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THE SEDUCTION OF SUCCESS

2 Chronicles 26

By

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Kings of Judah Lesson 8

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Which would you choose if you could: Success, mediocrity, or failure? That's a dumb question, isn't it? Who wants to be mediocre or to fail? We all want to succeed in our family and personal lives.

But the irony is that the success we all seek can easily destroy us. We've all heard of successful people--athletes, musicians, movie stars, or businessmen--whose success opened them up to temptations that ruined or even killed them. The poet Emily Dickinson wrote, "Success is counted sweetest by those who ne'er succeed." The Scottish essayist Carlyle wrote, "Affliction is bad; but for every person that can handle prosperity, there are a hundred that can handle adversity."

The life of King Uzziah illustrates Carlyle's point. Uzziah succeeded admirably, but his success seduced him into pride; his pride led to a sin that in a few moments nullified years of achievements. Though he reigned for 52 years and had many outstanding accomplishments, he was remembered by the sad epitaph, "He is a leper" (26:23). Uzziah's life teaches us that ...

The seductive danger of success is pride.

Uzziah's success is described in 26:1-15; his downfall in 26:16-23. We'll follow that outline to glean some lessons from each section.

1. Success is a great good if it comes from the Lord and is used for the Lord and His purposes (26:1-15).
 - A. Success (in the true sense) comes only from the Lord.

Uzziah was a hard-working, visionary king. But verse 5 makes it clear that the source of his success was not his effort or genius, but the Lord: "And he continued to seek God in the days of Zechariah, who had understanding through the vision of God; and as long as he sought the Lord, God prospered him." Uzziah's success was due to seeking God and His Word. The Hebrew word "seek" is the same word we have met in earlier studies which

meant, literally, "to trample under foot." The idea was that when you frequent a place, you beat a path underfoot. To seek the Lord means going to Him for His wisdom and help so often that you wear a path to God.

Uzziah did that. He followed Solomon's counsel, "Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make your paths straight" (Prov. 3:5-6). Isaiah, whose calling to ministry began in the year King Uzziah died (Isa. 6:1), chided the people for consulting mediums and spiritists and said, rather, "should not a people consult their God?" (Isa. 8:19). Uzziah consulted God.

The source of God's wisdom is His Word. In Uzziah's day, of course, the Bible was not completed. He no doubt at least had the Law of Moses, and perhaps Job, the Psalms, and a few other portions of the Old Testament. But he also had a godly counselor, Zechariah (known only here) who had understanding in the visions (some mss. read "fear") of God. Uzziah listened to the counsel of this prophet who understood God's Word. So through God's Word and prayer, Uzziah sought God and God prospered him.

That's the only kind of success or prosperity that matters--when you live by seeking God and His wisdom through His Word and prayer. As Psalm 1:1-3 puts it:

How blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, nor stand in the path of sinners, nor sit in the seat of scoffers! But his delight is in the law of the Lord, and in His law he meditates day and night. And he will be like a tree firmly planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither; and in whatever he does, he prospers.

I might add that some are successful in the eyes of the world--even the Christian world--but God does not share the same opinion. Others may be considered failures or nobodies by the world--even by the Christian world--but God considers them eminently successful. So we must be careful to seek after true success that comes from seeking God through His Word and through prayer. Then, if God grants a measure of success, realize that ...

- B. Success can be used for the benefit of the Lord and others.

Uzziah was a leader of far-reaching vision, whose accomplishments included both domestic and foreign projects. Verse 2 notes that he built Eloth and restored it to Judah. Eloth (modern Eilat) was the port city at the southern tip of Israel on what is today called the Gulf of Aqaba. Furthermore he subdued a number of Philistine cities to the west of Jerusalem and built Israeli cities in their region (26:6). He conquered the Arabians and Meunites to the south, and the Ammonites to the east paid him tribute (26:7-8). Uzziah also fortified Jerusalem, thus restoring the defense against the Northern Kingdom which his father had lost (26:9). Furthermore he built towers for the defense of his vast agricultural and livestock holdings in the outlying countryside (26:10). Uzziah "loved the soil" (26:10--an early ecologist!), and the land prospered under him.

Also, Uzziah developed a strong army which "could wage war with great power" (26:13). In addition to the traditional weapons (26:14), Uzziah installed the latest military hardware in Jerusalem--great catapults and arrow-shooting devices (26:15). As a result, we read twice (26:8, 15) of his widespread fame.

