



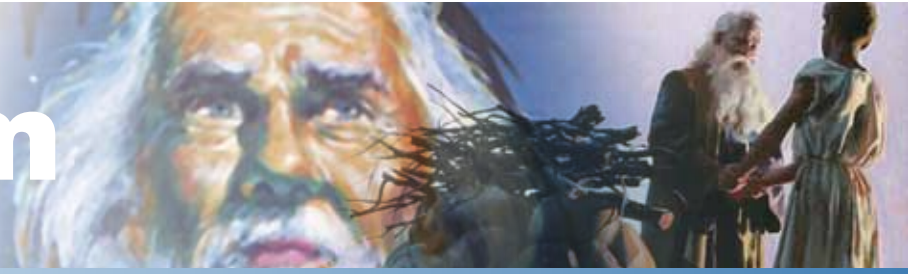
Abraham



International Fellowship
of Christians and Jews®

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Our Incredible Patriarch

AN OVERVIEW

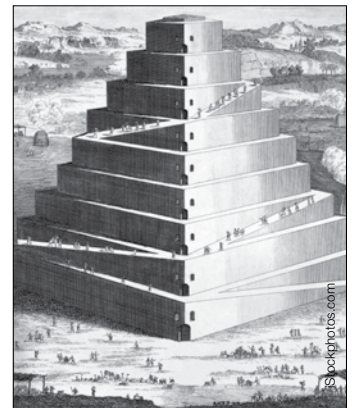
Abraham is arguably one of the most influential people in religious history. He is revered as a patriarch in three major religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. He is also considered the founder of monotheism—the worship of one God. We see the fruit of God’s promises to Abraham and the consequences of his choices—both good and bad—in our world today. For Jews and Christians, his life marked a decided shift in the way God deals with mankind.

The story of Abraham has continued throughout history, and still today, his story is our story.

OBEYING THE ONE TRUE GOD

When the generation that grew up after Noah began to turn away from the Lord and attempted to build the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1–9) to gain power for themselves, God turned from dealing with peoples and nations to calling one man—Abraham (originally known as Abram)—through whom He would create and raise up a new nation. This nation, Israel, would be God’s unique people.

Abraham came from a geographic area known for pagan worship. According to Joshua 24:2, Abraham’s father, Terah, was a worshiper of other gods. Rabbinic tradition tells us that Terah not only worshiped, but also created and sold stone idols in their home city of Ur (believed to be modern-day southern Iraq).



The Tower of Babel was a rebellion against God.

God’s first recorded words to Abraham are in Genesis 12, when the Lord commanded him to leave the familiar land of his father’s household and settle in a place that God would show him. This command came with a promise, and God’s promise to Abraham was threefold:

- I will make you a great nation;
- I will make your name great;
- I will bless those who bless you and curse those who curse you.

Abraham was seventy-five at the time, raised on his father’s polytheistic paradigm, and living in the highly developed city of Ur. This move today would be the equivalent of someone leaving his permanent home in a comfortable, modern city to live the rest of his life in an unfamiliar, partly desert region surrounding by potentially hostile people. Not exactly an easy choice to make!

Not only that, but Abraham and his wife, Sarah (originally known as Sarai), were also childless. At that time Sarah was sixty-five, and even in those days, that was not considered “childbearing” age. Remarkably, Abraham didn’t let any of these factors hold him back from following God’s call.



God told Abraham his descendants would be as numerous as the stars.

PROMISES AND COVENANTS

Accompanied by his wife Sarah and his nephew Lot, Abraham set out for the plains of Canaan. As God led, Abraham built altars of worship along the journey—and was blessed by so many livestock that he eventually had to part ways with Lot so they could each find enough pastureland for their flocks. Abraham and Sarah moved to Hebron and settled in the plain of Mamre (part of current-day Israel).

It is interesting to note that in selecting which land each would settle, Abraham allowed Lot to choose first. This was yet another demonstration of Abraham's faith in God's promise that he would be given all of Canaan—the land that was later to become Israel!

Once settled in their God-appointed land, the “*word of the LORD came to Abraham in a vision*” (Genesis 15:1) reassuring Abraham that God was his shield and reward. When Abraham expressed concern that he still had no heir, God told him that his offspring would be as numerous as the stars in the sky.

