

The Announcement of the Kingdom

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The Kingdom of God Series

Exodus 7-11 and 1 Kings 4

What I would like to do this weekend is revisit a theme that is foundational to Vineyard's understanding of ourselves as a church, but may not be that well understood by many of you who are new here. Even some of our old timers may need a bit of freshening up. I am planning to start today a new series on The Kingdom of God.

Now, you can tell a great deal about a church by what is at the center of the Christian message. Some churches would say that the center of the Christian message is social justice. These churches would be highly political and, perhaps, involved in protest marches. Many of the messages given in the church would have a political bent to them. Perhaps politicians would be regularly invited in to speak at the church.

Some churches believe that the center of the Christian message is to protect church people from the influence of the world. These churches would be very isolationist. The people in the church would likely dress differently than the people in the rest of American culture. Women would wear their hair differently. Hairstyles that might look like they are from 1940. There might be a whole new language system developed in this little church subculture. Kids in the church might be encouraged to not play with children in the neighborhood. The church is seen as a preserve, as a protected enclave against the onslaught of the world. Many, many churches have that feel and characteristic.

Some churches would say that the center of their church is the Bible. These churches might be characterized by strong pulpit ministry; lots of people taking notes. You might hear the clatter of notebooks opening and closing. There might be lots of Bible studies in the church. Churches that would say that the heart and soul of their ministry is the Bible often will have a deficit when you explore areas outside of Bible teaching. There might be in that church a deficit in the area of worship or a genuine experience of God, the Holy Spirit, or a deficit in spiritual power, or a deficit in the practice of social justice and ministry to the poor, or a deficit in the area of the practice of Christian community.

I could go on in multiplying the examples of what is the center of different American churches' self-identity. The Vineyard movement, understanding the Christian message, embraces the Bible and social justice and some level of distinctiveness of God's people from the world, as well as Christian experience, community. We would say that the center and the circumference of the Christian message is contained in the phrase: The Kingdom of God. This is the message Jesus preached.

If you have a Bible, I want you to see this in Mark 1:14. It says, “After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee proclaiming the good news of God. ‘The time has come,’ he said, ‘the kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news.’” He went around everywhere preaching the message of the kingdom.

If you would further turn with me to Acts 28:30, we read about the apostle Paul’s ministry. Here it says, “For two whole years Paul stayed there [he is talking about there in Rome] in his own rented house and welcomed all who came to see him. Boldly and without hindrance, he preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ.”

The message of Jesus, the message of Paul is contained in this phrase: The Kingdom of God. And the message of American churches today, as well as English churches and churches in Zambia, Cambodia, and Indonesia needs to be the message of the Kingdom of God.

When Jesus came preaching that the kingdom of God was at hand, his message fit into a long story line that his hearers, the Jews, were totally familiar with. No Jewish person sat around scratching his or her head and said, “The kingdom of God is at hand? What does that mean?” They didn’t translate it into, “Well, I think what Jesus means by the kingdom of God being at hand is that if I believe in Jesus when I die, my soul will go to heaven.” That would not have been the understanding of the Jews. I need to believe in Jesus and when I die my soul will go to heaven.

When Jesus said the kingdom of God is at hand, no Jewish person said, “Oh, Jesus means the world is going to end tomorrow.” They would not have heard a message that sounds like “I, Jesus, am planning to start a new institution called the church.” When Jesus said the kingdom of God is at hand, Jews of his day did not hear a message that sounded like, “Hey, come with me to church on Sunday where you will hear some pretty cool music and some great preaching and you don’t even have to get dressed up.”

The kingdom of God meant more than: Come to church. We have a pretty cool thing going. It is real laid back. The kingdom of God meant more than: Believe in Jesus and your soul will be saved and you will be on your way to heaven. Jews knew, or at least thought they knew, what Jesus meant by the kingdom of God is at hand because this fit into a whole story that Jews told and retold each other Sabbath after Sabbath; holiday after holiday; day in and day out, for several thousand years.

