

King Uzziah

Tonight we are going to continue our study of obscure Bible stories. This time we are going to talk about one of the least famous kings of Judah: the righteous King Uzziah.

After the reign of King Solomon, God divided the nation of Israel into two parts. The tribes of Judah and Benjamin were given to the line of David, and David's descendents reigned over them. Since Benjamin was a very small tribe, this kingdom eventually became known as simply Judah. The rest of the tribes were given to other men to reign, and became known as Israel. Sadly, Israel never had any righteous kings: every single one of their rulers was wicked. But Judah was a different story. Some of Judah's kings were wicked, and some of them were righteous. You never really knew what you were going to get from one generation to the next.

Uzziah's father, Amaziah, is a great example. 2 Chronicles 25 tells us that Amaziah started out his reign as a righteous, God-fearing king. However, one day God gave Amaziah victory over the Edomites. After this amazing victory, Amaziah took the idols of the Edomites back with him to Judah and began to worship them:

2 Chronicles 25:14: “Now it came to pass, after that Amaziah was come from the slaughter of the Edomites, that he brought the gods of the children of Seir, and set them up to be his gods, and bowed down himself before them, and burned incense unto them.”

Keep in mind that Amaziah had been a servant of the Lord. Yet, as soon as he saw these idols he departed from God and became an idolater. He did this in spite of the fact that God just gave him an amazing victory over the Edomites! That victory alone should have taught him that the Lord was stronger than the false idols of the Edomites, and yet he did not learn that lesson. Amaziah decided to abandon the God who had given him an incredible victory, and instead worship some idols that were unable to save the people of Edom.

Needless to say, God was not happy about this. The Lord turned him over to his enemies:

2 Chronicles 25:20: “But Amaziah would not hear; for it came of God, that he might deliver them into the hand of their enemies, because they sought after the gods of Edom.”

Amaziah then launched a disastrous attack against Israel. He lost badly. In fact, he lost *really* badly:

2 Chronicles 25:22: “And Judah was put to the worse before Israel, and they fled every man to his tent.

23 And Joash the king of Israel took Amaziah king of Judah, the son of Joash, the son of Jehoahaz, at Bethshemesh, and brought him to Jerusalem, and brake down the wall of Jerusalem from the gate of Ephraim to the corner gate, four hundred cubits.

24 And he took all the gold and the silver, and all the vessels that were found in the house of God with Obbededom, and the treasures of the king's house, the hostages also, and returned to Samaria.”

This was a terrible defeat. A large portion of the wall protecting Jerusalem was broken down – which, in those days, meant that the city was now vulnerable to attack and easy prey for other nations. The treasures of the temple were stolen, the king's wealth was taken, and even hostages were taken as well. Amaziah lost badly. His false gods – his worthless idols, which he had taken from the Edomites – were not able to save him from defeat at the hand of the king of Israel.

As you can imagine, this loss did not go over very well among the people of Judah. A conspiracy arose against the king, and Amaziah was assassinated:

2 Chronicles 25:27: “Now after the time that Amaziah did turn away from following the Lord they made a conspiracy against him in Jerusalem; and he fled to Lachish: but they sent to Lachish after him, and slew him there.”

As you can see, Amaziah's decision to turn from the Lord to worship idols did not turn out very well for him. This was the legacy that Uzziah was faced with: his father was an idolater who brought ruin upon the nation. Uzziah was given a city that was weak and vulnerable and a treasury that had been looted. On top of that, Uzziah became king when he was just 16 years old:

2 Chronicles 26:1: “Then all the people of Judah took Uzziah, who was sixteen years old, and made him king in the room of his father Amaziah.”

Imagine a sixteen-year-old kid reigning over an entire nation. That is the situation Judah was faced with.

So what kind of king did Uzziah become? Well, as we will see, Uzziah made some good decisions and some bad decisions. This man reigned over Judah for an astonishing 52 years:

2 Chronicles 26:3: “Sixteen years old was Uzziah when he began to reign, and he reigned fifty and two years in Jerusalem. His mother's name also was Jecoliah of Jerusalem.”

Unlike his father, Uzziah was not an idolater. He served the Lord:

2 Chronicles 26:4: “And he did that which was right in the sight of the Lord, according to all that his father Amaziah did.”

Uzziah did not serve the worthless idols of the Edomites. His reign started well – but as we will see, it ended poorly. Uzziah served the Lord during the ministry of the prophet Zechariah:

2 Chronicles 26:5: “And he sought God in the days of Zechariah, who had understanding in the visions of God: and as long as he sought the Lord, God made him to prosper.”

