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Uzziah: God-Given Success

2 Chronicles 26:1-23; 2 Kings 15:1-7

Unit Theme:

Learning From Great Spiritual Leaders

Central Truth:

God rewards those who seek Him.

Focus:

Affirm that true success comes from seeking God and determine to walk with Him.

Context:

Uzziah reigns as the eleventh king of Judah in the eighth century BC.

Golden Text:

“As long as [Uzziah] sought the Lord, God made him to prosper” (2 Chron. 26:5).

Study Outline:

- I. Seek God and Do Right
(2 Chron. 26:1-5)
- II. God Grants Success
(2 Chron. 26:6-15)
- III. Pride Brings Judgment
(2 Chron. 26:16-23)

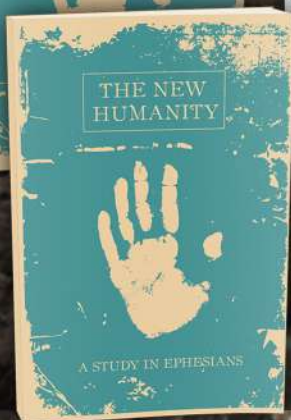
INTRODUCTION

Proverbs 16:3 states, “Commit to the Lord whatever you do, and your plans will succeed” (NIV). Solomon’s famous injunction here reminds us that all forms of success proceed from the hand of God. The Bible is clear that this includes material, professional, military, and spiritual success. In fact, no one finds success based on their own ingenuity or strength. The “self-made” person, so revered in modern society, is a myth. No one creates themselves. The Bible is clear that everything about our lives is a gift. Therefore, even though we exert ourselves to succeed as full participants in the journey of life with God, we could not work, speak, or act without the body, mind, and spirit God has given us. Because God has given these things freely, we can be sure that success also is God-given.

Because of this truth, success can just as easily be lost as it can be gained. In the scriptural worldview, this occurs when we choose to refrain from dedicating ourselves and our plans to God’s kingdom and glory, thus splitting our souls and our motivations into parts. This downfall is always the result of a breach of integrity. The English word for *integrity* stems from the Latin *integritas*, which was the word Roman soldiers shouted to signify to their commander that their equipment was complete and that they were ready to engage the battle. When we talk about a substance that *disintegrates*, we refer to something that loses this sense of wholeness, cohesion, or readiness. The troubling reality of integrity is that it takes years to gain but only a moment to give away.

Helen Keller wrote, “Character cannot be developed in ease and quiet.” She understood the process of character formation is not neat and tidy. Yet examples in our world today indicate that even solid character can be destroyed through a single act of compromise. We see it in the downfall of major corporations who fix numbers and rip others off. We see it in political leaders who lie to their people. We even see it in Christians who stray from their faith for one reason or another. The Bible, however, calls us to renew our integrity so we can remain in a posture that allows God to bless us.

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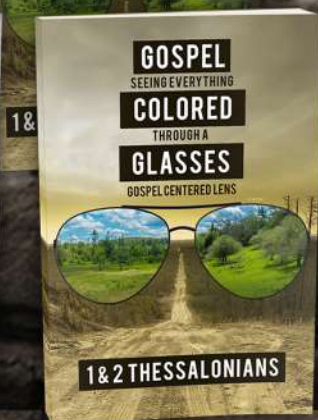
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I. SEEK GOD AND DO RIGHT (2 Chron. 26:1-5)

Second Chronicles 26 presents us with yet another change in the leadership of Judah. Interestingly, the narrative of Uzziah's rule is far longer here than its companion in 2 Kings 15. A fascinating component of the Bible, and thus Bible study, is that there are often slightly differing perspectives on nations' rulers. We will see toward the end of the passage that 2 Kings 15 is a bit more sympathetic to Uzziah, even as the facts in each passage align perfectly. Also, for unclear reasons, Uzziah is named *Azariah* in 2 Kings. The former means "my strength is God," and the latter "God has helped." The two terms do not have any clear similarities in Hebrew. Uzziah was probably known according to each of these names for unknown reasons. But the family records in each passage indicate this is definitely the same ruler.

A. Transition in Leadership (vv. 1-2)

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.

