THE HEART OF GOD INTRODUCTION



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A Scriptorium Study

And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself. Luke 24.27

The Fellowship of Ailbe

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Introduction to The Heart of God: Introduction

It is impossible to overestimate the importance of the Bible to the Christian life.

Impossible to overestimate, but not to undervalue.

Many Christians have yet to discover the power of God's Word to show them Jesus, and to equip them for every good work. They agree concerning the Bible's importance, but they find reading and studying the Scriptures somewhat daunting. At best, they may dabble in the Word, reading over favorite passages, following a daily devotional guide, preparing for a Bible study class, or looking up Scriptures related to a sermon.

But serious study, based on deep understanding and love of Scripture, study that brings them into an encounter with the living God and His glory – such study not yet become part of their daily regimen.

One reason this may be the case is the difficulty some people have finding their way around in the Bible. So many books, so many different themes, such a large quantity of revelation to consume! Where to begin? How to keep it all together? What sense to make of it all?

The Heart of God studies provide a road map through the Scriptures, unfolding key unifying threads and following the development of those matters closest to the heart of our Lord Jesus Christ, from Genesis to Revelation. Through all our study we'll see how the Scriptures lead us to Jesus, and how He, in turn, brings into the presence of our heavenly Father and His Kingdom. There, as we encounter God and His glory, the Spirit can transform us increasingly in to the very image of our Lord Jesus Christ.

We begin our study of *The Heart of God* by looking at the uniqueness and unity of Scripture, and at three primary themes which lie close to the heart of God.

We're pleased to provide *Scriptorium* studies in PDF format at no charge. We hope you will find them helpful and encouraging as you press on in your journey toward spiritual maturity with the Lord.

Please visit our website, <u>www.ailbe.org</u>, to discover the many other resources available to serve your needs. The Fellowship of Ailbe is a spiritual fellowship in the Celtic Christian tradition. Visit our website also to subscribe to our worldview study *ReVision*, our devotional newsletter *Crosfigell*, and our worldview newsletter *The Week*.

If you find these studies, or any of our other resources helpful, we hope you will consider making a contribution to help support our work. You can do so by using the donate button at the website or by sending your gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe, 19 Tyler Dr., Essex Junction, VT 05452.

We hope you find this study of Acts instructive and helpful to equip you for your walk with and work for the Lord. Thank you for joining us.

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1 A Sword in Our Hands

Read and meditate on Psalm 12.

We are about to embark on a whirlwind tour of the Bible. In a day such as ours, where increasingly, half-truths, exaggerations, flattery, deception, and outright lies are becoming more the *lingua franca* of a generation, we need to make sure we are well-anchored in the truth of God.

For reflection

1. In Psalm 12, David connects a rise in autonomy – people acting as a law unto themselves (v. 4) – and ungodliness (v. 1), to people turning their backs on truth (vv. 2, 3). Can you see this process reflected in our own day? Explain.

2. What does David want God to do about this (v. 3)? Meditate on Psalm 12.5. *Why* might we expect God to "arise"? What should we expect Him to arise to do? For whom? Who are these people? (Hint: The word which NKJV translates *safety* in v. 5 is closely related to *salvation*.) Taken together with what's lacking and what's present in verses 1-4, what was David wanting God to arise and do?

3. According to Hebrews 4.12 and Psalm 149.5-7, what does the Lord use, and in whose hands, in order to "cut off" (Ps. 12.3) the lies and flatteries of an autonomous and godless age? What are the implications of this for you? How well prepared for this calling are you?

4. God's Word is "pure" (v. 6), like silver refined seven times. What does it mean to say that something is pure? How should the emphasis on seven refinements of that pure Word bolster our confidence in it? How could you tell if someone had such confidence in the Word of God?

5. To what does "them" refer in v. 7 (look back to v. 6)? Should we expect to adjust God's Word to suit the times in which we live? Why not? But (v. 8) we should be realistic: Will we ever be able to relax our guard against lies, flatteries, deceit, and half-truths? How does this warning make finding *safety* in the Word of God all that much more important?

Summary

God does not sit idly by while people oppress and take advantage of one another through lies and deceit. He is always preparing a response, always readying His people to wield the Sword of Truth into a world of vileness (v. 8), in order to establish His salvation (v. 5) more firmly among those He comes to save. Is your present approach to the Word of God adequate to enable you wield that Word in the way God intends?

