

2 Chronicles 26 – Good Friday

“Did you hear about King Uzziah?” “What, our king Uzziah? Oh, I love him! The powerful general, the one who did all the rebuilding, who loves God and is famous all over the world, who’s had a really long reign...” “Yeah that’s right, him! Well, he’s got ill. He’s got a skin disease, so he’s not allowed in the temple anymore. He’s got to live in a separate house, and his son’s taking over, he can’t be king anymore.” “Cor, poor guy, what happened?”

You can imagine the conversations around Jerusalem after this all happened. What went wrong? Uzziah was doing great! In what way did he fail?

We’re going to dig into that, it’s a really great story, but also we’re going to go further. Because we don’t just want to wallow in the sad history of this flawed king. Today is Good Friday so you might be wondering why we’re looking at this weird Old Testament story, instead of one of the gospel accounts of Jesus’ death. Well don’t worry we’re going to talk about Jesus, because this story shows us how badly we need him. As we look at Uzziah, Jesus’ great x18 grandfather, we see a glimpse of the better King, who succeeded where Uzziah failed. And we’re going to see how Good Friday makes a massive difference to us and our relationship with God. If you’ve loved and followed Jesus for fifty years, for five weeks or if you’re just investigating, let this true story show us how wonderful he is and how he’s done an amazing thing for us.

Right at the start of my sermon this morning, even if you fall asleep for the next 20 minutes, remember this, this is the message of Good Friday – **Jesus entered God’s presence and opened the way for us – so approach boldly. Jesus entered God’s presence and opened the way for us – so approach boldly.** And I think the story of Uzziah shows us how amazing that is. We’re going to see what it takes to enter God’s presence, how amazing it is that the way is open for us, and why this means we may approach God boldly.

1) Entering God’s Presence

The first thing we’re going to see is what it means to enter God’s presence. This is what Uzziah does in v16 – “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.” But let’s not get ahead of ourselves, let’s look at who Uzziah was.

Let’s imagine we’ve got a game of “Top Trumps – Kings of Judah”, here’s Uzziah’s card. What have we got – **Popularity 100** Everyone makes him king, look at v1 “All the people!” **length of reign: 52 years.** v3 **God-seeking rating: 10.** v5 says that! Seeking God doesn’t mean looking for him, as if he’s hiding, no it means asking him what’s right, seeking his will, trying to please him. What else? **Enemies conquered: 3.** Look at v7 Philistines, Arabs, Meunites. **Fame: 8.** It’s not the whole world, but he’s famous in Egypt and among the Ammonites, who used to be Judah’s enemies, that’s pretty amazing! **Construction: 10.** He builds towers, rebuilds cities, digs cisterns to give people water, and works the fields! And finally **Size of army: 310,100** that’s the numbers in v13 added together. 10 times the population of Huntingdon.

Pretty strong card I'd say! A pretty good king! And the author tells us again and again how he became such a good king. v5 "As long as he sought the LORD, God gave him success". v7 "God helped him against the Philistines". v15 "He was greatly helped". He didn't do this on his own, he had God with him. All these top trumps ratings, the most important one is his "God-seeking rating" Uzziah seeks God and prays, asks him what's right, because of this, God gives him success. Uzziah sees himself as God's servant and wants to do his will.

But sadly, this doesn't last. Come back with me to v16, this is a key verse, the turning point of the passage. the uplifting victory music stops, and a single violin note hovers before the soundtrack changes and everything comes crashing down. – "But after Uzziah became powerful, his pride led to his downfall." Oh dear. What did he do? "He was unfaithful to the LORD his God, and entered the temple of the LORD to burn incense on the altar of incense."

Now hang on, this seems like a good thing, doesn't it? Is this just another way of Uzziah seeking the Lord? It's like he's bringing God a present! Well no, because God's law clearly states that only the priests can enter God's presence. Normal people could only enter the temple courtyard, they could be outside it, and offer sacrifices there, but only the priests could go into God's holy place. And then there's "The most holy place" and that's marked off by a big thick curtain. One priest could go in there once a year. Uzziah's not a priest, and he tries to go into the holy place, the first one. We don't know much about why he does this, we know it's pride. Perhaps he got so proud that he just forgot he wasn't meant to go in there because he wasn't a priest. Or maybe he got so proud that he looked back at his life and thought "God wants me, God wants me there right?" He got proud, and he thought that his good deeds earned him a right to God's holy place, a right to an intimate, personal relationship with God.

Do you find yourself doing that sometimes? Do you find yourself getting relaxed about what God's word says, feeling like it doesn't really apply to you? Or do you even find yourself thinking - "God wants me! God's lucky to have me on his side. I'm doing a good job, he's my mate. He wants me around, I got so much going for me!" So the question in Uzziah's story is this – is that going to work? Can you get into God's presence based on the good stuff you've done?

