

Bobby Driscoll was born in a small town in Iowa. He was such a cute little boy that his parents took him to Hollywood for a screen test. Bobby was an immediate success. As a blond, blue-eyed 6 year old, he became Disney's first child star – the first person the Disney studio ever signed to a long-term contract. Bobby Driscoll was the star of *Treasure Island* and many other early Disney movies. He was the first voice of Peter Pan. Bobby won an Academy Award while still a young boy.

But when Bobby Driscoll was still relatively a young man in his 20's, his life took a drastic turn. He was arrested on assault, robbery, forgery and drug charges. There was no reason for his criminal behavior – he had more money than he could spend. But Bobby Driscoll's life continued in a downward spiral, and he eventually dropped out of sight. Even his father and mother didn't know where he had disappeared to. Eventually, Bobby's father began a search to find his long, lost son.

One day, 2 children playing in an abandoned tenement on New York City's lower east side found a corpse. The dead body had no identification. Authorities, after a brief investigation, buried him in an anonymous pauper's grave. A year and a half later, Bobby Driscoll's father happened by this police station on his systematic search for his son. One of the policemen remembered that the vagrant that they had buried some time before matched the general description that Mr. Driscoll gave. So the body was exhumed, the fingerprints were checked and sure enough, the father had finally found his son, Bobby.

There are many people who start out on a fast road to success in life. But the test of character is found in one's ability to maintain success. And the ultimate test of the quality of one's life is found in the ability to end well.

Whenever you watch a world class mile run where a new record is anticipated, there is always one runner who sprints out ahead of the rest. Runners call him the rabbit. The rabbit is the one who runs very fast for the first lap or so in order to set a quick pace for the other runners. But the rabbit usually doesn't even finish a quarter of the race. No, that early pace-setter just quits suddenly and walking off the track. The real, world-class runners run right on by him and finish the entire race. They are the ones who get the medals at the end and receive the applause from the crowds. The rabbit might have started out well and looked very impressive for a lap or two, but he doesn't even finish the race.

It is not happenstance that the Bible compares the Christian life to a distance race – not a sprint, but a marathon. The applause for the one who finishes well will be given by God himself when he proclaims *well done, good and faithful servant*. The rewards given will be crowns that God himself has designed.

Uzziah was a king who started out well and accomplished many admirable goals in his long and illustrious reign. But, sadly, he was not a king who finished well. I would invite you to look briefly at the life of this 5th good king of Judah as it is recorded in 2 Chronicles 26. We have been looking at the 8 kings in the southern half of Israel who are designated as good or righteous rulers by God. After the nation of Israel split following the death of Solomon, 40 kings ruled over God's people – 20 in the northern tribes that we called Ephraim or Israel and 20 in the southern section that was usually called Judah. None of the northern kings were called good – they all followed the idolatrous pattern that Jeroboam initiated setting up the golden calves in Dan and Bethel. Only 40% of the kings of Judah were called good – 8 out of 20. We have already seen why the first 4 of the 8 were righteous, now let's look together at Uzziah, the 5th good king. Note with me first of all the many good things that Uzziah accomplished in his reign. READ 2 Chronicles 26:3-15:

2CH 26:3 Uzziah was sixteen years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem fifty-two years. His mother's name was Jecoliah; she was from Jerusalem. ⁴ He did what was right in the eyes of the LORD, just as his father Amaziah had done. ⁵ He sought God during the days of Zechariah, who instructed him in the fear of God. As long as he sought the LORD, God gave him success.

2CH 26:6 He went to war against the Philistines and broke down the walls of Gath, Jabneh and Ashdod. He then rebuilt towns near Ashdod and elsewhere among the Philistines. ⁷ God helped him against the Philistines and against the Arabs who lived in Gur Baal and against the Meunites. ⁸ The Ammonites brought tribute to Uzziah, and his fame spread as far as the border of Egypt, because he had become very powerful.

2CH 26:9 Uzziah built towers in Jerusalem at the Corner Gate, at the Valley Gate and at the angle of the wall, and he fortified them. ¹⁰ He also built towers in the desert and dug many cisterns, because he had much livestock in the foothills and in the plain. He had people working his fields and vineyards in the hills and in the fertile lands, for he loved the soil.

2CH 26:11 Uzziah had a well-trained army, ready to go out by divisions according to their numbers as mustered by Jeiel the secretary and Maaseiah the officer under the direction of Hananiah, one of the royal officials. ¹² The total number of family leaders over the fighting men was 2,600. ¹³ Under their command was an army of 307,500 men trained for war, a powerful force to support the king against his enemies. ¹⁴ Uzziah provided shields, spears, helmets, coats of armor, bows and slingstones for the entire army. ¹⁵ In Jerusalem he made machines designed by skillful men for use on the towers and on the corner defenses to shoot arrows and hurl large stones. His fame spread far and wide, for he was greatly helped until he became powerful.