God and Abraham made a sacred covenant together, and God foretold the Israelites' slavery in a foreign land for 400 years. He also spoke of their rescue and then promised the land to Abraham's descendants, thus prophesying and securing the birth of Israel.



Abraham traveled to Canaan with Sarah, his nephew Lot, and all their livestock.

RISE OF ISHMAEL

Over a decade had passed since Abraham and Sarah had received God's promise of an heir, and Sarah was still without child. So she decided to help matters along and gave her servant Hagar to Abraham, hoping they could create an heir. But when Hagar became pregnant, she grew hateful toward Sarah. As a result, Sarah treated Hagar harshly, and the maidservant ran away. Despite being rejected by Sarah, the Lord reassured Hagar that she would give birth to a son, Ishmael, and that Ishmael's descendants would be too numerous to count.



Abraham sends Hagar and Ishmael into the desert.

Ishmael is known as a prophet and patriarch to Muslims, and they believe their founder Muhammad was one of his descendants. Many believe the centuries-old conflict between Israelites and Arabs started with these two sons and resulted from Abraham and Sarah's decision not to wait for God to fulfill His promise.

Despite Abraham and Sarah's actions, God remained faithful. When Abraham was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to him again and made another covenant. This covenant was marked by the physical act of circumcision—the first time this practice was introduced in the Bible. During this sacred exchange, God changed their names to Abraham and Sarah. This marked the first of several times throughout Scripture when God would underscore a sacred encounter by giving His followers new names. He also reassured the couple that even in their advanced age Sarah would indeed have a child, a son they would call Isaac.

LONG-AWAITED CHILD

When Abraham learned of God's plan to destroy nearby Sodom and Gomorrah because of the residents' sins, he pleaded with God to spare the town if fifty righteous people were found living there. In one of the longest recorded conversations between God and a man, Abraham kept lowering the number of righteous citizens that might allow the town to be spared. (See Genesis 18:16–33.) When not even ten righteous men were found within the city, God destroyed it in a rain of fire and brimstone.

Shortly after, Abraham and Sarah went on a journey. Afraid that foreign leaders might harm him to obtain Sarah as a wife for themselves, as she was a beautiful woman, Abraham lied and said Sarah was his sister. This was not the first time Abraham had done this. Both times that he lied a foreign king took Sarah into his house to be one of his wives—and both times God’s anger brought down punishment on these kings’ households until they returned Sarah untouched back to Abraham.

In their old age, Sarah and Abraham conceived the child God had promised—a son named Isaac. When the boy was still young, God tested Abraham’s love and loyalty by commanding him to sacrifice the child on an altar. When God saw that Abraham was willing to obey this command, He provided a ram instead for the sacrifice at the last minute. God blessed Abraham again for this display of sacrificial obedience.



Abraham obeyed God, even taking his only son, Isaac, to be sacrificed.

LEGACY OF FAITH

Sarah lived to be 127, and when she died, Abraham buried her in a cave he purchased near Hebron. He went on to secure a wife for their son, Isaac, and eventually took another wife for himself, Keturah, with whom he had six more sons. Abraham lived to be 175 and was buried by his sons Isaac and Ishmael in the cave with Sarah.



Abraham buried his wife, Sarah, in the cave of Macpelah.

Eventually Abraham and Sarah’s bodies were joined in this burial cave by the bodies of their son Isaac and his wife Rebekah, and that couple’s son Jacob and his wife Leah. This burial place is now known as the Cave of the Patriarchs, or the Tomb of the Patriarchs, and is one of the most revered and visited holy sites.

Today Jews and Christians remember this patriarch whom Jews consider the father of the nation of Israel, and who Christians believe started the family line that eventually led to the birth of Jesus. (See Matthew 1:1–17.) People of both faiths revere Abraham as a man who knew God personally, obeyed him sacrificially, and took the marks of this special relationship on his body and in his name—a flawed but faithful patriarch who left an incredible legacy of faith.