Let me explain what I mean about a message fitting into a story. I am going to use an example from a book called *Jesus and the Victory of God* by the British Bible scholar, NT Wright. It says how you feel about the message: It’s going to rain, depends on the context you hear that statement. It’s a pretty straightforward statement: It’s going to rain. But how you hear it depends on the context. For example, if you were having a picnic in the park and you heard the message: It’s going to rain – you might get bummed out. You might say, “Awww...that’s a real drag. I was planning a nice day at the park.” On the other hand, if you were in Sub-Sahara Africa and your nation was

experiencing a great drought and famine and you heard the message: It's going to rain – that might be the cause of a whole tribal celebration and everyone might go out in the fields and dance. If I was Elijah and you were some of the people living in Elijah's day and I said to you: It's going to rain – you might step back in fear because I had shut up the heavens for several years.

See, our understanding of simple phrases depends upon the story that goes with those phrases. Here's another quick example. You hear the phrase: It's over – pretty straightforward phrase, but your reaction depends upon where that phrase fits into the story. The phrase "it's over" might be a cause of celebration and people breaking out the champagne if we mean the war is over. No more war – it's over! The phrase "it's over" might be the cause of an emotional collapse if it means your loved one's life is over. I'm sorry, the doctor says, we have done all we can. It's over. Or it might be the cause of great panic, if you are only half way through a test and the teacher says, "Put down your pens; it's over."

My point is that when Jesus came preaching the kingdom of God, what people heard was fit into a 2000-year-old story, which went something like this. God is coming to free his people from their enemies and to bring about an age of prosperity and blessing, creating for himself a people who will live distinctive lifestyles, wholly for the Lord. People heard not: Believe in Jesus and your soul will be saved; or come to church; or stop smoking and drinking – what they heard was the whole promise of the Old Testament told over and over again for 2000 years is being fulfilled in Jesus. God is coming to release his people from their enemies; to bring in an age of blessing and prosperity; and, to create for himself a people who have a distinctive lifestyle and who will live wholly for God.

Tonight, I want to quickly explore each of these three elements: the kingdom means the defeat of the enemies of God's people; the kingdom means blessing and prosperity for God's people; and the kingdom means the creation of a people who live distinctive lifestyles wholly for the Lord. I have called tonight's talk "The Announcement of the Kingdom." Let's pray.

Now I want to show you how the kingdom of God and this theme was part of a long story that Jews would have known. So that when Jesus came preaching that the kingdom of God was at hand, people were not sitting around scratching their heads saying, "Gee, what does this mean?" They understood that the kingdom had these three elements: the freeing of God's people from their enemies; the blessing of God's people with prosperity and health; and, the creation of a people who would live distinctive lives wholly for God.

If you have a Bible, open up to Exodus 6:6,

"Therefore, say to the Israelites: 'I am the Lord and I will bring you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. I will free you from being slaves to them and will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment. I will take you as my own

people, and I will be your God. Then you will know that I am the Lord your God, who brought you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. And I will bring you to the land I swore with uplifted hand to give to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob. I will give it to you as a possession. I am the Lord.”

We see the elements that I cited regarding the people’s understanding of the kingdom in these three verses. In v. 6 God says that when he comes he will free his people from their enemies. “I am the Lord and I will bring you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. I will free you from being slaves to them and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment.”

Then he cites the third element of our understanding of the kingdom in v. 7: “I will take you as my own people and I will be your God.” He is creating a people with a distinctive lifestyle, a distinctive way of doing life – who live lives wholly for God.

And the kingdom means that blessing and prosperity and health are coming the way of God’s people. Verse 8: “And I will bring you to the land I swore with uplifted hand to give to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob. I will give it to you as a possession. I am the Lord.” I am going to bring you to the Promised Land – the land of milk and honey, the land of blessing and prosperity.

Let’s take these up in turn. What are we talking about by the kingdom of God? What do millions and millions of Christian people pray for every week for church or every day in their prayers when they say the Lord’s Prayer and, particularly, that line that reads: Thy Kingdom come; thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” What would it look like if God’s kingdom came in answer to our prayers? If God’s will was done on earth as it is in heaven?

Well, one thing it would look like is the enemies of God’s people would be defeated. When we talk about the enemies of God’s people being defeated, we are talking about the collision of the kingdom of God with the kingdom of God’s enemy – Satan. The collision of the kingdom of God with the world system opposed to God. The collision of the kingdom of God with your sin and my sin and the collective sin of America and all the nations.

Some of you have seen the movie, The Perfect Storm. It is a great illustration of kingdoms in collision. Because in The Perfect Storm you have this coming together of several storm fronts – a hurricane meeting a cold wave creating what one might call The Perfect Storm.

