

Forced Choices

Acts 7.59-8.8

FUPC
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Have you ever been forced to make a choice you didn't want to make?

Your car just passed 200,000 miles and you're hoping to keep it for 50,000 more miles because now is a really bad time financially and you're not in a position to buy another car. And then, one day while driving home from work, the red lights on the dashboard light up like its Christmas. And you know its not good. After getting towed to your mechanic's garage... you get the verdict: the repair bill will be twice what the car is worth. What do you do? You're face to face with a forced choice.

You show up for work and notice that everyone is acting a little strange toward you, like they know something you don't know. Your Supervisor stops by to ask if he could talk with you privately. He tells you that the company is downsizing and they have to let four people go... and you're one of them. Clean out your desk. Friday will be your last day. Now what? You're face to face with a forced choice.

We've all faced them – disappointments, accidents, illnesses, injuries, failures, being in the wrong place at the wrong time, leaks in the roof, and water damage to kitchen cupboards. An aging parent who falls and now needs constant care. These are things we hadn't counted on or planned for. These are the budget busting experiences that set us back and push us to the edge of our resources and faith.

We're headed in one direction, confident and hopeful, and suddenly we find ourselves in the midst of a storm that threatens our security, changes our plans, and puts everything we count on up for grabs. It happens to all of us!

It happened to the early church. Those first Christians living in Jerusalem were forced to make some painful choices that they weren't prepared for and wished they could put off. Before Jesus left them he gave them a vision and an assignment. Its found in Acts 1.8 ***“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”***

On the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit did come upon them and they left that upper room filled with miraculous courage and passion telling the good news of God's love through Jesus who had just been crucified. But he came to life again and was calling all people everywhere to a new relationship with God.

The church exploded. Three thousand people on that first day alone. Two thousand more people a few days later. And as the church grew, it attracted all kinds of people who were living on the edge...the sick, the terminally ill, widows and orphans. It was too much for the 12 apostles to manage and care for. They decided to choose seven devout men whose mission would be to arrange for the care of those who were especially needy. These were the first Deacons – men set apart for service to others. One of these men was Stephen. Chapters 6 and 7 of Acts tells his story.

Try to put yourself inside the mind of this Jerusalem church and feel what's going on. This is their home. They're familiar with neighbors, the people they buy supplies from, the people they work with. Their aging parents are here. They have homes and vested interests in this community and they have no intention of leaving. Why should they? They're secure, comfortable, everything's familiar and life is predictable. Yes, Jesus said that they were to carry the gospel to Judea and Samaria, and from there

to the rest of the world. “But that wasn’t meant for us, was it? Surely someone else can do that mission.”

As successful as they were, with thousands of people becoming followers of Jesus and being baptized... for all that, they were stuck. They weren’t going anywhere. And they had organized themselves to take care of everyone’s needs. The 12 apostles would preach and do bible studies and take care of the “spiritual” needs of this mega-church. And the 7 deacons would take care of the practical issues of the organization, clothing, food, shelter, and protection for the widows and orphans. They were doing a great job. But they were stuck!

Until something happened that forced them to make some different choices. Stephen, one of the seven deacons, was an amazing leader, full of the power of the Spirit. And the religious leaders of the day could see how he was making them look bad. So someone came up with an accusation that he was preaching blasphemy against God and he was brought before the Sanhedrin, the Jewish religious authorities. His defense was a long sermon in which he told the story of God’s love for Israel and all humankind beginning with Abraham. And it ended with him calling his accusers “stiff-necked” and “betrayers of God” and “murderers” of God’s Son Jesus.

At this, the court erupted in a pandemonium of outrage and hatred toward Stephen. They dragged him out of the court and into the street where they began to stone him. It was an immediate and relentless judgment to shut him up by killing him... and yet in that experience, Scripture says that Stephen saw heaven opened and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. All the stone throwers took off their heavy outer tunics and gave them to a young man to hold. His name was Saul and he looked on with relish to see this unworthy blaspheming Christian die the death he surely deserved. And then we read this. *On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went.*

It was a forced choice experience. The Christians could stay in Jerusalem and face the prospect of being stone to death just because of their loyalty and faith in Jesus. Or they could leave, escape with what they could carry and find a safer place to live. They scattered to Judea and Samaria. Jerusalem was no longer safe. Circumstances made the decision for them. What they were not able or willing to do freely came about as the result of a forced choice.

The result? The church was established wherever they went. One of those places was Antioch. And in Acts 13, Saul has become Paul and gone through his own conversion and transformation into a Christian missionary. That Antioch church sends Paul and Barnabas on the first mission trip to Asia Minor and eventually to Rome. What Jesus had charged them to do, they finally ended up doing. *“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”*

With all that as a background, let’s take a quick look at the forced choices we bang up against in our lives. **First thing I notice** is that forced choices almost invariably come as a surprise. We’re hardly ever prepared with a contingency plan... plan B. The cartoon on the cover of our bulletin says it all very eloquently I think.

Second thing I notice is that the choices we make are not necessarily ones we’d have made without being forced to make them. We may consider them as “plan B” – or think of them as selling out, or a compromise, or settling.

Third thing I notice is that the outcome of many of our forced choices is often a greater sense of happiness or satisfaction, or freedom or accomplishment than we could have otherwise known. Failure becomes the doorway through which we walk only to find that we're stronger than we imagined, we can accomplish more than we ever dreamed, and opportunities that come our way are beyond what we thought possible. Sometimes, having to leave behind what IS enables us to embrace a new reality that just blows our mind. And then we look back and wonder why we were so afraid, reluctant and stubborn in facing changes in our life that put us on a mountain top of joyful fulfillment and abundance.

Sometimes, God's handwriting is all over the forced choices of our lives, helping us to move beyond our comfort zones into deeper waters, riskier choices and new possibilities that open the doorway to greater blessing than we thought possible. Sometimes, a forced choice is God's way of saying "I have a better plan. Trust me. Don't be afraid." Change is inevitable. Growth is always a choice.

You may be facing a forced change today that you didn't expect and would not have chosen. I give you this blessing: May God lead you into a wider, more spacious, more abundant, and beautiful place than you could have ever dreamed up yourself. Amen.