

ARISE & BUILD

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TOWARD A FRUITFUL FUTURE

BY MARTIN G. SELBREDE



In contrast to the paralysis that a blocked future inflicts upon people (see Kyle Shepherd's companion article in this issue of *Arise and Build*), we find strong scriptural support for a future that pulls us purposefully forward toward the blessings God has promised His people in the world. Once we grasp the kind of future that God has placed before us, we become motivated to work toward that future in confidence, with diligence, according to the riches of God's grace.

It is instructive to note that many counterfeit futures have been put forward by humanists of various stripes, each with its strident cheerleaders goading on their followers who all share one thing in common: a commitment to rebel against the rule of Christ and arrive at their goal on their own power. Two such visions of progress toward a "known" future are worth pointing out. Marxist communists have their own vision of an allegedly inevitable future that they're willing to sacrifice themselves—and you—to attain. The largest book I ever encountered at a Christian bookstore (that wasn't a Bible) was Dr. Francis Nigel Lee's massive *Communist Eschatology*, which documents the nature of the Marxist conception of the future and the part Marxists play in realizing it. The power of a strong vision for the future is a profound one, driving this ideology aggressively across the world's continents and capturing the minds of humanists in its stampede through history.

Another secular vision of the future is put forward by the poets of evolutionism: you are part of a train of events, and by

imputing to each of us the status of a steppingstone to a brighter future, these poets bid us to see ourselves as a small part of a massive story reaching back to the birth of the world. Loren Eiseley's books exemplify this approach of placing man in a context designed to simultaneously humble him and exalt him. Note particularly his popular book, *The Immense Journey*, and *The Unexpected Universe* (among others). Eiseley and others use all the tools of language to make the trek through so-called deep time a noble one, even if chance is conceded to be governing the process. The importance of capturing hearts and getting man to embrace these humanistic futures (a worker's paradise or biological perfection, the latter now associated with merging man and machine) is driven by the motivational force in these visions of unregenerate man.

ETERNITY PLACED IN MAN'S HEART

Why should man be receptive to this kind of vision-casting practiced by humanists? He responds to these siren calls because he is God's creature, and God has embedded in man a sense of eternal things, which is part of the image of God in man. This internal motif creates problems for man, as Ecclesiastes 3:10-11 alerts us, and he can choose either to cling to God's purposes and Christ's Kingship, or strike out on his own and assert man's conceits and autonomy to try to satisfy (or sublimate) his hunger for eternal things.

I have seen the travail which God hath given to the sons of men to be exercised in it. He maketh everything beautiful in his time, eternity also he hath set in their heart, so that no man can find out the work that God maketh from the beginning to the end. (Eccl. 3:10-11, trans. Hengstenberg)

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Humanistic man, in effect, attempts to seize the reins from God and take control of the future, as he refuses to accept what Scripture here asserts. He wants to either control the future himself, or comfort himself with the fiction that if he cannot control it, no God is there to control it either. Man won't wait for God: man will force things to be beautiful on man's schedule without reference to God. This revolutionary act on his part ensures ugliness, not beauty, on a global scale given man's forsaking of the Lord of life. His attempts to create heaven on his own terms instead create hell on earth.

Not only are men unable to see "the work that God maketh from the beginning to the end," they cannot see how "He maketh everything beautiful in his time" either. Man's sense of the eternal tells him that these beautiful things are there, but they are irrevocably concealed from those who walk by sight. As Dr. Rushdoony pointed out, it is faith that has the truer, more accurate vision. But humanistic man demands a future he can see, putting his faith in Marxist determinism or evolutionary progress—and always putting determination in the created order and denying it to the Creator and King.