Closing Prayer

Help, LORD, for the godly man ceases!For the faithful disappear from among the sons of men.They speak idly everyone with his neighbor;*With* flattering lips *and* a double heart they speak.May the LORD cut off all flattering lips,*And* the tongue that speaks proud things,

Who have said,
"With our tongue we will prevail;
Our lips *are* our own;
Who *is* lord over us?"
"For the oppression of the poor, for the sighing of the needy, Now I will arise," says the LORD;
"I will set *him* in the safety for which he yearns."
The words of the LORD *are* pure words, *Like* silver tried in a furnace of earth,
Purified seven times.
You shall keep them, O LORD,
You shall preserve them from this generation forever.
The wicked prowl on every side,
When vileness is exalted among the sons of men.

Psalm 12

Next steps – Preparation: If you have not mapped out your Personal Mission Field, watch this video (<u>click here</u>), download the worksheet and do so. Here is your field of battle for wielding the Sword of God's Word. Begin praying daily for the people in your Personal Mission Field.

2 Appetite Adjustment?

Read and reflect on Job 23.10-12, Jeremiah 15.15, 16, and Revelation 10.1-11.

Our purpose in this survey of God's Word, which we are ramping-up to begin, is not to study every single book in exhaustive detail, nor even to gain a thorough overview of each book. Rather, we will follow the development of certain Biblical *themes*, as these unfold throughout the Bible. By tracing these, we will discover more of the richness, diversity, flavor, completeness, and overall wholesomeness of Scripture, which make feeding on the Word indispensable to the life of faith. Our primary goal in this series is to *increase your hunger for the Word of God*.

For reflection

1. Each of the passages for this lesson envisions the Word of God – the Scriptures – as something to *eat*. Why is this a useful way to think about the Bible and our need for it? How does *eating* the Scriptures relate to being able to *wield* the Sword of the Lord?

2. When people are hungry, they eat. And when they eat, they gravitate toward what they prefer most, that which is most flavorful and nutritious. But if we have no *appetite* for the Word of God, it's because we're trying to satisfy our needs with *other* cuisine. How did Job explain the nature of his hunger for God's Word? What would it look like if that were *your* attitude toward the Scriptures?

3. Jeremiah and John both describe *eating* the Word of God in agreeable terms. Why should we expect spending time in God's Word to be enjoyable, delightful, and uplifting? What can prevent us from *savoring* the Word like this?

4. Uh oh: John says that, as we begin to *digest* the Word of God, it can leave a sour feeling in our souls. Why is this? Why should we *expect* the Bible to be a little *dis*tasteful at times?

5. Paul (1 Corinthians 3.1-3), Peter (1 Peter 2.1-3), and the writer of Hebrews (Hebrews 5.12-14) picked up on this metaphor of *eating* the Word of God. According to them, what kind of people are likely to do this? Why should they do it? What will happen as they do?

Summary

We have to get the Word into our souls before we will become skilled at wielding it in our Personal Mission Fields. But if we haven't developed a taste for the Word of God, it's because our appetites are being satisfied with other things. What kinds of other things? What are you putting into your soul – mind, heart, conscience – instead of the Word, that is keeping you from becoming more skilled in wielding the Word in this age of lies and deceit?

Closing Prayer

Let the saints be joyful in glory; Let them sing aloud on their beds. *Let* the high praises of God *be* in their mouth, And a two-edged sword in their hand, To execute vengeance on the nations, And punishments on the peoples; To bind their kings with chains,

And their nobles with fetters of iron; To execute on them the written judgment— This honor have all His saints. Praise the LORD!

Psalm 149.5-9

Next steps – Conversation: Why is the process of eating and digesting such a good way of thinking about our relationship with the Bible? Talk with a Christian friend about this question.

3 The Word of God – All of It!

Read and reflect on 2 Timothy 3.15-17 and 2 Peter 1.16-21.

Because the Bible is the Word of God, it has one Author. Thus, in spite of the great *diversity* of writers we find in the Scriptures, we should expect them to demonstrate a certain *consistency* from Genesis to Revelation. Like a perfectly designed banquet, with various courses, Scripture provides a glorious spread of spiritual nourishment for the hungry soul. We need to learn to eat *all* the Word of God.