2. He built Eloth, and restored it to Judah, after that the king slept with his fathers.

Uzziah accedes to the throne during a bloody time in Judah's history. His father, Amaziah, was a mixed bag when it came to following God's commandments. Taking vengeance upon the Judean officials who had conspired against his father (Joash), Amaziah unsurprisingly took a militaristic approach to leadership. His failures far outweighed his successes, to the point that he introduced new foreign gods from Seir to Judah (25:14). This resulted in astounding arrogance from Amaziah, who even provoked the northern kingdom of Israel to battle. The results were disastrous, as Jerusalem's wall was torn down by Jehoash's forces (v. 23). Also, articles meant to furnish the Temple in Jerusalem were looted by the fellow Jews from the north in this civil war (v. 24). His pride destroyed, Amaziah was eventually killed by his own colleagues.

It might seem strange that such a fallen ruler would be automatically followed by his son. After all, wouldn't putting Amaziah's son in his father's place lead to the same sort of rule? As the saying goes, "The apple doesn't fall far from the tree." However, we must remember that dynasties were normative in this time period. Although there are some democratic processes in the text, kings were not voted upon by the people. Also, the technical competence needed to govern was inaccessible outside of the royal court. There were no schools of government or advanced degrees in leadership. Those who possessed the ability to administrate governments learned that ability through being raised in the royal court. Kings patiently trained their sons in the complex arts of warfare, basic economics, and staff

Uzziah (you-ZIE-uh)—v. 1—means "my strength is Jehovah"
in the room (v. 1)—"instead of" (NKJV)
Eloth (v. 2)—Meaning "palm grove," it was a strategic sea-port town on the Red Sea.

Talk About It:

List three facts about Uzziah you learn from these verses.

“If God is your partner, make your plans big.”

—Dwight L. Moody

Talk About It:

1. How do verses 3 and 4 characterize Uzziah's reign?
2. Compare Uzziah with his father (v. 4).
3. Compare the prosperity principle in verse 5 with Psalm 1:1-3.

administration. Uzziah, however, has already shown some promise as a young leader. Elath was a city often contested for by Israel, Judah, and the Edomites, and at an early age Uzziah is successful in annexing it again for Judah (26:2).

Uzziah's introduction can also be paired with an important piece of archaeology, called the “Uzziah Tablet.” The enormity of this archaeological find cannot be emphasized enough. It is extremely rare to have a nonbiblical source testifying to the existence of a Jewish ruler this ancient, but that is exactly what this tablet represents. Found in 1931, the tablet is a gravestone that reads in Hebrew, “The bones of Uzziah, king of Judah. Open not.” It is always exciting when the science of archaeology proves the historical reliability of Scripture.

B. Commitment to God (vv. 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.

After walking us through the relatively smooth transition from Amaziah to his son Uzziah, we are introduced to this new king through the familiar summary formulas for the nation's kings. The language includes much nuance; it is not straightforward. And it is loaded with tension.

Fifty-two years is a mammoth reign, so the first part of the summary in verse 4 is unsurprising. To reign this long, God was likely very involved. Unfortunately, there is an ominous turn in this verse, since the reader clearly knows that Amaziah did *not* in fact serve the Lord wholeheartedly (25:2). His kingship ended in disaster for himself and the kingdom of Judah.

Verse 5 of the lesson text continues this ominous trajectory, hinting that Uzziah was known for serving Yahweh with certain strings and conditions attached. The Zechariah in question cannot be the son of Jehoiada, who died before Uzziah's birth, nor the minor prophet after whom a book is named. All we know for certain is that he was a personal instructor or adviser for Uzziah. The language is interesting. We would expect Zechariah to instruct Uzziah in “the fear of the Lord,” a common phrase referring to teaching the entire Torah (e.g., Prov. 1:7). Zechariah, however, teaches Uzziah “the visions of God”—what God dreams the nation of Judah could look like if Judah were fully devoted to the divine plan. What an able adviser! Zechariah has a clear mental picture for where God wanted to take the kingdom, and under His guidance, Uzziah prospers.

This gives us a grand pattern for what it means to succeed under the rule of God. We also can count on trustworthy advisers like Zechariah who understand God's word and heart. However, we must stay true to God's vision. The phrase "as long as" tips us off that this may not happen in the reign of Uzziah. Indeed, trouble looms just beyond the horizon.

"He who trusts in the Lord will prosper."