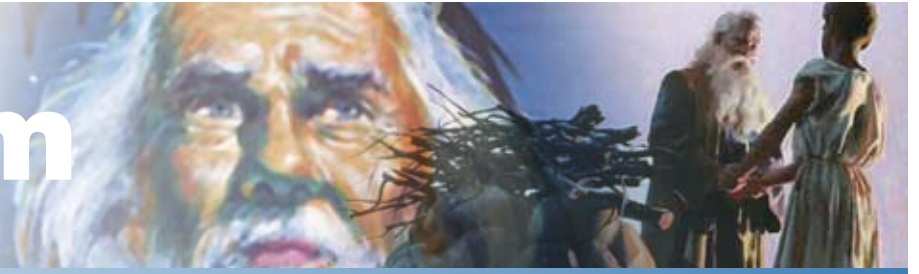
Indeed, despite being homeless in a land given to him by God, childless despite his name which means “exalted father,” and clueless as to how God was going to keep His promises to him, Abraham chose to believe. And because of that one decision, God credited Abraham’s faith and gave him the gift of righteousness: “*Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness*” (Genesis 15:6).



The Tomb of the Patriarchs in Hebron is one of the holiest sites for Jews today.

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Lesson One:

The Promise-Maker

Lesson Objectives

Through the study of God's covenant with Abraham, we will learn important lessons about God's character and about the implications of these covenants for us today. We will also observe that:

- God sought out a special, personal relationship with man.
- God made promises to Abraham and his descendants that we can still see at work today.
- Abraham's relationship with God was open and communicative, a great model for us today.
- Abraham was honest with God about his questions and fears—and God responded graciously.
- We serve a covenant-making and covenant-keeping God.
- God is faithful to His word—despite our sinfulness.
- As with Abraham, God credits our faith in Him as “righteousness.”

Key Bible Verse

When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to him and said, “I am God Almighty; walk before me faithfully and be blameless. Then I will make my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your numbers.” — Genesis 17:1–2



Abraham tells Sarah of God's covenant to bless them with a child.

Before You Begin

Covenants were commonly made in the ancient Near East. They served as contracts or formal agreements between two parties, usually between kings or between a king and his subjects. For the Jews, this concept was transformed entirely, however, by God insisting that it also represented the relationship between Himself and His people, Israel.

One of the foundational principles of Judaism is that God and Israel are eternally linked by covenant. This covenant, or *berit* in Hebrew, is everlasting and binds God with all future generations of Israel as well (Deuteronomy 29:14–15).

The first covenant described in the *Torah* (the main religious text for Jews, known to Christians as the first five books of the Old Testament) was between God and Noah, entered into after the flood. As part of His agreement,

God promised never again to destroy the earth with a flood. Noah promised that he and his descendants would observe basic moral laws, which the rabbis identify as prohibitions against murder, theft, cruelty to animals,



Noah's thanksgiving to God.

worshiping idols, blaspheming God, engaging in sundry illicit physical relationships, as well as the positive command to set up a system of justice so that society would be ruled fairly (Genesis 9:1–9).

The second covenant described in the *Torah* was between God and Abraham, the first Jew, in which God promised Abraham countless descendants and also to make him into the father of a great nation. God, moreover, promised Abraham that He would be his God and the God of his descendants, and that He would give them the land of Canaan as an eternal possession (Genesis 17:7–9). Abraham, as part of his agreement, promised to believe in God and to act justly and righteously before Him (Genesis 17:11).

The next covenant, regarded by Jews as the culmination of God's first covenant with Abraham, was made between God and the entire nation of Israel at Sinai. Israel promised to obey God's *Torah* and commandments, while God promised to bless them and reward them for their deeds (Deuteronomy 30:15–19).

This covenant presumes both God's reaching out to Israel as well as Israel's acceptance of Him as their one and only God. If Israel is "the chosen" people, she is also "the choosing" people in accepting God as Lord. In addition, Jews believe that while God has a special relationship with Israel deriving from these covenants, He remains the God of the universe and all people.

The links between God and Israel may have been formalized through a covenant that demanded loyalty and commitment from both parties. They remain rooted eternally, however, in a mutually abiding love.



Moses receives the Ten Commandments.