For reflection

1. What words or ideas do Paul and Peter use to indicate that Scripture ultimately is the work of God? What does each of these ideas suggest about the *process* whereby people came to write words which turn out to be the Word of God? Look at 1 Corinthians 2.12, 13. How should this encourage you as you seek to understand the Scriptures better?

2. Paul and Peter were mainly referring to the Old Testament. However, the New Testament makes similar claims for the writings of the Apostles. How can you see this, for example, in Ephesians 3.4, 5; 2 Peter 3.1, 2, 15, 16; and 1 John 4.6? Did the Apostles think we should regard their writings in the same way we regard the Old Testament, as the very Word of God?

3. Who were some of the *human* authors of Scripture? Name one or two things you like about each of these. How can you see that the Spirit of God was working through each one of them? That is, what leads you to believe that the words of *these human authors*, diverse and separated from one another in time as they were, are nevertheless *the very Word of God*?

4. Meditate on Matthew 13.51, 52. What did scribes do in Jesus' day? What would you expect a *Kingdom* scribe to be doing? What makes a scribe *wise* to do this Kingdom work? What "treasure" does Jesus seem to have in mind here (cf. Ps. 119.162), and how should you interpret this with respect to your growing appetite for God's Word, and your desire to be skillful in wielding the *two edges* of Scripture in your Personal Mission Field?

5. Meditate on Acts 20.17-27. Paul would never see these people again. He'd done all he could do to help them be strong in the Kingdom of Jesus Christ. What especially did he emphasize in verses 26 and 27? What is "the whole counsel of God"? What kind of *minimum daily requirement* would you suggest as a *diet* for feeding on this *cuisine*?

Summary

The Bible is the Word of God. That should just about say it all, at least to those who claim to be the sons and daughters of God (Jn. 1.12). Our God Who created, redeemed, keeps, and is sanctifying us has spoken decisively and clearly to us all the counsel we need to do the good works for which we have been saved (Eph. 2.10). What would you think of someone who seemed to have but little appetite for the Word of God? What would you say to such a person to encourage him to take up better *dietary habits*?

Closing Prayer

As the deer pants for the water brooks, So pants my soul for You, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and appear before God? My tears have been my food day and night, While they continually say to me, "Where is your God?" When I remember these things, I pour out my soul within me. For I used to go with the multitude; I went with them to the house of God, With the voice of joy and praise, With a multitude that kept a pilgrim feast. Why are you cast down, O my soul? And *why* are you disquieted within me? Hope in God, for I shall yet praise Him For the help of His countenance.

Psalm 42.1-5

Next steps – Transformation: Review your present approach to reading and meditating in Scripture. What adjustments do you need to make to help ensure that you are becoming a wise consumer of God's Word?

4 The Diversity of Scripture

Read and reflect on John 5.39 and Luke 24.13-32.

The Bible came into being over a period of some 2,000 years. It was written by perhaps 40 different people, in three languages (Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek), and on three different continents (Africa, Asia, Europe). This alone, as we might expect, makes for great diversity within the pages of Scripture. But the diversity of Scripture takes other forms as well.

For reflection

1. For example, consider the various *literary genre* in which the Scriptures were written. How would you describe the dominant literary genre for each of the following?

1 Kings: Psalms: Matthew: Ephesians: 1 Timothy: Revelation:

2. The Bible also demonstrates uniqueness and diversity in the wide variety of *subjects* it addresses. For example, see if you can provide a reference in the Bible relating to each of the following topics:

The meaning and purpose of human life: What is love? Worshiping God: Good government/bad government: Ethics and values: Why do people act the way they do? The nature and purpose of the cosmos:

3. The Bible consists of two "Testaments" – the Old and the New. While in many ways these two Testaments are alike, in other ways they differ. What are some ways the Old and New Testaments differ?

4. Can you think of some ways that the Old and New Testaments are alike?

5. At the heart and core of all Scripture, everywhere and anywhere you turn in Scripture, is the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. Jesus Himself confirmed this, as we see in John 5.39 and Luke 24.13-32. How should knowing this affect our approach to daily reading and meditating in God's Word? How does 2 Corinthians 3.12-18 guide you in thinking about this question?

