This is pretty good: “If you want to make God laugh, tell him your plans.” I think it actually comes from an old Yiddish Proverb. The proverb goes like this: “Man plans, and God laughs.” I like that: man plans, God laughs. And you old guys know it’s true: life doesn’t quite work out the way we plan it, does it. So we plan (as we should) and God chuckles. We plan (and I think God wants us to plan), and every once in a while God lets us work our plan. But rarely, rarely do things turn out exactly as we plan them.

Especially … if we’re chasing the Wild Goose. Now if you haven’t been here recently, the Wild Goose is what some of the ancient Celts called the Holy Spirit. We kind of like that, so we are using Wild Goose as a symbol of the Holy Spirit. The explanation is kind of long; all you really need to know is this: The Wild Goose is wild, and unpredictable, and he’s really, really good at messing up your plans for a simple, safe life. The truth is, my plans for me and God’s plans for me are often … different. What God wants for me and what I want for me often clash. And if I am serious about doing life with God, if I am serious about accepting God’s will for my life, I’m going to end up in places where I didn’t plan to be, doing things I didn’t plan to do. You? Have you ever sensed God’s plans for you clashing with your plans for you? And have you ever given in to God’s will, and ended up in a place where you didn’t plan to be, doing something you didn’t plan to do?

It happened all the time in the Bible. Have you ever looked at the maps at the back of a Bible? Sometimes they have a map of Paul’s missionary journeys. This is weird: If you follow Paul’s missionary journeys on a map, there aren’t many straight lines. Paul kind of zig-zags across his world. Now I don’t think Paul planned it that way. And if you start scratching at the stories, you’ll discover that many of his stops weren’t planned – by Paul, they weren’t really on Paul’s itinerary. He ends up in Athens because a mob in Thessalonica ran him out of town. He went to Troas, and to Philippi, because God slammed the doors shut on his plans to go south into Asia or north into Bithynia. Paul planned, but occasionally – in fact, pretty often – God laughed. Because sometimes God has a place for us to be, or a thing for us to do that just isn’t in our plans.

And usually God doesn’t tell us about these “divine detours” in advance. I think he wants us to trust him, just to go when he nudges. And sometimes, I
think, he doesn’t tell us in advance because if we knew ahead of time where God was going to take us, and what God was going to ask us to do, we’d run, the other way. Listen, God warned Paul right at the start, right after he became a Christian, that chasing the Wild Goose was not going to be easy. He’s tells us that too. But even after God told Paul it wouldn’t be easy, Paul still had no idea what chasing the Wild Goose would cost him. One time Paul started listing some of the troubles following he’d had chasing the Wild Goose. He says, • Five different times the Jewish leaders gave me thirty-nine lashes. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked. Once I spent a whole night and a day adrift at sea. I have traveled on many long journeys. I have faced danger from rivers and from robbers. I have faced danger from my own people, the Jews, as well as from the Gentiles. I have faced danger in the cities, in the deserts, and on the seas. And I have faced danger from men who claim to be believers but are not. I have worked hard and long, enduring many sleepless nights. I have been hungry and thirsty and have often gone without food. I have shivered in the cold, without enough clothing to keep me warm. (2 Corinthians 11.24-27)

Guys, if one of you guys came up here this morning and said, “I want to be a Christian.” And I said, “Excellent. Now here’s what it’s going to cost you: 3 severe whippings, 2 beatings with clubs, a stoning, 3 shipwrecks, bad guys are going to come after you, your own people will come after you, your own family will come after you, you’ll experience total exhaustion, fierce hunger, extreme thirst” … would you still sign up? … Well, I don’t know where chasing the Wild Goose will take you. But I know this: you won’t always end up places where you plan to go, and you won’t always end up doing things that you plan to do. And that’s … cool. Some of the most exhilarating moments of my life have been quite unplanned … by me.

Okay, if you have a smartphone or a tablet with a Bible app, or even one of those old-fashioned paper Bibles, open up to Acts 27. If you don’t have a Bible with you, the verses will be on screen as well. We’re going to get to Acts 27 in just a couple minutes. First let me kind of set the stage for what’s going on. If you were here last week you’ll remember (I hope) that the apostle Paul was compelled by the Holy Spirit to go to Jerusalem. He’s being driven to Jerusalem by God. He also knew that there’d be trouble when he got there. And there was … a boatload of trouble. He was
arrested, then he was sent to prison ... By the way, none of this was on Paul’s agenda. His plan was not to go to Jerusalem so he could check out their jails. He spent two years in prison, he went through several trials. Finally he appeals to Caesar. Now he had a right to do that as a Roman citizen, he could request that his case be settled in Rome.

