

March 22, 2023, Lenten Midweek 5

Know Thyself: Uzziah

2 Chronicles 26:1–5, 15b–21

Psalm 110; Hebrews 7:1–10, 26–28; John 10:11–18

Hymns: *LSB* 529, 564

Inscribed at the Delphic Oracle, a temple of pagan prophecy in ancient Greece, were the words “Know Thyself.” Traditional Greek wisdom considered that every man should know who he was. If you’re a commoner, know that you are a commoner. If you’re an aristocrat, know that you are an aristocrat. Know your privileges and obligations. Know your strengths and weaknesses. Perhaps most important to the Greeks, know that you are mortal. You are not a god, and you should not try to imitate the gods. Know yourself.

Perhaps we would say, “Know your place.” Although perhaps this goes against the grain of our culture, which prizes being free of any restrictions and being who you want to be, there is still great wisdom in this phrase. Especially with respect to God, you do well to know that he is God and you are not.

King Uzziah held the highest office in the land of Judah. He was a descendant of David and a good king. ***“He did what was right in the eyes of the Lord, according to all that his father Amaziah had done”*** (26:4). Uzziah was the grandson of King Joash, about whom we spoke last week. Uzziah ascended the throne at sixteen 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. As with the other kings, this was not because of his greatness. ***“As long as [Uzziah] sought the Lord, God made him prosper”*** (26:5).

The reign of King Uzziah as described in 2 Chronicles 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 enriched Judah. Again, Scripture says ***“his fame spread far, for he was marvelously helped, till he was strong”*** (26:15).

Yes, Uzziah was a strong king but he was a terrible priest. That ought to go without saying, for he was not a priest. He was a king.

Unfortunately, King Uzziah did not heed the maxim, “know thyself.”

He let pride or as the ancient Greek would say hubris inside of him. He grew proud to his destruction and decided to play priest. Uzziah entered the Holy Place in the temple to burn incense. Only the priests were to go there; only the sons of Aaron were to offer incense. Perhaps you remember that even Aaron’s sons, Nadab and Abihu, had burned unauthorized incense and paid with their lives.

But Uzziah was proud, apparently believing in his strength above all else, and boldly entered the temple to burn incense. Azariah the high priest and eighty other priests tried to stop him. They said, ***“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”*** (26:18). King Uzziah reacted in anger. No one would tell him what he couldn’t do! Filled with pride, he believed he was the supreme ruler. He was famous around the world, and he was strong. That, however, didn’t make Uzziah a priest. Offering incense in the Holy Place was not his place.

The punishment for this impudence was that the Lord struck him with leprosy. Right on his face, the result of his sin could be seen. This wasn't simply a matter of sickness. As a leper, he was ritually unclean and therefore *“excluded from the house of the Lord”* (26:21).

Indeed, he was also effectively removed from office as king because the law for lepers was that they must be separated from the population. Even as king, he lived in a separate house, and his son, Jotham, governed the people of the land. Thus isolated, King Uzziah's strength and fame were of no account. Even at death, when he was buried in the kings' burial field, Uzziah was separated from his fathers according to Levitical law (Leviticus 13:46). His whole identity was changed so that his epitaph is, *“He is a leper”* (26:23).

King Uzziah was a strong king. But not only could his strength not save his people; it couldn't even save him. Such is the strength of kings. If we are to follow a king who brings salvation, he will have to be a stronger king than Uzziah.

So it is that Jesus, the Messiah, the Son of Uzziah, is our strong king. 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 lepers. His power forgave the sins of men and taught with authority and power, hitherto unknown.

The Son of God was not filled with hubris. Although the eternal Word was in the form of God, he emptied himself to be born of a virgin in the likeness of men. He was found humble and riding on a donkey as the crowds chanted, "*Hosanna to the Son of David!*" This Son of David humbled himself in obedience to his Father, even to death on a cross. Far from pride, Jesus suffered shame and spitting and mocking from sinners. Yet he lay down his life of his own accord.

In this death, the Son of Uzziah humbly took the role of priest. This was not to gratify pride or show authority. The King of the Judeans became a priest to offer the one sacrifice his people needed. He was not weak like the sons of Aaron who had to wash for their own uncleanness and offer sacrifice for their sins before offering sacrifices for the

people. Nor was his sacrifice feeble like their bulls and goats which, offered daily and yearly, could never take away sins. Only the perfect Lamb of God, offered by the Messiah, was the single sacrifice for sins offered for all time. And Jesus, the great High Priest, did not follow the order of Aaron, whose sons died one after the other. His priesthood is forever after the order of Melchizedek, for it is testified that he lives.

As the Son of Uzziah hung on the cross, he endured the isolation of a leper. Jesus became sin and bore our sin in his body—all the uncleanness of our flesh. Separation from his Father, our God Almighty, resulted in the death of the Son as the Spirit departed his body. What weakness the chief priests and rulers of the Judeans saw! Yet this was not the weakness of hubris, but the strength of Jesus' humble purpose. There never was strength like our Lord bearing the weight of the world's sin on his striped back. There was all evil and the devil's power defeated. On the cross, Jesus was truly revealed: The Son of Uzziah is the strong King and Priest.

As the King of the Judeans hung on the cross, the curtain of the temple tore. The Holy Place lay open to all who would follow the Son and Lord of David. Indeed, when our High Priest offered his perfect sacrifice, God highly exalted him above the heavens, where he sat down at the right hand of the Lord. There the Son of David is David's Lord and our Lord interceding for us, offering perfect prayers sweeter than any incense on earth. By his blood, we therefore have confidence to enter the holy places.

In Christ, we are a chosen race and a royal priesthood. He has freed us by his blood and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father. The Ruler of kings on earth has made us a place with him in the kingdom of heaven. Our place is in the presence of God.

Let us boldly draw near to the throne of grace and receive mercy in every need.

Amen