Summary

The Bible is filled with rich diversity – literary, thematic, cultural, historical, affective, aesthetic, and more. But at the heart of Scripture is revealed the very heart of God, the revelation of Himself and His will, especially in the Person of our Lord Jesus Christ. In what ways can all the various forms of diversity in Scripture help us in getting to know the heart of God? How would you describe your

approach to getting to know the heart of God in His Word to this point?

Closing Prayer

Why do the nations rage, And the people plot a vain thing? The kings of the earth set themselves, And the rulers take counsel together, Against the Lord and against His Anointed, saying, "Let us break Their bonds in pieces And cast away Their cords from us." He who sits in the heavens shall laugh; The Lord shall hold them in derision. Then He shall speak to them in His wrath, And distress them in His deep displeasure: "Yet I have set My King On My holy hill of Zion." "I will declare the decree: The LORD has said to Me, 'You are My Son, Today I have begotten You. Ask of Me, and I will give You The nations for Your inheritance, And the ends of the earth for Your possession. You shall break[a] them with a rod of iron; You shall dash them to pieces like a potter's vessel."" Now therefore, be wise, O kings; Be instructed, you judges of the earth. Serve the LORD with fear, And rejoice with trembling. Kiss the Son, lest He be angry, And you perish in the way, When His wrath is kindled but a little. Blessed are all those who put their trust in Him.

Psalm 2

Next steps – Conversation: Talk with someone in your Personal Mission Field about how they balance their reading and study of Scripture.

5 The Unity of Scripture

Read and meditate on John 17.

In Jesus Christ, all the diversity of Scripture comes together in One. Jesus gathers up all the rich diversity of Scripture and threads it into a tapestry featuring Himself as the primary Subject. In John 17, as Jesus prayed on the night before His crucifixion, we observe Him pouring out His heart to God concerning the matters which were of most importance to Them both. What is revealed about the heart of God in this passage should provide guidance for discerning the heart of God – the unifying threads of Scripture – in every other place in the Bible as well. Let's look more closely at what Jesus reveals here.

For reflection

1. Foremost among the concerns of Jesus Christ as He talks with His Father in this passage is the *glory of God*. Read through John 17 carefully. In which verses does the theme of the glory of God appear? Summarize what these passages, taken together, tell us about the glory of God. What does Jesus want to see happen with respect to the glory of God?

2. But what *is* the glory of God? What does this idea mean? The following passages suggest how the writers of the Old Testament understood the glory of God. In each passage, what can you learn about this important unifying thread of Scripture?

Exodus 24.16, 17: Exodus 40.34, 35: 2 Chronicles 7.1-3: Psalm 19.1-4:

3. Look at Habakkuk 2.14. What seems to be the heart of God in Scripture with respect to His glory? According to 2 Corinthians 4.6, where does that glory seem to shine brightest (cf. Rev. 1.12-17)? How does this help us to understand God's plan for His glory?

4. A second primary concern that comes out in Jesus' prayer is that of *the people* God has given to Him. What do we learn about these in each of the following verses from John 17?

v. 3: vv. 6-8: v. 10: v. 13: vv. 14-19: vv. 20-23: v. 26:

In Jesus' mind, how do the people of God relate to the glory of God?

5. The final unifying thread of Scripture that appears in John 17, relates to what Jesus refers to as His "hour." Jesus was anticipating the completion of His work, at least, this phase of it. His focus was on bringing to completion that *work of redemption* whereby God will be glorified in and through

His people. In which of the verses in John 17 do you see this concern expressed? Summarize what you find there:

Summary

In John 17 Jesus bears His heart to God. In His prayer we may discern the heart of God – His determination to be glorified, His care for His people, and the work of redemption which Jesus fulfilled, so that God's people might know and glorify Him. We may expect to find these same ideas recurring and threading together throughout the whole of Scripture. Review 2 Corinthians 3.12-18. Based on what we've seen in this lesson, how might you be able to know when you were entering the glory of God during your time in His Word? What makes this possible? How should *seeing* God in His glory affect the way you *live* as one of His people?

