

The Puzzle of King Uzziah

FOCUS THOUGHT

God calls us to live a faithful life that ends as it began.

FOCUS VERSE

II 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.

LESSON TEXT

II Kings 15:1–7

1 In the twenty and seventh year of Jeroboam king of Israel began Azariah son of Amaziah king of Judah to reign.

2 Sixteen years old was he when he began to reign, and he reigned two and fifty years in Jerusalem. And his mother's name was Jeholiah of Jerusalem.

3 And he did that which was right in the sight of the LORD, according to all that his father Amaziah had done;

4 Save that the high places were not removed: the people sacrificed and burnt incense still on the high places.

5 And the LORD smote the king, so that he was a leper unto the day of his death, and dwelt in a several house. And Jotham the king's son was over the house, judging the people of the land.

6 And the rest of the acts of Azariah, and all that he did, are they not written in the book of the chronicles of the kings of Judah?

7 So Azariah slept with his fathers; and they buried him with his fathers in the city of David: and Jotham his son reigned in his stead.

II Chronicles 26:3–5

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.

4 And he did that which was right in the sight of the LORD, according to all that his father Amaziah did.

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.



CULTURE CONNECTION

REFILLED WHILE IN A COMA

Dr. Joey Peyton received a call to visit an elderly couple in the hospital. According to the doctors, something rather strange was happening while the man lay in a coma. With his wife in visible distress, the hospital thought Dr. Peyton, being a Pentecostal chaplain, might be the best to handle the situation.

Upon entering the room, Dr. Peyton instantly realized the man, though in a coma, was speaking in tongues. He told the wife that her husband was fine, he was just praying. “He doesn’t pray and hasn’t even attended church in years!” she responded. She became quite angry and said she was no longer interested in any more discussion.

The next day when Dr. Peyton arrived in the room, the man was sitting up in a chair. When asked if he remembered anything from the previous day, he talked of a dream he remembered having. In his dream, he was back at an old brush arbor with his parents and had been refilled with the Holy Ghost.

This man had left his Pentecostal faith when he and his wife decided to get married. He had been raised Pentecostal and she was Catholic. They both walked away from their faiths and decided to attend a different church. She was faithful with the kids, but he could not bring himself to attend.

While on his deathbed and in a coma, he had returned to God and had been refilled with the Holy Ghost. He spent the last few days of his life testifying of what God had done and declaring there was only one way to God.



OUTLINE

I. THE RISE AND FALL OF AZARIAH

- A. Early Success
- B. Final Demise
- C. Almost Succeeding Is the Worst Tragedy

II. PUZZLING PERSPECTIVES

- A. The Reign of Azariah/Uzziah in II Kings
- B. The Reign of Azariah/Uzziah in II Chronicles
- C. Self-Reflection Is Vitally Important

III. FALLEN HEROES—A CALL TO REFLECTION

- A. Humans Not Heroes
- B. Re-Envisioned History
- C. We Must Begin and End Well



CONTEMPLATING THE TOPIC

One sobering reality of our social-media saturated world is that one moment of weakness or one indiscretion can literally ruin a person’s life forever. In its own brutal way, our society is learning that being a good person “most of the time” really does not count for all that much in the end. It is absolutely vital, in this social era where we are daily rocked by scandals from the most unimaginable places, that we as the people of God learn again the importance of faithfulness.

That is the real topic of today’s lesson. How do we ensure that our lives are truly consistent and faithful to God? By looking at the telling and the retelling of the life of King Uzziah in the books of II Kings and II Chronicles, we will explore the scriptural call to faithfulness and the path to developing it.

