

Christ's Ambition Is Our Ambition

2 Chronicles 26:16-23 • 2021-10-24



Did you hear about the recent publicity stunt with space travel? A few days ago, the second richest man in the world made history by inviting a 90-year-old celebrity to take a journey into space. The celebrity had once starred in a groundbreaking TV series about trekking into space as the final frontier. Now at 90 years-old that actor was shot up in a rocket. He rode a capsule to the very edge of space. Naturally there were people excited by this event. But it also drew some criticism. Some people joked that they could now officially stop buying compostable straws and forget about environmental conservation efforts since some people were burning 11,000 gallons of fuel per second to blast celebrities on joy rides into outer space. I think they felt that his great success and wealth have gone to his head. Regardless of what you might think of that stunt you'd have to agree that fame and success can certainly start to go to a person's head. Space travel isn't inherently wrong. Ambition isn't wrong. And success isn't intrinsically bad. But success, power, and fame can all start to go to a person's head. Clearly you can still end up overstepping your bounds without having to step into space. It just takes one small step to cross from godly ambition into selfish pride. Today we'll consider a man in ancient Israel who was riddled with success all his life, but who ended up letting it all go to his head. And we learn an important truth about our ambitions.

Uzziah had it all going for him. He became a popular king in Judah at the young age of sixteen. And don't get me wrong. Uzziah wasn't just popular. He was actually a godly king. He was trained in the fear of the Lord and served the Lord faithfully. His ambition was good.

You can see his ambition led him to accomplish many good things for the kingdom of Judah. He inherited a weak military which had faced a humiliating defeat in the days of his father. But he never wanted to let that happen again. So, he created a strong military force. And with his military he brought security to his nation. Uzziah crushed several surrounding enemies. He tore down the walls of the Philistine's and built-up fortresses for Judah. His flocks and cattle grew to great numbers. The land prospered under him so that he dug new wells and planted new vineyards. The strength of his military grew and his reputation as a powerful king grew. He equipped his troops with the latest and greatest fighting technology. He built the towers of his cities to have the latest defense technology with early versions of catapults and projectile launchers. All this growth and success went on for over fifty years. Scripture mentions twice how his fame spread to the surrounding lands. As you read about his account in 2 Chronicles 26 it becomes very clear: Uzziah was blessed; his fame and power were renowned. He served the Lord. And his ambition was good.

But then came the turning point. 2 Chronicles 26 records, *"But when he had grown powerful, the pride in his heart led to his destruction."* Uzziah's sin doesn't seem nearly as bad as the sins of some of his fathers before him. He didn't turn to the worship of false gods. He didn't start to introduce Baal worship. He didn't take on multiple wives and worship their gods. What was his sin? He entered the temple of the Lord.

You might say, "Isn't that a good thing that he entered the temple of the Lord?" It is good to come near to the Lord and to worship him. But it is never good to come near to his house and worship him in pride. Uzziah entered the temple to perform the duties that were only assigned to the priests. He was going to offer up incense on the altar, a task which only the priests were appointed to do. When Uzziah stepped into the temple to make an offering, Azariah the head priests confronted him. Eighty other brave priests also joined with Azariah. *"It is not right for you, Uzziah, to burn incense to the Lord. That is for the priests, the sons of Aaron, who are consecrated to burn incense. Get out of the sanctuary, because you have been unfaithful. This action will not result in any praise for you from the Lord God."*

We see this same type of overreaching of authority all the time. There are those in politics taking on more power than what was given to them. We see lawmakers and judges placing themselves over God by the types of laws they make and enforce. No judge has the right to say killing a human being isn't murder. No one gave any lawmaker the right to redefine God's created order. Power grabbing is done by those who try to change God's design for marriage, for human life, and for human sexuality. We constantly see people taking on more than what God has given them.

And we are familiar with what happens when someone gets too much power and control. They use it to take on more power. Because who can stand against the powerful? These priests were described as brave. And wouldn't you have to be brave to stand up against such a popular and powerful king?

It doesn't shock us that the human heart craves more and more power. But it should alarm us that even godly ambition can end up turning into selfish pride. We've all heard the expression, "pride comes before the fall." That isn't just true for unbelievers. It is also true for godly men and how they chose to live and worship the Lord. Uzziah was described as faithful to the Lord and wasn't worshipping idols. But Uzziah overstepped his limits in pride.

