



THE TREE OF LIFE

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In the year 739 BC, Isaiah, a prophet of Judah, had an encounter with God.

Isaiah 6

¹ It was in the year King Uzziah died that I saw the Lord.

Who was this King Uzziah? Why was his death such a strong point of transition in the life of God's prophet?

Let's find out from the history of 2 Chronicles 26.

After the death of King Amaziah (his father), Uzziah was crowned king of Judah.

³ Uzziah was sixteen years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem fifty-two years. His mother was Jecoliah from Jerusalem. ⁴ He did what was pleasing in the Lord's sight, just as his father, Amaziah, had done. ⁵ Uzziah sought God during the days of Zechariah, who taught him to fear God. And as long as the king sought guidance from the Lord, God gave him success.

⁶ Uzziah declared war on the Philistines and broke down the walls of Gath, Jabneh, and Ashdod. Then he built new towns in the Ashdod area and in other parts of Philistia. ⁷ God helped him in his wars against the Philistines, his battles with the Arabs of Gur, and his wars with the Meunites. ⁸ The Meunites paid annual tribute to him, and his fame spread even to Egypt, for he had become very powerful.

⁹ Uzziah built fortified towers in Jerusalem at the Corner Gate, at the Valley Gate, and at the angle in the wall. ¹⁰ He also constructed forts in the wilderness and dug many water cisterns, because he kept great herds of livestock in the foothills of Judah and on the plains. He was also a man who loved the soil. He had many workers who cared for his farms and vineyards, both on the hillsides and in the fertile valleys.

¹¹ Uzziah had an army of well-trained warriors, ready to march into battle, unit by unit. This army had been mustered and organized by Jeiel, the secretary of the army, and his assistant, Maaseiah. They were under the direction of Hananiah, one of the king's officials. ¹² These regiments of mighty warriors were commanded by 2,600 clan leaders. ¹³ The army consisted of 307,500 men, all elite troops. They were prepared to assist the king against any enemy.

¹⁴ Uzziah provided the entire army with shields, spears, helmets, coats of mail, bows, and sling stones. ¹⁵ And he built structures on the walls of Jerusalem, designed by experts to protect those who shot arrows and hurled large stones from the towers and the corners of the wall. His fame spread far and wide, for the Lord gave him marvelous help, and he became very powerful.

¹⁶ But when he had become powerful, he also became proud, which led to his downfall. He sinned against the Lord his God by entering the sanctuary of the Lord's Temple and personally burning incense on the incense altar.

¹⁷ Azariah the high priest went in after him with eighty other priests of the Lord, all brave men.

¹⁸ They confronted King Uzziah and said, "It is not for you, Uzziah, to burn incense to the Lord. That is the work of the priests alone, the descendants of Aaron who are set apart for this work. Get out of the sanctuary, for you have sinned. The Lord God will not honor you for this!"

¹⁹ Uzziah, who was holding an incense burner, became furious. But as he was standing there raging at the priests before the incense altar in the Lord's Temple, leprosy suddenly broke out on his forehead.

²⁰ When Azariah the high priest and all the other priests saw the leprosy, they rushed him out. And the king himself was eager to get out because the Lord had struck him. ²¹ So King Uzziah had leprosy until the day he died. He lived in isolation in a separate house, for he was excluded from the Temple of the Lord. His son Jotham was put in charge of the royal palace, and he governed the people of the land.

A very powerful king, who sought the Lord and to whom God gave great success. He was a godly leader, who lost his way when, through pride, he crossed a moral line and presumed to act in the priest's role. God struck him with leprosy and he spent the rest of his years in isolation, excluded from the throne and the Temple and the Presence. This was the king who had just died—Isaiah's king—when Isaiah saw the Lord.

Now, with this background, let's return to the words Isaiah recorded:

Isaiah 6

¹ It was in the year King Uzziah died that I saw the Lord. He was sitting on a lofty throne, and the train of His robe filled the Temple. ² Attending Him were mighty seraphim, each having six wings. With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. ³ They were calling out to each other,

"Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of Heaven's Armies! The whole earth is filled with His glory!"

⁴ Their voices shook the Temple to its foundations, and the entire building was filled with smoke.

⁵ Then I said, "It's all over! I am doomed, for I am a sinful man. I have filthy lips, and I live among a people with filthy lips. Yet I have seen the King, the Lord of Heaven's Armies."

⁶ Then one of the seraphim flew to me with a burning coal he had taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. ⁷ He touched my lips with it and said, "See, this coal has touched your lips. Now your guilt is removed, and your sins are forgiven."

⁸ Then I heard the Lord asking, “Whom should I send as a messenger to this people? Who will go for Us?”

I said, “Here I am. Send me.”

⁹ And He said, “Yes, go, and say to this people,

‘Listen carefully, but do not understand. Watch closely, but learn nothing.’ ¹⁰ Harden the hearts of these people. Plug their ears and shut their eyes. That way, they will not see with their eyes, nor hear with their ears, nor understand with their hearts and turn to Me for healing.”