I. THE RISE AND FALL OF AZARIAH

A. Early Success

Just before the fall of the northern kingdom of Israel to Assyria, the divided nation enjoyed an extended period of surprising prosperity with Jeroboam II reigning in the north and Uzziah/Azariah (essentially variant spellings of the same name) reigning in the south. During this period, Assyria was occupied with internal issues. The more proximate Syrian power, centered in Damascus, had been broken to the point that it never fully recovered. This relative peace and quiet, it seems, reignited both Judah's and Israel's expansionist tendencies. For example, of Jeroboam II's reign, II Kings 14:25 (see also v. 28) declared: "He restored the coast of Israel from the entering of Hamath unto the sea of the plain."

The Chronicler, who presents an expanded account of Uzziah's reign, points out that he largely followed Jeroboam II's example: "And God helped him against the Philistines, and against the Arabians that dwelt in Gurbaal, and the Mehunims. And the Ammonites gave gifts to Uzziah: and his name spread abroad even to the entering in of Egypt" (II Chronicles 26:7–8). With these newly expanded borders, the divided kingdoms' extent nearly matched the extent of the united kingdom under Solomon, which is the acknowledged apex of biblical history, Israel's own "Golden Age." The Chronicler added another clue to the greatness of the era by noting that Uzziah's fame had spread southward to the border of Egypt. This is language similar to that used to describe King David's successes in I Chronicles 14:16–17. For all intents and purposes, it appeared that the "glory days" had returned despite the division of the kingdom.

The Chronicler's expanded recounting divides the description of Uzziah's successes into two sections, dealing with foreign and domestic affairs respectively. Uzziah's foreign expansions represented success in that they served to subjugate long-standing enemies of Judah (e.g., Philistia, Ammon, Arabia). Uzziah's domestic successes include rebuilding and fortifying the city of Jerusalem; abundance of flocks, herds, and crops; and equipping a mighty standing army.

The note in the text about the creation of "engines" (II Chronicles 2:15) that stood upon the towers has intrigued generations of scholars. Many have suggested these may have been a type of catapult; however, catapults appear to have been a later invention and, furthermore, there is no known type of catapult designed for use with both stones and arrows. J. Barton Payne suggests they are better understood as defensive mechanism, a kind of shield "used to cover defending troops as they repelled enemies seeking to scale the walls" (*Expositor's Bible Commentary*).

These two sections are united by the use of the catchword *strong* (Hebrew *hazaq*) in verses 8 and 15. Furthermore, the term appears in close proximity to the word *help* (Hebrew *azar*), referring explicitly here to divine aid and support. Thus, the story of

Uzziah's stunning success, as told by the Chronicler, is a story of divine blessing rather than simply personal achievement.

» *Why is it important for us to recognize our blessings as being from God instead of the result of our intellect and ability alone?*

B. Final Demise

In the Chronicler's record, II Chronicles 26:16 essentially reverses the entire story of Uzziah: "But when he was strong, his heart was lifted up to his destruction." This is the third appearance of the catchword, but this time Uzziah's strength is not the strength of divine favor and blessing; it is the strength of human hubris and pride! Uzziah had perverted the very blessings of God. Instead of acknowledging God as his help—as the One who made Uzziah's success possible—he claimed these blessings as markers of his own personal prowess and ability.

What makes Uzziah's usurpation of divine blessing as personal accomplishment even more brazen is that the Book of Psalms, with its undeniable linkage to the great King David, frequently uses "Help" as a divine title, similar to "Rock" or "Shield" or "Refuge." In fact, the celebratory psalm that inspired Martin Luther's hymn, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God," is built around this metaphor of God as our help. (See Psalm 46:1–3, 5, 10–11.)

Because of Uzziah's pride, he assumed responsibilities forbidden to the king since the establishment of the Israelite monarchy and was struck down as a leper in the Temple of God. Because of his leprosy, he was driven not only out of the Temple precincts but also out of Judean society altogether. He lived the rest of his days in an isolated house ("several house"—KJV). Steven McKenzie points out that this phrase, literally translated "house of separation," has been found in Ugaritic texts, where it is used as a description of the underworld, the abode of the dead (*I–II Chronicles*). In other words, because of his pride, Uzziah became a "walking dead man"!