Uzziah certainly did many good things:

*he listened to wise counsel during his younger years. There was a wise, godly mentor named Zechariah that Uzziah listened to. Now we don't know anything else but what we read in this passage about this man Zechariah. There were many prophets named Zechariah in the Old Testament, of course, because this was such a popular name. Zechariah means *the Lord Remembers*. This is a great name to have, so it was very popular. But this obscure Zechariah that influenced Uzziah obviously was a godly person who had a positive effect on the king. It is to Uzziah's credit that he surrounded himself with godly influences that would help him on his life's journey. We often forget that the circle of influence that we choose to live in is our responsibility. God holds us responsible for the influences that we allow into our lives.

*he helped his people build a strong economy.

He built towers in the desert and dug many water cisterns. He had much livestock in the foothills and in the plain. He had people working his fields and vineyards in the hills and in the fertile lands.

In a semi-desert land that has an agriculturally based economy water is critical. Uzziah built many cisterns dug to hold the water that comes only during the 2 month rainy season in Israel. The king loved the soil. He didn't lose contact with his constituents, living in some ivory tower where he lost touch with real issues that people face. Uzziah was a king who could relate to his people. He worked hard so that the economy would prosper. And during his long reign, the nation of Judah did very well. Uzziah's reign was probably the most prosperous time of the entire divided monarchy for Judah.

*he also built a strong military providing defense and security for his people. You can see how Uzziah very carefully and systematically took care of the borders of his country.

*he defeated the Philistines (26:6) This took care of the western border of Judah between his country and the Mediterranean Sea.

*He Ruled over the Ammonites (26:8) This took care of the eastern border of Judah on the other side of the Jordan River.

⁸ *The Ammonites brought tribute to Uzziah, and his fame spread as far as the border of Egypt, because he had become very powerful.*

*you noticed also in this verse that it says his fame spread to the border of Egypt (26:8) This shows Uzziah's influence to the south. And, of course, Uzziah had his blood ally, Israel, to the north with whom he maintained good relations. So during Uzziah's reign, he carefully protected his nation, giving them a buffer zone of each side.

*And Uzziah was innovative in developing military defenses that would give Judah security and confidence. The Bible tells us that he developed catapults to hurl large stones from the walls of Jerusalem. This would have been the star wars protective missile defense system of Uzziah's day.

¹⁴ Uzziah provided shields, spears, helmets, coats of armor, bows and slingstones for the entire army.

¹⁵ In Jerusalem he made machines designed by skillful men for use on the towers and on the corner defenses to shoot arrows and hurl large stones.

*2 times it is repeated that Uzziah became famous and powerful (26:8,15) Now when the Bible says something once, it is important. But when it says the same thing again, it is usually for emphasis. Uzziah was a very famous and powerful king. In fact, when you take the land that Uzziah controlled as king of Judah and you combine it with the land that Jeroboam 2nd, the King of Israel to the north, controlled at the same time when Uzziah was ruling, you have the closest that the Jewish people ever came to the dominance that King David enjoyed after the division of the kingdom. This was without question the most prosperous time for the Jewish people during the divided kingdom period.

*Uzziah had long, prosperous reign. 52 years is a long time for any king to reign. But especially in these days when the life expectancy was so much shorter and when the 2 kings before him had been victims of assassination plots and the time before them was dominated by the pagan rule of Queen Athaliah. Uzziah assumed the throne during tenuous, turbulent times and he brought great prosperity and security to the nation. You can't ask for much more out of your political leaders than that.

It would be wonderful if we could end Uzziah's reign on that note. He would have come down in history as one of the greatest kings to have ever ruled God's people – in 3rd place after David and Solomon. But the simple, undisputed fact is that Uzziah ended poorly. The reason why he ended poorly is that he forgot who the source of his blessings was. You see, God had blessed Uzziah with all of the blessings that we have enumerated. But late in his life, after he had achieved so many successes, Uzziah became puffed up in pride. Like Nebuchadnezzar who would come just a little bit later, Uzziah looked at his kingdom and began to pat himself on the back for all that had been accomplished. In his pride, Uzziah committed a horrible sin in the eyes of God. Read it with me in 2 Chron. 26:16-21:

2CH 26:16 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. ¹⁷ Azariah the priest with eighty other courageous priests of the LORD followed him in. ¹⁸ 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."

2CH 26:19 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. ²⁰ 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.

2CH 26:21 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.

Now Ezra gives a detailed account of Uzziah's sin here in the Chronicles account. 2 Kings just tells us that Uzziah contracted leprosy – it doesn't say why. The Chronicles account also lets us know why Ezra chose to use the name Uzziah instead of Azariah for the king as the 2 Kings account did. This 5th good ruler of Judah during the divided monarchy period actually had 2 names – Azariah and Uzziah. This was a very common practice back in these days. The 2nd Kings account uses the name Azariah exclusively. The 2nd Chronicles account uses the name Uzziah exclusively. But we can now see why. 2nd Kings doesn't give any details of the ruler's sin – it just tells us that he became a leper near the end of his life. But 2nd Chronicles tells us the story of what happened in the temple. Because the high priest at this time was also named Azariah (another common Hebrew name at this time), it would have been very confusing to have 2 Azariah's in the same story – one trying to force himself into the temple area to offer incense and the other trying to prevent him from doing so. So Ezra uses Uzziah as the king's name in his giving the historical account in 2nd Chronicles.