But God's setting eternity in man's heart is a divine gift. "It is man's highest privilege to discern something eternal behind the transitory objects of the present world."¹ This fact drives us to consider the future that is hurtling toward us that comes from God's hand. When we look upon our children and grandchildren, we are seeing living roots extending into the future, allowing us to discern His purpose for His people across the generations. The resulting confidence should lead us to fruitful labor toward that future (John 15:8) rather than paralysis or humanistic detours into futility. Humanists promote a godless ideology and walk by sight, such that "the 'gift' of 'eternity' is a terrible burden from this age."²

ISAIAH'S VISION OF FUTURE FRUITFULNESS

Isaiah 32:1-8 has been discussed in *Arise & Build* before,³ as it describes in detail what our future holds.⁴ The next six verses deal with intervening judgments

until verse 15 transitions us forward in time to the vast repercussions arising from the pouring out of the Spirit of God on the world. Kilpatrick summarizes these verses this way: "It is a vision of the fruitful earth in quiet beauty, and of a righteous people rejoicing in the security and peace of those who do the will of God."⁵ So understood, we'll walk through verses 15 through 18 in sequence to catch the prophet's vision.

15a. *Until the Spirit be poured upon us from on high.* Skinner points out that "Spirit" is "used absolutely and denotes the Divine principle of life, and especially the power by which the will of God is made to prevail in human society."⁶ Oswalt's explanation is equally valuable:

If God's people were ever to share His character, an outcome devoutly to be hoped for, then it would have to come about through an infusion of God's Spirit into human beings. This development relates fundamentally to a crisis of Lordship. God cannot fill where He does not rule. Thus, it is no accident that this statement occurs in this context of divine kingship. So long as human beings usurp ultimate rule of their lives, there is impotence, unrighteousness, and dependence upon the very forces which would destroy us.⁷

15b. *And the wilderness be a fruitful field, and the fruitful field be counted for a forest.* Oswalt explains that "what was formerly useless for crops will become fertile, while what was fertile will become a veritable jungle. When the creative energy of God is let loose the results are always astonishing."⁸ A tremendous transformation in the natural world is asserted and is then immediately tied to moral transformation in the next verse.

16. *Then judgment shall dwell in the wilderness, and righteousness remain in the fruitful field.* Skinner points out that judgment and righteousness then become "the foundations of social order."⁹ These two terms, *judgment (justice)* and *righteousness*, are pulled from the first verse of this prophetic chapter (Isa. 32:1) and are now provided with a stupendous geographic range in which to operate. Ridderbos points out how extraordinary the reach of justice is:

The importance of justice prevailing in the grassland is that shepherds come here to pasture their flocks. In this dispensation, that justice is often violated because stockmen take possession of each other's wells or pastures (cf. Gen. 13:6-7; 26:20ff.). The distance from the settled areas encouraged the tendency to allow might to prevail over right. The fact that all this will change is not only because of the righteous government that will then be established (11:4ff; 32:1-2) but also because of the spiritual renewal the Spirit will have brought about in people. On the earth that is full of the knowledge of the Lord, no man, indeed no animal, will cause another any harm (11:6-9).¹⁰

In short, we have justice extending where we traditionally have least expected to find it.

Kilpatrick further unpacks the priorities that Isaiah is putting forward here in an easily understood form:

God and His righteousness come first. That message, men have consistently ignored. They have refused to believe that religion is related to economics, despite the fact that the history of human enterprise, the story of competitive private business, the unavailing quest for peace, all testify to the impossibility of creating a just and enduring order of life while greed, pride, selfishness, and such distortions of the spirit prevail in the relations of men.

It is here that the supreme relevance of the Christian gospel to the problems of humanity is to be seen; for good character is not a natural endowment of man, but something attained, not by human device, but by the recreative power of God's Spirit. The modern humanistic philosophy, with which so much psychology and social science are infected, dismisses this claim of faith, or at most concedes to it a merely subordinate influence.

There is not a single problem now vexing society on which the Word of God has not light to throw; but the first duty of those who will speak for God is to confront the world with His declared purpose and revealed will. This world can never know peace till life is organized on the principles laid down by God for His

children. It is to be remembered that Jesus Christ came not merely to proclaim a new life, but to produce it.¹¹

17. *And the work of righteousness shall be peace, and the effect of righteousness, quietness and assurance forever.* This verse alerts us that we are not merely to be passive in relation to securing peace but rather *laboring* for justice and righteousness so that peace can be the resulting product. Ridderbos therefore defines this entire passage of Isaiah as teaching "Peace Through Justice (32:15-20)."¹² Kilpatrick again provides a strong exposition of this verse of the prophecy:

