

The Weakness of Strength

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Date: 13 October 2013

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[0 : 0 0] Now we're going to come to our Bible reading, which you'll find today in the Old Testament on page 377. We are looking at the second book of Chronicles, chapter 26.

We'll be taking up the series in Isaiah in the new year and having a run at it, but this is part two of a mini-series.

Part one of it was preached some weeks ago. Not all of you were here, and I'm not flattering myself that those of you who were will remember it. We looked at 1 Chronicles 20, the story of King Jehoshaphat.

Today we're going to look at what in many ways is an opposite and parallel story about one of the very great kings of Judah, late on in the story, who comes to the throne.

So let's read 2 Chronicles 26, and we'll read the whole chapter. And all the people of Judah took Uzziah, who was 16 years old, and made him king instead of his father Amaziah.

[1 : 0 6] Uzziah built Eloth and restored it to Judah after the king slept with his fathers. Uzziah was 16 years old when he began to reign, and he reigned 52 years in Jerusalem.

His mother's name was Jechaliah of Jerusalem, and he did what was right in the eyes of the Lord. According to all that his father Amaziah had done.

He set himself to seek God in the days of Zechariah, who instructed him in the fear of God. And as long as he sought the Lord, God made him prosper, God made him strong.

He went out and made war against the Philistines, broke through the wall of Gath, and the wall of Jabni, and the wall of Ashdod. And he built cities in the territory of Ashdod, and elsewhere among the Philistines.

God helped him against the Philistines, and against the Arabians who lived in Gorbahal, and against the Mayunites. The Ammonites paid tribute to Uzziah, and his fame spread even to the border of Egypt, for he became very strong.

[2 : 1 2] Moreover, Uzziah built towers in Jerusalem at the corner gate, and at the valley gate, and at the angle, and fortified them. And he built towers in the wilderness, and cut out many cisterns, for he had large herds, both in the Shephelah and in the plain.

And he had farmers and bind dressers in the hills and in the fertile lands, for he loved the soil. Moreover, Uzziah had an army of soldiers fit for war in divisions, according to the numbers in the muster made by Gile the secretary, and Messiah the officer, under the direction of Hananiah, one of the king's commanders.

The whole number of the heads of father's houses of mighty men of valor was 2,600. Under their command was an army of 307,500, who could make war with mighty power to help the king against the enemy.

And Uzziah prepared for all the army shields, spears, helmets, coats of mail, bows, and stones for slinging. In Jerusalem he made engines, invented by skillful men, to be on the towers and the corners, to shoot arrows and great stones.

And his fame spread far, for he was marvelously helped till he became strong. But when he was strong, he grew proud to his destruction, for he was unfaithful to the Lord his God, and entered the temple of the Lord to burn incense on the altar of incense.

[3 : 50] But Azariah the priest went in after him, with eighty priests of the Lord, who were men of valor. And they withstood King Uzziah and said to him, It is not for you, Uzziah, to burn incense to the Lord, but for the priests, the sons of Aaron, who are consecrated to burn incense.

Go out of the sanctuary, for you have done wrong, and it will bring you no honor from the Lord God. Then Uzziah was angry. Now he had a censer in his hand to burn incense, and when he became angry with the priests, leprosy broke out on his forehead, in the presence of the priests, in the house of the Lord, by the altar of incense.

And Azariah the chief priests and all the priests looked at him, and behold, he was leprous in his forehead. And they rushed him out quickly, and he himself hurried to go out, because the Lord had struck him.

King Uzziah was a leper to the day of his death, and being a leper, lived in a separate house, for he was excluded from the house of the Lord. And Jotham his son was over the king's household, governing the people of the land.

Now the rest of the acts of Uzziah from first to last, Isaiah the prophet, the son of Amoz, wrote, And Uzziah slept with his fathers, and they buried him with his fathers in the burial field that belonged to the kings.

[5 : 07] For they said, He is a leper. And Jotham his son reigned in his place. Amen. This is the word of the Lord. Now, if you could please turn again to page 377 to 2 Chronicles 26, and we'll have a moment of prayer and ask the Lord's help as we come to this passage.