God's Promises to Abraham

Read Genesis 15.

1. In verse 1, what did God promise to be for Abraham? Why would those promises be significant to Abraham?

2. How did God respond to Abraham's question in verses 2–3? What does this teach us about God and the way He interacts with us?

3. In verse 8, Abraham asked God how he could know that he would someday possess the Promised Land. What did God do in answer to Abraham's question?



4. Think of a time when you have questioned God. How have you sensed His response?

5. What do you think it means that God credited Abraham's belief as righteousness? Why would it have been hard for Abraham to believe God at this time?

6. What two very significant events in Israel's future were revealed to Abraham in Genesis 15:13–14?

Abraham's Promises to God

1. How do you view Abraham's question to God in Genesis 15:2–3? Does it reveal a lack of faith, or was his perplexity understandable given the circumstances?

2. In Genesis 15:6, how did Abraham respond to God's reassurances and promises? To what end?

3. Read Genesis 14:21–24, which recount the events just before God and Abraham made their covenant. In this passage, what did Abraham refuse to put his hope in?

4. Consider how Abraham interacted with and responded to God in these chapters. In what ways would you like to follow his lead?

Sealing the Deal

1. What actions did God require of Abraham to mark their covenant?



2. Why do you think God required these steps?

3. What did God do to seal their covenant?

4. God waited thirteen more years after the birth of Ishmael before appearing to Abraham again. Read Genesis 17. What was God teaching Abraham by another long delay in reaffirming His promises?

5. What further promises and actions were made between God and Abraham in this chapter?

6. How did Abraham respond this time to God's words of covenant with him?

What This Means Today

Reread Genesis 15:13–16, 18–20 and Genesis 17:4–8, 20–21.

1. How have we seen the fulfillment of these promises God made to Abraham throughout Israel's history?

2. How have we seen in our world today the consequences of Abraham and Sarah not waiting on God to fulfill His promise of an heir?

3. How old was Abraham when God made good on his promise of an heir? What does this teach us about God's timing?

Something to Think About

Abraham did not immediately receive everything God promised him, proof that God does not operate on our timetable. It is always tempting to “help” God out with His plans, especially when He seems to us to be taking too long. While God and man are certainly partners in life, we need to resist the urge to manipulate circumstances to achieve *our* plans on *our* time frame.

Is there something that you are waiting upon God for right now? Ask God to help you sacrifice your schedule and to choose instead to trust Him to keep His promises.

Read these verses about “*waiting on the Lord*.”
Select one to memorize that will help you as you wait.

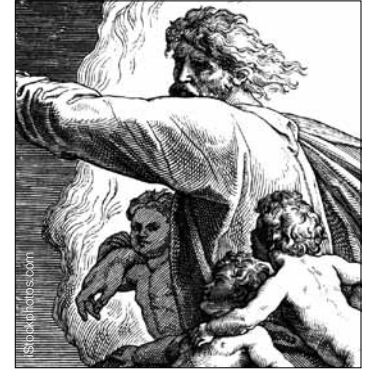
- Psalm 5:2–3
- Psalm 27:13–14
- Psalm 33:20–21
- Psalm 37:7
- Psalm 38:15
- Psalm 130:5
- Isaiah 30:18
- Lamentations 3:25–26
- Micah 7:7



Extra Credit

A Christian Reflection

1. Read Matthew 1:1–17. What else came from God’s promise of a son to Abraham? What is the significance of this?



2. Read Romans 2:25–29. How did this teaching change the meaning and purpose of circumcision? What do you think “*circumcision of the heart*” means?

3. What practical steps can you take to live by this spiritual measure?

4. What do the following verses teach about the “*circumcision of the heart*,” and the shift in the covenant relationship between God and man spoken of in the New Testament?