The lesson for us is inescapable. If we are to know peace we have to show a new concern for righteousness, a new understanding of the spiritual conditions of peace. No one can claim that in all modern man's unavailing labors for peace there has been a first concern for righteousness. We have not aimed high enough; we have set our sights on a balance of power, on compromise between competing ambitions, on mutual pacts, and on all the manipulations of human resources which might prevent war. Limiting our conceptions of peace to a state of armed preparedness, we have hoped that fear would restrain strife. In no sense is that truly a quest for peace, [it is just] a precarious cease-fire. A true peace cannot be arranged at the council table.¹³

There is a glorious future ahead that has already been set in motion by the omnipotent Lord. Isaiah fills out the details and delineates the outworkings involved in the securing of that glorious future not only through the Lord's work, and the Spirit's work, but also His work through us as His ambassadors, as the Spirit-filled men of Exodus 30:1-11.¹⁴

18. *And my people shall dwell in a peaceable habitation, and in sure dwellings, and in quiet resting places.* Note the actual journey that landed us here at this destination, beginning just before verse 15, when the destruction and barrenness decreed was asserted in verse 14 to be *forever*. But verse 15 immediately flips this *forever* on its head as it opens with "Until the Spirit be poured out on us from on

high.” This is a radical shift in direction, as Lange points out: “Thus, the word ‘until’ that begins verse 15 is both a restriction of the preceding hyperbolic ‘forever’ and a bold bridge from the present into the remote future.”¹⁵ There is a shift from a false and baseless security to a true and legitimate one, because the Spirit from on high “will be emptied out on us, completely poured out” as Lange renders the Hebrew.¹⁶ God sets the means in motion by sending His Spirit into the world to convict it of righteousness.


The sequence of this prophecy is summarized by Kelley: “The outpouring of the Spirit will result in the increased fertility of the earth, and in the establishment of justice and righteousness throughout the world. The widespread practice of righteousness will in turn produce peace and tranquility forevermore.”¹⁷ Delitzsch asserts that the transition from 32:9-14 to verses 15-18 depicts “the destruction of the false rest to be followed by the realization of the true,”¹⁸ whereby the false peace cobbled together while defying God’s law becomes the worthless chaff that it is.

A PEOPLE NOT YET BORN

We are to cling to the precious promises God has provided to His people, most notably that our labor is not in vain in the Lord, and that our works shall follow us. Whatsoever we do to “establish the law” (Rom. 3:31) brings peace closer to realization, for the King who rules in righteousness (Isa. 32:1) is also the Prince of Peace (Isa. 9:6-7). The future is the domain where the increase of Christ’s government and of peace dwell. God’s people are to be future oriented, because the future is God’s and not man’s, and His grip on it serves as our refuge and strength.

Consequently, we are to adopt a steppingstone theology: a willingness to be part of the chain of events that ushers in the blessings of Isaiah 32:15-18, for the sake of our children and children’s children. Abraham was informed that kings would come forth from him, which doubtless reinforced his looking forward in time to glorious victories he could only faintly imagine. So must we walk in the spirit of the closing verses of Psalm 22,

where the generational theme is all but engraved with the point of a diamond, with all eyes upon the future that Christ holds in His hands: “Posterity shall serve Him; it shall be told of the Lord to the coming generation; They shall come and proclaim His righteousness to a people yet unborn, that He has done it.” (ESV)

And how far will His dominion extend *geographically* in the future on His people’s behalf? To the utmost limits, for Isa. 33:17 literally refers to His realm as “a land of distances.” There is then no such thing as a blocked future, or a constricted domain, for the adopted sons and daughters of the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. You can see down the corridor of time quite well with the eye of faith, and thus can work accordingly with all joy and diligence so that you might hear those coveted words, “well done, good and faithful servant.” 