Amen. And God our Father, as we read the story of this ancient king, we pray that we may not simply regard it as a historical account, but we may indeed find in it what the Holy Spirit is saying to us today.

So we ask indeed that that gracious Holy Spirit will come and enlighten our minds and warm our hearts. And he will take my human words in all their weakness, and use them faithfully to unfold the written word.

And so lead us to the living word, Christ Jesus, in whose name we pray. Amen. Some of you may remember the television program after they were famous.

I think it was on about the 1990s. And this was tracing the story of people who had achieved stardom very early, stardom perhaps on the stage, on the screen, or in the sporting world, maybe while they were still in their teens.

[6 : 48] And these programs followed the lives of some of those people who were now in their 30s and 40s. They had faded out of sight. They were no longer famous, hence the name, hence the title, after they were famous.

Now, in some cases, of course, they had simply returned to ordinary life. They had had that moment of glory and then simply returned back to ordinary living. But in others, there were sad stories of drugs, of alcoholism, of people going completely off the rails, being incapable of coping with that early fame.

And in all the cases, there was a sense of unrealized potential. They had done so well. They had begun so well. And yet, their lives had petered out. Now, this chapter we've read has that effect.

It is a melancholy chapter. A man who began outstandingly well. I mean, the story of his reign, as we'll see, is quite impressive, but ended in failure and disaster.

Both his father, Amaziah, and his grandfather, Joash, had similar patterns in their lives, although their success was not so spectacular as Uzziah's.

[8 : 02] His father, in fact, had been taken hostage to the northern kingdom and eventually assassinated by his own people. In verses 1 and 2, Uzziah came to the throne probably while his father was still a hostage in the north.

And in an early sign of leadership, he retakes the coastal port of Eloth, which is still, of course, the resort of Eloth on the Red Sea.

A very famous place. Solomon had built copper and silver mines there. So, very early on, he shows this, if you like, this star quality. This is going to be a vigorous, powerful leader.

Now, some weeks ago, we looked at a parallel story, as already mentioned. The story of his great-great-great-grandfather, Jehoshaphat. This is in 2 Chronicles chapter 20, if you like, to read it later, because these two chapters are very clearly parallels, very clearly contrasting.

Now, the difference between him and Uzziah and Jehoshaphat is that Uzziah is a strong man. Uzziah is a powerful, vigorous, effective leader.

[9 : 13] Jehoshaphat was essentially a weak man, well-meaning, kindly, but a man who found it impossible to say no. And yet, when he faced a great crisis, when an enormous army came against him, he did not fail because he trusted in the Lord.

The words that he prayed was, We have no strength, but our eyes are on you. So, in that story, the story of Jehoshaphat, we have the strength of weakness.

This story is the weakness of strength. Three times in the passage, verses 8, 15, and 16, the word strong is used of Uzziah.

And indeed, there are other words, like the end of verse 5, The Lord God made him prosper, literally translated, made him greater than ever. This is a strong man.

That's what his name means. Uzziah means, The Lord, Yahweh, is my strength. But the key is the chilling phrase, the end of verse 15. He was marvelously helped until he became strong, until he was strong.

[10 : 26] Now, clearly, the chapter falls into two parts, and we're going to take this as our two main points today. Verses 1 and 2, I see the introduction, how he comes to the throne and shows early military success.

The first part, verses 3 to 15, we're going to call greatly helped. Uzziah was greatly, or we can use the phrase from the text itself, he was marvelously helped.

Now, make no mistake about this. This man was a great leader, and his faith was genuine enough. So let's say a word or two about his faith.

There are really two elements of emphasis here. One is on his inner life, if you like, his faith. The other is on his outward accomplishments, the things he did in both the military and in the economic sphere.

So first of all, he had a genuine faith. Verse 5, he set himself to seek the Lord, to seek God. He set himself to seek God.

[11 : 30] This word set himself means he made a deliberate, disciplined attempt to seek God. This is something that's later said of one of the best of all the kings, as Josiah, who is told in chapter 34.

While he was still young, he began to seek the God of his father. Young people, that's a great model to follow in the early days of your lives, with your whole lives before you, beginning to seek the Lord, and in the grace of God, a whole life to give to him.