And when the kingdom of God collides with the kingdom of God’s enemies, there is a perfect storm. We see this collision in Exodus 7:8-12:

The Lord said to Moses and Aaron, “When Pharaoh says to you, ‘Perform a miracle,’ then say to Aaron, ‘Take your staff and throw it down before Pharaoh,’ and it will become a snake.” Then Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh and did just as the Lord commanded. Aaron threw his staff down in front of Pharaoh and

his officials, and it became a snake. Pharaoh then summoned wise men and sorcerers, and the Egyptian magicians also did the same things by their secret arts: Each one threw down his staff and it became a snake. But Aaron's staff swallowed up their staffs.

Here is a great illustration of the collision of God's authority represented by Aaron's staff and the authority of Pharaoh and his magicians who were working by occult powers. We see that God's power is stronger.

Now, when we talk about the kingdom, we must deal with the fact that all of it is presently not here and there are forces hostile to God's kingdom. Church members and pastors deeply desire to be kind. The English pastor, Studdert-Kennedy, reminds us that even kindness has a limit. "Christians trying to be kinder than Christ, cease to be kind at all." Christ was very clear that "the world," in at least one of its biblical senses, is hostile to God and everything God stands for.

What does the Bible mean by "the world?" The term "world" is used in three different senses in the New Testament. First of all, it refers to the earth and the created order. God, we are told, "made *the world* and everything in it." It is in this sense that the apostle John wrote about saying, "*The world* was made through him."

Second, when the Bible speaks of *the world* it sometimes means simply the world of people, people of various races and ethnicities – the world of men and women. It is likely in this second sense that the apostle John writes, "For God so loved *the world* that he sent his only Son..." It is an unfortunate fact that the majority of men and women have not loved God or served him. Rather in the case of Christ, they were antagonistic to Him, rejected Him, and ultimately nailed Him to a wooden cross.

So, it is not surprising, then, that the Bible uses the term *world* in a third sense to refer to the human race in its opposition to God, and in its refusal to receive the truth, to worship God, to believe in Christ, or to follow his commandments. *The world* in this last sense is the mindset of unredeemed humanity. Or as David Wells puts it, "The 'World' is the way in which our collective life in society and the culture that goes with it is organized around the self and the substitution for God. It is life characterized by self-righteousness, self-centeredness, self-satisfaction, self-aggrandizement and self-promotion with a corresponding distaste for the self-denial proper to union with Christ." It is *the world* in this third sense, a way of life hostile to God, that the apostle John was referring to when he wrote, "Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world – the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does – comes not from the Father, but from the world. The world and its desires pass away..."

The world in its hostility murdered Christ and the world in its hostility continues to murder Christ's followers to this very day. It was the world in the form of the Chinese Boxers that slaughtered hundreds of foreign missionaries and tens of thousands of

indigenous Christians at the beginning of the 20th century. It was the world that E. J. Cooper, a Protestant missionary, wrote to his mother about when he said:

“The Lord has honored us by giving us fellowship in his sufferings. Three times stoned, robbed of everything, even clothes, we know what hunger, thirst, nakedness, weariness are as never before, but also the sustaining grace and strength of God and his peace in a new and deeper sense than before... billow after billow has gone over me. Home gone, not one memento of dear Maggie [his wife] even, penniless, wife and child gone to glory, Edith [his other child] lying very sick with diarrhea, and your son weak and exhausted to a degree, though otherwise well.”

The world attacked two families and six young children in the town of Luchen, chasing them from one village to another, hurling sticks and stones and shouting, “Death to the foreign devils.” One seven year old named Jessie Saunders understood the character of the world when, after being stoned, she said to her mother, “If they loved Jesus they would not do this.”

It is the world that still practices crucifixion at the beginning of the 21st century, in Sudan, the largest country in Africa. After enduring more than forty years of civil war, the predominantly Christian population in Southern Sudan is subject to torture, rape and starvation for its refusal to convert to Islam. Christian children are routinely sold into slavery. Muslims who dare to convert to Christianity in the North are faced with the death penalty. In the decades of the 1980’s and 1990’s, Sudan’s death toll of more than 1.9 million is far greater than the much better publicized slaughter in Rwanda (800,000), Bosnia, (300,000) and Kosovo (several thousand as of the beginning of 1999) *combined*.

The world in the form of the modern Chinese government acknowledged “...the church played an important role in the change of Eastern Europe...” then it ominously added “...if China does not want such a scene to be repeated in its land, it must strangle the baby while it is still in the cradle.”