1. Ernst Wilhelm Hengstenberg, *A Commentary on Ecclesiastes* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1998 reprint), p. 107.
2. Craig G. Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), p. 167.
3. <https://chalconedon.edu/resources/articles/is-the-kingdom-present-2>
4. <https://chalconedon.edu/resources/articles/the-scope-of-healing>
5. D. D. D. Kilpatrick in *The Interpreter’s Bible* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1956), vol. 5, p. 345.
6. John Skinner, *The Book of the Prophet Isaiah, Chapters 1-39* (Cambridge, GB: Cambridge University Press, 1896), p. 245.
7. John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 1-39* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986), pp. 587-588.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 588.
9. Skinner, p. 245.
10. Jan Ridderbos, *Isaiah* (Grand Rapids, MI: Regency Reference Library, 1985), pp. 266-267.
11. Kilpatrick, pp. 345-347.
12. Ridderbos, p. 264.
13. Kilpatrick, p. 347.
14. <https://chalconedon.edu/resources/articles/the-spirit-filled-men>
15. John Peter Lange, *Commentary on the Holy Scriptures: Isaiah* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, n.d.), p. 343.
16. *Ibid.*
17. Page H. Kelley in *The Broadman Bible Commentary* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1971), vol. 5, p. 283.
18. Keil & Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, n.d.), vol. 7, sec. 2, p. 53.

THE PARALYSIS OF A BLOCKED FUTURE

BY KYLE SHEPHERD



THEOLOGICAL CAUSES OF A BLOCKED FUTURE

In 1959, psychiatrist Dr. Henri Ellenberger made an important observation based on his work with patients suffering from various serious mental conditions. Quoted at length by Dr. Rushdoony in *God's Plan for Victory*,¹ Dr. Ellenberger observed:

Wherever the future becomes empty, as with manic and certain psychopaths, life is a perpetual gamble and the advantage of the present minute is taken into consideration; wherever the future is inaccessible or blocked, as with the depressed, hope necessarily disappears and life loses all meaning.²

A *blocked future* is a future that is perceived to be “empty” or “inaccessible” for various reasons. This leads to paralysis and inactivity. Dr. North writes:

If people believe that they are doomed as individuals, they find it difficult to survive in a life-threatening crisis. This is also true about civilizations. Self-confidence rests heavily on an optimistic view of the future. The vision of time that a society shares is very important for understanding how it operates. If you think you are running out of time, you will do certain things; if you think you have all the time in the world, you will do different things. Your vision of the future influences your activities in the present.³

An *open future* is the opposite: a future perceived to be ripe with purpose, redemption, clarity, and dependability. Dr. Rushdoony, in *God's Plan for Victory* and *Faith & Action*,⁴ dives into Dr. Ellenberger's comments and shows in detail how premillennial and amillennial eschatologies lead to a blocked future for the Christian, so we'll not duplicate his efforts here. Instead, we'll look at several additional theological approaches which lead to a blocked future and paralysis in life and decisionmaking.⁵

First, when a man rejects God as the starting point of all understanding, he necessarily replaces meaning with meaninglessness. Chance governs his universe, and thus no matter how hard he works, he will always be operating in a meaningless void that he vainly seeks to attribute meaning and purpose to. The non-Christian has full knowledge of this, too, since he “hold[s] the truth in unrighteousness” (Rom. 1:18). His future is empty because he has gutted his reality.

Second, when a man rejects God as the predestinating Lord of history Who is both transcendent and immanent, he must live as though either man or Satan is in charge of history. In either case, however, man ends up seeing history as controlled and predestined by conspiracy, by the elites. History becomes a manifestation of the will of this or that secret group, and no action that can be taken is strong enough to counter these powerful elites. Moreover, if God is not sovereign and predestinating, then there is no meaning to events that have happened to him, personally. In his mind, God does *not* cause “all things to work together for good to those who love God” (Rom. 8:28, NASB). If God is not sovereignly working things together for his good and guiding him through life, then chance occurrences (or the unstoppable elites) are all that propels man forward and there is nothing to learn or glean or draw encouragement from.