Now in the next chapter and a half of the book of Acts we are going find four different ways our plans get messed up. If you live long enough, you’ll experience all four. Remember: we plan, and God laughs. Well, I have four objects up here that represent different ways our plans get screwed up. We’ve already seen the first. **(Handcuffs)** The apostle Paul goes to Jerusalem to bring money to the Christian poor and to honor God in the temple. But when he gets there, his enemies lie about him, his enemies get him arrested, and he does time in jail for two years – for a crime he didn’t commit. Well, these handcuffs are going to represent any time our plans are changed by evil, any time sinful people mess up our life. And that happens, sometimes. Sometimes bad things happen because there are bad people, and their sins hurt us. Paul wore chains every day for years because men chose to lie, and others used those lies to hurt him.

Well, in Acts 27, Paul’s luck goes from bad to worse. **(Acts 27.1-2 on screen)** They decide to send Paul to Rome on a boat. Remember, he’s traveling in these *handcuffs*, as a guest of the Roman penal system. Well their boat is making its way along the coast (because back then it was dangerous to go straight across an open sea), and the weather keeps getting worse and worse. Have you ever been in a fairly small boat in some really rough water? It’ll test your mettle. **(Acts 27.9 on screen)** Well they finally had a confab. The weather was so bad, and it was so late in the year that they couldn’t expect it to get better, so Paul tried to get them to pull in to the shore, and wait it out. **(Lifejacket)** He says, (Acts 21.10) “Men I believe there is trouble ahead if we go on -- shipwreck, loss of cargo, and danger to our lives as well.” Now Paul had already been in three shipwrecks, he had some sense of what could happen. (Acts 27.11) “But,” it says, “the officer in charge of the prisoners listened more to the ship’s captain and the owner than to Paul.” Which makes sense. I’d listen to a ship’s captain before I’d listen to one of the prisoners. But this time the captain was wrong, maybe he was reckless because to stop would cost him money. This time the prisoner was right. Their decision was reckless and stupid. They made a bad call, a bad choice.
I don’t have time to unpack the story; it’s a very detailed account. They get driven out to sea by the wind. They try to strengthen their boat because it’s being beaten to pieces by the storm. They throw their cargo overboard to try to keep afloat. The storm goes on for two weeks. Finally Paul – remember, he’s still a prisoner – Paul calls everyone together and he says, “Men, you should have listened to me in the first place and not left Crete. (You were reckless and stupid, you made a bad call.) You would have avoided all this damage and loss.” (Acts 27.21) But then he tells them that even though their ship was going to go down, God was going to save their lives. And he was right, again. The ship did go down, but God did save their lives. And by the grace of God Paul made it through shipwreck number 4.

Okay, remember, the handcuffs represent any time our plans are changed by evil, any time sinful people mess up our life. Well, this life-jacket represents any time our plans are changed by stupid. Sometimes we do stupid things, we make bad decisions, and it messes up our life. Sometimes people around us do stupid things – they are not mean, they are not evil, just foolish – and it messes up our life. We’re heading down our path, we’re working our plan, and sometimes we are thrown off our path by evil, and sometimes we are thrown off our path by stupid.

Well, Paul’s story goes from bad (cuffs), to worse (life-jacket), to worser (is that a word?) (Pause over box with holes in it) Now, in most parts of the country they couldn’t do this, but this is Kentucky. And we handle … snakes … in Kentucky. (Reach in carefully and remove) Just teasing – it’s rubber. Pretty cool though. My grandson is going think I’m really cool when I give it to him after this sermon.

So here’s what happens. After the ship goes down all the crew and all the prisoners make it to an island. (Acts 28.3 on screen) So they build a fire and Paul is gathering wood to put on the fire, when a poisonous snake bites him. Talk about a bad day. He’s already a prisoner (cuffs), he manages to survive a shipwreck (life-jacket), just so he can be bitten by a poisonous snake. If I’d have been Paul I might have been, “Come on God! If I was going to die by snake-bite, why didn’t you just let me drown? Really?!”

Now, apparently the snake was bad one. It says, “The people of the island saw it hanging from his hand (they knew what kind of snake it was) and said
to each other, “A murderer, no doubt! Though he escaped the sea, justice will not permit him to live.” But Paul shook off the snake into the fire and was unharmed. The people waited for him to swell up or suddenly drop dead.” (Acts 28.4-6) But he didn’t. And that snakebite was going to change the direction of Paul’s life, for a while.