This is the world that is seen in the “Christian” West. For Western Christians to have the proper perspective on this, they must listen to people who come from other cultures to the West. As Eugene Peterson astutely observed,

“If you listen to Solzhenitsyn or Bishop Tutu, or university students from Africa or South Africa, they don’t see a Christian land. They see almost the reverse of a Christian land. They see a lot of greed and arrogance. And they see a Christian community that has almost none of the virtues of the biblical community, which has to do with a sacrificial life... The attractive thing about America to outsiders is the materialism, not the spirituality... what they want are cars and television. They’re not [attracted to] our gospel.”

One way the hostility of the world to Christ is apparent, at least in Western expression, is in the view that Christianity is either irrelevant or irrational. At the end of 1997, A. M. Rosenthal, the former executive editor of the New York Times, candidly confessed

about Christianity's irrelevance, "I realized that in decades of reporting, writing, or assigning stories on human rights, I rarely touched on one of the most important [rights]. Political human rights, legal, civil and press rights, but the right to worship where and how God or our conscience leads, almost never."

Religious freedom and the role of the church worldwide simply never show up on the radar screen of the cultural elite in America. Economics are endlessly discussed as are political considerations, social differentiations, racial and gender divides. But the cultural elite in America are generally unable to see, much less understand, the role of faith (Christian or otherwise) upon the decisions of ordinary people. Patrick Glynn reflected upon his undergraduate days at Harvard in the late 1960's saying:

When I left my Jesuit high school to attend Harvard in 1969, I plunged into an environment where the death or the disappearance of God was simply taken for granted. It was not so much that the professors who taught me were anti-religious – the English Department (apart from a couple of practicing Catholics and a few other church-goers) was marked by a kind of sad yearning for lost Christianity. It was simply assumed that religious belief had become impossible for rational human beings in the modern era, a fact that one accepted with a certain melancholy and nostalgia for previous ages when it was still possible for 'men' to believe.

When religion does appear on the radar screen, it almost always does so in its most irrational form, such as the latest battle between science and religion, or the latest witchcraft scare in a local public school, or the most recent, completely harmless book that is being selected for censorship by "fundamentalist" parents. Of course, the term *fundamentalist* is never used in its appropriate historic context, as one who subscribes to the fundamental of the faith or even, more narrowly, as one who takes a position of opposition to the modernist tendencies. Fundamentalism in the press is almost always used as shorthand for "religious fanatic." It is often preceded by adjectives (whether appropriate or not) such as "right wing" or "ultra-conservative," or it is followed by "follower of" as in the expression, "right wing, fundamentalist follower of Jerry Falwell" or "ultra-conservative, fundamentalist follower of Pat Robertson." The portrait is one of blind, unthinking, often intolerant and bigoted commitment to some religion or religious sect. The portrait allowed the elites to dismiss Christians without ever taking seriously what a particular Christian may be saying, or without ever asking the question whether a Christian's viewpoint may, in fact, be a true one.

Thus, despite all the talk about multi-culturalism, contemporary culture regularly balks at including Christianity in its "gorgeous mosaic." This resistance to Christ and Christianity has sometimes been dubbed the "ABC rules," meaning "anything but Christianity." It's ok for Joe Lieberman to talk about his faith, but a Christian better not say, "The reason I decided this was because of Christ."

Let me pause here and say that if you are experiencing upset in your life, if things are stirred up for you and you are a Christian, if it seems like you are in the midst of a storm, it doesn't necessarily mean that something is wrong. In fact, smooth sailing all the time

for you may, indeed, be an indication that you aren't involved at all in the activities of the kingdom of God. Because the activity of the kingdom of God is going to be a collision of two storm fronts - not equal. In the story in Exodus 7:8-12, Aaron's snake, representing the power of God, swallows up the snakes of the magicians, which represent the power of the occult.

Friends, as a word of encouragement to you, it is often the case that upset and turmoil means that you are exactly where God wants you and that God's kingdom is coming through you. Even some of the little things you do in your life because of your loyalty to Jesus Christ can create tremendous upset. Little things like your personal choice to not have a TV or to not allow your children to own any video games or to own any of the game boys or Nintendo's. That can be quite upsetting to other folks. It is surprising. People celebrate choice, but if you choose in a direction apart from the culturally accepted pattern – if you say, “We aren't going to have a TV,” you will hear: “What are you, some kind of communist? Are you some kind of isolationist? Why don't you watch TV? Are you one of those people we have to be afraid of? Do you have a bunker mentality?” By the way, it's a very little thing we do; we take a three month break from TV each summer – pull the plug. Some of you are more radical; I commend you for it. But it's really nice to do something else.

