

Know Thyself: Uzziah

Lenten Midweek #5 – 03/22/23 – Mt. Calvary Luth.

Text: 2 Chronicles 26:1-5, 15b-21 Pastor Keith Besel

Introduction

✘ According to an ancient Greek author, there was an inscription carved in the wall of the pagan Temple of Apollo that became a famous maxim in Greek culture. It simply said, “Know Thyself”. So, according to traditional Greek wisdom every man should know who he is in society and in life.

→ If you’re a commoner, then know that you are a commoner. If you’re an aristocrat, know that you are an aristocrat. Understand both your privileges and your obligations. Know your strengths and your weaknesses.

→ Perhaps most important to the Greeks was to know that you are mortal. You are not a god, and you should not try to imitate the gods. So in everything in life, “Know yourself”.

I. Know your place in life.

✘ The clearest way to express this saying today would be for us to simply say, “Know your place.” Now I know that those words probably are a little grating for our modern American, 21st century minds to hear, since we pride ourselves in thinking that we should all be free of any restrictions. In fact, the maxim of our day goes more like this: “Be whoever and whatever you want to be.”

→ But as a Bible-believing and Christ-confessing person, I’m just going to come straight out and say it. I still believe there is great wisdom in the phrase, “Know your place”. Especially when it comes to your relationship with God, you and I all do well to know that He is God and we are not!

II. Uzziah’s pride led him to forget.

✘ King Uzziah, also known as King Azariah in the book of 2 Kings, held the highest office in the land of Judah. He was a descendant of David and is listed among the “good kings”, because, as verse four tells us, “He did what was right in the eyes of the LORD, according to all that his father Amaziah had done.”

→ Uzziah was the grandson of King Joash, about whom we spoke last week. Uzziah ascended the throne as a sixteen-year-old and reigned fifty-two years – one of the longest-serving kings. He won victories over the Philistines on the coast and the Arabians in the desert. His fame reached the border of Egypt.

→ And just as it was with all of the other kings, his greatness was not because of his greatness. Verse five clarifies, “...as long as [Uzziah] sought the LORD, God made him prosper.”

✘ 2 Chronicles describes the reign of King Uzziah as one that is defined by his strength. He broke down the wall of Gath, the city from which Goliath had come. Ancient enemies like the Ammonites paid tribute to him. He fortified Jerusalem with high-tech weapons that could shoot arrows and stones from towers. He expanded the kingdom and increased Judah’s wealth. So, as verse 15 tells us, “...his fame spread far, for he was marvelously helped” – by the LORD, that is – “till he was strong.”

→ Yes, Uzziah was a strong king. That was his place; the place where God had gifted him. But he was a terrible priest. Why? Because he was not a priest! What is it about these kings and their issues with not knowing their place in God’s Temple?

- This is probably the best place for me to pause and publically ask you all for your forgiveness regarding an incorrect statement that I made in last week's message. You might remember that last week we learned about how King Joash forgot his place and had Zechariah stoned in the middle of the Temple. And I told you that this was the same Zechariah who wrote the book of Zechariah in the Bible. Well, I was wrong on that piece of information. It ends up that I got my "Zechariahs" mixed up – since there are only 32 different Zechariahs in the Old Testament alone. I lost track of my mental timeline, because the Zechariah from last week, plus the Zechariah in verse five of tonight's text are about 200-250 years too early to be the prophet who authored the Old Testament book. So, I guess you could say I forgot that my place is pastor and not Zechariah-historian.
- ✘ Anyway, when it came to understanding who is, and who is not to be entering into the Temple to offer prayers and sacrifices King Uzziah did not heed the old Greek maxim, "Know Thyself."
 - He let his pride grow inside of him to the point that it brought his own destruction. Instead of being content with the important role of king, Uzziah decided it was his "place" to play priest. So he entered the Holy Place in the temple to burn incense.
 - But God had been very clear in His command that only the priests were to go there; only the descendants of Aaron were to offer incense. Some of you actually might remember that even Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu, "offered unauthorized fire" at the incense altar and the LORD's fire consumed them both on the spot (Lev. 10:1-2).
 - ✘ But Uzziah believed in his own strength above all else, and so he boldly entered the temple to burn incense. Azariah, the high priest and eighty other priests tried to stop him. They said in verse 18, "It is not for you. ... Go out of the sanctuary, for you have done wrong, and it will bring you no honor from the LORD God."
 - King Uzziah forgot his place though and reacted in anger. He believed no one could tell him what he could or couldn't do. He believed he was the supreme ruler. His worldly fame and strength made him think he had the right to do anything he wanted. The problem is; that still didn't make Uzziah one of God's priests. It was not his place to offer incense in God's Holy Place.
 - And so, instead of fire as He did with Aaron's sons, the LORD struck Uzziah with leprosy as the punishment for this insolence; right on his forehead so that the result of his sin could be seen by everyone. This wasn't simply a matter of sickness. As a leper, Uzziah was now ritually unclean and therefore by God's Law he was permanently "excluded from the house of the LORD" (v.21).
 - This meant that because the law for lepers was that they must be separated from the rest of the population, he was also effectively removed from his office as king. Even as king, he had to live in a separate house, and his son, Jotham, governed the people of the land. So now Uzziah's strength and fame came to nothing. Even at death, when he was buried in the kings' burial field, Uzziah's body was separated from his fathers according to Levitical law (cf Lev 13:46). Verse 23 after our text tells us that Uzziah's entire identity and reputation was now changed from "King of Judah" to be, "He is a leper" (26:23).

