

Pride comes before the fall

- a. People want more than God gives
- b. God gives more than we deserve

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. Azariah the priest with eighty other courageous priests of the LORD followed him in. They confronted him 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.”

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. 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.

King Uzziah had leprosy until the day he died. He lived in a separate house—leprous, and excluded from the temple of the LORD. Jotham his son had charge of the palace and governed the people of the land.

The other events of Uzziah’s reign, from beginning to end, are recorded by the prophet Isaiah son of Amoz. Uzziah rested with his fathers and was buried near them in a field for burial that belonged to the kings, for people said, “He had leprosy.” And Jotham his son succeeded him as king.

Brothers and sisters in Christ,

He just wanted to fit in. Scott was new to the neighborhood. He hadn’t made any friends yet, but he knew the other kids played baseball, so he grabbed a hat and an old glove and ran out to the field. The only problem was Scott had never played baseball before. He couldn’t throw and he couldn’t catch, so when he went to play, he absolutely embarrassed himself. The other kids laughed him off the field. And he never would have gone back if it wasn’t for Benny. Benny taught Scott how to throw and catch and hit, and in no time he was playing with the guys every day. He finally fit in. So one day, when the kids lost their baseball, Scott said, “hey, I’ve got a ball!” He grabbed the ball from his house, and on the first pitch, Scott hit his first home run ever, right into the neighbor’s backyard. Scott was ecstatic—and then his heart sank. Because that neighbor’s backyard was guarded by a vicious, 200-pound “gorilla dog-thing” that everyone called “The Beast.” And that was his dad’s baseball—and it was signed by Babe Ruth. Maybe you know the movie. The Sandlot—it’s a classic. And maybe you know what happens next: the boys try every trick in the book to get the ball back, but eventually they realize someone has to hop the fence. So Benny, who was the fastest, strongest, most athletic kid in town, volunteered. But as soon as Benny’s feet landed in that backyard, he knew that his speed didn’t mean a thing. The Beast was even bigger and scarier than the boys had heard. All Benny knew was that he had no business being where he was, and he needed to get out as fast as he possibly could. That *should* have been the reaction of King Uzziah in our sermon text today. He should have realized right when he walked into the temple that he had no business being where he was, and he had just walked into a very dangerous situation. But instead, his arrogance blinded him to that fact.

Usually, arrogance doesn’t just come from nowhere, and that was true in the case of Uzziah. He was one of the “good kings.” Remember, after Israel had begged for a king, they had King Saul who started off good but ended up being an absolute disaster. Then Israel had King David, the man after the Lord’s own heart. David

made some terrible mistakes in his life as king, but he stayed faithful to God. David was a “good king.” Then came wise King Solomon. Again, there was a lot in Solomon’s life to be critical of, but he built the temple of the LORD and he died as a believer. Another good king. And then... it all fell apart. After Solomon died, there was fighting over who should be the next king, and the kingdom of Israel ended up divided. It split in half—Israel in the north and Judah in the south. So now there were always two kings at a time, one in each kingdom. And for the most part... they were really, really bad. You read through the chapters of the Bible that talk about these kings and it’s like the refrain to a sad song: “so and so did evil in the eyes of the LORD. He did not turn away from the sins of the king before him.” The kings were supposed to set an example for their people in following the LORD, and instead, most of them weren’t even believers. They openly worshiped other gods, and they led their people down that same dangerous path.

So when a king like Uzziah came along, it was a breath of fresh air. Uzziah became king when he was 16, and even though his father had turned away from God, Uzziah was faithful. The Bible says, “He did what was *right* in the eyes of the LORD. He sought God.” And it says, “as long as he sought the LORD, God gave him success.” So when Uzziah went to battle against his enemies, the LORD led him to victory. He built towers in Jerusalem and made other architectural accomplishments. He had a large standing army, and the kingdom of Judah prospered under king Uzziah. The Bible says, “His fame spread far and wide, for he was greatly helped until he became powerful.” *Until* is the key word there. It was God who gave Uzziah his success, *until* Uzziah became arrogant and started to think that his success came from himself. And like our sermon text says, “his pride led to his downfall.”

So what did Uzziah do that was *so* prideful, *so* arrogant, *so* disrespectful before God? He overstepped his role. He did something that even the king was not permitted to do. Maybe we can see how Uzziah got there. The word “king” in our minds is pretty much synonymous with having unlimited power and authority. As Americans, the word kind of leaves a bad taste in our mouth because we don’t like kings. We don’t like the idea of a ruler who has his power for life and can do as he pleases without anyone checking his authority. To say, “I am the king” is to say “I can do whatever I want.” And that’s where Uzziah was at in our text. He was rich, powerful, and famous. He had become great in every aspect of his life and his reign, and now he wanted to become great in his worship of God, too. He decided to go into the temple to offer sacrifices himself.

So, why’s that such a big deal? Well God had been *unbelievably* clear that his temple was a place of purity and perfection, and there were countless rules and regulations about which sacrifices were to be offered when and who was to offer them. If you read a few pages from the books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, you’re almost guaranteed to read something about the regulations for offering sacrifices to the LORD. And you might find yourself wondering why there were *so many* laws and regulations. Why did God say over and over and over how important it was to be clean and pure to be in his presence? Well the Israelites were God’s chosen people. The Savior would come from the people of Israel. And God’s temple was where he interacted with them on a personal level. It was where they offered their sacrifices, and it was where God told them that he had taken away their sin. So going into the temple was no ordinary thing. God wanted his people to know how big of a deal it was for them to come into his presence. And the responsibility and privilege of going before the LORD to burn offerings and sacrifices was for the priests alone, as God had said over and over again in Scripture. And yet it wasn’t enough for Uzziah. “I’m the king. I can do what I want.”