Third, when a man rejects the law of God as normative for every area of life, ethics devolve into subjectivity and pragmatism. No clear path forward is seen because God's ordained path has been blocked off: “No Entry.” It has been blocked off because God's law requires responsibility and making hard decisions, and fallen man would prefer to find an easier road. Now every possible course of action is on the table, and ironically this glut of options leads to overwhelm and stagnation of decisionmaking. This is especially so in society, church, and state,

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where competing ethics result in gridlock and destruction. Dr. Rushdoony writes:

God has a plan for the conquest of all things by His covenant people. That plan is His law. It leaves no area of life and activity untouched, and it predestines victory. To deny the law is to deny God and His plan for victory.⁶

Fourth, when a man rejects the blessings and curses of God in history, he casts a question mark over the results of anything he does. Meredith Kline denied that God brings sanctions based on ethical conformity to God's law, writing that "prosperity and adversity [must be] experienced in a manner largely unpredictable because of the inscrutable sovereignty of the divine will that dispenses them in mysterious ways."⁷ Thus, if one takes Dr. Kline's slot-machine approach, man begins to either obsess over whether he's doing exactly the right thing, making exactly the right decision, because he is left alone at the wheel—or else he spins out, knowing there's no point to anything he does. He has no confidence that anything he does will receive God's blessing.

THE PARALYSIS OF A BLOCKED FUTURE

The paralysis resulting from a blocked future is widespread.

First, a blocked future leads directly to a reluctance to "Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth" (Gen. 1:28). Why have children if by bringing them into the world we cause them to become victims of the certain doom we'll face in our lifetime? An email arrived in my inbox the other day written by a highly successful Christian entrepreneur and businesswoman. She wrote that until she had a sound eschatology of victory, specifically postmillennialism, she was certain the rapture, the Antichrist, and economic doom were around the corner. She couldn't bring herself to be so cruel as to usher in children to this world. Her future was blocked. It was only a recognition and acceptance of sound eschatology that caused her to want to have children. She now has an open future—and a large dominion-oriented family that is unusually productive for the Kingdom.

Second, when it comes to entrepreneurship, work, and dominion, Dr. Rush-

doony notes that "We are not motivated to action unless we know the purpose for our action."⁸ A blocked future leads one to *not* "subdue [the earth]: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth" (Gen. 1:28). There is no motivation to steward the earth, multiply its resources, and invest our talents (Matt. 25:14–30). Dr. Rushdoony elaborates:

Work gives no dominion in the world of humanism, and vacationing is an attempt to escape from the fact of frustration and castration. Man without dominion is a eunuch, and humanistic man, lacking true dominion, runs from work into a frenetic sexuality, trying to prove a false potency, because he knows in his heart he is an impotent man insofar as true dominion is concerned.⁹

Man without dominion purpose stemming from a Christian-theistic view of the world runs from work into addictions of all kinds: endless scrolling on social media, pornography, drugs, consumerism, and more.

Third, a blocked future results from the repudiation of God's law as the normative ethic. This is most visible and has the sharpest consequences when it comes to ignoring God's law in matters of justice and oppression. Man, having replaced God's law with man's law, is now left with no clear path for pursuing justice in cases of abuse and oppression. This results in competing approaches regarding whether or not to heed the cry of an oppressed person based on their gender or church membership status, different opinions on how or whether to assess the truthfulness of a victim's claims, disparate standards for accepting evidence and witnesses, and fundamentally incompatible positions on sentencing. Evil is called good and good is called evil (Isa. 5:20), deceptive oppressors manipulate others into considering them bountiful (Isa. 32:5), smoking flaxes are quenched and bruised reeds are broken (Isa. 42:3)—all because man, having chucked God's law since "there is no light in them," does not go "to the law and to the testimony" (Isa. 8:20). The result of all this? Justice grinds to a halt, and the victim is crushed in the

gears. The victim herself now has a blocked future: there is no justice and therefore, according to Isaiah 51:5 and Zechariah 9:9, there can be no healing.¹⁰ That lack of justice and judgment results in a blocked future, as Dr. Ellenberger pointed out in 1959. “Hope deferred maketh the heart sick: but when the desire cometh, it is a tree of life” (Prov. 13:12).