What about those who serve the Lord today? There have been popular and successful presidents of church bodies, seminary professors, and church leaders who have let their popularity and position take over. They assume that because they are successful, they are God's gift to the church. They make changes which God never called them to

make. Pride comes before the fall for church leaders. Is the Roman Papacy the only church leader to ever overstep his authority before God? Synods and church bodies have crumbled under the prideful changes of some of their leaders. Pastors are called to serve the church. Some, however, lord it over the church. Heads of households are called to lead their family in instruction of the Lord. But then they sometimes end up dismissing the role of their God-given pastor. Some for example presumed during the pandemic that they didn't need their pastor and began to serve the sacrament at home even though they had a God-given shepherd. Is that godly ambition or selfish pride? Many families have crumbled under spiritual pride disguised as godliness. How many children have brought spiritual turmoil into their homes when they abandon their parent's faithful church? Why do they do it. It's certainly not always done in humility! How many have arrogantly treated their church or pastor as disposable to their own spiritual harm? How many are not content to carry out the role which God has given them and overstep their bounds?

Pride leads to destruction. What role has God called you to in his kingdom? Is it to parent, to lead others, to serve as a head or as a helper? Maybe you don't want to fly a rocket to space, but might you want to sometimes tread where God has called others to serve and not you? The moment we presume too much before God we have crossed the line from godly ambition to selfish pride. And the moment we think we can approach God on our own terms we have crossed a deadly line that leads to destruction.

Uzziah was confronted by the brave eighty priests. I pray that if I ever see someone overstep their bounds, I have the courage to confront them even if they are popular and powerful. I pray that if I ever overstep my calling to shepherd the flock that there is someone brave enough to call me to account. Granted, I'm not widely popular, but would you call me or another pastor to account even if they were popular? And how would you respond if someone rebuked you for going too far in pride with your own spiritual life? Would you get angry or humble yourself?

Uzziah responded by becoming enraged. How dare the priests hold him back! But God responded too. Uzziah was immediately struck with leprosy. He rushed out of the temple in fear as the priests escorted him out. It's no small thing to overstep before God.

I don't think Uzziah fully grasped what he was doing with that small overstepping! Those who want a higher place than what God has given them don't know what they are really asking. We read earlier in Mark 10 about two of Jesus' disciples who let their position go to their heads. James and John wanted more than a position of apostleship. They wanted to be the second and third in command and seated in glory.

Jesus responded by telling them they didn't know what they were really asking. You want to be exalted in God's kingdom? Then imagine yourself confined to your God-given role as servant of all. *"You know that those who are considered rulers over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. ⁴³But that is not the way it is to be among you. Instead, whoever wants to be great among you will be your servant, ⁴⁴and whoever wants to be first among you will be a slave of all. ⁴⁵For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."*

How could we even dare to take one step closer to God in our pride? But our God stepped in to call us back to our place. We have accounts like this to remind us of the dangers of our pride. We have his Word that exposes our own sinful pride. It wasn't just Uzziah and James and John who struggled with pride. You do. I do. We all do. And the position we've earned is a place of punishment with all who in pride try to be like God or place themselves over God.

There is one man, however, who never overstepped his divinely given role. Jesus alone had the right to enter the throne of God. He alone was consecrated and holy enough to stand in the holy presence of the throne of God and offer up any sacrifice. He could not overstep his bounds. But despite his great position he stepped into every sinner's place. He entered this world in lowliness. He served us all and gave his life up for us all. That was the place and position he chose to take. That is the one we follow.

The next time you feel like you deserve to over assert your position in God's kingdom, remember Christ. Remember him stepping in our place. Remember his great display of humility and sacrifice. Pride may come before the fall. But humility comes before being lifted. Just as Jesus rose in victory over death and hell, you will rise with him. We need not overstep our bounds. We will be invited into his presence and given a seat at his table. We will be lifted up.

That 90-year-old celebrity was excited about the invitation to visit space. When he got back from space, he began to poetically describe how frail human existence is. There is just a thin line between life and death. We are just a very small step away from sudden death. He was right about that!

No human being can stand in pride or dare to tread where God has not invited them. Thank God that he has made it his ambition to invite us to serve him! Our ambition has changed. Christ's ambition is now ours. His ambition, one of lowliness, service, and the cross, is now our ambition. Fulfill with that same godly ambition whatever role our God has given you in this life. Whether you serve as a pastor, parent, friend, child, mother, father, or any other role, do it with the same ambition as Christ.