—Prov. 28:25
(NIV)

II. GOD GRANTS SUCCESS (2 Chron. 26:6-15)

Beginning with verse 6, the writer of 2 Chronicles details the success of Uzziah which was broadly summarized in verse 5. We have seen consistently that this is the pattern of the literature in the books of Kings and Chronicles. That is, kings are introduced, summarized, then explained in an extended narrative. As we move into the explanation section, we find a king on top of his leadership capacity. The reader is left to wonder, however, whether things can stay that way for young Uzziah.

A. The Boom Years (vv. 6-10)

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.

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.

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.

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.

Uzziah's legacy begins with his military exploits. The *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* comments on why this makes sense, given the history of his family:

The unpopularity of his father, owing to a great military disaster, must ever have been present to the mind of Uzziah, and early in his reign he undertook and successfully carried through an expedition against his father's enemies of twenty years before, only extending his operations over a wider area. The Edomites, Philistines and Arabians were successively subdued (these being members of a confederacy which, in an earlier reign, had raided Jerusalem and nearly extirpated the royal family); the port of Eloth, at the head of the Red Sea, was restored to Judah, and the city rebuilt; the walls of certain hostile towns, Gath, Jabneh and Ashdod, were razed to the ground, and the inhabitants

Talk About It:

1. How do verses 6 and 7 describe Uzziah's military exploits?
2. Describe the fame of Uzziah (v. 8).
3. What did the king accomplish in Jerusalem (v. 9)?
4. Describe Uzziah's agricultural successes (v. 10).

of Gur-baal and Maan were reduced to subjection. Even the Ammonites, east of the Jordan, paid tribute to Uzziah (James Orr, general editor).

Verses 6 and 7 focus on God's involvement in aiding Judah against the pagan Philistines. These military accomplishments brought Uzziah fame even southward into Africa, as the kings of the ancient Near East grew restless, wondering if they could be the next to face Judah's mighty army.

Verses 9 and 10 show Uzziah recognized that military success required a strong defense, so he fortified Jerusalem and desert outposts with towers. Towers were built for several reasons. First, they were the spy and communication system which quickly alerted the military if borders had been breached. Lookouts were posted in towers to watch the horizons for any signs of foreign invasion, and signals were put into effect for long-distance communication between towers and cavalry. This function was likely fulfilled by the towers Uzziah built in the desert.

Second, towers were strategic locations in battles. The high perch of towers allowed archers the best angle at picking off a besieging army.

Third, towers could be places of protection for the king and his officials. If the city wall was breached, the royal family would be hidden in a tower where the walls were thick and difficult to penetrate. It was not uncommon for kings to be found hiding in towers at the end of a fierce battle in which the attacker prevailed.

Uzziah also enhanced the agricultural infrastructure of Judah (v. 10). This was accomplished through an irrigation system of cisterns which provided both water for livestock and nourishment for plant life to sustain the livestock. A lover of the soil, Uzziah gloried in the fruit from the fertile lands of Judah, and he created jobs for farmers who were taken onto the imperial payroll.

"The greatest achievements are those that benefit others."

—Dennis Waitley

B. A Military Force (vv. 11-15)

(2 Chron. 26:11-14 is not included in the printed text.)

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.

Talk About It:

1. How many division leaders were in Israel's army (v. 12), and how many fighting men (v. 13)?

This passage provides a behind-the-scenes look at Uzziah's military success. His success is not attributed to a claim to divine status, as was common for neighboring kings, but rather God blessed his careful preparation. His armies were known both by their extensive training and their smart organization. Uzziah even employed a secretary to keep them properly divided. He knew that in hand-to-hand combat, having the

right number of soldiers in the right places on the battlefield was paramount for success. His organization was impressive, with 307,500 soldiers serving under 2,600 family leaders, amounting to nearly 120 soldiers per division/leader. Uzziah completely funded the soldiers' equipment from the royal court. In the past, the men had often been responsible to furnish their own battle gear. Uzziah understood mathematics and engineering. His impressive military mind invented primitive catapults and trained warriors to operate them. In hand-to-hand combat, such machines must have been especially lethal. As a result, Uzziah's fame spread, yet the text is clear that the king did not stand alone. Through God's help, Uzziah achieved military and technological excellence.

