

The Long and Winding Road

Isaiah 6

Uzziah wasn't a bad king. To the contrary, he was a king who reigned for a long time and he generally lived up to both his names. We read about this ancient king of Judah in the Old Testament, especially the books of Second Kings and Second Chronicles.

“Uzziah” is a composite name from two Hebrew words. “Uzziah” combines the Hebrew abbreviation for Yahweh (the “iah” part of the name) with a Hebrew root. The root is *'uz*, meaning “strength,” so the name “Uzziah” means, “Yahweh is [my] strength.” And God was Uzziah's strength – generally.

Uzziah is also known by an alternate name “Azariah.” Like “Uzziah,” “Azariah” is also a composite name in Hebrew. It combines the abbreviation for Yahweh with the Hebrew root for “help” (*'azar*). We can translate “Azariah” as, “Yahweh is [my] help.” And God was Azariah's help – generally.

But even the best kings can go astray. Even the best prophets can go astray. Even the best people can go astray. As Jesus warned those who wished to stone a woman caught in adultery, “Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her” (Jn. 8:7).

The History of Uzziah/Azariah

In 2 Kings, the Prophet Historian principally uses the name, “Azariah.” Azariah began to reign at age 16, and he sat on the throne for 52 years. This inordinately long stretch includes the time that Azariah's father was technically king (although *in absentia*, as a conquered king in captivity in Israel and on the run in Judah). It also includes the time where Azariah's son Jotham was co-regent.¹ Like his father and grandfather, 2 Kings tells us that Azariah, “did what was right in the eyes of the Lord,” yet there is still the caveat that it was in the same measure as his father:

And he did what was right in the eyes of the LORD, according to all that his father Amaziah had done. Nevertheless, the high places were not taken away. The people still sacrificed and made offerings on the high places (2 Kings 15:3-4).

Beyond this, the 52-year reign of Azariah is wrapped up in Kings noting that the Lord “touched the king, so that he was a leper to the day of his death, and he lived in a separate

¹ See, Thiele, Edwin, *A Chronology of the Hebrew Kings*, (Zondervan 1977), at 41ff. See also part 3 to this lesson available for download at www.Biblical-Literacy.com.

house” (2 Kings 15:5). That is all the Prophet Historian is willing to say in 2 Kings, save that Azariah’s son Jotham reigned as regent while his father was a leper.

To further unfold the story of this king, one must look deeper into Scripture as well as some history and archaeology. 2 Chronicles 26 fills in the details nicely, using the alternate name Uzziah.

The people placed 16-year old Uzziah on the throne in place of his father Amaziah. Reading and remembering what happened to his father puts the pieces together with relatively little speculation. Although he was a godly king in Judah, Azariah/Uzziah’s father “Amaziah” had let his confidence over winning his battle against the Edomites become blind arrogance. He added the gods of Edom to his retinue, and then Amaziah led Judah into an ill-conceived battle against Israel at Beth Shemesh. In that battle, the wicked Israelite king Joash defeated Judah, and captured and imprisoned Amaziah. Before returning with his captive adversary, Joash also marched to Jerusalem, destroyed part of the walls and gates (leaving it vulnerable to attack by others), and grabbed the bounty available in the king’s house, temple, and elsewhere. Hostages were taken from among the common people as well.

This defeat was devastating and humiliating. Tellingly, even with their king captive and alive, the people of Judah seemed to have no interest in getting him back. Instead, they set his 16-year-old son on the throne. So great was the native discontent and disgust with the exiled king, that when the king was allowed to return to Judah a decade or so later, the Judahites conspired against him and ultimately assassinated him in Lachish.

As Chronicles explains in greater detail, Uzziah was placed on the throne at an early age, but was under the care and guidance of the godly Zechariah.

He [Uzziah] set himself to seek God in the days of Zechariah, who instructed him in the fear of God, and as long as he sought the LORD, God made him prosper (2 Chron. 26:5).

