

Character Studies: Uzziah, Daniel, Stephen

In today's readings we have three character studies, each providing lessons for ourselves, Uzziah, Daniel and Stephen. So let us turn to 2 Chron 26 and read about Uzziah, his father was murdered because they were dissatisfied with him, the nation was very unstable when at the age of 16 he began to reign. "2.Chron 26 v 3 Uzziah was 16 years old when he became king and he reigned in Jerusalem for 52 years. His mothers name was Jecoliah, she was from Jerusalem. He did that which was right in the eyes of the Lord, just as his father Amaziah had done. 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". We are told that this Zechariah, (not the prophet that wrote the book), but a God fearing advisor taught him the fear of the Lord.

Uzziah had tremendous enthusiasm, and with God's help he had dramatic victories over the Philistines and Arabians and others so feared him that they paid tribute. He establish extensive agricultural policies, built well fortified defences, had a well trained army – (V 13 of 307,500 men – that's as big as the Russian army) The nation became prosperous and internationally renowned. End of verse 15, "His fame spread far and wide, for he was greatly helped until he became powerful". This peace and prosperity was the direct blessing of his believing in God, v5 He sought God during the days of Zechariah --- as long as he sought the Lord, God gave him success". It is the same with us; we will only be spiritually successful whilst we seek the Lord. Do we really seek the Lord every day?- Uzziahs faith in God was known far and wide and people could see by the results and actions that he was a believer in God. Do we show by our lives that we too are believers? Do we dig, weed and cultivate our spiritual fields to produce fruit? There can be no results without toil. He built defences against the enemies – How strong are we building our defences against the enemy? - our greatest enemy being ourselves, we are influenced by the world we live in, "the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the pride of life".

Uzziah's success seems to have gone to his head, he seems to have thought all the prosperity and security of Judah – the Ecclesia of God - was as the result of his own achievements – when they were the result of Gods blessing. He felt he could go into the temple and offer incense, a work which God had specifically reserved for the divinely appointed Priests, and so, was struck down with leprosy. V 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". The only way God had provided for man to communicate with Himself was via the priests. In the case of Uzziah his affliction resulted in his living outside of Jerusalem, where doubtless he reflected upon his mistakes and so could have been forgiven. Even great Moses, the meekest of men lapsed in saying, "must we fetch you water out of the rock", when it was not him but God. We cannot claim any successes, anything achieved is because of God's blessing.

In looking at Uzziah's successes, one thing that struck me was that they seemed all material things – big army,

intensive agricultural development, fortifications and the like. But there is no mention of the temple being restored and the precious metals replaced or the idols removed. Indeed the idolatrous altars were still in place. Has this any lessons for us? We believe in God and He seems to have blessed many of us above the average; are we becoming a body of intellectual materialists? We have many fine halls, great gatherings, hyped up with sophisticated upmarket presentations, but over the last few years in particular, it seems to me the Gospel is primarily preached by example, especially to the poor of this world. That's where the majority of converts

have always come from, and there is a possibility that the blessings of God we all have may not always be directed at the right things.

Turning to Daniel, we have another young man, who at 15 was taken captive to Babylon, nine hundred miles away taking two months of walking 15 miles a day – they must have been exhausted, fearful and hungry, sad at leaving home and family who may have been killed. He was selected with others for training in the palace and they were given a meal from the king's table. I guess it was a superb meal, but Daniel and his three friends refused to eat it. What an insult to the king, they were being given privileged food. Why? because it would have been offered to idols and they did not believe in the king's gods but in the God of Israel. Somehow, via the hand of providence they were allowed to have simpler food that had not been offered to idols. These lads had made a stand, and God blessed them, they had purposed in their hearts to serve the Lord irrespective of consequences. That little verse from a poem, sums up Daniel's character.

Dare to be a Daniel,
Dare to stand-alone
Dare to have a purpose firm
And dare to make it known,

After Daniel had interpreted the dream, Nebuchadnezzar had a great image built possibly representing himself and forced every one to bow down and worship it. But Daniel's three friends refused – The king was furious – these three Hebrew captives refusing to bow down to him, the god of the earth. As far as Nebuchadnezzar was concerned none was greater than himself. In chapter 3 vs16-18, the humble declaration of the three friends is made. "O Nebuchadnezza, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it, and he will rescue us from your hand, O king. But even if he does not, we want you to know O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up". They were prepared to die, rather than deny their God. They were tested to the limit of endurance. – In his rage Nebuchadnezzar commanded them to be thrown into the fire, and not a hair of their head was singed; the angel of the Lord delivered them. They were not certain if God would give them a last minute reprieve. Even if they had died, it would only be a peaceful sleep until the resurrection.

There is no doubt that God can deliver from such situations. In a smaller way, the fiery trials we sometimes may undergo, we are delivered, not by our own prowess, but by God working through our guardian angels. There are times when one is not delivered; sometimes God's servants are killed – even His only begotten Son had to go through intense suffering and an agonizing death. But he believed in God, he was faithful unto death and consequently God in righteousness raised him from the dead and it is through his death that He will save us from eternal death and give us the more abundant life at Jesus' coming.