2. Describe the army's weaponry (vv. 14-15).
3. Explain the significance of the term "marvellously helped" (v. 15).

III. PRIDE BRINGS JUDGMENT (2 Chron. 26:16-23)

Christians often refer to falling away from God as *backsliding*. The term insinuates that following God always involves forward movement. Life with Yahweh is always moving, growing, and stretching toward new heights. Hebrews 12:1 pulls this together in the metaphor of a race: "Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us." When this process is reversed, destruction is imminent. We see this especially in the latter years of Uzziah's reign, in which we are once again disappointed by a Judean king's failure to hold to perfect faith in God.

A. A Heated Confrontation (vv. 16-18)

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.

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

fourscore (v. 17)
—eighty

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.

We have become used to this pattern in moving through the annals of Judah's kings. We desperately hoped that Uzziah would stay true to Yahweh rather than give into narcissism. However, we are sorely disappointed.

The phrase "his heart was lifted up" refers to pride. Initially, it is not a consequence of pride that we expect. We have come to expect kings who intentionally turn away from Yahweh to

Talk About It:

1. What caused Uzziah's downfall (v. 16)?
2. Describe the priests' bold actions (vv. 17-18).

“In his pride, Moses lost his temper and was kept out of the Promised Land (Num. 20:1-13). Pride kept Joshua from seeking God’s will at Ai, and he lost the battle (Josh. 7). King Nebuchadnezzar’s pride turned him into an animal (Dan. 4), and Peter’s pride led to his denial of Christ (Luke 22:31-34).
—Warren Wiersbe

Talk About It:

1. How did Uzziah respond to the priests’ actions (v. 19)?
2. How did God punish Uzziah (vv. 20-21)?
3. In verse 23, what final facts are given about Uzziah?

serve foreign gods. It is noteworthy that God regards Uzziah’s sin in the Temple with the same seriousness. The king’s sin lies in what he knows to be off limits. He knows that only priests can burn the incense upon the Temple altar. But he is puffed up. As king, he is used to getting what he wants and doing whatever he likes. At the peak of his success, perhaps he scoffs at the idea of a priest interceding to God on his behalf. After all, hasn’t God clearly blessed all that he set his hands to do? Isn’t he worthy of the simple task of burning incense, to seek the Lord on his own? Thankfully, a group of brave priests will not allow God’s temple and name to be desecrated without a fight—even if that fight is with a powerful king.

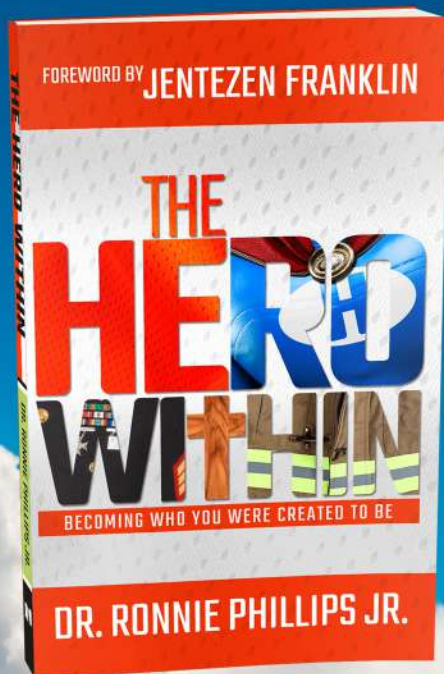
A courageous cadre of eighty priests recognizes the grave seriousness of the situation. They recite the teaching from the Torah which takes many shapes throughout the Pentateuch. To cite one example, in Numbers 4:19-20 we get a picture of how God expects the various orders of Hebrews to approach Temple worship. The Aaronic priesthood is especially set apart to come before God with incense. Again, Uzziah is fully aware of this. As a result, Azariah and the eighty priests declare judgment on the king. This had to take remarkable courage, and it is a testimony to the stability of the different branches of the kingdom in Uzziah’s reign. Everything in the land is working properly, which is why the priests are bent on following the Torah in the way worship is conducted in the Temple. Uzziah’s fate rests in his response.

B. Judgment of Disease and Seclusion (vv. 19-23) (2 Chronicles 26:19-23 is not included in the printed text.)

Once again, the story takes a turn for the worse. Like David before the prophet Nathan, Uzziah has the option of repentance. After all, the priests are not confronting him with any sort of radical or fringe interpretation of God’s Word. It is crystal clear to everyone in the room. Yet in Uzziah’s response we see the degree to which his pride has ballooned. His ego has grown larger than his faith in God and His Word.