Uzziah was able to defeat the Philistines in the west, including their strongholds at Gath, Jabneh, and Ashdod. Uzziah defeated Bedouin tribes in the south,² and the Meunite tribes and Ammonites in the east. The strength of Uzziah reached as far south as Egypt, where his “fame spread” (2 Chron. 26:8).

Uzziah successfully rebuilt the broken walls of Jerusalem, fortifying it beyond the destruction wrought by Joash. In the desert and wilderness lands of southern Judah and

² “God helped him against ...the Arabians who lived in Gurbaal” (2 Chron. 26:7). Scholars are uncertain of the location of this town, which means, in Hebrew, “the dwelling of Baal.” See entry “Gurbaal” in Bromiley, G. W., ed., *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, Revised*. (Eerdmans 2002).

beyond, Uzziah built cisterns that aided the herders.³ Uzziah mustered a large and strong military, segregating the troops into divisions and sections. Rather than expecting the soldiers to provide their own weapons (which was typical), Uzziah prepared for the army shields, spears, helmets, armor, bows and slings. He also made primitive catapults for launching projectiles from Jerusalem’s towers.⁴

Chronicles records these magnificent achievements of Uzziah, as he listened to the prophet Zechariah. As he grew strong, however, things changed. The Chronicler puts a stark contrast together in 2 Chronicles 26:15-16:

And his fame spread far, for he was marvelously helped, till he was strong.
But when he was strong, he grew proud, to his destruction.

The Hebrew nestles these words right together. We get a better picture if we segregate out each Hebrew word with markings so we do not dilute the power by having to use multiple English words to convey the full meaning:

He was marvelously helped] until] when he was strong] and because he was strong]
grew proud] his heart] until destroyed]

We need to pause and notice the play on words used by the Chronicler. The first word, in English “He was marvelously helped”, is the same core word as in the name “Azariah,” which we mentioned earlier means, “Yahweh is my help.” After “until,” we have in Hebrew the word translated, “when he was strong.” The core word in Hebrew is a synonym for the core word in the name “Uzziah,” which means “God is my strength.” The passage is saying very beautifully in Hebrew, in essence, “He was Azariah and Uzziah until he grew proud and was destroyed!”

The words are depressingly written, and rightly so. The Chronicler gives some further details. Calling it “unfaithful to the LORD his God,” Uzziah is cited for entering the temple

³ Uzziah kept a solid interest in ranching and agriculture. The Chronicler underscored, “he loved the soil,” describing the care Uzziah took in not only hiring, but supplying materials for farmers and vinedressers (2 Chron. 26:10).

⁴ “The invention of these war machines marks an era in warfare, since by their use the power of an army was greatly increased whether for attack or defense. They were simply machine bows and slings, which, by the application of mechanical principles, were made to propel heavier projectiles than the smaller weapons that were held by hand... Nearly all catapults employed in ancient and medieval artillery operated by a sudden release of tension on wooden beams or twisted cords of horsehair, gut, sinew, or other fibers... Several balls of limestone that were found in excavations in Jerusalem in 1869 are believed to have been used as missiles and hurled from a ballista [“catapult”].” Freeman, J. M., & Chadwick, H. J., *Manners & Customs of the Bible*, (Bridge-Logos 1988).

to burn incense upon the altar. This, of course, is a priestly function, not that of the king. The Chief Priest Azariah, followed by 80 other priests, stood against Uzziah proclaiming,

“It is not for you, Uzziah, to burn incense to the LORD, but for the priests the sons of Aaron, who are consecrated to burn incense. Go out of the sanctuary, for you have done wrong, and it will bring you no honor from the LORD God.” (2 Chron. 26:18).

Uzziah’s reaction was not the contrition one might hope for. He was angry with the priests. He stood with his anger in his heart and the incense censer in his hand. This is quite the scene. The king is moving into unauthorized worship out of his arrogance. When confronted, he stands ready to pray, holding his incense but not holding his temper! The king would not agree to stop until leprosy broke out on his forehead in the presence of the priests, right by the altar of incense!