Well, no. Uzziah might be the king, but God is so much greater than him. His sin is like dirt to God, he's leaving muddy footprints all over God's house, stinking up the place. It's embarrassing! The only people who could enter God's presence were the priests, and they could only enter God's presence because God makes them clean. They're sinful too. Just like Uzziah. They went through rituals to cleanse them from their sin, before they went in. And there were certain things they could never do, like touching a dead body. God graciously allows the priests into his holy place because he makes them clean, as representatives of God's people. This is the way God lives in relationship with his people, on his initiative, his cleansing of priests. People can only come to God on his terms, not on the basis of anything they've done.

This is why Uzziah with all his success, all his fame, cannot enter God's presence. And if God won't let this king in, how can we think he'll let us in?

This is the problem humanity faces – there is a God. There is something more than this world. And we don't find it by searching in ourselves, or even in loving other people, or in enjoying this world. We find it in relationship with him. And no matter how good we try to be – we cannot enter his presence. We're standing outside banging on the door screaming "Let me in!" But the door is barred, there's no way we're getting in. The source of everything good, the God who made light shine into darkness is too holy for us. We're messed up, broken sinners, and we can't dare go near him, and so we're destined for an eternity of darkness, separation, and grief.

That's where Good Friday comes in. We don't have priests here, we don't have Charlie up here entering God's presence every week for us. There's no altar here for us to offer sacrifices. So aren't we disobeying God's law, God's way of coming to him?

No. Because we do have someone who entered God's presence to offer not just incense, but a sacrifice. Not king Uzziah, but King Jesus. And he didn't just enter the temple, he entered heaven itself! Hebrews 9v24-25 "For Christ did not enter a sanctuary made with human hands that was only a copy of the true one; he entered heaven itself, now to appear **for us in God's presence.**"

When Jesus died on the cross, it wasn't a mistake! It was a sacrifice. Jesus, offering himself outside God's presence on earth, and then entering heaven – the real centre of God's presence, not just the temple – to present that sacrifice. And his sacrifice is so much better, because it lasts forever! It only happened once! We don't need priests any more!. That's why it really bugs me when other Christians refer to their church leaders as priests. Jesus is our priest! We don't need anyone else! Because Jesus rose again we know he's in heaven now, presenting that sacrifice – he's not dead, he's alive, and every time we sin we have Jesus in God's presence heaven saying "Yes, but I paid for that sin. You can't count that sin against them, because I paid for it."

That's the story of Good Friday, Jesus entering God's presence, to offer a sacrifice for our sins, yours and mine.

But it gets better.

2) Opening the way

Jesus entered God's presence *and* opened the way for us.

Let's go back to Uzziah and the priests in the temple. As good as the temple system is for the people of Judah (and it was good, let's not deny that, it allowed them to come to God), it meant that only the priests could come in. And the priests couldn't do anything to open the way for anyone else. So when Uzziah tried to enter God's presence, they needed to intervene. Did you see that? v17 "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.'"

Courageous indeed, to challenge the king! But they're doing right, they're not acting rashly, they've gathered a group of priests to issue this challenge, and they're correcting Uzziah

according to God's word. But then Uzziah doesn't take it very well. He becomes angry, v19, and as a result God strikes him with leprosy, which in the Bible is shorthand for a skin disease. One commentator says "To attempt the rite [offering the incense] was bad enough, to be angry at being rebuked for it was what brought the punishment."

Just an aside quickly, I think there's a lesson here for all of us in leadership. Church pastors, ministry leaders like life group leaders, fathers and husbands who are leaders in the home, or even higher-up leaders in the Church of England. We need to act in accordance with God's word. And when leaders don't do that, we as members of the church, or the ministry team, or the family, need to challenge that, holding our leaders accountable. That doesn't mean confronting a leader every time they do something you don't like. But, like the priests, seeing when they do something that's disobeying God, gently take them aside, maybe after having discussed it with a few others, and say "Look, here's what God's word says. I think what you're doing isn't right." In a way that's what's happening in the Church of England now as people up and down the country are challenging the leaders of the CofE, saying that redefining marriage is not right, and explaining what God's word says about that. A courageous and godly way to rebuke leaders. And church leaders, team leaders, husbands, and fathers – when we're rebuked, don't be an Uzziah, don't get angry and rage at people with a flaming censer. Listen to what they have to say, they may well be right. And they may well help you act better in line with God's word.

Anyway, back to the story – The priests couldn't open the way to God for Uzziah. He was not allowed to go and offer incense, but he tried to. So what happens to him? Well, he gets angry and God afflicts him with a skin disease, which according to the Old Testament Law makes him even more unclean. So quick as a flash the priests drag Uzziah out of there, and he's excluded from the temple of the Lord for the rest of his life. Not even allowed in the courtyard! He lives in a separate house, and his son Jotham becomes prince regent, taking over his duties, until Uzziah dies and Jotham becomes king in his place. What a sad ending to this poor guy's life! He got the opposite of what he wanted! It's a classic tragedy, where the king rises to the top, and then tries to go higher, and falls far lower than he ever thought he could. And what made that happen? v16 – "His pride led to his downfall".