Caught red-handed with the incense censer in hand, Uzziah burns with anger toward these priests who have called him to accountability. He screams and yells words at them that are not printed in the text. He rages around the altar. He is accountable to no one! This sin is even more egregious than the first. As Azariah and his associate priests look at Uzziah, they notice a white, leathery spot has suddenly appeared on his forehead. Recognizing the judgment of God and the reality that a contagious leper in the Temple is a threat to the entire body of worshipers, the band of priests immediately rush the powerful king off of the grounds. Finally, he is broken. Realizing his condition, “[Uzziah] himself was eager to leave” (v. 20 NIV).

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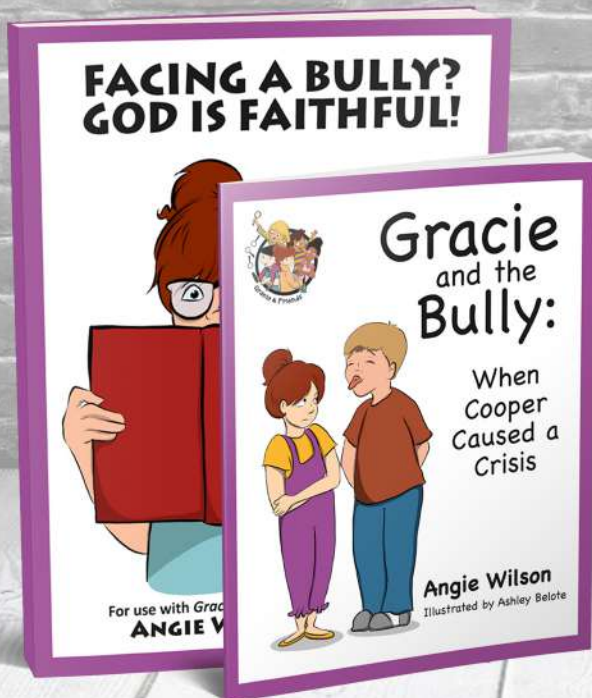


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He knows that his arrogance has resulted in his undoing. Yet God's mercy will continue to sustain him.

The true judgment, as verse 21 indicates, is that Uzziah would never enter the Temple again. Seclusion from the nation was bad enough, but severance from the house of the Lord is worse. He will not have the opportunity to right his wrongs. His son will govern in his place. Nonetheless, God does allow Uzziah to live out his days in security and safety, along with the pleasure of seeing the rule of the kingdom peaceably pass onto his son.

Though guilty of sinful pride, Uzziah at least refuses to serve polytheistic pagan cults. This places him among those imperfect leaders who were given success by God.

CONCLUSION

The life of Uzziah stands as a testimony to the truth that success lies in God alone. The day Uzziah began to focus on his own perceived rights and powers, success was taken from him. This was not only true of Uzziah and the other kings of Judah, but in our own lives as well. "You are not your own; you were bought at a price," Paul says in 1 Corinthians 6:19-20 (NIV). As followers of God, we do not own ourselves, much less our success.

GOLDEN TEXT CHALLENGE

"AS LONG AS [UZZIAH] SOUGHT THE LORD, GOD MADE HIM TO PROSPER" (2 Chron. 26:5).

There was a direct connection between seeking and success in the reign of King Uzziah. It was not when Uzziah sought success that he found it, but when he sought after God.

The word *sought* emphasizes continued inquiry and devotion. It comes from a word which meant "to tread a place or path." It depicted someone regularly going to a place, seeking or searching, and, as a result, *treading* a path. As long as Uzziah regularly sought the Lord, God made him to prosper.

This formula for success was not just true for Uzziah. The psalmist wrote, "How blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked. . . . But his delight is in the law of the Lord. . . . And in whatever he does, he prospers" (Ps. 1:1-3 NASB).

The Dash

Look at a tombstone, and at the top you will find a set of imprinted dates connected by a dash. The dash represents the totality of that person's life and accomplishments on the earth. As believers, we must remember that the success of our "dash" depends on our reliance on God.

Daily Devotions:

- M. Pray for God's Favor
Psalm 90:14-17
- T. Beware of Pride
Ezekiel 28:11-19
- W. Seek God and Live
Amos 5:4-15
- T. God Blesses Our Witnessing
Acts 11:19-24
- F. Give God Glory
Acts 12:19-24
- S. Pray to Know God's Will
Colossians 1:9-14