

Separated by Pride; Restored by Christ

2 Chronicles 26:16-23 (NIV)

¹⁶ But after Uzziah became powerful, his pride led to his downfall. He was unfaithful to the LORD his God, and entered the temple of the LORD to burn incense on the altar of incense. ¹⁷ Azariah the priest with eighty other courageous priests of the LORD followed him in. ¹⁸ They confronted King Uzziah and said, "It is not right for you, Uzziah, to burn incense to the LORD. That is for the priests, the descendants of Aaron, who have been consecrated to burn incense. Leave the sanctuary, for you have been unfaithful; and you will not be honored by the LORD God." ¹⁹ Uzziah, who had a censer in his hand ready to burn incense, became angry. While he was raging at the priests in their presence before the incense altar in the LORD's temple, leprosy broke out on his forehead. ²⁰ When Azariah the chief priest and all the other priests looked at him, they saw that he had leprosy on his forehead, so they hurried him out. Indeed, he himself was eager to leave, because the LORD had afflicted him. ²¹ King Uzziah had leprosy until the day he died. He lived in a separate house—leprosy, and banned from the temple of the LORD. Jotham his son had charge of the palace and governed the people of the land. ²² The other events of Uzziah's reign, from beginning to end, are recorded by the prophet Isaiah son of Amoz. ²³ Uzziah rested with his ancestors and was buried near them in a cemetery that belonged to the kings, for people said, "He had leprosy." And Jotham his son succeeded him as king.

When you think of the great kings of Israel, you probably have thoughts of the mighty warrior David who slew the giant Goliath or of Solomon with his wisdom and riches. Who is this Uzziah? Uzziah was one of the many other good kings who followed in David's family line. He lived in the 8th century B.C. and reigned 52 years in Jerusalem. He had a well-trained army of over 300,000 soldiers who defeated the Philistine and Ammonite people. He also built up Judah with fortified cities and towers. He was famous. "[Uzziah] sought God during the days of Zechariah, who instructed him in the fear of God. As long as he sought the LORD, God gave him success." (2 Chronicles 26:5) He was a good king who did what was right by following the LORD and his Word.

Then it changed. "But after Uzziah became powerful, his pride led to his downfall." (verse 16a) After all the victories, after all the building projects, after faithfully and humbly serving God, Uzziah began trusting in himself, thinking he was so great. In his pride, he sinned. "[Uzziah] was unfaithful to the LORD his God, and entered the temple of the LORD to burn incense on the altar of incense." (verse 16b) He thought that he was so great, so deserving of honor from God, that he took the role reserved for the priests and went into the LORD's temple. He came to God on his own terms, on the basis of his own merits, who he was, thinking that he was exceptional. He didn't need to listen to God's Word that said only the priests from the tribe of Levi were God's chosen representatives for worship before the people. Only they could go into the temple. But he was the great and powerful Uzziah. He was untouchable. He was extraordinary. He deserves to go into the LORD's temple and burn incense to God. He's exceptional.

Uzziah in his pride determined that he was an exception to God's Word, his commands. Do you consider yourself an exception to the rules? That person who whipped passed me on I-15, oh man, do I hope that he is pulled over. But when I go 10 over because I'm in a hurry or not paying attention, then I should get the speeding ticket? Do I harshly criticize people, tell them what they should do (namely, what they should be doing for me), but then treat them with disgust when they criticize me, that I should do something for them? Do we nod our heads in agreement that we should hear God's Word and spend time studying his Word whether at home or at church and even send our spouse and our kids to do so, but we don't go ourselves, that we don't spend time studying his Word as if I am the exception, that my wife and kids need this, but not me?

What makes you the exception? Do you hold yourself to a different standard than God does? Do you find ways to say that God's Word does not apply to you when it comes to changing your lifestyle, your habits, your words, your thoughts? It is pride in who we are that leads us to live and act and think as the exception to God's Word. Do you let God's Word confront you, or do you blow it off because you are the exception?