If you choose, in America today, to become downwardly mobile, that is, everyone else is getting on the “up” escalator and their lives are a pursuit of more and more and faster and faster and bigger and bigger, and they are passing you on the up escalator, if you choose to get on the down escalator and simplify your life and give away or throw out unnecessary stuff and move into a smaller place, or shift down from two incomes to one, to raise your children with a full-time mom, if you choose to become downwardly mobile by not expanding your business or not taking new clients, saying I have enough, I am busy enough, I work hard enough, I spend enough hours in the office – you are going to create upset. People are going to say, “Are you crazy? What's the matter with you? Why don't you want more and more and bigger and bigger?”

Little choices. If you choose to challenge a coach who believes that baseball, football, or soccer for a 7-year old girl should be her whole life, and you approach the coach and demand that you have dinner together with your family, that not every night is ruined because of some practice, or that Sunday morning is set aside for God and worship – the coach, the other parents, the league, the whole American competitive spirit will feel under attack.

Just choose to give up a good career and become a missionary or go into pastoral ministry. You will get an earful from parents, from friends. If you postpone your career to raise your kids – just do something that slightly rattles the cage of America, like voice an opinion that says just because someone chooses something doesn't make it right, in a conversation, if you challenge the relativism of America and you suggest that someone's chosen course or sexual behavior is wrong, be prepared for a storm.

And the bigger the issue – we are talking about abortion or voicing a dissenting opinion in a thoroughly postmodern college classroom, you might experience the perfect storm. But it doesn't mean you are wrong, friend. The kingdom may be coming through you and you are experiencing a clash of the kingdoms.

Just choose to tell the truth and insist on the truth in a dysfunctional family. To insist on the truth with an alcoholic or insist on the truth with a sexual abuser. To draw the line and say, "I am simply no longer going to play the game of this family of cover up and hiding and shame. I am going to just tell the truth." Be prepared for the storm.

You can't talk. You can't tell the truth in this family. You can't feel those things. You're the problem. Why are you creating so much upset for us now? Why are you ruining our lives? Why are you bringing us so much shame?

The encouragement, however, is that in the clash of the kingdoms, the kingdom of God is more powerful than any opposing kingdom. And when God's kingdom comes, he crushes the enemies of God's people. That is, by the way, the meaning of the plagues. You know, when Moses was sent to Pharaoh to announce to him that if he didn't let God's people go, plagues would come upon his nation.

Do you know what those plagues were? They were demonstrations of the coming of God's kingdom to defeat God's enemies. So for example in the first plague where the Nile River was turned into blood, the Nile was in ancient Egypt thought to be the home of the Nile god Ha'pi. In the first plague, God bloodies the nose of this Egyptian god Ha'pi. In the fifth plague, the Egyptian livestock die. The Egyptians used to worship the bull. It was sacred to the god Apis. And cows were sacred to the goddess Isis and the ram was sacred to the god Ammon. So the representatives of these three gods – the bull, the cow and the ram – they were all exterminated. And then the Egyptians used to worship the sun. They called the sun god Ra. So what does God do in the 9th plague? He blots out the Egyptian God Ra. And in the final plague, the 10th plague, Pharaoh and his first born were thought to be living gods on earth. And what does the God of Israel do? He kills the first born sons of Pharaoh and the other Egyptians. This so-called deity dies.

The kingdom of God means the defeat of the enemy of God's people. Now, we are going to explore this topic in future weeks in much greater length. But for now, let me just suggest to you that you have some enemies. Like the Jews back in Egypt, there are things that enslave you, that hold you back from the experience of a full and abundant life. And the enemies that you battle with may not be the ones that you focus upon all of the time.

What holds you back from the enjoyment of a full and rich life may not be as you imagine. You might think that what holds you back from the enjoyment of a full and rich life is the fact that you are single and you want to be married. Or that you have an unhappy marriage. Now, it is possible that this is your real enemy. And you can ask

God to allow you to find a marriage partner and to heal your marriage. You might think that your enemy is your unhealthy body. It may be and you can ask God for health.

