



ACTS 17

“By chance” where could you end up? If you woke up one morning and found yourself in a different bed “what would you think?” What would your spouse think: just kidding? Maybe you went on a trip and ended up in places you never planned. Are you ready for that kind of adventure? Would you like being James Bond or Laura Croft traveling around world? I bet they never knew where they would end up next; they just went for a ride.

Many of you have heard of “Place of Rescue” in Cambodia. It’s for children and parents that have been displaced by the Cambodian society due to Aids. It is run and founded by a fabulous lady named Marie Ens. I met her several times over the years and she truly is a saint. What a wonderful lady doing wonderful work. Sometimes I’m critical about the western church just supporting overseas missions work. Marie Ens is the exception.

She and her husband began work on a place called Rescue for children. Tragically her husband died and she was left holding the bag. What would she do now? Marie was put in a place she never saw coming. I remember her saying “I

can't do this alone, it's just little old me." Yet she heard and accepted that call of God. The lives that have been touched in "Place of Rescue" owe their happiness to more than just Marie ens. I believe God heard their cries. He put Marie in such a place that she had to decide, yes or no without warning. That is our God.

Elizabeth Elliot wrote an autobiography called "Passion and Purity." It is the painful love story of her and her first husband Jim Elliot. They spent something like 5 years dating off and on. Each one totally committed to Gods call. Jim refused to marry her until God said so. She refused to let him go because she believed Jim was her man. So Jim and Elizabeth waited on God. Their passions for each other grew wildly, but they refused to compromise Gods call to purity. This book drove me nuts. It was like "just get a room will ya."

The crazy part of the story is the ending. Jim finally asked Elisabeth to marry her and they were blissfully married for 6 years. In the last year Jim was called with four other guys to minister to some cannibals in South America. The men eaters were happy about that. They killed Jim and the other 4 who went with him. Elizabeth "by chance" was without a husband again. Imagine being called to Gods work and realizing you're going to die. Imagine realizing your life partner is not your life's partner. Elizabeth Elliot became a missionary to those same cannibals and she wrote several books on purity and Gods call. Through circumstances not of her own doing she became so much more.

All of these people and many more like them found themselves called by God. They were passionate about God's will for them. One thing they had in common for sure was that God put them in situations they never saw coming. How would they react? What would happen if they had to think differently in the twinkling of an eye? Today's sermon takes a long look at several of these questions. How do you know where God might take you? How would you react if God changed your plans? Are you ready for the real work of God?

The Bible is full of "by chances" Moses was destined to die because he was a Hebrew Baby, yet "by chance" his mother saved him by floating him off in the Nile River. "By chance" a young Egyptian princess found him. "By chance" King Saul disobeyed God and spared some of the people of Agag in 1 Samuel 15. "By chance" Esther was chosen to be queen. "By chance" she was put on the throne to save the Jewish people from destruction from the decree of Agag. "By chance" Jesus was destined to die by the hand of Herod, as a baby and as a man. "By chance" Jesus' death became a blessing to the whole world when he rose from the dead. "By chance."

I realize that these things might not be by chance. Maybe someone or fate had a hand in it. It seems someone or something is looking out for these people. Directing and guiding their lives to a final outcome. "By chance" is there a God who is moving the world? Did God save Moses by guiding the basket down the

river to just the right place in the reeds? Did God place Esther in just the right place to be noticed by a king? Did God put Herod in such a place to intersect with the life of Jesus? These are the questions that make life interesting.

Do you see the signs when God puts you in a certain place for a certain reason? Are there “by chances” in your life. I might even ask the question “are you awake to see them”? I noticed in a paper I wrote that there were some “by chances” in my life. I noticed I have been saved by God several times. My mother had German measles when I was born. I should have died or at-least been deformed, yet I’m ok I think. I jumped off a cliff for fun as a kid and landed on my head. I survived, sort of. I was missed by a bus on the street by inches. I had meningitis and came out of it ok. I was an unbeliever but God saved me from certain death. A car accident in America, and on and on I could go. By chance I am here today. We all have these stories.

Today we are entering our third part of the series energizing church. God places us in situations that are beyond our control. They are the “by chances” in life. The theme today is not so much “by chance” but what do you do when you’re there. Are you ready for the chance meeting with someone.

I wanted to run a singles group. I went to all the pastors in the city to gain their support. One united pastor was retiring and he said to me. “You will meet many different people that are single for different reasons.” “Are you prepared for

that?” I thought sure that’s why I’m here silly. Then he said “do you speak their languages.” That took me off guard. Languages like English, French? His point was: do I know how to talk to someone in their situation and in there space? I realized that day I needed to use the right words in the right situation.