At that point, the priests rushed Uzziah out of the temple, indeed, Uzziah himself hurried out, no doubt hoping for a quick cure! Such a cure was not coming, however, and Uzziah lived in a separate house all of his days as a leper. It was at this point, most likely, that his son Jotham began to reign as a co-regent. Uzziah died, years later, and was not buried with his fathers in the tomb of kings. Instead, he was buried in a field that belonged to the kings, keeping him separate even in death because he was a leper (2 Chron. 26:23).

Historical sources give further insight into this story, at least as tradition handed it down among Jews. The first-century Jewish historian Josephus (37-c.100) wrote a history of the Jews. Josephus was a Jew descended from priests on his father’s side and the royal Hasmonean family on his mother’s side. For a while he lived as an Essene in the wilderness, but he returned to his Jerusalem roots as a learned Pharisee.

During the Jewish revolt against Rome, Josephus initially commanded forces in Galilee. When Galilee fell to the Roman general Vespasian, Josephus was one of only two survivors from his army. Brought before the general, Josephus prophesied that Vespasian would soon be emperor. When that prediction came true, Vespasian freed Josephus and employed him as a mediator, interpreter, and authority on matters Jewish. After the war, Josephus returned to Rome and was treated as family by the emperor. From there, Josephus wrote a number of works about his Jewish heritage, including *The History of the Jews*.⁵

Josephus (in chapter 10, section 215) set out the basic story, adding a few other facts:

Uzziah was sixteen years old when he was made king of Judah in place of his murdered father, Amaziah. He was very energetic, defeating the Philistines, Arabs, and Ammonites. Then he repaired the walls of Jerusalem,

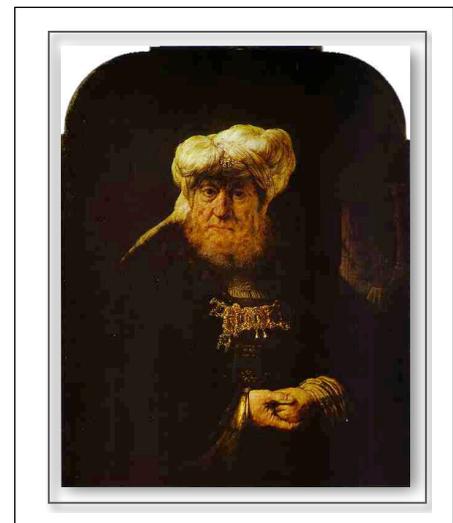
⁵ While there is a readily available and frequently found translation of the works of Josephus by William Whiston, there is a much more recent and readable condensed translation by Dr. Paul L. Maier, which is highly recommended! Maier, Paul, *Josephus: The Essential Writings* (Kregel 1988).

dug canals, and strengthened the army. But this success made him proud, and he forgot that it was God who enabled him.

One day, during a public festival, he put on the priestly garment and went into the temple to offer sacrifice to God on the golden altar. The priests tried to prevent him, saying it was not lawful for anyone except the descendants of Aaron to offer sacrifice. The king became angry and threatened to kill them unless they were quiet. While he spoke, however, the earth began to shake, and the temple split open. A bright shaft of sunlight shone through the opening and fell on the king's face, which instantly became leprous. As soon as the priests saw the leprosy, they told the king to leave the city as an unclean person. In horror and shame, he did as he was told, and lived outside the walls as a private citizen. His son Jotham took over the government, and Uzziah died in despondent grief at age 68, having reigned 52 years.⁶

Josephus adds a number of details, keeping fully consistent with the Biblical text. Josephus adds to the accomplishments of Chronicles noting that Uzziah “dug canals.” Josephus also underscored that Uzziah’s pride involved forgetting that it was God who had enabled Uzziah’s successes. Josephus adds that Uzziah put on priestly garb, and then shows the extent of Uzziah’s anger and the priests’ courage as Uzziah “threatened to kill them.” We should add that the Chronicler did note that the 80 priests who stood against Uzziah were “men of valor”! A final add of Josephus is the earthquake and shaft of light that shone on Uzziah’s now leprous face.