You see, sometimes *(cuffs)* it is sin, it is evil that changes our plans, that changes the direction of our life.
- A bully picks you as a target – and drives some of your friends away.
- We are fired, unfairly, unjustly – and we needed that job.
- Or, rur spouse cheats on us – and our marriage is shattered – sin is messing up our plans, changing our life.
- Someone steals our money – and we needed that money.
- Someone lies about us, or spreads malicious rumors about us – and it costs a promotion, or a reputation, or a friend. Sin is messing up our plans, changing our life.

Evil can steal our dreams. *(life-jacket)* And sometimes it is recklessness, or stupidity that changes our plans, that changes the direction of our life.
- We go into serious debt because we think we need it all now, and we spend too much, we overuse the credit cards – we make bad financial decisions. And stupidity changes our life.
- We refuse to see the doctor soon enough, and we let the disease spread – we make a bad call – and our plans get all messed up.
- We work too hard, and we alienate or we lose our family – and realize later how stupid that was. Our dreams are shattered.
- Or we play too hard, and we neglect our family – stupid, we realize too late.
- We decide to blow off our classes, and later we usually regret it.
- You marry him before you really know him – and find out later, that was stupid. That’ll change your life!
- We take a job because we are impatient, sometimes; or we quit a job because we are mad – dumb. Stupid can change a life.

But sometimes it is neither sin, nor stupid, sometimes *(snake)* it’s just because we live in a broken world. Sometimes there really is no one to blame, we just live in a hard world where hard things happen that mess up
our lives. Some of you guys think these things are evil, but they’re really not. They are just part of our world, trying protect themselves, trying to eat.

- But sometimes in this world we get bitten by snakes – and that can mess up your plans, that can change your life.
- Sometimes we get sick.
- Sometimes there are tornadoes that mess up our life, or floods, droughts, or fires that mess up our plans.

They are not evil, they are not stupid, they just happen. Men plan, and God laughs… Why do you suppose God lets this stuff happen? Why does he let evil people mess up your life? Why doesn’t he protect us from the bad decisions we make? Why doesn’t he protect his own from snakebites, and disease, and other “natural” disasters? …

By the way, I told you we are going find four different ways our plans get messed up, and that if you live long enough, you’ll experience all four. Sometimes it is sin, sometimes it is stupid, sometimes it is just living in a broken world, but sometimes … sometimes it is God, it is the Holy Spirit, it is the Wild Goose who messes up our plans. Sometimes he is a master choreographer. He can set things up, he can open doors he can slam doors shut, he can use people, he can use all kinds of things to put us, not where we planned to go, but where he wants us. My preaching partner, Randy, thinks God sent that storm to get Paul to Malta, because once he was there he introduced them to Jesus. I kind of doubt God sent the storm; but I think God used it. Randy thinks God sent the snake to bite Paul, to open a door for Paul’s preaching. It did! I kind of doubt God sent the snake (I’m a bit cynical about stuff like that), but I think the Wild Goose used that snake bite to open some doors.

- Listen, guys: God has never caused any of the evil in your life. He didn’t cause evil men to fire you, or abuse you, or lie about you. God doesn’t cause evil. But he can use their evil for his purposes. He can use bad things people do to us to do his work in us, and through us.
- God never causes stupid. I don’t think the Wild Goose has ever nudged you to make a stupid financial decision, or a stupid relational decision, or a stupid work decision. God doesn’t cause stupid. But he can use our stupid decisions for his purposes. He can use them to do his work in us, and through us.
• I think God rarely causes the “natural calamities” we face in our world. He can. He can brew up a storm if he wants, he can send a snake if he wants, he can make us sick to get our attention. But I don’t think that’s normal. Most of the time calamities just happen. But God can use them for his purposes. He can use them to do his work in us, and through us.

Here’s the deal, guys: we plan, and our plans get messed up. We head for a destination we choose, and we run into a ditch, or there is this detour that takes us way away from the path we chose. But listen, every ditch, and every detour can be used by God. Whether you are in the ditch because of evil, whether you are there because of stupid, whether you are there because sometimes life is tough – every ditch, every detour can be used by God. Do you buy that? He’s that smart, he’s that powerful, he’s that good. This Oregon boy, who planned to be an FBI agent, and then who planned and trained to be a Bible professor, never planned to preach at a church in Frankfort, Kentucky, there were some pretty tough detours and some pretty deep ditches along the way, used by God. Randy, my preaching partner, was a great basketball coach, and a great college administrator. He never planned to lead a church in Corydon, Indiana. There were some pretty tough detours and pretty deep ditches along the way. Neither Randy nor I would have ever guessed things would turn out as they have; but looking back, both of us can see the Wild Goose directing our paths. He can take us on quite a ride.