When King Uzziah was unfaithful to God and went into the LORD's temple, "Azariah the priest with eighty other courageous priests of the LORD followed him in. They confronted King Uzziah and said, 'It is not right for you, Uzziah, to burn incense to the LORD. That is for the priests, the descendants of Aaron, who have been consecrated to burn incense. Leave the sanctuary, for you have been unfaithful; and you will not be honored by the LORD God.'" (verses 17-18) Can you imagine the icy, sickly feeling that these priests probably had in their guts. This is their king, one who they respected, one who they served in worship, one who had the authority to punish them, lock them up, execute them. He had a formidable army that would probably follow his commands without question.

Yet the priests confronted Uzziah's pride for Uzziah's sake and the LORD's sake, not theirs. This prideful, sinful, unfaithful action will only hurt you, Uzziah. God will not honor you. He has commanded against you doing this. You are not the exception to God's Word.

Has someone called you out on your pride, on the way that you make yourself an exception to God's Word and his commands? Did you respond with humble repentance or did you rage like Uzziah, shout back at the person, "How dare you judge me?!" We don't like being corrected. We don't like to be humbled. And often anger and bitterness and resentment take over.

King Uzziah raged at the priests who confronted him. While he was continuing in his sinful pride that he is the exception and should be allowed to do what he was doing in the LORD's temple, a skin disease broke out on his forehead instantly making him unclean. The LORD made it clear that Uzziah was not the exception, that he could not come before the LORD on his own terms, on his own merits. They rushed Uzziah out, and he was banned from the temple of the LORD. In fact, he had to live in a separate house per God's laws and commands and had to have his son Jotham effectively take over as King. Eventually, Uzziah died, but because of his leprosy he could not even be buried with the kings who had gone before him. He was buried separately in a cemetery that belonged to the kings of Judah.

I don't know if any of you have had an infectious skin disease break out on your forehead for your pride, but the physical separation that Uzziah experienced is a picture of the spiritual separation we experience from God because of our pride, our thoughts that we are the exception to God's commands and laws. No one can stand before God on their own terms, not even great King Uzziah. If we think that we can come before God based on who we are, what we have done in life, we will find ourselves separated from God for longer than just a life. Our pride that leads us to think that we are the exception to God's commands will separate us from God for eternity.

King Uzziah's story of his prideful downfall is such a bitter ending to an otherwise great and God-pleasing life. Yet, this story is not as tragic as we might think on the first read through. Yes, Uzziah was buried apart from his ancestors, the kings of Judah that had gone before him. But don't miss this phrase: "Uzziah rested with his ancestors." (verse 23a) This one little phrase means that King Uzziah went to heaven, where leprosy clung to him no more, where he was united with all believers in God who had come before him and would be united with all believers who come after him. Uzziah had himself separated from God because of his pride, but God also restored Uzziah to give him a Sabbath-rest with his ancestors.

How did this happen? Uzziah's sins separated him from God. Leprosy that showed that physically. Yet, even with this skin disease, this did not stop God from carrying out his promise to build a house for David, that a king from his line would reign forever and over all nations. This is the promise of Jesus to come through David's kingly line, a line passed down through Uzziah to Jotham to eventually Mary and Joseph. Uzziah's unfaithfulness and pride and all other sins he did could not negate what God promised to do. He still sent Jesus through this kingly family line who then saved the world in spite of the sin that separated us from God, in spite of the fact that we cannot come to God on our terms. Instead, he made the terms and he kept the terms for us and for Uzziah so that Uzziah as well as us would dwell with our ancestors who have believed in that Messiah from David's line just as we do. This is Uzziah's Sabbath-rest as well as ours. The work is done. Jesus accomplished it. And so we will rest forever with him in heaven, with the believers that have gone before us.

As good as we can be, we are not the exception to God's laws and commands. We are not enough to stand before God. But God came through the kingly line of David and Uzziah and Jotham. He came down from heaven and was born of the virgin Mary. He accomplished perfection for us in our place. He was tempted in every way that we are yet he did not sin. He drank the cup of suffering. He was the servant of all who gave his life as a ransom for many. Through Christ, we are no longer separated from God, but we have a Sabbath-rest, a restored relationship with God. Christ restored us to himself. Because of what Christ has done, we are confident that we too will rest in heaven with the Christians who have gone before us. We pray that the next generation has their pride firmly placed on Jesus, just as Uzziah did, just as Jotham did, just as we do, and so have a Sabbath-rest. Amen.