Sometimes people can get jealous and try to undermine one, and this happened to Daniel when the other Administrators ganged up on him, Daniel 6 v5, they said, "We will never find any basis for charge against this man Daniel unless it has something to do with the law of his God" So they got the king to make a decree that no one for thirty days should pray to any God except Nebuchadnezzar. It was a really dirty trick to play on loyal Daniel who is thought to have been 80 years old at that time. Daniel was not afraid to make it known that he still prayed to the God of Israel and consequently was thrown into the lions den. But the angel of the Lord delivered him. Fortunately we do not seem to be called upon to make such great decisions, but in a smaller way, some at times may seek to prey upon us like roaring lions to devour us - but faith in our

God, can deliver us from them.

How? By his angels. The same angels that delivered Daniel look after us, we read of the angels "Are they not all ministering spirits, sent forth to minister for those who shall be heirs of salvation?" Because of our belief in the Gospel, which by God's grace has been revealed to us, we are heirs to the Kingdom and the specific job of the angels is to minister to us, to help us gain the Kingdom. The power of the angels is tremendous – one in one night destroyed 185,00 Assyrians, Why? Because Hezekiah prayed to God.

Daniel had a regular plan of praying to God three times a day. Prayer requires the deep purposeful concentration of our minds, so that we can project our minds beyond the affairs of this life and dwell upon divine things. It is only by being constantly in attune with God that we can walk with Him. His hand will be holding ours and leading us as a good shepherd, over the hills and through the dark valleys, and nothing, even if its roaring lions, or fiery trials, will be able to separate us from the love of God.

Then we come to Daniel Ch 7, we all know how the beasts give greater detail to the to Daniel Ch 2, Nebuchadrezzas image. There are differences of opinion over the later day possibilities, many fell in v 25 the time, times and half a time refer to 1260 literal days of persecution of the saints, some interpret the saints as being Israel others ourselves, may be it is both Israel and the saints. There is much talk of "The faiths" by the Pope, Prince Charles and various others and they may well turn against Israel and those like ourselves who are pro Israel. Whatever the outcome, nothing can happen to us outside of God's control and the same God that cared for Daniel and his three friends will also look after us. Perhaps the time of trouble such as never was is yet to come, it could for us be a most exciting time in which we

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We now look at Stephen who dared to be a Daniel and paid the price for so doing. The pious religious leaders with all there understanding and knowledge of the Scriptures. Were furious and gnashed their teeth against his preaching, their legalistic intellectualism and materialism was being challenged. It was because of their jealous, envious pride that they killed Jesus and also Stephen. God allowed those evil men to act like that, which in the end God turned to advantage. In Acts 7 v9 Stephen gives the example of Joseph "Because the patriarchs were jealous of Joseph they sold him into Egypt" The poor lad Joseph suffered dreadfully – in spite of his keeping his faith in God, things so often looked bleak and impossible, God seemed to have forsaken him. His guardian angel was there, manipulating evil circumstance, ultimately for his good that he became the ruler of Egypt. And could deliver his family from death. Incredible!

Stephens's martyrdom marked a turning point in the Truth; the believers scattered all over the world taking the Gospel with them. That proud punctilious Pharisee, who looked after their cloths, whilst they lobed stones at Stephen, indeed he may have been the ringleader of this killing. This Saul who became Paul seems to have been haunted at times over this wicked act ,which he mentions several times in his writings, I think it played an important part in his conversion. Stephen gave Paul an example to follow, that he never forgot. Stephens last words to Paul were, Lord do not hold this sin against them", God granted that Prayer and Paul was forgiven and became an example for us to follow.

In these three lives we can see the hand of God in control. In Uzziahs case the Country prospered in many ways and the enemies of other nations, naturally stronger than Judah did not attack them, and they had peace and prosperity, all the time that he believed God. In Daniel we have seen as a young and old man he put God first and the angels openly delivered him from what humanly speaking was certain death. We see Stephen loyally proclaiming the Truth and rebuking them for their evil, and challenging them to repent which cost him his mortal life, but his martyrdom served a great purpose in the Truths formative years.

Today they all rest from their labours in sleep and we have in our humble ways to follow their examples and to have total Trust in God. In spite of apparent difficulties either caused by others, even ourselves or the frailty of the flesh, God is in total control, nothing can happen to us outside of Gods control. There is a purpose behind everything, which we will only know when Jesus returns. The angels are there to minister to our needs. It is Gods purpose, that because by His grace we have understood the Gospel, believe and try to honour Him, that we are going to inherit the Kingdom. Jesus so loves us that he endured the cross and despised the shame so that he could win us as his bride.

So let us, dare to be a Christian,

Dare to stand-alone

Dare to have a purpose firm

And dare to make it known.