Rembrandt knew the Josephus details and, when painting Uzziah, had a shaft of light split down the picture onto Uzziah’s face, the middle of his clothes and onto his crossed hands.



While the earthquake is not mentioned in Kings or Chronicles, an earthquake during the reign of Uzziah is referenced in several other places in Scripture. In Amos 1:1, the prophetic book begins with a date reference,

⁶ *Ibid.*, at 171-172.

The words of Amos, who was among the shepherds of Tekoa, which he saw concerning Israel in the days of Uzziah king of Judah...two years before the earthquake.

Similarly, several hundred years later, the earthquake was still in the memory of the people as noted in the prophecy of Zechariah,

And you shall flee as you fled from the earthquake in the days of Uzziah king of Judah (Zech. 14:5).

As for the death of Uzziah, and his burial in a field of the kings, rather than the tomb of kings, we have an archaeological addition, courtesy of the now deceased, Dr. E. L. Sukenik, field archaeologist of Hebrew University in Jerusalem. In 1931, Dr. Sukenik was rummaging among the collections of the Russian Archaeological Museum located on the Mount of Olives outside Jerusalem. The museum contained items collected by a Russian Priest Antonin between 1865 and 1894. Sukenik found a stone slab that was a 14-inch square written with very careful Hebrew/Aramaic letters, that most scholars date in a range from 130 BC to 70 AD. The consensus translation of the writing is: “Hither were brought the bones of Uzziah king of Judah – do not open!”⁷



Scholars reckon that the inscription is dated from the Christian era because the bones of Uzziah were being moved from one location to another. This move is consistent with Uzziah being buried in a field as noted in Chronicles rather than in the tomb of kings. Scholars have found in Jerusalem a number of carved tombs that are of aristocracy, if not kings, and that date from the time of the divided monarchy. While those scholars debate which carved tombs, if any, were the tombs of the kings,⁸ there is no indication that the bones of kings were removed from any caves for subsequent reburial. While a discovery may be unearthed later, as of now, only the bones of King Uzziah are ones that were set in one place and then moved to another.

Duke's Eric Meyers suggests that Uzziah's remains were “somehow disturbed during some leveling or building operations” which he ascribes to the period of Herod Agrippa (37-44 AD). Meyer then notes the denial of burial in the sepulchers of kings because of Uzziah's

⁷ The history of the scholars debating fine points of translation is as interesting as the history of discovery. For more read Albright, W.F., “The Discovery of an Aramaic Inscription Relating to King Uzziah”, *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*, (Dec. 1931) 44:8-10.

⁸ See, e.g., Rahmani, L.Y., “Ancient Jerusalem's Funerary Customs and Tombs: Part Two,” *The Biblical Archaeologist*, (Autumn 1981) 44(4):229-235.

leprosy as a possible reason for the moving of the bones to a more proper place after they were cleansed of disease.⁹

Isaiah 6

Armed with this historical data, the experiences of Isaiah the prophet recorded in Isaiah 6 take on a more personal perspective. The events of Isaiah 6 are set into the historical context of King Uzziah/Amaziah, the good king whose life was unalterably changed by his arrogant decision of disobedience in the holy place.

Here is the text of Isaiah 6:1-7,

In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called to another and said:

“Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!”

And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. And I said: “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!”

Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hands a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar. And he touched my mouth and said: “Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for.”

At this point, Isaiah is commissioned to take a message from God to the people of Judah.¹⁰ The message is closely related to this experience pertaining to God’s holiness. Perhaps more than any other Old Testament prophet, Isaiah is replete with prophecies about Jesus the Messiah. One of the most important is in this Isaiah 6 scene.

⁹ Meyers contends that the Jewish practice at the time of Christ was to consider the decaying of flesh in the land of Israel as process to atone for sins, causing Jews outside of Israel to ship bones back for re-interment in Israel. If this idea is correct, then it has interesting implications for the early Jewish view of Jesus who was resurrected in his flesh, with no decay and no need for personal atonement. It further underscores his flesh and blood resurrection and the message to doubting Thomas and others to touch his flesh, and feel his wounds. See Meyers, Eric, “The Theological Implications of An Ancient Jewish Burial Custom,” *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, (Oct. 1971) 62(2):95-119.