Closing Prayer

All the ends of the world Shall remember and turn to the LORD, And all the families of the nations Shall worship before You. For the kingdom *is* the LORD's, And He rules over the nations. All the prosperous of the earth Shall eat and worship; All those who go down to the dust Shall bow before Him, Even he who cannot keep himself alive. A posterity shall serve Him. It will be recounted of the LORD to the *next* generation, They will come and declare His righteousness to a people who will be born, That He has done *this*.

Psalm 22.27-31

Next steps – Conversation: Ask a pastor or church leader how you can become more effective at discerning the Lord Jesus in all your reading and study of Scripture.

6 God's Covenant: Promise

Read and meditate on Genesis 12.1-3 and Hebrews 13.20, 21.

We need to introduce one final idea. Throughout the Bible God carries His unifying threads of revelation along by a unique vehicle, His covenant. The covenant of God is like the shuttle of a loom. It gathers the unifying threads and combines them in various ways, as it moves through the unfolding of Scripture, to accomplish the overall design of the divine Weaver. At the heart of God's covenant are the precious and very great promises of God.

For reflection

1. God's covenant was present in His Word from the beginning, although it was first given recognizable form in Genesis 12.1-3. Here we find six promises God made to Abram, the father of all who believe (Rom. 4.16). The land God promised to show Abram would provide the Old Testament staging-ground for the initial unfolding of these promises. How would you summarize the promises God made here?

2. God's covenant unfolds and develops by stages throughout the Old Testament, as we shall see during the course of our study, and realizes its full promise and prospect in our Lord Jesus Christ. Look at Luke 1.67-75. How did Zechariah understand the significance of his son's birth, and what it portended, as this related to the covenant with Abram (Abraham)?

3. God's covenant is packed with precious and very great promises, which Peter recalls in 2 Peter 1.4. According to Peter, what is the purpose of those promises, and therefore of God's covenant? What is necessary in order to gain access to those promises?

4. According to Paul, all the promises of God find their fulfillment in Jesus Christ (2 Corinthians 1.20). What does this suggest about any promise of Scripture we might wish to claim, and any place in Scripture where we may be observing the unfolding or development of God's covenant?

5. Meditate on Acts 1.4-8 and Acts 2.32-39. How do the Spirit of God and the salvation offered in the Gospel relate to the promises of God's covenant, which are in Jesus Christ, "Yes" and "Amen" (2 Cor. 1.19, 20)?

Summary

Promises are the engine of God's covenant, driving it forward through Scripture and bringing the people of God along toward Him through His redemptive work on their behalf. How would you describe the role that God's precious and very great promises have played in your life to this point?

Closing Prayer

Give ear, O my people, *to* my law; Incline your ears to the words of my mouth. I will open my mouth in a parable; I will utter dark sayings of old, Which we have heard and known, And our fathers have told us. We will not hide *them* from their children,

Telling to the generation to come the praises of the LORD, And His strength and His wonderful works that He has done. For He established a testimony in Jacob, And appointed a law in Israel, Which He commanded our fathers, That they should make them known to their children; That the generation to come might know them, The children *who* would be born, That they may arise and declare them to their children, That they may set their hope in God, And not forget the works of God, But keep His commandments; And may not be like their fathers, A stubborn and rebellious generation, A generation *that* did not set its heart aright, And whose spirit was not faithful to God.

Psalm 78.1-8

Next steps – Preparation: Do you have a system for keeping track of and organizing the things you learn from your time in the Word? Whom could you ask for some help in doing this?

7 God's Covenant: Fulfillment

Read and meditate on Matthew 5.17-19, Matthew 6.10-13, Matthew 8.10-13

Jesus fulfills all the promises of God. But He does so only within a particular *framework*, a framework introduced by the coming of the Spirit and bringing with it the promise of salvation. That framework is the Kingdom of God.

For reflection

1. Jesus associated Abraham – with whom God first articulated His covenant – with the Kingdom He had come to embody, proclaim, and bring near. What does this suggest about God's intentions when He first entered into His covenant with Abraham? Consider Genesis 17.1-6. Look at Genesis 49.8-11. Does it seem to you that Jacob was already looking forward to this promised Kingdom? Explain.