» *Why do you think it is easy for people to abuse or misuse God's blessings?*

C. Almost Succeeding Is the Worst Tragedy

Uzziah's auspicious beginnings only serve to heighten the sense of tragedy at his dishonorable end. Uzziah had an opportunity to be the "next David," to restore the former glory of the kingdom of Israel. He had everything he needed to be successful: an extended period of international peace, agricultural abundance, renewed access to international trade, and—most important—the blessing and favor of God. Yet, the tagline of Uzziah's life would have to be: "He *almost* succeeded." Even with all those secular benefits and spiritual advantages, Uzziah's life ended in dramatic failure.

II. PUZZLING PERSPECTIVES

A. The Reign of Azariah/Uzziah in II Kings

We may tend to overlook the differences in how the story of King Uzziah's reign is related in the books of II Kings and II Chronicles. As can be seen from this lesson's Scripture text, the Kings account of Uzziah's life is only a brief outline, following the familiar pattern of the so-called "regnal formula." The use of this formula has several important effects on the narrative of Kings. First of all, the regnal formula is introduced after the kingdom is divided into northern and southern realms; by constantly synchronizing the royal history of both kingdoms, the book was subtly emphasizing that, even though Judah and Israel were divided politically, they were still considered together as God's one chosen people. This approach held out hope that one day the divided Kingdom would be reunited.

The most crucial element of the formula is the evaluation of the king's reign, usually given in comparison to King David (for Judean kings) or in comparison to King Jeroboam (for Israelite kings). There is only one criterion for success: faithfulness to God's covenant. Furthermore, there is only one test for such faithfulness: worship of God alone. The writer of Kings positively evaluated Uzziah, saying, "He did that which was right in the sight of the Lord" (II Kings 15:3). But he added a qualification: "Save that the high places were not removed: the people sacrificed and burnt incense still on the high places" (II Kings 15:4). Therefore, the reader is led to understand that though Uzziah was a good king overall, he did not measure up to the faithfulness of the ideal King David.

The only other information provided about the reign of Uzziah is found in verse 5: "And the LORD smote the king, so that he was a leper unto the day of his death." Coming as it does on the heels of what appears to be a positive evaluation of Uzziah's reign, this statement has a shocking effect, especially since there is no explanation offered. Clearly, Uzziah did something that brought about divine displeasure and a judgment of leprosy, but the writer said nothing more.

» *Why is it such a tragic thing to see leaders make such dire mistakes?*

B. The Reign of Azariah/Uzziah in II Chronicles

The writer of Chronicles took a much greater interest in the reign of King Uzziah. In fact, the Chronicler added key pieces of additional information. First, the Chronicler included the fact that Uzziah recovered the port city of Elath, which would have reopened Judah's access to international trade. According to Steven McKenzie, this would have invited the readers to think of Uzziah as a new Solomon (*I-II Chronicles*). Second, the Chronicler acknowledged that Uzziah "sought God," but then immediately qualified that statement to a specific time period "in the days of Zechariah." The statement concludes ominously: "As long as he sought the Lord, God made him to prosper." This recalls the story of King Joash, who, like

Uzziah, also followed God as long as the priest Jehoiada was present to guide him. However, as soon as Jehoiada died, Joash ceased to follow the Lord with all of his heart. (See II Chronicles 24:2, 15–18.)

The final addition is the significant expansion that detailed the sin that caused King Uzziah’s leprosy. In fact, the Chronicler’s preference for the name “Uzziah” (rather than the variant “Azariah”) probably arose from the inclusion of this story, in order to avoid confusion of the king with the high priest, who was also named Azariah (II Chronicles 26:17). Uzziah’s specific infraction was his entering the sacred precincts of the Temple intending to offer incense as a priest. First of all, the list of royal duties given in the Mosaic Covenant (Deuteronomy 17:14–20) granted the king no such priestly right or privilege. Furthermore, Uzziah’s actions here recall both the sins of Saul (II Samuel 13:2–5) and Jeroboam I (I Kings 12:33; 13:1)! However, Uzziah was not judged for offering incense (which he never actually did); he was judged instead because of his prideful spirit.