¹⁰ Some scholars also believe this is the original call to a prophetic ministry for Isaiah.

Isaiah makes a point of placing the events in their chronological time – “in the year that King Uzziah died.” This wasn’t to get a date on the events. That was never as much a concern in antiquity as it is today. Rather, Isaiah is deliberately recalling the freshness of King Uzziah/Azariah’s life and death because it was relevant to the events unfolding.

If the history of Josephus is right, then Isaiah would have known of the earthquake and bright light that accompanied Uzziah’s tragic experience. Isaiah would have likely known also that Uzziah was in the temple in an effort to offer a sacrifice at the incense altar. Neither the High Priest, nor the attendant priests could stop Uzziah in his pride. It took an act of the Lord.

In that light, examine the similarities and contrasts of Isaiah and Uzziah. Isaiah, like Azariah, was a good guy, a godly guy – not perfect, but a good fellow nonetheless. Also like Uzziah, Isaiah was not a priest. Isaiah too found himself in the temple. In Isaiah 6, Isaiah was not physically in the Jerusalem temple, for the Lord was sitting on his throne, and there was no throne in the temple. This scene is the heavenly throne room of God. It is what the earthly temple merely symbolized. The temple was filled with the glory of the Lord. God’s robe alone filled the temple.



While Uzziah took center stage in his temple encounter, Isaiah shrank back and the LORD held not just center stage, but also every corner! Uzziah was accompanied by priests trying to stop him from his sin, but with Isaiah in his temple experience were angelic beings (seraphim¹¹) singing antiphonally about God's holiness, and his glory filling the earth

While Uzziah's encounter, based upon Josephus, involved him holding an incense censor (with its smoke/incense) and an earthquake, Isaiah's encounter echoed Uzziah's but exponentially more. For Isaiah, the entire temple was filled with smoke, and the foundations quaked. Uzziah reacted in pride in his encounter. He would not leave until escorted out, and then only the fear of his leprous condition pushed him into action. Isaiah was not filled with pride; he was filled with awe and reverent fear. In humility he cried out his own sinfulness, "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips..." This came from a man who knew of his recently departed King's experience in the temple and the unclean leprosy that came to him! Isaiah's contrition, however, did not bring forth leprosy. It brought salvation!

A seraph went to the altar, bringing a burning coal (a piece of the sacrifice from the altar) and touching it to Isaiah's uncleanness. Isaiah's sin was atoned for by the sacrifice on God's heavenly altar, once that sacrifice was applied to Isaiah.

As the story concludes, God sent Isaiah on a mission with a message to give his people. Isaiah left the temple, not a leper cast out for the rest of his days. Isaiah left forgiven, with the voice of God ringing from his clean lips as Isaiah proclaimed the prophetic word to the people! The heart of Isaiah and the forgiveness of God's sacrifice, combined to produce a different result than the pride of Uzziah and his arrogant personal sacrifice.

Living on this side of the historical events of Calvary, especially having just completed a study of Jesus as the temple of God, one can readily see the sacrifice on the heavenly altar that forgives the sin of Isaiah and anyone else who comes into contact with it.

Isaiah speaks plainly about the sacrifice that atones for sin later in Isaiah 53:4ff:

Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

¹¹ "Seraphim" is the Hebrew plural for "seraph." In its root meaning, "seraph" denotes something that is burning color or glowing. Here, most every scholar sees through the contextual description that angelic beings are being described. *See generally*, Koehler, L., Baumgartner, W., Richardson, M., & Stamm, J. J., *The Hebrew and Aramaic lexicon of the Old Testament*, (Brill 1999).

He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth. By oppression and judgment he was taken away; and as for his generation, who considered that he was cut off out of the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people? And they made his grave with the wicked and with a rich man in his death, although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth.

Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him; he has put him to grief; when his soul makes an offering for guilt, he shall see his offspring; he shall prolong his days; the will of the LORD shall prosper in his hand. Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied; by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities. Therefore I will divide him a portion with the many, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong, because he poured out his soul to death and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and makes intercession for the transgressors.