But the truth is that most of what enslaves us as people and keeps us from experiencing an abundant life are not the enemies and the slave masters we suppose. Much of the activity of God's kingdom is going to be assaulting our self-imposed slavery made up of our own addictions and our own deadly sins. When the kingdom comes God is going to assault your greed and your demand for more and more, bigger and bigger and faster and faster. And your gluttony – your substitute of creation for the Creator. And your lust, and your envy and your pride. These are the enemy citadels that the kingdom is going to be assaulting when God comes in power.

What does it mean when we pray “Thy kingdom come”? What did the Jews hear when they heard Jesus announce the kingdom of God is at hand?

They heard that their enemies would be defeated. The Jews heard that God was going to come to bless his people. When we pray “thy kingdom come” we really mean bring the fullness of your blessing, Lord, to this situation, to this person, to this church, to this city. Defeat your enemies and bring your blessing.

If you have a Bible, I want you to see this in 1 Kings 4. Solomon's kingdom was an Old Testament picture illustrating what the kingdom of God would be like when it finally came. Under King Solomon the nation of Israel reached its apex. It was never more prosperous, never more at peace, never experienced a fuller blessing, than it did during the reign of King Solomon. And Solomon's reign is a picture of that coming kingdom that Jesus was announcing. This is what people heard. We read in 1 Kings 4:20, “The people of Judah and Israel were as numerous as the sand on the seashore; they ate, they drank and they were happy.” The promise to Abraham that your descendants will be as numerous as the sand on the seashore is being fulfilled. “They ate, they drank and they were happy.” The kingdom of God is a party.

And in the end there is going to be a party. There is going to be a great messianic banquet.

“Solomon ruled over all the kingdoms from the River to the land of the Philistines, as far as the border of Egypt. These countries brought tribute and were Solomon's subjects all his life.”

The enemies of God's people are defeated and we read in verse 22: “Solomon's daily provisions were thirty cors of fine flour and sixty cors of meal, ten head of stall-fed cattle, twenty of pasture-fed cattle and a hundred sheep and goats, as well as deer, gazelles, roebucks and choice fowl.”

Ancient kings were judged by the magnificence of their courts. And that's not too dissimilar to the situation today when we still judge people by the size of their house, the size of the party they throw, the weddings they put on. I read recently that the average

price of weddings in Columbus is \$32,000. In many cultures, you really are judged by the spread you put out when you show hospitality.

I know when I was in India and we went to people's houses, they didn't do what we do in America. In the US you go to someone's house and they barely shut the TV off. It is amazing if they greet you at the door. They might order in a pizza and you all eat it out of a box. But in the ancient world and in Asia and Africa today if someone is going to show you hospitality, they go all out. They are cooking all day long. They have 25 different dishes. Unless you literally die of overeating at the table, you keep getting food.

And Solomon every day put on this tremendous smorgasbord. Talk about an all-you-can-eat buffet: the breads, the cakes, the cattle, the 20 pasture fed cattle, 100 sheep and goats and deer, and wild game.

There was one word that would summarize the blessing of the kingdom that we are reading here in 1 Kings 4. And the Hebrew word is "shalom." It means far more than peace or the absence of war. It means total well being in every aspect of your life – your health, finances, marriage, kids, your relationship with your extended family, with your neighbors, your flock, your job, your crops, herds, vines – everything you touch, everything that affects you, it is all blessed – shalom, peace, prosperity. That's the kingdom. Shalom means blessing and well being in your relationships but also with God. It touches your worship, your prayer, your sense of intimacy with God, your ability to hear God. It touches your past through forgiveness, your present through the provision of spiritual power, your future by giving you hope. Shalom is the kingdom – well being, a nice plump wife and seven, eight or ten strapping, healthy sons and ½ a dozen or so beautiful daughters all sitting around a table laden with food. Eating, laughing and enjoying.

This shalom, this kingdom, didn't only affect a person financially and physically. It didn't only affect them relationally or even spiritually. But the blessing of God that comes through the kingdom, through the shalom of God, even blesses a person intellectually. Look at v. 29:

"God gave Solomon wisdom and very great insight, and a breadth of understanding as measureless as the sand on the seashore. Solomon's wisdom was greater than the wisdom of all the men of the East and greater than all of the wisdom of Egypt."