Fourth, a blocked future results in no compelling reason to seek for the unity, reconciliation, and strengthening of the church, with the endpoint being, as St. Paul sets forth, “Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ” (Eph. 4:13). If a Christian only sees this as a fruitless endeavor due to overriding eschatological concerns (i.e., premillennialism or amillennialism), then he will abandon ship when it comes to this. As Dr. Rushdoony notes:

Not work but waiting was the new emphasis, waiting for the rapture, for premillennialists, and waiting grimly for the tribulation and end, for amillennialists.¹¹

But God calls us to “seek peace, and pursue it” (Ps. 34:14b).

Fifth, a blocked future leads to a lack of motivation when it comes to growing in self-government due to lack of clarity. God designed the brain to be able to assess whether a plan or goal is attainable or not (i.e., the likelihood of reward) based on what it already knows and emits chemicals to drive motivation toward achieving that goal. Once progress is made toward the goal, this progress—a “reward”—is perceived by the brain and further dopamine is released, prompting further motivation. The process repeats. This mechanism is part of how God created man to pursue dominion, justice, and righteousness. But when a man’s future is blocked, when he sees something as unattainable or meaningless despite knowing he should do it, the brain will assess the likelihood of a reward—in this case, an ultimately unattainable or meaningless exercise would not be considered a reward—and withhold the motivating chemicals, leaving the man with no motivation. Thus a man facing a blocked

future will struggle with discipline, personal development, and self-government. It’s important to note that man is *not* a product of chemicals, and the root of this chain can be found in a belief. These difficulties do not ultimately stem from chemicals but from faith and ethics.

In all this, we must pursue St. Paul’s words, “bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ” (2 Cor. 10:5). For “in him we live, and move, and have our being” (Acts 17:28), and ultimately have a truly open future. 🏠

1. R. J. Rushdoony, *God’s Plan for Victory: The Meaning of Postmillennialism*, third edition (Vallecito, CA: Chalcedon / Ross House Books, [1997] 2022), p. 13.
2. Henri F. Ellenberger, “A Clinical Introduction to Psychiatric Phenomenology and Existential Analysis,” in Rollo May, Ernest Angel, Henri F. Ellenberger, eds., *Existence: A New Dimension in Psychiatry and Psychology* (New York: Basic Books, 1959), pp. 106-107 (referenced in *God’s Plan for Victory*, p. 13).
3. Gary North, *Millennialism and Social Theory* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1990), p. 335.
4. R. J. Rushdoony, *Faith & Action* (Vallecito, CA: Chalcedon/Ross House Books, 2019), vol. 3, pp. 1234–1241.
5. There are additional causes for a blocked future that find their roots in various mental conditions, but these mental conditions are often brought about by trauma or abuse unaccompanied by the requisite justice on the perpetrator required by God’s law, which is a consequence we’ll look at later in this article.
6. *God’s Plan for Victory*, p. 43.
7. Meredith G. Kline, “Comments on an Old-New Error,” *Westminster Theological Journal*, XLI (Fall 1978), p. 184, quoted in *Millennialism and Social Theory*, p. 43.
8. *God’s Plan for Victory*, p. xv.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 29.
10. This is beyond the scope of the present article, but as Martin Selbrede points out, Isaiah 51:5 and Zechariah 9:9 indicate a chronology: justice is a prerequisite for healing. See Selbrede, “Domestic Abuse & The Church: Lecture 3,” ChalcedonTV, filmed April 27, 2019, video of lecture, 58:14, youtube.com/watch?v=z4y-5-17RYE.
11. *God’s Plan for Victory*, p. 17.

Humanism is collapsing, but is the Church ready to govern in Christ's name?

Rushdoony predicted the times in which we live which is why he focused the mission of Chalcedon on the great work of Christian Reconstruction. The only remedy to what we face is a return to Christian faith, character, and obedience.

Rushdoony wrote, "The Biblical doctrine of theocracy means the self-government of the Christian man," (*Sovereignty*, p. 31) which means the Christian most needs the resources to equip him for Biblical self-government.

The Chalcedon Foundation is a "think-tank for the self-governing Christian," and our mission is to equip Christian families and churches to apply the faith to every area of life and cultivate faithfulness to God's law and covenant in order that Christ's Kingdom might increase.

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