Verse	Teaching	Change
1 Corinthians 7:18–20		
Galatians 5:5–6		
Galatians 6:12–16		
Colossians 2:9–12		

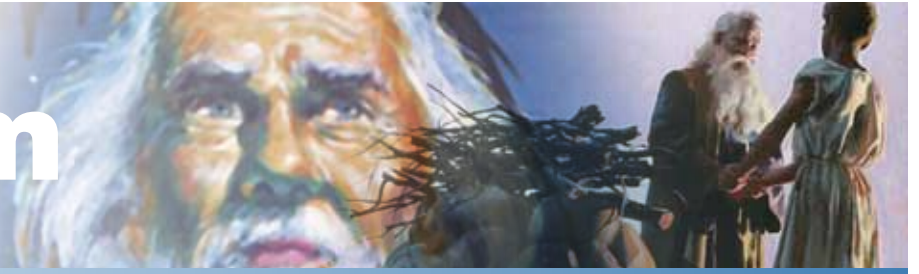
SOURCES

Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein, *How Firm A Foundation*, Paraclete Press, Brewster, Massachusetts, 1997.

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Lesson Two:

The Promise-Keeper

Lesson Objectives

Through the study of God fulfilling His promise to Abraham, we will learn important lessons about God's character and about God's relationship with His chosen people. We will also observe that:

- God's timing is not our timing.
- Radical obedience to God leads to His amazing work in our life.
- God keeps His promises.
- God's covenant to Abraham impacts us still today.

Key Bible Verse

When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to him and said, "I am God Almighty; walk before me faithfully and be blameless. Then I will make my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your numbers." — Genesis 17:1–2



Before You Begin

God made some amazing promises to Abraham: that his offspring would be as numerous as the stars (Genesis 15:4–5); that Abraham would live to an old age (Genesis 15:15); that he would be the father of many nations (Genesis 17:4); and that the land of Israel would be his descendants' everlasting possession (Genesis 17:8). For a man who was uprooted by God from his homeland and who had no children well into his old age, these promises must have seemed far-fetched—and amazing.

Abraham clung to these promises. He refused a reward from the king of Sodom for his role in rescuing Lot and many other people from marauders (Genesis 14:21–24), choosing instead to wait on God for the fulfillment of His word and His promise. Because of this great faith, God greatly honored Abraham and assured him that he had nothing to fear.

God made promises and a covenant with Abraham and considered him "righteous" because of his deep faith, yet we see in the Genesis account that Abraham certainly was human. When it seemed that God was taking too

long to fulfill His promise of an heir, Abraham and Sarah took matters into their own hands, and Abraham fathered a child with Sarah's maid, Hagar. This wasn't in line with God's plan, however. The child that resulted, Ishmael, only complicated the story because he became the ancestor of the Arab people, some of whom are Israel's enemies to this day.



We can relate to Abraham's impatience, and we are awed by his obedience. When God asked for the physical mark of circumcision, Abraham was quick to obey. When God asked the unthinkable, that Abraham sacrifice his long-awaited son, Isaac, Abraham never wavered in his response. Abraham's answer to Isaac's question about the lamb for the sacrifice—*"God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son"* (Genesis 22:8)—is a tremendous statement of faith in God's ability to provide for His people. And God did indeed provide a sacrifice to take Isaac's place.

What is perhaps most inspiring about the story of Abraham is that whether he was waiting on God or running ahead of His will, God was faithful to him. In His infinite mercy and grace, the Lord gave Abraham second chances; He didn't hold Abraham's missteps against him. God gave Abraham a new name, a long-awaited child, and the honor of being the father of a nation.

Yes, it happened because Abraham was a man of great faith. But even more so because God is faithful. He is a covenant-making, promise-keeping God. And we who are counted among Abraham's offspring are a living, breathing testament to this beautiful truth.

Birth of Ishmael

Read Genesis 16

1. Why do you think God was delaying the fulfillment of His promise to give Abraham a son and heir to the Promised Land?

2. How did God's response to the plight of Hagar and her son demonstrate that He is a merciful and compassionate God?

3. The name Ishmael means "God hears," because God heard and responded to Hagar's need. Hagar called the spring where God met her *"the well of the Living One who sees me."* What lessons do we find in Hagar's experience?

4. What were the results—then and today—of Abraham and Sarah not waiting on God to fulfill his promise?

5. When have you ever had to wait on God? What were the results of your waiting—or not waiting—on His timing?

Abraham's Name Change

Read Genesis 17

1. In verse 1, God refers to himself as *El Shaddai*, typically translated as “God Almighty.” The name speaks of His power to do anything, no matter how hard. Why did this name have special meaning to Abraham at this point in his life?