¹¹ Then I said, “Lord, how long will this go on?”

And He replied,

“Until their towns are empty, their houses are deserted, and the whole country is a wasteland;

¹² until the Lord has sent everyone away, and the entire land of Israel lies deserted.

¹³ If even a tenth—a remnant—survive, it will be invaded again and burned. But as a terebinth or oak tree leaves a stump when it is cut down, so Israel’s stump will be a holy seed.”

Israel was a great tree, God’s chosen tree to feed the nations. But, like their King Uzziah, they were cut down in the end because of their stubborn pride and sin.

However, take note of this: *Israel’s stump will be a holy seed*. They were cut down, but not destroyed. They still had a future; they would grow again and produce good fruit. Their destiny was intact, but delayed.

Over 170 years later (567 BC), Daniel was in captivity in Babylon, when his king, Nebuchadnezzar, had a nightmare. When all his magicians and fortune-tellers could not unravel the mystery of the dream, at last, Daniel was called. God gave Daniel the dream’s interpretation. It was a stern warning and a promise. I’ll let Nebuchadnezzar tell the story, for it is his own.

Daniel 4

¹ King Nebuchadnezzar sent this message to the people of every race and nation and language throughout the world:

“Peace and prosperity to you!

² “I want you all to know about the miraculous signs and wonders the Most High God has performed for me. ³ How great are His signs, how powerful His wonders! His kingdom will last forever, His rule through all generations.

That’s Now, but This was Then

⁴ “I, Nebuchadnezzar, was living in my palace in comfort and prosperity. ⁵ But one night I had a dream that frightened me; I saw visions that terrified me as I lay in my bed.

¹⁰ “ ‘While I was lying in my bed, this is what I dreamed. I saw a large tree in the middle of the earth. ¹¹ The tree grew very tall and strong, reaching high into the heavens for all the world to see. ¹² It had fresh green leaves, and it was loaded with fruit for all to eat. Wild animals lived in its shade, and birds nested in its branches. All the world was fed from this tree.

¹³ “ ‘Then as I lay there dreaming, I saw a messenger, a holy one, coming down from heaven.

¹⁴ The messenger shouted,

*“Cut down the tree and lop off its branches! Shake off its leaves and scatter its fruit!
Chase the wild animals from its shade and the birds from its branches.*

¹⁵ But leave the stump and the roots in the ground, bound with a band of iron and bronze and surrounded by tender grass.

Now let him be drenched with the dew of heaven, and let him live with the wild animals among the plants of the field.

¹⁶ For seven periods of time, let him have the mind of a wild animal instead of the mind of a human.

*¹⁷ For this has been decreed by the messengers; it is commanded by the holy ones, **so that everyone may know that the Most High rules over the kingdoms of the world.** He gives them to anyone He chooses— even to the lowliest of people.”*

¹⁹ “Upon hearing this, Daniel (also known as Belteshazzar) was overcome for a time, frightened by the meaning of the dream. Then the king said to him, ‘Belteshazzar, don’t be alarmed by the dream and what it means.’

*“Belteshazzar replied, ‘I wish the events foreshadowed in this dream would happen to your enemies, my lord, and not to you! ²⁰ The tree you saw was growing very tall and strong, reaching high into the heavens for all the world to see. ²¹ It had fresh green leaves and was loaded with fruit for all to eat. Wild animals lived in its shade, and birds nested in its branches. ²² **That tree, Your Majesty, is you.** For you have grown strong and great; your greatness reaches up to heaven, and your rule to the ends of the earth.*

²³ “ ‘Then you saw a messenger, a holy one, coming down from heaven and saying, “Cut down the tree and destroy it. But leave the stump and the roots in the ground, bound with a band of iron and bronze and surrounded by tender grass. Let him be drenched with the dew of heaven. Let him live with the animals of the field for seven periods of time.”

*²⁴ “ ‘This is what the dream means, Your Majesty, and what the Most High has declared will happen to my lord the king. ²⁵ You will be driven from human society, and you will live in the fields with the wild animals. You will eat grass like a cow, and you will be drenched with the dew of heaven. Seven periods of time will pass while you live this way, **until you learn that the Most High rules over the kingdoms of the world and gives them to anyone he chooses.** ²⁶ But the stump and roots of the tree were left in the ground. This means that you will receive your kingdom back again when you have learned that heaven rules.*

*²⁷ “ ‘King Nebuchadnezzar, please accept my advice. Stop sinning and do what is right. Break from your wicked past and be merciful to the poor. Perhaps then you will continue to prosper.’
One Year Later*

²⁸ “But all these things did happen to King Nebuchadnezzar. ²⁹ Twelve months later he was taking a walk on the flat roof of the royal palace in Babylon. ³⁰ As he looked out across the city, he said, ‘Look at this great city of Babylon! By my own mighty power, I have built this beautiful city as my royal residence to display my majestic splendor.’