This third part in our series will talk about the words we use. So I call this sermon “Big words and strange places.” Christians have different ways of explaining themselves. We use what is called chrtianese. We talk about salvation, sin, and baptism. Do the lost in this world have a clue what you are talking about? In school we were docked marks for speaking christianese. We were trained to speak to the audience in their language not in our church language. That is hard to do. I am Christian in my words. For the most part the people I talk to are not. Yet, I am not talking to myself, I am talking to them. “By chance” you might be placed in the path of people outside church circles. Do I know their language?

Would you please open your Bibles to Acts 17. This chapter captures our use of words. Paul has been placed “by chance” in a place he does not fully understand. Paul has been placed in an area called Mars hill in Athens. I hope to show you today that Paul used this unexpected meeting to reach people in their language.

Paul was interested in his audience, but that was not always the case. The Paul we read about came by lessons from God. God prepared Paul and groomed

Paul to be bold and adventurous. Listen to Paul in Philippians 4 **“I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. 12 I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. 13 I can do all this through him who gives me strength.”**

Paul wrote those words because of the situations God put him in. God trained him for an adventure in Acts 17. So let’s see how God did that for Paul and what we can learn from it. Let’s read beginning in Acts 17 verse 1. **“When Paul and his companions had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a Jewish synagogue. 2 As was his custom, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, 3 explaining and proving that the Messiah had to suffer and rise from the dead. “This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Messiah,” he said. 4 Some of the Jews were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a large number of God-fearing Greeks and quite a few prominent women.”**

Paul is on his journeys and this is his third one. He is a seasoned veteran at spreading the gospel. I love the beginning of verse 2 **“as it was his custom.”** Paul made it his point and mission to attack the Jews in the synagogue on the Sabbath.

He probably had a strategy. Talk to the most powerful people. If you could turn them you can turn them all. He probably picked the Sabbath because so many people would be there. This was the perfect storm for Paul to preach about Jesus. I find there was probably one more strategy. It says in verse 2 he was reasoning with them from the scriptures. The New Testament? No, it wasn't written yet. Paul was talking to them from where they are, and from what they know "the Old scriptures."

There is a great lesson to be learned in these first few verses. One: is that Paul goes where the people are. The synagogue was a happening place. It was not just a church. There was a marketplace there. People were always coming there to make sacrifices, talk about God, and do business. Paul did not invite them to his home, he went to theirs.

In church we have a bad habit. We invite, but we don't go. Do we go to where the lost are? No, we are at home babysitting the saved. It has become a custom of believers to take care of each other. That is good, it is noble, and it's biblical, yet there is something wrong about it. We have made our Christian life about preserving the faith and we have called it "growth in the kingdom." One year, a pastor told me that 8 people were saved. Just 8? To some that is a lot and to others it is small. Of those 8, 3 were children of Christians, and 3 were rededications to God. In reality only 2 people were saved that year, and the church

was a buzz about it. Just a dumb question but “maybe church is the wrong place to save people.” I suppose another question might be: are the lost worth saving?

Maybe we are past that now and it’s about preserving the church? Is it these days?

A second lesson from Paul is that he speaks to them in their language. They probably spoke Greek or Hebrew, but the language I am talking about is their beliefs. He is talking bible to bible guys. There is no point in talking about knitting to them. Paul is making his points in their terms. It’s about their values, and their scriptures. Paul is relating to them on their level.

One final unexpected point in these verses is what I call sideways preaching. For the most part the areas where Paul spoke were like the men’s room. Women did not usually get involved or were allowed in this area. This was a Jewish community. Generally outsiders like Greeks did not enter this area. Yet it says in verse 3 **“Some of the Jews were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a large number of God-fearing Greeks and quite a few prominent women.”** This is sideways preaching. When we are talking to someone, yet others standing near are hearing the words. At work I love to throw out seeds to my co-workers. Just mention God in our conversations. Sometimes people in another Isle can hear me (ok I’m a big mouth). I have come to know that God may have perked other ears than the ones I’m talking to.

I think Paul is sideways preaching without knowing it. Paul is learning a lesson in Acts 17. Paul is on a journey. He has a plan. He goes to the synagogue as was his custom. He preached to the bible guys. Yet it says some Jews and a large number of Greeks and rich women bought into what he was saying. I don't think Paul was expecting that to happen. He wanted the Jews, yet he got so much more. You could say he was preaching to them all, but as we go along in this journey I'll show you that was not Paul's pattern.