C. Self-Reflection Is Vitally Important

What is most noticeable in the Chronicler’s story of Uzziah are all the allusions and connections to the stories of other kings who began well but ended badly—Solomon, Saul, Jeroboam I, Joash. In every case, the root problem was a false sense of accomplishment that gave birth to pride and arrogance.

There is a reason Scripture often calls us to seasons of remembrance and reflection, and it certainly is not to bolster our flagging sense of self-worth with a rehearsal of our greatest accomplishments. No, any honest review of our lives would reveal how much we have been undeservedly blessed; our accomplishments are rarely our own. We have often had others help us in crucial ways at key moments and, most certainly, we have been strengthened by the hand of God. The real tragedy of Uzziah’s life is that he simply became another king who “forgot where he came from,” as the old saying has it.

» *What do you do personally to maintain a thankful heart?*

III. FALLEN HEROES—A CALL TO REFLECTION

A. Humans Not Heroes

As this lesson draws to a close, we can draw some key truths from the sobering example of King Uzziah. First, we can be thankful that the story of Uzziah is in the Bible. Perhaps one of the most wonderful things about Scripture is its realism about human nature. The kings of Israel and Judah are no comic-book superheroes or Hollywood movie stars with near-magical superpowers or unbelievable good looks and charm. No, the kings of Israel were real flesh and blood. There is no attempt in either Kings or Chronicles to cover for Uzziah’s sin, but neither do the books ignore the good he accomplished. Both his successes and his failures are there for all to see.

Such honesty lets this story serve as both encouragement and warning. Like Uzziah, if we are faithful to God, we know God will bless us and prosper us in our work for the kingdom of God. If, however, we let our hearts be lifted up with pride—if we ever confuse our blessings as our accomplishments—then we run the risk of a ruinous fall.

B. Re-Envisioned History

The story of Uzziah also demonstrates the importance of revisiting our past, over and over again. Though we cannot date the composition of the books with absolute precision, it is clear that Kings presents to us an “exilic” perspective on Israel’s monarchical history, focused largely on explaining the national tragedy of the Exile. Chronicles comes from a later generation and utilizes a “post-exilic” perspective, focused more on finding patterns of hope and warning in Israel’s national story to inspire and exhort those who are trying to rebuild a fallen nation.

Chronicles, however, is not “revisionist” history; rather it is “re-envisioned” history. As was noted above, the Chronicler did not simply focus on Uzziah’s successes; in fact, he offered a more detailed record of Uzziah’s sin! Clearly, the Chronicler wanted to emphasize the importance of treating the newly-rebuilt Temple with reverence, but it seems he wanted to do something greater. If Israel was to succeed in rebuilding herself as a nation, she must address this nationalized pattern of early success followed by pride and apostasy.

» *What is one thing you wish you could tell your younger self about what it means to live for God successfully?*

C. We Must Begin and End Well

The lessons of faithfulness from the life of Uzziah still apply to us. First of all, the biblical metric for the “good life” is not success but faithfulness. By most external measures that we utilize today, Uzziah’s reign was successful. It was a period of peace and prosperity, there was a strong military, and international trade and commerce revived. It is not enough to simply begin well; we must also end well, maintaining our faithfulness to God.

▶▶ INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

Beryl Markham, the first person to fly the Atlantic solo from east to west, said in her memoir, *West with the Night*: “If a man has any greatness in him, it comes to light, not in one flamboyant hour, but in the ledger of his daily work.” If there is anything to be learned from the life of Uzziah, it is that a lifetime of faithfulness to God always comes down to today’s decisions. The question that faces us is not “Will you be faithful to God *for the rest of your life?*” but “Will be you faithful to God *today?*”