Now, this is not the same person who wrote the book Zechariah. That book was written during the reign of King Darius (Zechariah 1:1), who was king over Babylon while the people of Judah were in exile there. Uzziah was king long before the time of the exile. Although this Zechariah had an understanding of visions, he is an altogether different Zechariah.

This verse tells us that while Zechariah was alive and carrying out his ministry, Uzziah served

the Lord. It seems that Uzziah needed someone to lead him – he would only be good if someone was standing over him. Once Zechariah was gone, though, Uzziah got into a lot of trouble. Uzziah is not the only king who had this particular problem. After the time of Uzziah, a man named Jehoash reigned over Judah. He also did what was right – but only during the lifetime of Jehoiada the priest:

2 Kings 12:2: “And Jehoash did that which was right in the sight of the Lord all his days wherein Jehoiada the priest instructed him.”

Jehoiada lived for a long time, but eventually he died:

2 Chronicles 24:15: “But Jehoiada waxed old, and was full of days when he died; an hundred and thirty years old was he when he died.”

A hundred and thirty years old is a pretty long life! Jehoash had plenty of time to learn how to be a good and righteous king, but yet as soon as Jehoiada died Jehoash went bad. He abandoned the worship of God and began to serve idols:

2 Chronicles 24:17: “Now after the death of Jehoiada came the princes of Judah, and made obeisance to the king. Then the king hearkened unto them.

18 And they left the house of the Lord God of their fathers, and served groves and idols; and wrath came upon Judah and Jerusalem for this their trespass.”

The Lord used another Zechariah, the son of righteous Jehoiada, to tell the king that his idolatry was wrong. In response the king had him *killed*:

2 Chronicles 24:21: “And they conspired against him, and stoned him with stones at the commandment of the king in the court of the house of the Lord.”

Not only did the king put to death the son of his lifelong friend and mentor, but Zechariah was murdered *in the temple*. Jehoash was only willing to serve the Lord as long as his mentor was standing over his shoulder. As soon as that mentor was gone, Jehoash began worshiping idols and killing people. The king would only be good as long as there was someone around making him be good. Once that person was gone, his true nature emerged and became obvious to everyone.

There are some people who are like that. They will be good as long as someone is making them be good. They will do the right thing as long as certain people are watching. But if they are left to their own devices, they will do what they really wanted to do all along. Their religion is just a show that they put on for the benefit of other people. It isn't genuine and it isn't who they truly are. It's just an act.

Uzziah served the Lord during the days of Zechariah – and when Uzziah served the Lord, the Lord blessed him. When Uzziah began his reign Jerusalem was in tatters – but since he served God, the Lord blessed him. Uzziah was not only able to defeat the Philistines, but he actually built cities in their territory:

2 Chronicles 26:6: “And he went forth and warred against the Philistines, and brake down the wall of Gath, and the wall of Jabneh, and the wall of Ashdod, and built cities about Ashdod, and among the Philistines.”

The protective walls that surrounded key Philistine cities were destroyed. The Philistines were so humbled that Uzziah was able to build Jewish cities in their midst. God gave him victory over the Philistines, and over other nations as well:

2 Chronicles 26:7: “And God helped him against the Philistines, and against the Arabians that dwelt in Gurbaal, and the Mehunims.

8 And the Ammonites gave gifts to Uzziah: and his name spread abroad even to the entering in of Egypt; for he strengthened himself exceedingly.”

As long as Uzziah served the Lord, God watched over him. God gave him victory after victory. God strengthened his nation and protected him in battle. God even gave him a great name – verse 8 tells us that the king became famous. As long as Uzziah honored the Lord, the Lord honored him.

Uzziah repaired the breaches in the wall around Jerusalem. In fact, he went further to strengthen Jerusalem's defenses even more than they had been originally:

2 Chronicles 26:9: “Moreover Uzziah built towers in Jerusalem at the corner gate, and at the valley gate, and at the turning of the wall, and fortified them.”

Not only was Uzziah a strong king, but he was a rich king as well. As long as he served the Lord, God blessed him with great wealth:

2 Chronicles 26:10: “Also he built towers in the desert, and digged many wells: for he had much cattle, both in the low country, and in the plains: husbandmen also, and vine dressers in the mountains, and in Carmel: for he loved husbandry.”