This is the cool part in Acts 17. Paul went on missionary journeys. Each time he tried to go in a planned order. God however had different plans for him this time. The Jews in Thessalonica, where Paul was teaching, had had enough of him. Listen beginning in verse 10 **“As soon as it was night, the believers sent Paul and Silas away to Berea. On arriving there, they went to the Jewish synagogue. 11 Now the Berean Jews were of more noble character than those in Thessalonica, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true. 12 As a result, many of them believed, as did also a number of prominent Greek women and many Greek men.**

Paul is whisked away to another town and again Paul searches out the synagogue and bible men. Again more Greeks and women of high standing come

to the Lord. Not so many Jews because in reality Paul is sideways preaching and he can't see it.

How often are we trying to get our word out our way? How often are we trying to reach this group or that group, yet we have horse blinders on. We only see what we want to see and miss the mission field all together. If God is orchestrating our lives, by his will, then why are we so concerned with our plans and our journeys?

One woman was asked in church, "How do you begin your day?" She said she gets up in the morning and asks God what they should do today. That is the way we should do life. Yes we work, and yes we have bills to pay, yet we don't do our day with God, do we? Is he coming along for the ride? Is he driving the bus, or is he riding in your bus?

My wife and I love driving in LA, just kidding Deanna. One time we took a wrong turn and ended up in East LA. It is a very interesting area. We saw fires in the streets, bars on the Kentucky fried chicken, and a wall of bars around the church. This was very cool for me but not so much for her. We were trying to get somewhere, yet God directed us though East LA. I noticed things I had never seen before. God was putting us in their home, their comfort, and out of ours. How did we react? We got the hell out. We did not embrace the place God had taken us too. We took god and got the hell out.

Listen to verses 13-15 **“But when the Jews in Thessalonica learned that Paul was preaching the word of God at Berea, some of them went there too, agitating the crowds and stirring them up. 14 The believers immediately sent Paul to the coast, but Silas and Timothy stayed at Berea. 15 Those who escorted Paul brought him to Athens and then left with instructions for Silas and Timothy to join him as soon as possible.”** God again has taken Paul out of his intended target and placed him in a spot not of his choosing. Paul is about to have an aha moment.

Maybe you could see the utter depravity of a place you find yourself in like East LA. Maybe you might see the homeless downtown in Calgary. What is God showing you where he takes you? Are you showing him where you take him? Listen to God in Deut 32 **“That very day the Lord spoke to Moses, 49 “Go up this mountain of the Abarim, Mount Nebo, which is in the land of Moab, opposite Jericho, and view the land of Canaan, which I am giving to the people of Israel for a possession.**

I have been there. I have seen sort of what Moses saw. He probably saw a lush ground. He probably saw a large Jordan River. I saw pollution, dust, and no water. The Jordan River is now 3 feet wide. There are flies like you would not believe. My point is God took Moses and showed him something he was not going

to have, but he showed him. God showed me too and I was not impressed. Was Paul impressed by what God was showing him in Athens?

Paul has been going from town to town doing God's work. It's good work. Don't get me wrong, Paul has a good heart for God. Yet, Paul had on biblical horse blinders. He is so focused on his mission he forgot the people. He hits the popular places. The places he can relate to, and the places he is comfortable. God is about to put Paul in an uncomfortable place: in Athens.

Some well-meaning Christians place Paul up there with Jesus. He is perfect and does no wrong. That is not our Paul. I feel he is working out his Christianity in his letters. There is a struggle to understand Christ in his words. Do we get a perfect picture of Jesus through Paul because he is smart? Sort of because Paul understands the relationship between Jews, gentiles and Christ, yet Paul is a human being that sins just like the rest of us. The reason God picked Paul's words for the Bible is not because Paul was smart but rather because Paul, through his experiences, saw so much more than just life, he saw God in it.

In Acts 17 Paul is on a journey. He has purposely gone to the Jews to reason with them in each town. Once Paul is placed by God in Athens, we can see Paul learn a lesson that he never saw coming. In Athens Paul seems to be out of his comfort zone. Verse 16 **While Paul was waiting for them in Athens; he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols.** What would you do if

God put you in a place that rejects the Lord? Most Christians flock to a church because it's a Jesus community. We tend to avoid worldly places. Again Jesus purpose for coming was to seek and save the lost. He was not here to save the saved. The commission called "a great one" by Jesus was to go forth and spread the good news to the whole world, not the whole church.

We as a body of Christ have forgotten that. We have built churches for the saved. I believe that is not necessarily a bad thing: churches should reflect the God we worship. It is called Gods house for a reason. But I have this burning question: is what we have built kept us in and the lost out? The problem is we have this great commission thing, and as followers of Jesus we are asked to go not stay home. Matthew 13 points out we are not to seek and save the lost, that is Jesus job, he is called the sower. We are the seed. We are cast wherever Jesus casts us. Jesus casts us in church and in the world. Paul was cast in Athens and they were not Jews and not bible men. Paul has been cast into their world.