The apostle John tied this section of Isaiah's prophecy in chapter 53 to the throne room scene of Isaiah 6. In John 12:38-41. John explains that in Isaiah 6, the prophet saw, "the glory" of Jesus and "spoke of him."

This sacrifice of Jesus cleans the unclean, and readies the servant for the call and mission of God! This allows us to worship and serve God in humility and forgiveness!

Jesus is, "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (Jn. 1:29). Acts 8:32 clarifies that Jesus was the "lamb that is led to the slaughter" of Isaiah 53. Christ offered the "with the precious blood ... like that of a lamb without blemish or spot" (1 Pet. 1:19). In Revelation 5, we read that Jesus is the Lamb who was both slain as a sacrifice and still sits on the throne!

POINTS FOR HOME

1. "...*he was marvelously helped, till he was strong. But when he was strong, he grew proud, to his destruction*" (2 Chron. 26:15-16).

This passage should create in us, the tremor felt in the earth in the days of King Uzziah! We should experience a personal earthquake of major proportions. Thank God for each day, for each breath, for each opportunity, and for each encounter. As things go well, we should not be proud, nor should we take credit! We should readily admit, both internally and to others, with genuine hearts, that God is at work and God is responsible for all good things and every good accomplishment.

May I suggest you join me in a habit of each morning and each evening doing something very specific? Each morning take a moment to think about your day. Then in prayer, dedicate that day to the Lord. Ask our Father to help you live that day in faithful obedience, making the most of every chance to serve him and walk in the good works that he has prepared for you. Then each night, as you prepare to sleep, think through the day. Where were you faithful? Where do you see your mistakes? What were your missed opportunities? Take inventory while prayerfully repenting and seeking God's help for the next day. He is faithful not only in his forgiveness, but in his Spirit's powerful assistance. Then the next day, do this again. With a nod to the prideful downfall of Amaziah and others, we should add a note here. Some days you will notice you did "better" than others. That is never as cause for pride! In the words of Keith Green, "And when I'm doing well, help me to never seek a crown, for my reward is giving glory to you!"¹²

2. "*Azariah... Uzziah...*" (1 Kings; 2 Chron.).

Both of these names speak of a hope and a position of faith. "Yahweh is my help," and "Yahweh is my strength." These are wonderful labels to wear. They need to be lived-out confessions and experiences, however, and not simply worn like a fish bumper sticker or a "WWJD" bracelet!

If Azariah had lived up this name, then he would have found Yahweh as his help, and he would not have been angry with the priests for trying to stop his sin. If Uzziah had lived up to his name, then he would have never put himself in a position of arrogant pride, where his personal value in his offerings to God seemed to trump the rules of God! This was a man suitably named, but lost in action! He thought that his own help and his own strength could trump that of God's message, God's priests, and God's instructions for worship and obedience. He was wrong.

God is holy (repeat three times), and not someone we traipse before in our good times and our own ways. His glory fills the entire earth and more. His presence causes the foundations of heaven to quake. Let him be your help and your strength. He is more than enough, and none of us – NOT ONE OF US—is adequate on our own.

3. "*Woe is me!*" (Isa. 6:5).

Have you had an encounter with God? Have you ever been in worship or prayer, where you sensed his presence in purity, grandeur and glory? I have not had the vision/experience of Isaiah, but I can recall many times of worship when I felt myself before the Creator God, joining feebly with all creation in bringing praise to him. If you have experienced this, I suspect like me, you felt yourself small and totally out of place, at least on your own merit. For there is not one of us "clean" on our own. Each of us only can be in God's presence

¹² Green, Keith, "Oh Lord, You're Beautiful!" This entire song bespeaks of this point for home and is well worth repeated listens!

without resulting destruction, if our uncleanness is touched by the sacrifice of God's altar. This sacrifice, we are taught, is the body and blood of Jesus. It is his sacrifice that truly removes sin. By his stripes we are healed.