2. So as the covenant advances throughout Scripture, we should expect God to be preparing His people to realize that covenant, and all its promises, within a *Kingdom* framework. How is such an outlook encouraged by such passages as Deuteronomy 17.14-20 and 2 Samuel 7.12-16? Is this consistent with what we see in the rest of the Old Testament? Explain.

3. The Old Testament kingdom of Israel, being temporal and without the permanent presence and power of the Spirit widely received, was more a *type* of the promised Kingdom than the *reality*. What's the difference between those two ideas? Does this mean that Israel's Old Testament kingdom experience has nothing to teach us? Explain.

4. Look at Isaiah 9.6, 7. The prophet pointed the people of His day forward to another Kingdom. What kind of Kingdom did he call them to envision? Jesus focused a great deal of His teaching on the Kingdom, beginning with Matthew 4.17. From what we saw in Acts 2, why was this necessary? What does it mean to *seek* the Kingdom of God (Matt. 6.33)?

5. The Kingdom provides the framework within which the promises of God's covenant are realized, by grace through faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. All the unifying threads of Scripture come together in Jesus, within the context of His Kingdom. As we seek the Kingdom, we enter more completely into God's promises, and into the very heart of God in Scripture, our Lord Jesus Christ. How important is it, therefore, that we have a good understanding of the Kingdom of God, of what it means to *enter* and *seek* that Kingdom, and to make sure we're living as citizens and ambassadors of that Kingdom as disciples of Jesus Christ?

Summary

Jesus brings the Kingdom to all who believe in Him. The Kingdom of God is the power of God, in His Spirit and salvation, whereby God brings His promises to fruition in and through His people, unto righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit (Rom. 14.17, 18). According to Philippians 2.13 and Ephesians 3.20, to what ends has God called us to His Kingdom and glory (1 Thess. 2.12); and how powerful is His Spirit in bringing that Kingdom and those promises to fruition in us? Is this your experience of being in the Kingdom of God, and flourishing within His covenant?

Closing Prayer Praise the LORD! Praise the LORD, O my soul! While I live I will praise the LORD; I will sing praises to my God while I have my being. Do not put your trust in princes, Nor in a son of man, in whom there is no help. His spirit departs, he returns to his earth; In that very day his plans perish. Happy is he who has the God of Jacob for his help, Whose hope is in the LORD his God, Who made heaven and earth, The sea, and all that *is* in them; Who keeps truth forever, Who executes justice for the oppressed, Who gives food to the hungry. The LORD gives freedom to the prisoners. The LORD opens *the eyes of* the blind; The LORD raises those who are bowed down; The LORD loves the righteous. The LORD watches over the strangers; He relieves the fatherless and widow; But the way of the wicked He turns upside down. The LORD shall reign forever-Your God, O Zion, to all generations. Praise the LORD!

Psalm 146

Next steps – Enlarge your Mission Field: Download a copy of the PDF for this week's study, and give it to a friend. Invite your friend to study The Heart of God with you. Plan to get together from time to time to share what you're learning.

For reflection or discussion

- 1. Why does it make sense that God's people should *hunger* for His Word? Is hungering for the Word something we can develop or encourage? Explain.
- 2. What are some aspects or components of Scripture that demonstrate its great diversity? In what ways can we see that, in spite of that diversity, Scripture is a single Book, telling a single story?
- 3. What do we mean by saying that Jesus is the very heart of Scripture? Give some examples of this from the Old and New Testaments.
- 4. What is God's covenant, and how does His covenant relate to His Kingdom?
- 5. What's the most important insight or lesson you've learned from the study for this week?

Glory to Glory

We are transformed into the image of Jesus Christ *from* the glory we encounter in God's Word *to* the way we live for His glory in the world (2 Cor. 3.12-18; 1 Cor. 10.31).

What have you encountered of God's glory in our reading and meditations in this week's studies? That is, how has He shown Himself *to* you more clearly?

How do you expect this *experience* of God's glory to help you *live more consistently for* His glory in the daily details of your life?

What have you learned about yourself from this week's study to help you in knowing more of the presence, promise, and power of the Kingdom? To equip you for serving Christ in your <u>Personal</u> <u>Mission Field</u>?

The Fellowship of Ailbe

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Thank you.