³¹ “While these words were still in his mouth, a voice called down from heaven, ‘O King Nebuchadnezzar, this message is for you! You are no longer ruler of this kingdom. ³² You will be driven from human society. You will live in the fields with the wild animals, and you will eat

grass like a cow. Seven periods of time will pass while you live this way, **until you learn that the Most High rules over the kingdoms of the world and gives them to anyone He chooses.**'

³³ "That same hour the judgment was fulfilled, and Nebuchadnezzar was driven from human society. He ate grass like a cow, and he was drenched with the dew of heaven. He lived this way until his hair was as long as eagles' feathers and his nails were like birds' claws.

³⁴ "After this time had passed, I, Nebuchadnezzar, looked up to heaven. My sanity returned, and I praised and worshiped the Most High and honored the One who lives forever. His rule is everlasting, and His kingdom is eternal. ³⁵ All the people of the earth are nothing compared to Him. He does as He pleases among the angels of heaven and among the people of the earth. No one can stop Him or say to Him, 'What do You mean by doing these things?'

³⁶ "When my sanity returned to me, so did my honor and glory and kingdom. My advisers and nobles sought me out, and I was restored as head of my kingdom, with even greater honor than before.

³⁷ "Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and glorify and honor the King of heaven. All His acts are just and true, and He is able to humble the proud."

In summary, King Nebuchadnezzar was enriched by the Lord's will and became very powerful, represented by the great tree in his dream. But his power and wealth fed his pride and he was cut down to a mere stump by the hand of God, who will share His glory with no one. **A great tree to a small stump—by the hand of the Sovereign Lord.**

Do you see the connection to Isaiah's prophecy almost two centuries earlier?

Israel, also, was cut down to a stump, as an act of divine discipline for their departure from the faith, but **the stump prefigured their eventual restoration and return to great fruitfulness.** For the covenant God made with their ancestor Abraham promised that all the nations of the world would be blessed through Abraham's descendant, which is Jesus Christ. And God watches over His words of promise to fulfill them, in spite of the waywardness of His people.

So, also, with the dream of Nebuchadnezzar. His demise was discipline, not destruction. **His stump and roots were left in the ground, as a promise of future restoration and regrowth.** And, indeed, that's what happened in his life. Once Nebuchadnezzar concluded that all glory belonged to God, he called upon the Lord, and God restored his sanity and also his kingdom and greatness.

Okay, fascinating as these illustrations and their connection may be, what do these stories have to do with us? We, too, are experiencing changes and transitions in our world. The pandemic has shifted all that we knew as normal life. Riotous protests about racial prejudice have shaken our peace. A rancorous presidential election presents a variety of possible transitions in leadership.

Transitions of leadership in themselves are confusing and difficult. Some people are elated by the changes, while others are discouraged by the same changes. Some celebrate, while others sulk. That's just the way humans behave.

But these Biblical records give us a privileged glimpse behind the curtain of human politics and culture, to see the sovereign hand of our God at work among the nations of the world.

Psalm 75:6 *No one from the east or the west or from the desert can exalt a man.*

⁷ But it is God who judges: He brings one down, He exalts another.

This is why the Church of Jesus Christ is commanded to pray for those in leadership in our nation, whether or not they were our balloted choice. While others may celebrate them or jeer at them, only God's people are committed to *pray* for them—for their well-being, for their wisdom, for their courage, for their uprightness.

If we permit our political leanings or social philosophies to undermine or commandeer our faith and allegiance to Jesus Christ, it is *we* who will experience the discipline of the Lord. For, in truth, it is the Church (for all its weaknesses and fractures) that is the moral compass of our generation. If we abandon our place as servants of the Most High God, there is no one to replace us. There is no Plan B.

We are bound by Scripture to maintain the unity the Spirit gives us with everything that is within us. To bend every effort. To lend all our strength. To pursue with all our heart. To permit nothing—not even a transition of leadership (whether within the church or outside the church) to dampen our spirits or sideline our faith.

The Church of Jesus Christ is neither red nor blue. It is both. It is purple—the color of royalty. Let's represent our King and His everlasting Kingdom during whatever changes may come—in this election, or in the days to come.

For our destiny is to be a people of God—one people, united in faith and spirit. Our destiny is to bear much fruit for the glory of God. Our destiny is to change the world, one transformed and discipled soul at a time.

Church, you have a job to do. Don't shirk it. Don't ignore it. Don't neglect it.

You're going to leave this building this afternoon. You're going to leave your house tomorrow morning. As you're going—wherever each day may take you—make disciples from among all peoples. You are their tree of life.

This is our mandate. This is our contribution to world peace. This is our investment in the Kingdom to come. Shine the light of the Gospel message wherever and whenever you can.

Be a faithful Christian.

Be a reliable soldier of Christ.

Be a fruitful tree in the garden of the Lord.

The world—your family, your friends, your neighbors—are looking to you.

Show them Christ.