Verses 17 and 18: **"So he reasoned in the synagogue with both Jews and God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there. 18 A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to debate with him. Some of them asked, "What is this babblers trying to say?" Others remarked, "He seems to be advocating foreign gods." They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection."**

Paul sideways preaches with the best of them. He is amazing at it but I wonder if he even knows it to this point. He is in Athens and he sees the idols, yet he seeks another synagogue full of Jews. One day God changed Paul's routine. Paul is speaking in the marketplace and "by chance" some philosophers are there listening to him. **"As well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there. 18 A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to debate with him. Some of them asked, "What is this babbler trying to say?" Others remarked, "He seems to be advocating foreign gods."**

Paul's ministry is really about to change. He called himself an apostle to the gentiles, yet he seems to be seeking out Jews: strange don't you think? We have read so far that many gentiles have been converted right before his eyes. Now he is in Athens and some Greeks have noticed him. They want to know more. Verse 19 thru 21 **"Then they took him and brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus, where they said to him, "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? 20 You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we would like to know what they mean." 21 (All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.)"**

Paul in the first part of our chapter was whisked away to other towns and other synagogues, but this time he is taken to a Greek place where they debate

Greek stuff. I believe Paul's eyes are opened to the gentiles for the first time. God has been guiding Paul to preach about Jesus. Paul loved to say he is an apostle to the gentiles but was it just lip service. God places Paul in gentile central to get his attention. Today Paul needs to step up his game, and he does. We need to step up our game too.

We use big words to impress Christians. Are you sanctified? Are you saved? You need joy; peace; and contentment. We talk a good talk about saving the lost but we talk big words and phrases the lost don't understand. We preach from the church but we don't preach in the marketplace or from a secular place like Mars Hill.

Imagine me telling you that "you as a Christian" should be living a joyful life. You should be feeling the spirit all the time. You are in control of your sin. Maybe I might tell you that Jesus saves you. Jesus is love. Jesus is the answer. We sit in church and nod our heads like bobble head dogs in the back of cars.

The lost are not bobble heads. They are asking "saved from what?"; "what is love"; "where do I get this joy"; "what are the answers?" In your Christianese wisdom you tell them "just find Jesus and you will have those answers." In reality we haven't got a clue what we're talking about. How does Jesus bring joy to an unhappy person? How does Jesus save a rich happy person? What are the answers that Jesus has for us? What are your answers? Is it just lip service?

We love to talk and we love to stand up and say we have Jesus, but to the lost, we are hollow. When pressed for answers on the world's stage, we are silent. Many Christians today have no real answers. Does that mean there are none? No it does not. We need to be ready and prepared to give answers. Answers that mean something to the lost and not to just the saved. Joy is great but how do we get there? Answers are great but how do they work in my life? Being saved is cool but what does that mean tomorrow? Paul in our chapter steps up to the plate. He is in the game that God placed him "by chance", and he is ready because Paul has lived in their shoes.

Verses 22 and 23 **"Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: "People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. 23 For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: to an unknown god. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship—and this is what I am going to proclaim to you."**

This is Mars Hill. A place in Athens where the men go to talk, debate, and enjoy their time. God has put Paul in the heart of Greek culture. There are idols, secular thinking, and unbelief. Paul better have an answer. Does Paul say you need love, joy, and Jesus? No he uses the things in their lives to explain the things he knows about God. He uses their idols and their understanding to meet Jesus. The

point today is not to read this whole chapter. Paul goes on to bridge the gap between their world and our world. He uses their stuff and their wisdom to do it. Paul is now a preacher to the gentiles. I bet he has changed.

This chapter in a nut shell is about opening our eyes and hearts to the world around us. We focus on our plans too much. We make arrangements way too much. Sometimes we have to leave room for God to move. “By chance” he might move us, grow us, and change us. The world is out there not in here. Paul was doing a good thing trying to reach the Jews in their house. God just opened his eyes a little farther to the rest of the world. We are great at boxing ourselves into a smaller more manageable world. It’s time we expanded our horizons. There is a world out there to be saved that is not inside the church.

Finally in closing, look at your surroundings. Why has God put you here, right where you are “by chance” on any given day? Maybe we can learn a thing or two about the lost before we can talk to them. The burning questions might be are you doing life with God or is God doing life with you? Is my Christian life comfortable? Maybe you need to shake some things up? Maybe you should not be the one shaking things up? Maybe today we should ask God if we “by chance” can ride along with him for a change.