2. What unique thing did God do in verses 5 and 15? Why do you think He made these changes?

3. In verses 10–14, God established the covenant of circumcision. How did He explain the significance of this action? How quickly did Abraham obey God's command concerning circumcision?

4. Why is it significant that Abraham simply fell on his face and said nothing as God established the sign of circumcision and told Abraham to circumcise his household?

5. What words do you read in Genesis 17:8 that indicate God's plan was to give the Holy Land to Israel for all time?

Birth and Offering of Isaac

Read Genesis 21:1–7 and Genesis 22:1–18

1. Genesis 21 shows that Sarah also waited in faith for the birth of the promised son. What lesson had she learned from the incident with Hagar fourteen years earlier?



2. From Genesis 22:3, see if you can identify at least five specific steps Abraham took to obey God's command.

1) _____

2) _____

3) _____

4) _____

5) _____

3. Mount Moriah gained more significance later in Israel's history. What important structure did Solomon build for God on this holy site (see 2 Chronicles 3:1)?

4. In what way did the substitution of a ram for Isaac's life foreshadow Israel's sacrificial system under the Law of Moses? How is this substitution significant for Christians?



5. Abraham's obedience brought a great blessing from God (Genesis 22:17–18). How is the statement of verse 18 similar to the promise of Genesis 12:3? How does this promise impact you?

Deaths of Sarah and Abraham

Read Genesis 23:1–11 and Genesis 25:1–11

1. In Abraham's day, people were buried in their homeland. By burying Sarah in Canaan instead of back in Ur, what was Abraham saying about the land to which God had led him?



2. All of Canaan belonged to Abraham, but the only piece of land he ever actually owned was a burial cave, which he had to buy. Why do you think God kept Abraham living as a nomad?

3. How did his special provision for Isaac reveal Abraham's belief that his own death would not mean the end of God's promises to him?

4. What significance do you see in the fact that Isaac chose to live near Beer Lahai Roi, where God answered prayer and cared for Hagar (Genesis 16:14)?

5. What legacy of faith are you leaving with those in your life?

Something to Think About

While Abraham is revered as a man of great faith, he also displayed great obedience. And that obedience wasn't always easy! In Jeremiah 32:27, God says, *"I am the LORD, the God of all mankind. Is anything too hard for me?"* It's not always easy to keep this truth in mind, but when we consider Abraham's life, we see the amazing fruit of obedience to God's commands.



1. How can you be more obedient to God today? What command might He be calling you to obey?

Extra Credit

Read the following Scriptures from the New Testament. What do the following verses tell us about what God's promise to Abraham means to us today?

Verse	Promise
Matthew 1:1–17	
Matthew 3:8–10	
Luke 1:39–45	
Luke 1:67–80	
Luke 19:8–10	
Romans 4	
Romans 9:6–33	
Galatians 3	

SOURCES

Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein, *How Firm A Foundation*, Paraclete Press, Brewster, Massachusetts, 1997.

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RABBI YECHIEL ECKSTEIN



In 1983, Rabbi Eckstein founded the *International Fellowship of Christians and Jews* (*The Fellowship*), devoting his life to building bridges of understanding between Christians and Jews and broad support for the State of Israel.

He is an internationally respected Bible teacher and acknowledged as the world's leading Jewish authority on evangelical Christians.

Under his leadership, *The Fellowship* now raises over \$125 million annually, making it the largest Christian-supported humanitarian nonprofit working in Israel today.

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Building Bridges. Saving Lives.



The *International Fellowship of Christians and Jews* was founded in 1983 by Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein to promote understanding between Christians and Jews, and to build broad support for Israel through these ministry programs:

BLESSING JEWS IN NEED AROUND THE WORLD



- **On Wings of Eagles** — Helping bring Jews to the Holy Land

Isaiah 58.

- **Isaiah 58** — Providing lifesaving aid and assistance to impoverished Jews in the former Soviet Union



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UNDERSTANDING THE JEWISH ROOTS OF THE CHRISTIAN FAITH



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