Solomon's mind was as expansive as the kingdom was. Look at v. 32. He spoke 3000 Proverbs. You read the book of Proverbs and it is filled with practical wisdom on how to do life well. We live in a time where people are clueless – clueless in Columbus, clueless in Seattle and Los Angeles and New York regarding how to raise decent kids, how to solve racial problems, how to deal with the problem of poverty, how to have a decent marriage.

I mentioned a few weeks ago that most folks are like a guy driving down the road with one elbow out of the car window and the other one around some beautiful woman. But no hand on the steering wheel. If you ask the average person: What's your philosophy of life? What guides you? How do you teach your kids right and wrong? What's the basis of your decisions? From what source do you get all of your values? People wouldn't have a clue.

The kingdom of God means guidance for life. Wisdom for handling really tough situations and really tough people. A valuable system in the midst of a culture that is just shredding around us.

The kingdom of God is songwriting. His songs number a thousand and five. When the kingdom comes you are going to see songs and music produced. And as Derek Morpew so well describes in his book called "Breakthrough on the Kingdom," Solomon is a master of natural sciences. "He described plant life from the cedar of Lebanon to the hyssop that grows out of walls." He is a botanist. He also taught about animals. He is a zoologist. And birds – he is an ornithologist. And reptiles – he is a reptilist. He is even an ichthyologist – that's a great word, isn't it? He knows about fish.

The kingdom of God, in other words, is not just a spiritual phenomenon. It is not believe in Jesus and one day he will take your soul to heaven. The kingdom means God's blessing in every realm of your life. It is freedom from affliction and addiction. It's mental and emotional health. It's wisdom and understanding. It's brilliance in the intellectual world. It is blessing on your marriage and your kids. It's grace in your job situation and favor on an operation that you or a loved one is about to undergo. It is the forgiveness of your sins and hope for the future. It is the healing of race relations. It is liberty from sexual brokenness and temptation to homosexuality. It is shalom – the favor of God.

The kingdom of God is the defeat of the enemies of God's people. It is blessing upon God's people. And finally, and I won't have time to cover this, it is the creation of a people who will live a distinctive lifestyle wholly for God. That's what Paul spoke of in Titus 2:14: Christ redeeming us so he could make us into a people for his own possession, zealous for goodness. All I want to communicate under this point right now – we are going to look at this in future weeks – is that the kingdom of God is not meant to be absorbed into American individualism as if it is something to be enjoyed by the solitary person. When God's kingdom comes, God creates a community of his people, who together live lives that are distinct from the world around them.

I will tell you, friends, that it is huge, because we today are facing a culture, a world system, of unprecedented power. Never in the history of the world has there been a culture more powerful than western culture in its consumerism, in its secularism, in its individualism, in its turning of everything into a marketing opportunity.

My dear friend, Andy Saperstein, recently returned from Central Asia where he and his family are serving in missions. He said even in Central Asia, now that the Soviet Union

has fallen, you see signs everywhere of the triumph of Western culture. He said there are now huge billboards along the road with a cocky looking, aloof, Central Asian young man with two babes in back of him marketing cigarettes. The message across it is "You have gone your own way." Screaming an American value system of autonomy – you've gone your own way, baby. Something utterly alien to the tradition and history of Central Asia, and yet, it's triumphing.

And in this last point, all I want to say is that only as the church regains the message of community, of us being part of a people who have a common way of doing life, who support one another in a lifestyle distinctive from the world, who collectively challenge the reigning gods of consumerism and individualism and autonomy and sexual liberation – only as we are a people together will we have any hope of successfully doing battle with the juggernaut of Western culture.

And so we pray: Thy kingdom come. God defeat your enemies. Bring your reign of blessing and come not only to me as an individual, but to create a people who live wholly for you. Let's pray.

Sermon – July 8-9, 2000
Rich Nathan
The Kingdom of God Series
Exodus 7-11 and 1 Kings 4

The Announcement of the Kingdom

- I. The Meaning of the Kingdom (Mark 1:14-15)
- II. The Characteristics of the Kingdom
 - A. The Defeat of the Enemies of God's People
 - 1. The Perfect Storm (Exodus 6:6-8; 7:8-12)
 - 2. The Great Victory (Exodus 7-11)
 - B. The Blessing of God's People (1 Kings 4:20-28)
 - C. The Creation of God's People Who Live Distinctive Lives Wholly for God