Listen: by the time Paul is shipwrecked and snake-bit, he had already written these words – and he lives them. He says, “We know (we know) that in all things (even in the detours, even in the ditches) God works for the good of those who love him.” (Romans 8.28) In all things, good and bad, in things we plan, and in things we don’t, God works for the good of those who love him. Paul doesn’t say that everything that happens is caused by God. God doesn’t cause sin, and God doesn’t cause stupid. He says, in all things, even in our ditches, even in the detours, even in the messes -- God can and God will work for the good of those who love him.

Think about what God can do with our messes. You see, sometimes he uses these detours to shape us into the people he meant us to be, and sometimes he uses these ditches so we can serve people we wouldn’t have served.
• I don’t think my firing at the college was God-caused. But I think he used it to break my pride, and to teach me a whole lot about grace. I think he used it to grow me up, a bit. He still has a long ways to go. And I think he used it to lead me here. Our God is really good at using our failures for his purposes.

• I don’t think God caused your divorce, or your addiction, or the bankruptcy that resulted from your bad spending habits. But I think he can use them to draw you to him, to grow you up, and to position you so that you can help someone else who is where you were. Because God never wastes a hurt.

• I don’t think God caused your cancer, or your heart disease, or that accident you had. I know, God can cause sickness, but he usually doesn’t. But I think he can use them to draw you to him, and to grow you up, and to put you in a place where you can serve someone else who is struggling – because you’ve been there, and you understand.

Now … unfortunately, these ditches and detours do not always work out for our good. Paul says, “In all things God works for (he works for) the good of those who love him,” but God isn’t always successful. You see, it all depends on how we respond to the chains, and the shipwrecks, and the snakebites. When Paul got thrown in a ditch, he still trusted God, and he looked for whatever doors God might be opening. And God used him on those detours, God used him in those ditches. But I’ve seen Christians knocked in a ditch, and instead of drawing closer to God, they kind of push God away. They get disillusioned with God, or mad at God, and they push God away. I’ve seen Christians get sick, and they push God away. I’ve seen Christians struggle in their marriages, and they get ticked at God. I’ve seen Christians make messes for themselves with bad financial decisions, or bad relational decisions, or bad career decisions, and then they get frustrated when God doesn’t fix their mess, their way. Guys, in all things God will be working for the good of those who love him, but we have to cooperate. We have to keep trusting him. And we have to look for what he’s doing in us. And we have to look for how he’s wanting to use us.

And if you think about it, God deserves that kind of trust. Have you ever looked back at the tough times in your life and reflected on how God really was there for you? Have you ever thought about some of the times when your plans were all messed up, but God opened a door for you meet someone you wouldn’t have met, or do something you wouldn’t have done?
Have you ever reflected on the fact that often it is the hardest times we have been through that have shaped us the most, that have toughened us the most, that have helped us to appreciate life the most? A death in the family, a serious illness, a firing, a broken relationship, a bankruptcy – God can do some of his most dazzling work in the middle of our messes, guys, if we trust him.

I know this will make a few of you a little uncomfortable, but I need you to set aside the distractions and I need you to focus. This is between you and God. So close your eyes, and get quiet.

- Can you look back on a really tough time in your life, when your plans were shattered? Can you find a reason now for God allowing that time in your life to happen? As you look back, can you see how he grew you, or how he used you? …
- Think of a “failure” you’ve experienced recently, maybe that you’re going through a mess right now. In the plans of God, can you think about how he might use your mess for his purposes? …
- Can you see the troubles, and the disappointments, and even the surprises of your life changing you, transforming you into the person God wants you to be? If they are not, why not?
- Based on your experience of God in the past, can you trust him with your present, and can you trust him with your future, even if life doesn’t work out quite the way you planned it? …

You can open your eyes if you want. Guys, knowing the kind of God he is, knowing how good he is (and he is perfectly good), knowing how smart he is (and he is a whole lot smarter than we are), knowing how powerful he is (he’s tougher than anything you’ll ever face), knowing how he has been there for you in the past (and he has been); can you trust him with your present, will you trust him with your future? And in the middle of all the detours and ditches, will you look for a door God is opening for you to serve him?