But there are warning bells ringing. If that were all that was said, because, after all, the two parts of the chapter are so contrasting, we have to find out hints of what's gone wrong in the first part.

After all, you don't go to bed one night, walking with God, and waken up the next morning, more or less having lost your faith. It's always a gradual process, a whittling away, a drip, a kind of drip of water that wears away a stone.

And there are two things that are said here. Verse 4, he did what was right. It says, Josiah did what was right in the eyes of the Lord, according to all that his father Amaziah had done.

[12 : 48] Well, if you just glance back a page, 25 verse 2, we are told that Amaziah did what was right in the eyes of the Lord, yet not with a whole heart.

Amaziah had divided loyalties. Amaziah ended in failure. Uzziah, his son, also served the Lord with divided loyalties and ended up in failure.

You see, you've got this succession of kings, Joash, Amaziah, and Uzziah. They've got great qualities, but they end up in failure because their hearts are divided.

You see, God doesn't want another Amaziah. God wants another David, someone who with all his flaws and technicolor sins has an undivided heart towards the Lord.

It's said of David in 1 Kings 11, in contrast to his son Solomon, we are told Solomon's heart was not wholly true to the Lord as the heart of David his father had been.

[13 : 59] David did not have divided loyalties. Now, remember, I mentioned David deliberately because David sinned spectacularly.

David got it wrong in a way that's almost unthinkable, and yet his heart remained loyal to the Lord. Back in 1 Samuel 16, when the story of David begins, we are told the Lord looks on the heart.

Look on the outward appearance, the outward potential, the gifts and talents, the external ones. The Lord looks on the heart. You see, we can never follow God perfectly, but by his grace, we can serve him acceptably.

You see, the whole essence of covenant, the covenant that God made with his people, was that he was married to his people, that they were not to run after other gods and so on.

So that's the first thing. He served the Lord according to what his father had done. In other words, he was double-hearted, double-minded. And the other thing, in verse 5, he set himself to seek God.

[15 : 11] In the days of Zechariah are all the days of Zechariah who instructed him in the fear of God. This Zechariah is not the prophet whose book appears much later in the Old Testament.

It was a common name, but it is obvious Uzziah's mentor and teacher who had instructed him in the fear of God. The fear of God, which, as the book of Proverbs says, is the beginning of wisdom.

And his student had benefited from his teaching because he sought God in the days of Zechariah. Isn't there a problem here? Obviously, we need teachers.

We need mentors. We need examples. What happens when they move on? What happens when they're not there anymore? The strong hint here is that Uzziah had a second-hand element to his faith.

He was relying on the faith of his teacher, of his mentor. And that all was going to lead to disaster after the mentor, after the teacher has gone.

[16 : 13] So he had genuine faith, but it was a half-hearted faith, and it was a faith that depended on his teacher. That's his inner life, if you like.

But also, in the rest of this section, 6 to 15, he has genuine achievements. He is a man of vision. And the author is drawing attention to how this reign was a special one.

In the reign of Uzziah, it was almost as if the great days of David and Solomon were happening again. His military exploits reflect David.

He went out, in verse 6, he went out and made war against the Philistines. That was one of the great and notable achievements of David dealing with the Philistine threat. It was long after David's reign that the Philistines emerged again.

He had so severely crippled them and other old enemies. Now, this is a very important thing for a leader. He was genuinely fighting the enemies of his people.

[17 : 20] That's always very important for a leader in God's people at any time. After all, Jesus tells us in John 10 that the true leader not only feeds the sheep, the true leader fights the wolf.

Not much point feeding the sheep if you're going to let the wolves attack them, after all. And that's so important. You see, the hired hand will feed the sheep if the pay is good enough.

Well, one thing the hired hand will not do is fight the wolf. So this king, genuinely fighting the wolf, building up defenses, the 11 to 15 army of soldiers fit for war, prepared them, all the army shields and so on, made engines, invented by skillful men.

His fame spread far. In other words, people respected him. He was a military leader. He was a great king who was respected. So the days of David, in a sense, are being replayed.