Whenever God grants that kind of success and fame to a person, it should be used for the Lord and His purpose. Fame is simply an opportunity to tell more people of the greatness of God, so that His name is exalted. It also provides the opening to do more for the Lord's work and for His people, to see them established in His ways. George Washington Carver said that the only advantage of fame is that it gives you a platform for service. And, although viewed on a secular level, Erma Bombeck cuts to the heart of it when she says, "Don't confuse fame with success. Madonna is one; Helen Keller is the other." So we ought to view any measure of success God gives us as a trust to be managed for His glory and kingdom.

The hinge of the story is at the end of verse 15: "... for he was marvelously helped until he was strong." Uzziah's problem was precisely that--he became strong. Uzziah's success and strength led to his downfall.

2. Success is a great danger if we don't guard against pride (26:16-23).

Someone has said that the human being is the only animal that you can pat on the back and his head swells up. Uzziah started believing his own press clippings and his pride led to a fall. In one hour he ruined a prosperous lifetime as a successful king. When Uzziah became strong, his heart was lifted up, and that led him to enter the holy place in the temple to offer incense to the Lord. But the Law of Moses restricted that duty to the priests, and Uzziah was not a priest (Num. 18:1-7). Only the Messiah Jesus would combine the offices of Priest and King.

Perhaps Uzziah rationalized, "Yes, I know the Law of Moses, but let's not be legalistic! I've done well leading my people politically, but they also need strong religious leadership. Not being able to offer incense weakens my ability to lead and damages my public image. Besides, it's for a spiritual cause, to enhance our worship. And, all the foreign kings do it that way." It wasn't gross immorality or idolatry. The only problem was, God had forbidden it. Like another man in the Bible with a similar name, Uzzah (2 Sam. 6:6-7), who was struck dead for touching the ark of the covenant, Uzziah presumed on the holiness of God. Taking upon himself a task that required holiness, Uzziah was rendered ceremonially unclean for the rest of his life by being struck with leprosy. We should learn ...

A. Pride is at the heart of all sin.

In Isaiah 14:13-14, the prophet is speaking of the king of Babylon, but most Bible scholars agree that he goes beyond the human king and speaks of Satan's fall:

But you said in your heart, "I will ascend to heaven; I will raise my throne above the stars of God, and I will sit on the mount of assembly, in the recesses of the north. I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High."

Satan's original sin was pride that led him to exalt himself against God. He dangled the same temptation in front of Eve: "If you eat this fruit, you will be like God, knowing good and evil" (see Gen. 3:5). That was the beginning of the self-esteem movement, which invariably pulls God down and lifts man up. Satan was im-

plying that God was keeping Eve from realizing her full potential. But if she would only eat this fruit, she would be fulfilled. Ever since the human race fell into sin, all sin at its core consists of the arrogance of saying, "I know better than God and His ways. I don't need to submit to God's authority. I am an authority unto myself. I can be like God."

But Scripture is clear: "Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before stumbling" (Prov. 16:18). "God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble" (1 Pet. 5:5). If we want to avoid being opposed by God and if we want His grace in our lives, we must judge every proud thought and grow in humility. John Calvin wrote (*Institutes of the Christian Religion* [Westminster Press], ed. by John T. McNeill, 11:11:11):

A saying of Chrysostom's has always pleased me very much, that the foundation of our philosophy is humility. But that of Augustine pleases me even more: "When a certain rhetorician was asked what was the chief rule in eloquence, he replied, 'Delivery'; what was the second rule, 'Delivery'; what was the third rule, 'Delivery'; so if you ask me concerning the precepts of the Christian religion, first, second, third, and always I would answer, 'Humility.'"

He quotes further from Augustine:

"Why do we presume so much on ability of human nature? It is wounded, battered, troubled, lost. What we need is true confession, not false defense." Again: "When anyone realizes that in himself he is nothing and from himself he has no help, the weapons within him are broken, the wars are over. But all the weapons of impiety must be shattered, broken, and burned; you must remain unarmed, you must have no help in yourself. The weaker you are in yourself, the more readily the Lord will receive you."

Calvin concludes this section:

But I require only that, laying aside the disease of self-love and ambition, by which he is blinded and thinks more highly of himself than he ought [cf. Gal. 6:3], he rightly recognize himself in the faithful mirror of Scripture [cf. James 1:22-25].

The closer you draw to God through His Word, the more it confronts your proud, self-reliant nature and drives you to find your all in all in Christ. Even the Apostle Paul had to be given a thorn in the flesh to keep him from exalting himself (2 Cor. 12:7). He wrote, "And what do you have that you did not receive? But if you did receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it?" (1 Cor. 4:7). "Let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall" (1 Cor. 10:12). "For if anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself" (Gal. 6:3).

