



Session 7: Making Friends and Changing Lives through “Random” Encounters – Leader’s Notes

This session encourages group members to consider how seemingly random encounters shape our lives. It explores how the Holy Spirit’s promptings can guide us in meeting people meant to be part of our lives.

Sample responses to questions based on Acts

1. How did Paul and his companions meet people in seemingly random encounters?

Paul meets several people of note while traveling to Europe, having been turned away from Asia and redirected by the Holy Spirit. He and his companions, including Silas, visit temples and places where God-worshippers gather.

They meet Lydia in Philippi, along a riverbank where people gather to pray on a regular basis. They encounter the slave woman with the evil spirit while in town; this meeting leads to their arrest and time in jail, where they meet the jailer and his family. Paul meets fellow tentmakers Aquila and Priscilla in Corinth, after this husband-and-wife team were forced to leave Rome.

2. Were Paul and his companions planning on meeting these folks or did they (Paul, Silas, etc.) have something else on their to-do lists?

Paul and his companions seek worshipers of God, but they don’t know who they’ll meet and who will receive the word of God.

They certainly didn’t plan to meet the slave woman. However, God’s presence within them leads to the encounter in which Paul commands the evil spirit to leave the slave, which then destroys her value in generating revenue for her owners through fortune telling.

Paul and Silas befriend the jailer and his family after the earthquake that destroys the jail. The jailer fears that he’ll be condemned to death for allowing prisoners to escape from the ruined prison. Paul and Silas reach him and save him from himself as he’s contemplating suicide.

They may have planned to meet Aquila and Priscilla.

3. For these various encounters, describe how the circumstances were similar and how they were different.

The circumstances for these encounters are similar in that Paul and Silas are on a mission to reach people in Europe, specifically Philippi and Corinth.

Each situation is different in these ways: they meet Lydia where God-worshipers gather, they meet the slave woman in town, they meet the jailer and his family in jail following an earthquake, and they meet Aquila and Priscilla because of work-related reasons.

4. Did Lydia, the slave girl, the jailer, Aquila and Priscilla know anything about Paul and his companions before they met?

It's not clear whether any of these people know anything about Paul and his companions. Lydia may have known about the Christians, but she is considered the first European convert to Christianity so it's likely she hadn't heard of Paul or Jesus for that matter. Aquila and Priscilla may have known about Paul either as a Christian missionary or tentmaker (or both). It seems unlikely that the slave girl or the jailer know anything about Paul and his companions before their encounters.

5. How did the Holy Spirit influence these situations?

The Holy Spirit directs Paul away from Asia to Europe. He seems to prepare Lydia and the jailer for their meetings with Paul and prepares their families and households to receive the good news about Jesus. The evil spirit in the slave girl senses the presence of the Holy Spirit in Paul, leading to conflict and annoyance – which then leads to his meeting with the jailer.

6. What happened as the result of these encounters?

Lydia becomes a Christian and is instrumental in starting the church in Philippi. The jailer and his family members become believers. Paul works with Aquila and Priscilla, supporting himself during his missionary travels.

Sample responses to questions based on Acts and personal experiences

1. Describe memorable experiences with seemingly random people.



I can think of many memorable experiences. One that stands out is when I met a guy who introduced me to a new cycling group.

We met at a charity ride about an hour or so from our homes. He parked next to me at the ride. I initiated a conversation with him because I needed help with my bike and he was a bike marshal for Bike MS, meaning he was there to provide support to cyclists. We talked some before the ride and learned that we both lived in suburbs west of our city and had kids who attended nearby high schools.

After we finished the ride, my new friend said he belonged to a cycling group that I might enjoy as it included females. He had watched me ride and felt comfortable with my riding style and speed, and so issued this invitation.

I welcomed the idea of a mixed group. I was strong and competitive enough that I liked being pushed. But I wasn't strong enough to join just any ride, particularly those dominated by men.

So, after brief consideration, I gave this stranger my phone number and he added me to an email list and I started to ride with these folks. That led to my getting stronger and then riding with another group and so on. It really changed my life.

2. Were you at peace when talking with them? Describe how you felt during your interactions.

I felt uncomfortable about giving my phone number to a strange man, but I didn't feel uncomfortable with this person. After I got added to the email list, I learned that the folks in the group were well-respected people in their field. The group was loosely associated with a corporate-sponsored Bike MS team. Just as important, though, there was an active female cyclist providing leadership for the team and she was glad to have me ride with them.

3. Have you developed long-term relationships with those whom you encountered or were the encounters one-time events?

I rode several times with this person during subsequent group rides. A couple of times, he needed help and I was on the ready to help (one time, I gave him a tube after he had a flat tire; another time, I stayed with him after an accident).



Even though we're not in touch today, the encounter did lead to long-term relationships with folks in the group and their friends. So, this circle of random encounters has been extended multiple times.

4. Did you act welcoming or reserved in your interactions? Were you pleased with or do you regret how you behaved?

I think I was appropriately welcoming and reserved. I felt somewhat odd but not so much that I rejected the offer. I figured if there was a problem, then I'd deal with that later. I could have acted more eager, but I think I was in the realm of normal.

5. Do you think God placed these people in your path?

Yes, I think God influenced both of us that day. I have come to see that I can do things to prepare myself and that's important but only goes so far. I believe God works in ways that aren't predictable.

6. How do you tell if someone is safe or not safe? What signs do you look for? How do you think God wants you to act with strangers?

I like to think that I can tell if someone is safe or not, but really, I judge more on the situation than the person. The encounter I mentioned was in public and so it didn't scare me or make me think it was unsafe or inappropriate. I didn't arrange to meet this person in a private area.

One thing I consider when evaluating signs of safety is whether someone suggests or pushes for something inappropriate; that's my test I'd say. I think God wants me to be kind to strangers but not foolish.