But the priests, the men who *were* supposed to bring these offerings before God, realized the horrible mistake that Uzziah was making, and they begged and pleaded with him not to go through with it. And Uzziah,

in his extreme arrogance, became angry with them for suggesting that there was anything the king shouldn't do. Imagine that. Imagine being clearly in the wrong like Uzziah was and being bold enough to get angry at the people who are trying to set you straight. Only, I don't have to imagine all that hard. It's our default reaction when someone tells us we've done something wrong; we go on the defensive. "Who do they think they are, calling me out like that? Don't they know my track record of doing the right thing? And even if they are right... who are they to talk? They're no better." *That* is pride rearing its ugly head. We can have the best of intentions, trying to do the right things for the right reasons, but eventually, if we forget the fact that we can only do anything good with God's help, we develop the same attitude as Uzziah. God had blessed him so richly and made him into a great king, but his pride made him want even more.

God's justice against Uzziah was quick and decisive. The text says that he was *raging* at the priests—he wasn't just a little upset, he was furious. While he was raging at the priests in the temple, leprosy broke out on his forehead. The priests rushed Uzziah out of the temple, because on top of having a deadly disease, he was now unclean. Having leprosy made a person unclean and unable to live among God's people. For an unclean person to go into the temple, into the presence of God, was absolutely out of the question. They had to get Uzziah out of there. He hadn't understood his role, so God made it as clear as possible. For the rest of his life, Uzziah would be forced to live in isolation. Not only could he not go into God's temple, he couldn't be around his loved ones, all because of his own sinful pride.

And maybe now we're tempted to wonder, "Really, God? A horrible, life-changing disease that kept him away from his loved ones? I know he made a mistake, but that seems pretty harsh." When we start to think that way, there's a few things we need to remember. First: God is holy and just and loving, and he does what's best for his people even when we don't understand why he does what he does. Second: Uzziah's "mistake" was no minor infraction; he essentially told God that he knew better than him, and that Uzziah's way was better than God's way. But third, we look at what our text says about the end of Uzziah's life: "Uzziah rested with his fathers." This is how the Old Testament talks about people who died as believers in God. It's a cool little insight that the Bible gives us, telling us where people's hearts were at when they died. Despite his sin and the punishment God gave him, Uzziah died as a believer. He went to heaven. Do you think that would have been the case if his pride and arrogance had been allowed to go unchecked? Of course we can never really know the answer to that, but if Uzziah had kept going down the path he had been on, it seems like he may have ended up losing his faith in God and replacing it with faith in himself. God used a terrible illness to call Uzziah to repentance and bring him closer to himself. The curse God gave Uzziah was really a blessing that kept him in the faith.

It's easy to look at Uzziah and shake our heads and wonder how he could have been so foolish. But if we're really being honest with ourselves, and truthfully looking at what's in our own hearts, it's probably even easier to say, "That would've been me, too." Pride is one of those sneaky sins. You're not committing any blatant, obvious outward sins—and that's when the inward sin starts to take over. We start to reflect on all the good we've done, and suddenly, instead of looking for ways to love and serve our neighbor, we find ourselves looking down on them. We start to wonder why other people just can't figure it out like we can. And just like that, we've made it so that God's grace to us isn't quite as impressive anymore. "Yes, God, thank you for saving me. I'm lost without you. Just not as lost as some others." Of course those aren't the actual words that we think or say—but that becomes the attitude, the mindset that we have as we go through life.

We are prone to pride by nature. Just look at James and John from our gospel lesson—two of Jesus’ most reliable disciples—and what did they ask of Jesus? They said, “Give us some of that glory, Jesus. You can be the top dog, but we want to be right there with you.” And Jesus’ response showed them how foolish their request was. “You don’t know what you’re asking. Because if you knew what I was going to go through, you wouldn’t be asking it.” King Uzziah had no right to offer that sacrifice. James and John had no right to the glory that they asked for. In both cases their pride led them to overstep the role God had given them. But Jesus had the right to all glory. As God on earth, why wouldn’t he let people serve his every need? Why wouldn’t he let everyone know how incredible he was? And yet what did Jesus tell his disciples? “The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). If God himself chose to humbly serve sinful people, what does that mean for us? It means the life of a Christian is defined by humble, loving service of others.

All those sacrifices and offerings that the Old Testament priests carried out, they had a purpose. They pointed ahead to the Messiah. They reminded the people of the one who would come to make the one final sacrifice for sin. The role that Uzziah’s pride led him to covet is the same role that Jesus’ humility led him to accept. Jesus is the mediator between the holy God and sinners like us. All of our sins—the selfishness, the pride, the arrogance, and everything else—his sacrifice paid for them all. The all-powerful God of the universe came to earth to humbly serve us and save us. Knowing that makes any pride we could have in ourselves look absolutely foolish. So we look to humbly serve our God and our neighbor, and to say with the Apostle Paul, “May I never boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Amen.