, where people are obsessed with money and power and having the latest gadgets. Late one night, I was reading this passage from Romans – and I realized that I was living in Paul's Spain. I was surrounded by Godless people who lived for all the wrong reasons. It would be so easy for me. God had given me an opportunity to do what we all imagine Paul did – and that is to be a servant of Jesus Christ on the edge of the civilized world. My dream is that this church will be a brilliant, Christ-like beacon among the most sophisticated people on the planet, people who have everything but the knowledge that God is within them. Amen.