How is it that the American church has widely embraced a teaching for which there is absolutely no support in the Bible, that our emotional problems stem from low self-esteem? Pride is the root sin, at the heart of all sin.

When Uzziah arrogantly went in to offer incense, Azariah and 80 other priests courageously confronted this powerful king (26:17-18). We learn a second lesson about pride:

- B. Pride is revealed by an angry response to godly correction.

There are other marks of pride, of course. But invariably, if you're filled with pride, you react with indignation when a godly person tries to warn or correct you. When you become as powerful and successful as Uzziah, you can start thinking that you're accountable to no one. Your hard work and intelligence got you this far. You stop listening to those who challenge you and gather "yes men" around you. Earlier in his career, Uzziah accepted the counsel of the godly Zechariah. But now he angrily rejects the counsel of 81 godly priests: "I'm the king! These priests can't tell me what to do!" Ironically, Uzziah sought honor for himself, but these priests tell him plainly, "You have been unfaithful, and you will have no honor from the Lord God" (26:18). So Uzziah was enraged.

That's a good test of humility--how do you respond to correction? Do you examine your heart before God and admit it if you're wrong? Or, are you angry and defensive?

- C. Unjudged pride results in God's discipline.

If Uzziah would have repented on the spot, God probably would have been gracious in restoring him. But Uzziah didn't re-

pent until he realized that he had been struck with leprosy. Then he realized that God had struck him, so he hastened to get out of the temple, probably so he wouldn't get struck dead (26:20). The Lord never healed Uzziah--he remained a leper until he died. His spent his final years living in separate quarters. He never again worshipped in the house of the Lord (26:21). His son had to carry on the daily affairs of the household and kingdom. When Uzziah died, they didn't put him in the same tomb with the other kings, but buried him in the field near there so that they wouldn't defile the tomb. The final comment on his life was not, "What a great king!" but rather, "He is a leper."

You may think that God was a bit harsh with Uzziah. There's no question that His discipline was severe. But the Law prescribed death for anyone who was not a priest who entered the holy place. Uzziah could have been struck dead on the spot. We must treat God as holy.

We've lost sight of the awesome holiness of God in our day. We would dare to judge God for striking this proud man with leprosy! The promoters of self-esteem encourage us to get all our rage out toward God for the trials He has allowed into our lives! We're even being told that we need to forgive God, as if He somehow had no just cause to bring suffering into our lives! We flippantly bounce into God's presence and forget that we can only draw near through the shed blood of Jesus Christ.

God will not share His glory with proud man. If a man honors the Lord, the Lord will honor that man (1 Sam. 2:30). But if a man thinks that he is free to disregard God's Word and begins exalting himself, he will come under God's discipline (if he is a believer) or God's judgment (if he dies not trusting in Christ for salvation). The more successful we become, the more it ought to drive us to our knees with the awareness of our own weakness and sin, so that we cling to God alone as our strength and salvation.

Conclusion

One evening the great conductor Arturo Toscanini brilliantly conducted Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. The audience went mad; people clapped, whistled, and stomped their feet. Toscanini bowed and bowed. He signaled to the orchestra, and its members stood to

acknowledge the wild applause. Eventually the applause began to subside. Toscanini turned, looked intently at his musicians, and almost uncontrollably exclaimed, "Gentlemen! Gentlemen!" The men in the orchestra leaned forward to listen. Why was the maestro so disturbed? Was he angry? Had somebody missed a cue? Had the orchestra flawed the performance?

No. Toscanini was not angry. Toscanini was stirred to the very depths of his being by the sheer magnificence of Beethoven's music. Scarcely able to talk, he whispered fiercely, "Gentlemen, I am nothing." That was an extraordinary admission, since Toscanini was not known for his humility. "Gentlemen," he added, "you are nothing." That was hardly news. The members of the orchestra had often heard the same message in rehearsal. "But Beethoven," said Toscanini in a tone of adoration, "is everything, everything, everything!" (Told by Vernon Grounds, *Christianity Today*, 12/9/77, p. 13.)

That's the attitude we need toward ourselves and toward Jesus Christ. We are nothing; He is everything! If you ever receive the applause and praises of people for what you do, remember the story of King Uzziah--that the seductive danger of success is pride. And at least to yourself whisper, "Apart from Christ, I can do nothing!"

Discussion Questions

1. Should Christians strive for success? What are God's criteria for success?
2. What criteria should we use to measure a successful church? Numbers? Budget? Programs? (See Revelation 2 & 3.)
3. Does humility mean putting yourself down? How should you respond when someone compliments you for something you have done well?
4. What is the essence of biblical humility?

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