As you can see, God blessed Uzziah *tremendously*. God blessed his military might. God blessed his wealth. God blessed his reputation. As long as Uzziah sought the Lord and did what was right, God blessed him on every side.

Now, I am *not* saying that if you serve the Lord then God will bless you with wealth – that is not my point. The disciples were certainly righteous men and yet they led lives of poverty and were eventually executed for their faith. My point is that God blessed Uzziah in amazing ways.

Uzziah had an enormous military:

2 Chronicles 26:13: “And under their hand was an army, three hundred thousand and seven thousand and five hundred, that made war with mighty power, to help the king against the enemy.

The king was so strong that he was able to field an army of 300,000 men. He was so wealthy that he was able to equip this army with weapons and armor:

2 Chronicles 26:14: “And Uzziah prepared for them throughout all the host shields, and spears, and helmets, and habergeons, and bows, and slings to cast stones.”

The king was so clever that he was able to come up with innovative defenses for his city:

2 Chronicles 26:15: “And he made in Jerusalem engines, invented by cunning men,

to be on the towers and upon the bulwarks, to shoot arrows and great stones withal. And his name spread far abroad; for he was marvellously helped, till he was strong.”

Why was Uzziah so successful? Because God blessed him on every side. God blessed his military might, his wealth, and his reputation. Uzziah had it all. As long as Uzziah sought the Lord, the Lord was with him. Uzziah truly lacked nothing.

But then one day Zechariah died, and Uzziah was left to his own devices. Now, the king knew the difference between right from wrong. He knew what it meant to serve the Lord. God had blessed him on every side, and given him incredible power, wealth, and prestige. Yet it was here, at the height of his glory, that Uzziah made the decision that destroyed him.

We saw with Jehoash that as soon as Jehoiada died, the king turned to idols and murder. Once that godly influence was no longer around, the king dove into idolatry and evil. Uzziah did something very similar. Once Zechariah was no longer around to set him straight, Uzziah became proud. Uzziah believed that all the success that he experienced was his own doing. He was not humbled by it, nor did he see it as a rare blessing that God had given to him. Uzziah became so convinced of his own greatness that he did something terrible:

2 Chronicles 26:16: “But when he was strong, his heart was lifted up to his destruction; for he transgressed against the Lord his God, and went into the temple of the Lord to burn incense upon the altar of incense.”

At the height of Uzziah's power and glory he decided to go into the temple and assume the role of a priest. Now, Uzziah was from the tribe of Judah. In order to be a priest you had to be from the tribe of Levi. Uzziah was absolutely *not* allowed to do what he did – and he knew it. The commandment of God was very, very strict. If you weren't a Levite then you couldn't even go into the holy place of the temple, much less burn incense there! God restricted that job to the priests of a single tribe, and no one else was allowed to do it. This was a very well-known commandment and had been in place since the days of Moses.

This was not a minor transgression. God actually *struck people dead* for this sort of sin. At the very beginning of the tabernacle's existence, two of the sons of Aaron decided to commit a sin that was almost identical to Uzziah's. They offered something to God that the Lord had not commanded. The Lord's response was immediate:

Leviticus 10:1: “And Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, took either of them his censer, and put fire therein, and put incense thereon, and offered strange fire before the Lord, which he commanded them not.

2 And there went out fire from the Lord, and devoured them, and they died before the Lord.”

It was actually the *job* of these two priests to offer incense to the Lord – but they did it at a time when God said it should not be done. So God responded by sending fire from Heaven that killed both of those men where they stood. God *killed* them for doing this. What Uzziah was doing was actually worse: not only was he offering strange fire before the Lord, but he was doing it *in spite of the fact that he was not a priest*.

Uzziah knew that he was not supposed to be doing this, but he decided to do it anyway. Uzziah

was so convinced of his greatness that he thought he could get away with anything. He coveted the role of a priest and decided that he was going to take it for himself. After all, he was the king. He had served God faithfully. Why, God needed him! He had done all sorts of great things for Judah. God surely owed him this, right?

There are some Christians who commit this same sin. When God blesses them and they become great, they start thinking that they are better than everyone else. They think that they can get away with things – that if they transgress the law of God, it's really not that big a deal. After all, look at all the good they've done! Look at all the ways they've served the Lord. They have a “right” to commit this sin – they've earned it. All the good they've done balances out this little bit of evil. God would never judge them for it because they're such pillars of the church. God *needs* them. Besides, God loves them and will forgive them for what they've done.