III. We have a stronger king.

- ✘ Yes, at one time King Uzziah was a strong king. But even at his strongest he could not save his people. He couldn't even save himself. Such is the strength of earthly kings and princes and rulers.
 - But Jesus, the Messiah; the ultimate descendant of Uzziah, is the only King strong enough to save us all. His strength was not in military superiority – breaking down walls or collecting

tribute. Nor was it in developing new armaments. Jesus' strength was in freeing people from demonic possession and healing the sick, including those with leprosy. His power forgave the sins of men and He taught with the authority and power of God Himself!

✘ Pride had no place in Jesus' identity. Although He was the eternal Word in the form of God, He emptied Himself to be born of a virgin in the likeness of mankind. In humility He rode on a donkey even as the crowds chanted, "Hosanna to the Son of David!" This Son of David humbled Himself to the point of complete obedience to His Father; even to death on a cross. In fact, Jesus suffered the opposite of pride, enduring all manner of shame and spitting and mockery from sinners. Yet in love and obedience He willingly laid down His life.

→ And so it was in His death, that Jesus also took the role of priest. It was not out of false pride or misplaced authority. No, as King of the Judeans, Jesus knew His place well and He became the Great High Priest above all others; offering the one sacrifice that His people truly needed. He was not like the sons of Aaron who needed to be cleansed for their transgressions by offering a sacrifice for their own sins before they could offer sacrifices for the people. Nor was His sacrifice only temporary like their bulls and goats that had to be offered daily and yearly and still could never take away sin.

→ Only the perfect Lamb of God, offered by the One and only Messiah, was the single sacrifice able to address all sins for all time. That sacrifice, Jesus offered up when He allowed His own body to be nailed to the cross. It's there on Golgotha that He endured the isolation of a leper. Jesus became the sin of all; bearing your sin and mine in His own body – all the uncleanness of our flesh.

→ The result of that meant complete separation from His Father, and absolute death as His Spirit departed His body. Those chief priests and rulers of the Judeans saw what they believed to be the ultimate picture of weakness in Jesus! Yet this was no weakness at all, but the strength of the Son of God perfectly fulfilling and living up to His rightful place. Only our Lord Jesus had the strength to bear the weight of the world's sin on His torn and bloodied back and shoulders. Yes, on the cross, Jesus was truly revealed to be the one and only strong Priest and King.

IV. Our place – in the presence of God.

✘ And because He offered Himself as the perfect sacrifice, God highly exalted Him above the heavens, where He sat down at the right hand of the Father in His heavenly glory. There Jesus, as the Son of David is both David's Lord and our Lord; interceding for us every day; offering perfect prayers that are sweeter than any incense on earth. And now, by His blood, we have full confidence to enter the holy places in prayer and worship by faith.

→ After all, what is your place? Are you a king? Are you a priest? Well, according to the old covenant; the way of God's Law, you are neither. But now in Christ, 1 Peter 2:9 says that you are "a chosen race, a royal priesthood". He has freed you by His blood and made you and all who believe in Him, to be a kingdom and priests to His God and Father.

→ Yes, the Ruler of all kings on earth has made for you a place with Him in the kingdom of heaven. In verse three of our Reading from Revelation, chapter 21 tonight a voice from God's throne tells us, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them and they will be His people, and God Himself will be with them as their God."

→ So, dear Christian, take comfort and rejoice! Your place; my place is in the presence of God. So let us boldly draw near to His throne of grace and receive His mercy in every need. Amen.