"When God, when will we have a humble king?" cry the people of Judah as they reread this story. "When will we have someone who does the first half of Uzziah's story but not the second."

The answer is Jesus. Jesus is the king who does right, the king who enters God's presence not out of pride, but in humbling himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross. And Jesus does what the priests could not do – he opens the way for us. Mark 15v37-38 – the account of Jesus' death says "With a loud cry, Jesus breathed his last. The curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom." That's the one that separates the most holy place, the once-a-year place!

Jesus' death is the end of the temple system. The way we come to God now is not through animal sacrifices or human priests, but through Jesus' death, because Jesus opened the way. The curtain is torn. We have access to God.

The people of Judah couldn't go into God's holy place in the temple, not even their great king Uzziah could go in. And the priests could only go in once a year to the most holy place, the place of God's presence on earth. Jesus went into the heavenly throne room, the even holier place, and he blew the doors right off. And this morning he calls to you and he says "Come in! Come and spend eternity with the God who made you! Come in! No matter what you've done! I've paid for it! Look, I was nailed to the cross for you!" When he said "It is finished" he meant it! He meant it, there's nothing else you need to do to be able to go to heaven. Jesus has done it all and we just say "Thank you!" And we do all we can to cling on, to keep trusting, to keep going, so that when we die, we are holding on to him!

3) Approach boldly

And this is where we come to apply this to ourselves. Jesus entered God's presence and opened the way for us. So approach boldly.

Don't approach recklessly, like Uzziah did. God is holy, God is separate from us. You can't know God through your goodness. You can't earn his forgiveness. You need a priest, you need an intercessor, you need Jesus! Don't for a second think that you can come to God on the basis of your own life. There is no way we're good enough.

And never get to the point in your life where you think you deserve God's forgiveness. No matter how many years of service you have, no matter how many good things you've done for God. All the good deeds you have done are from God. Just like he gave Uzziah success – it's him who's given them to you!

Don't approach reluctantly

And don't approach reluctantly. When you pray, remember that the way is open! God wants you to come to him! Not because of what you've done, but because of Jesus.

And have confidence that God wants you in heaven with him. Never think "Ooh, I might not get in, I don't think I'm good enough." It's not about you being good enough. Kids, sometimes life's about earning your place somewhere, trying to deserve it. I used to think heaven was like that. But no! You don't need to earn it, Jesus has paid it all for you! If you're trusting in Jesus, you can have 100% confidence that you can spend eternity in heaven with him. What if I'm not as good as other Christians? Doesn't matter! Doesn't matter. Nobody's good enough – Jesus is the only one, and he paid for them and for you.

Approach boldly

So not recklessly, not reluctantly, but boldly.

God's arms are open wide. Through Christ, we can come. The curtain is torn, our priest is in heaven interceding for us. Hebrews 10:19-22 "Therefore brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, *let us draw near to God* with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings."

Brothers, sisters – draw near! **a)** Draw near now in prayer, God did so much to give us access to him, this Good Friday look at the cross and let it revolutionise your prayer life! Draw near! Come boldly! **b)** And when we die, we will draw near forever in heaven. Heaven's not just a nice place, heaven is where God is! It's eternal drawing near to our great God who loves us. And when we die, we can approach boldly.

Uzziah entered God's presence wrongly, and the way was barred for him

Jesus entered God's presence, his true presence in heaven, and he opened the way for us – so bold I approach the eternal throne and claim the crown through Christ my own.

If you're not a Christian here today, just checking out church on Good Friday, then come to Jesus as the only way to come to God. Rejecting Jesus is rejecting our only way to be reconciled with God. He is the only one who can bring us into his presence, who can give us eternal life. Don't turn down that offer!

Young people, TROGs, some days we might think God is happy with us, some days we might think he's not. You know if you want something from your parents, you might tidy your room first, to make them happy, and then ask them. And if you've been misbehaving, you probably won't ask them for an ice cream right away. God's not like that. Approach God boldly, no matter what you've done today! Whatever situation we're in, we can pray. God doesn't say "You've upset me today, so I'm not going to listen to you." God wants us to come to him. The way is open for us. Because we have access to God we can **PRAY**. That's an answer in your crossword I think.

And if you've been a Christian a long time. You may have heard fifty or more Good Friday talks. Are you getting to the stage where you're less amazed by this? "Jesus entered God's presence and opened the way for us". Don't lose sight of what a big deal that is. Look at Uzziah, look at the holiness of God, the requirements for coming to him, the curtain that barred him from entry. And see how Jesus broke all those barriers down. Our priest entering God's presence for us and opening the way for us too. Praise him for the wonderful news that we can approach boldly now, and eternally in heaven.

"And can it be that I should gain an interest in the Saviour's blood?" "Wait, wait, Jesus really died for me?" Yes he did, he died to bring us to God.

Jesus entered God's presence and opened the way for us – approach boldly.