The pride and arrogance of Uzziah is found in this attempt to sacrifice. And it's important that we remember from the account in 2nd Kings that one of his names was Azariah for it emphasizes the king's failure. Azariah means Jehovah has helped. The king had this as one of his names as a reminder that he had not achieved all of this prosperity for the nation in his own strength, but that God had helped him do it. But in his later years, Uzziah become so puffed up in pride and so arrogant that he forced his way into the holy place of the temple to offer incense sacrifice. In doing so, he was breaking at least 2 of God's commandments concerning His temple.

*In the 1st place, only priests had been designated by God to offer the incense sacrifice. And not just any priest could offer the incense. It had to be the priest who had been chosen by the lots drawn to serve in

the temple at that specific time. So in essence, God was choosing who He wanted to offer the incense sacrifice every time the lot was thrown. King Uzziah was not the person God chose to offer this incense.

*and in the 2nd place, Uzziah shouldn't have even been in that area of the temple at all. The altar of incense was located in the holy place of the temple. Only priests were designated by God to even go into that area of the temple. So Uzziah not only shouldn't have been offering the incense sacrifice, he shouldn't have even been in that area of the temple in the first place.

To the priests' credit, 81 courageous men tried to stop this powerful and famous king from doing this foolish thing. The Bible says that 80 priests joined the high priest, Azariah, in trying to dissuade Uzziah from this foolish act. But Uzziah was so puffed up in pride that he could not be deterred. He had come to the place where he felt that he was above the law. He had come to believe that he was the law. In his pride, he even felt that he was above God's law. So he willfully disobeyed what he clearly knew to be a transgression against God's holy commandments.

But God would show Uzziah who the ultimate ruler was. God wouldn't let Uzziah desecrate his temple area. As Uzziah was reaching out his hand to burn the incense on the altar, leprosy broke out on his forehead. We can't imagine the terror that must have gone through Uzziah's mind. For leprosy was the worst disease that was imaginable back in these days. Every generation has its dreaded, incurable diseases. A couple of generations ago, it was diabetes and polio. But then insulin and vaccinations were discovered. A generation ago, it was cancer. But then chemotherapy and radiation were developed. Today, it's AIDS. Back in Uzziah's day, it was leprosy. There was no hope or cure for the leper. The leper was not even allowed to live in the same community as the average person because of the contagious nature of his disease. So when leprosy broke out on Uzziah's head, he was immediately a marked man. He couldn't return to live in the palace; he couldn't even live in the city of Jerusalem. He would be doomed to spend the remainder of his life living outside of the city walls with the other lepers. His son, Jotham, would practically take over the throne of Judah. In one moment, Uzziah went from being a famous and powerful king to being a leper outcast.

As I have lived my life to this point and dealt with many different people, I have come to believe that there are 3 critical times in any person's life. Certainly we make important decisions throughout our entire life, but there are 3 times when we are most vulnerable:

*there is that important time in late adolescence and early adulthood when so many critical decisions must be made. This is the time when career choices are made; this is often the time when a life marriage partner is chosen; this is an important time when a course is chosen for one's life. Having made some of these critical decisions, a person then settles into something of a routine with family and career.

*But then mid-life comes along. This is a time when many of the goals that were set during those earlier years are achieved. The house is almost paid for now, many career goals have been achieved, there is some money in the pension program. And it is somewhere during this time that a person begins to evaluate the course of life that he or she has chosen. Was my career the right one? Have I achieved what I thought I would? This can be a turbulent time for some if there are unanswered questions in life, but it can also be a rewarding time if wise choices have been made in the past. Having gotten through the mid-life crisis, a person then embarks upon the 2nd half of his or her life.

*But sooner than we imagine come the retirement years. This is another time of great adjustment. The structured schedule of career life is traded for a great deal more freedom, but with that perk often comes health and financial issues. It is at this point that everyone faces the danger that Uzziah succumbed to – the danger of not finishing well, the danger of taking personal credit for all of the blessings that God has bestowed throughout the years.

It is important to start well – a person will never win the race if he runs the wrong course. We have to set a good life course for ourselves during our younger years.

It is important to adjust well – many a person has crashed his or her life through a poorly handled mid-life crisis. We all get side-tracked at times – we need to make the adjustments needed to get back on track again.

And it is important to finish well – how many people have lived a fine life until right near the end, but have failed to cross the finish line. Uzziah was such a person. We all need to learn lessons from his life so that we can like Paul say:

⁷ I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. ⁸ Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day--and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing. (2 Tim. 4:7, 8)