But God will not be mocked. The Lord is utterly impartial. He does not show favoritism – in fact, He does quite the opposite. God's judgments starts at the church, with the people of God. He disciplines those He loves precisely *because* He loves them. When a Christian decides he is so great and mighty that he has a right to sin, that Christian is about to have a very rude awakening. Pride goes before a fall.

God was merciful to Uzziah and gave the king a chance to rethink what he was doing. The brave priests of the temple resisted the king and told him that what he was doing was wrong:

2 Chronicles 26:17: “And Azariah the priest went in after him, and with him fourscore priests of the Lord, that were valiant men:

18 And they withstood Uzziah the king, and said unto him, It appertaineth not unto thee, Uzziah, to burn incense unto the Lord, but to the priests the sons of Aaron, that are consecrated to burn incense: go out of the sanctuary; for thou hast trespassed; neither shall it be for thine honour from the Lord God.”

The priests caught Uzziah in the holy place of the temple – a place he had no right to be. They immediately told him to put down the incense and leave, for he was sinning by just being inside the temple at all. They told him he had no right to offer incense, for only the consecrated sons of Aaron were allowed to do that.

These were very brave priests. It takes a lot of courage to stand up against the king himself – a man who could have them put to death if he wished. These priests stood up to the king and rebuked him. Sadly, the king did not listen to the priests. Instead he became very angry with them – and that is when God punished Uzziah:

2 Chronicles 26:19: “Then Uzziah was wrath, and had a censer in his hand to burn incense: and while he was wrath with the priests, the leprosy even rose up in his forehead before the priests in the house of the Lord, from beside the incense altar.”

God did not kill Uzziah; instead God humiliated him. God struck him with leprosy right where he stood. This changed the king's life dramatically – and not in a good way.

You see, under the Mosaic Law lepers were considered to be unclean. That meant they could not touch anything that was holy. Lepers were not allowed anywhere near the temple. In fact, they weren't even allowed to live with other people! They had to live alone (or with other lepers), because anyone they came into contact with was made unclean. Lepers were shunned and avoided by everyone. They were the outcasts of society.

The consequences of leprosy fell upon Uzziah immediately. As soon as he became a leper he was thrust out of the temple, for his very presence was defiling it:

2 Chronicles 26:20: “And Azariah the chief priest, and all the priests, looked upon him, and, behold, he was leprous in his forehead, and they thrust him out from thence; yea, himself hasted also to go out, because the Lord had smitten him.”

Uzziah was so proud that he thought he could get away with anything. He thought that he could do whatever he wanted, no matter how sinful or wicked it might be, and God would let him get away with it. He thought he was above the law – but he wasn't. He thought the commandments of God didn't apply to him – but they did. He thought that God would show him special consideration because he was such a great guy – but God didn't.

Uzziah was a leper for the rest of his life, and he lost everything. He lost his home, he was never able to go near the temple again, and he even lost his kingship:

2 Chronicles 26:21: “And Uzziah the king was a leper unto the day of his death, and dwelt in a several house, being a leper; for he was cut off from the house of the Lord: and Jotham his son was over the king's house, judging the people of the land.”

Uzziah had it all, and he lost it all. His reputation was gone in an instant. His glory, his strength, his reign – all of it was gone. God humbled him mightily. In one moment Uzziah went from being one of the most respected men of his time, to being an outcast that was avoided by everyone. His pride and disobedience ruined him.

In fact, his leprosy even cost him burial in the tomb of the kings:

2 Chronicles 26:23: “So Uzziah slept with his fathers, and they buried him with his fathers in the field of the burial which belonged to the kings; for they said, He is a leper: and Jotham his son reigned in his stead.”

The kings of Jerusalem were usually buried in the special tomb reserved for the kings – but not Uzziah. Since he was a disgraced leper, he was buried in a field instead. He was not even given a royal burial.

Why did this happen? Because he was convinced that he could get away with anything. He was convinced that he was so great, and such a special child of God, that the rules simply didn't apply to him. He thought that the commandments were for other, less righteous people. He decided that he could get away with it – but he couldn't.

As Moses once told the children of Israel, be sure your sin will find you out. God is not a respecter of persons. He is not going to give you a free pass to sin as you please. Your service to the Lord does not give you the right to be immoral. Uzziah is not the only person who found out, too late, that God is serious and does not tolerate sin from anyone.

The point is simple: do not follow Uzziah down the road to destruction. Things did not turn out well with him – and if we follow his example, they will not turn out well for us either.