But also the days of Solomon. Verse 10, he built towers in the wilderness, cut out many cisterns, so he had large hairs, both on the Shephala and the plain, and he had farmers and bind dressers in the hills and the fertile lands.

[18 : 27] This little phrase, he loved the soil. He genuinely loved the countryside. He wanted it to be beautiful. Now, if you read 1 Kings 4, you'll find that the last time this is talked about was in the days of Solomon.

I think you've got to remember this, that these, in the Old Testament, when you get glimpses of peace and prosperity, when you get a nation who are satisfied, when you get a nation who are, whose life is developing in this way, this is a genuine glimpse of the new creation.

It really is. It's in the reign of this king. Something of the promise to the patriarchs, remember Abraham promised the land, Moses, the land flowing with milk and honey.

This is actually happening. And that always looks back to Eden and forward to the new creation. Now, I don't mean by that, that people in Uzziah's reign were singing, crowning him with many crowns.

What I mean is that it was a genuine glimpse of the new creation. A genuine sign, a genuine trailer, if you like, of the main film. Now, all this is commendable, all this is inspiring.

[19 : 40] A man of real faith, a man of real vision, a military leader, an economic supremo as well. The strong suggestion here is that he was almost the ideal king.

So, what went wrong? Why did it all end in tears? And we come then to this chilling phrase, he was marvelously helped until he became strong.

He was marvelously helped until he started trusting in his own strength. Until he began to look at his achievements and see himself as the author of those achievements.

Until he began to boast. So, if we've had wonderfully helped for the first part, verses 1 to 15, I'm going to call the second main point, sadly disqualified, verses 16 to 23.

He had been greatly blessed. Verse 5, God made him prosper. Verse 7, God, God helped him. Verse 8, he became very strong.

[20 : 49] And of course, the verse we've just read, he was marvelously helped. Now, this is important that we don't trap this in the past and see it's just something that happened to an ancient king.

When God helps us, whether it's in our church lives or our individual lives, we need to remember that is what it is. It is the blessing of the Lord.

It's not our own achievements. And in our evangelical culture, there's developed a dangerous celebrity mentality. A dangerous sense that we are really doing rather well, that the Lord must be rather pleased with us.

There is so much bragging in our evangelical culture. And if you don't believe me, just go on to Facebook. No one ever preaches a bad sermon on Facebook.

No one ever has a church that is declining. No one ever does anything without being blessed. You look at conferences being advertised, then you discover it's being advertised by the guys who are speaking at them.

[22 : 03] That is dangerous. Very, very dangerous. And we begin to think in those terms. It was marvelously helped until they became strong.

Talking endlessly about ourselves and our achievements. I loved something in one of Carol Truman's blogs when he said, he advertised a conference and said, I think you should go to this.

You'll never have heard of any of the preachers. So that means it will probably be good. Now, I can understand what the man means. The self-promotion that goes on.

You know, it used to be regarded a normal part of growing up that we stopped telling stories about ourselves and how successful we were and how good we are. It's dangerous.

We need continually to remember that we are only servants. And if we are blessed, it is blessing. None of our ministries, none of our work, this side of glory, is all that impressive.

[23 : 11] When we stand in glory and look around at some famous guru who is also there, why will he be there? Exactly the same reason as you and me.

Because of the grace of God. Won't be there because he's been a celebrity or been a superstar. There by grace. Only by grace can we enter.

Only by grace can we stand. So, what happens to Uzziah here is a chilling example of what happens when we become strong.

First of all, he flagrantly disregarded God's holiness. Verse 16, he was unfaithful to the Lord, his God, and entered the temple of the Lord to burn incense on the altar of incense.

In other words, Uzziah becomes so strong, he thinks now that he can manipulate the Lord's work as well. Now, the book of Exodus and the book of Numbers laid it down that it was to be the sons of Aaron who served in the holy places.

[24 : 16] And that was an object lesson to people of the holiness of God. Surely no accident in the passage we read at the beginning from Isaiah chapter 6 in the year that King Uzziah died, that Isaiah heard the worship of the seraphim, holy, holy, holy, is Yahweh of hosts.

And the impressive thing about that chapter, if you read on from that verse, although Isaiah is overwhelmed by this titanic vision of God who is enthroned far above the heavens, it's not so much his smallness, it's his sinfulness, his unholiness that strikes him.

And throughout the scriptures, there are warnings not to trifle with holiness. You see, Uzziah treated the temple as if it were his property.

That is the problem. And that was what led to the tragic downfall of his great ancestor Solomon as well. Solomon built the temple and in his great days he dedicated it to the Lord with acknowledgement the Lord was far greater than him.

The heavens of heaven cannot continue, much less this house that I have built. But before he ended his life, he was building temples to false gods because he began to treat the Lord as his tenant rather than as his master.

[25 : 45] He ignored, in other words, the divine law given by Moses. He thought he knew better. He rushed into this and behaved foolishly.

Now the thing to notice is that he could have repented and been forgiven because the priest very boldly, verse 18, it is not for you, Uzziah, to burn incense to the Lord for the priests, the sons of Aaron, go out of the sanctuary.

He'll bring no honor to the Lord our God. It's only when he becomes furious and angry that the Lord judges him. leprosy may not be the absolute disease.

Leprosy can mean a very deadly skin disease, but whatever it was, it was going to disqualify him. Now I said earlier on, particularly to young people here, Uzziah is such a great model, set himself when he was young to seek for the Lord.

This is a sobering model to those of us who are older. Uzziah is not a young man behaving rashly. Uzziah is a mature man, probably in his 50s by this time.

[26 : 59] The danger of becoming complacent, the danger of imagining that we can make it now. This happens in all kinds of ways. And the danger when we become so accustomed to doing the work of the Lord that we think we can, oh, I can do that, that's no problem.

When we get into that state, we need to humble ourselves before the Lord. You see, Uzziah's anger here is not righteous anger, it's injured vanity.

How dare they speak to me like this? And we're told that Jotham was over the king's household, that probably Uzziah continued some of the functions of government, but as far as usefulness to the Lord, as far as the work of the Lord was concerned, his usefulness was over.

So what do we do then? How do we avoid ending up like Uzziah? I think, first of all, we need to remember that we are weak and fickle and can do nothing apart from the help of the Lord and his Holy Spirit.

Sometimes it's been said that if the Holy Spirit were removed from the church, ninety-five, perhaps more, ninety-five percent of its work could go on and no one would notice any difference. We need to trust in the Holy Spirit to do the work.

[28 : 24] Remember, the late William still used to say that God has only one worker, the Holy Spirit. And it's very important we recognize that. You see, if we recognize that, on the one hand, it will keep us from the pride of Uzziah.

When we begin to think, aren't we doing rather well, aren't we really achieving wonderful things? Then, when we realize that the Lord in his grace is doing wonderful things and allowing us to be part of it, that's the right way to look at it.

And also, it will keep us from despair when things go badly, as inevitably they do. We realize that once again, the Lord is in control, that we are not to have the glory for the wonderful things he does.

And if we are being faithful, we mustn't lacerate ourselves and wonder where we're getting. Of course, it's always good to examine what we're doing, to ask questions.

That's not what I'm talking about. What I'm talking about is the danger of simply looking at the work, its success and its failure as if it belonged to us.

[29 : 41] That's the first thing. Recognize we're weak and fickle. The work does not belong to us. And secondly, remember, we have a great high priest, Jesus, the Son of God.

I read earlier on from the letter to the Hebrews, we have a high priest who has gone into heaven, Jesus, the Son of God. And that's in the context of the danger of falling away.

The author of Hebrews is saying, look, when we get into danger, whether it's pride or despair, look upwards to the one who not only has finished the race, but who is alongside to help us.

God has greatly blessed so many of us. Let's never get to the situation where we begin to regard that blessing as our own doing.

Let's instead look up to heaven and see him there who made an end of all our sin. Amen. Let's pray. Lord God, in this ancient king's pride and in his presumption, we see very deeply into our own hearts.

[30 : 55] Lord, we are so often filled with pride, so often filled with satisfaction in our achievements. help us instead to realize that we have nothing except what we have been given.

Help us to trust in grace, the grace that brought us safe thus far, and the grace which will see us home. We ask this in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.
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Amen.