

INTRO to building narrative | ebook

Stories to help you raise resilient, mentally healthy kids

Use the power of story and research-backed narrative strategies to build connection, confidence, and strength in your family.

An introduction to the **6 Powerful Narratives Every Kid Needs** along with practical tips on how to get started building your family's narrative.



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STRONG FAMILIES TELL STORIES

Hello

If you are a parent who is struggling with your child's mental health, or who wants to push back against the mental health epidemic, you are in the right place.

Using the power of story, *you can raise resilient kids*. Using simple, straightforward tools you can engrain positive attributes like focus, confidence, and agency in your child - in a way that will stick with them into adulthood.

Narrative building isn't a quick fix, but it isn't untested either. These methods have shaped strong people for generations, and modern neuroscience and psychology now affirm what history already knew: story is how we make sense of the world. It's where science & meaning, truth & beauty converge.

The best part? Story is available to every parent. No degree required—just the willingness to step into the role of a narrating mom or dad with intention.

I'm excited to share the information I've uncovered in my research with you and my prayer is that it helps your child to be mentally healthy - without medication or therapy. So get ready to dive into these powerful strategies that can help you raise resilient kids in the midst of today's mental health crisis.



Resilience

The capacity to withstand or to recover quickly from difficulties. Toughness.

Hi, I'm Niki Bartelt—though these days I mostly answer to Mom... Mom... MOOOOM. It comes with the territory. I have three energetic boys, an amazing adult step-daughter, and a beautiful baby girl. They're my greatest joy—and my most honest mirrors (for better or worse). Humbling, to say the least. My husband is my best friend and the most incredible person I know. Our marriage—after Jesus—is the best thing that's ever happened to me.

I believe we're on the edge of a renaissance in America—one where parents reverse the mental-health crisis and raise a generation of resilient kids living with deep meaning and purpose. What we're doing isn't working, so I went looking for something better. I found it in story. Story is the cornerstone of agency and character. Scholarly research and history supports that—and so does my own life.

As a homeschool mom, I began weaving research-backed narrative practices into our everyday life. I'm still amazed by how often my kids ask to talk about these ideas—watching family videos, exploring our family tree, dreaming about the future. Those conversations always circle back to who they are, who they're becoming, and how we can all grow—together and individually. They're some of my happiest moments as a mom.

Narrative has become a powerful source of connection and strength in our family. And I want to share what I've learned with other parents—so together, we can push back against the wrong stories and keep our kids from being pulled into a gray world of meaninglessness brought on by anxiety, depression, and endless diagnosis.

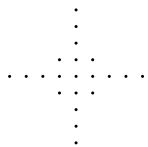
About Me



Niki Bartelt

Christ-follower | Wife of Aaron | Mom of 5
Homeschooler | Entrepreneur | Storyteller
Photographer | Videographer

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FIRST THINGS FIRST

Parenting | The Story of Generativity

The stories you tell yourself about your parenting contribute *greatly* to your child's mental health.



Generativity

Commitment to guiding, nurturing, and contributing to the well-being of future generations.

I'm a good parent and I can totally do this.



I know — there are days when it doesn't feel like it. But I'm here to remind you: this is a true story. And it's one you need to believe ASAP if you want to raise mentally healthy kids.

Parental self-efficacy is the belief that you've got what it takes to shape your child's growth, behavior, and well-being through confident, intentional, and authoritative parenting.

You don't need to outsource your parenting to experts or constantly second-guess your instincts. You are the most equipped person on earth to guide your child toward resilience and purpose. Believe that story—and live it out every day.

Research shows that this *single mindset shift* doesn't just lead to healthier, happier kids and families—it strengthens your own mental health too.

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Fake it til you make it. Commit to yourself that you will go with your gut for the next month on your parenting decisions. Start to trust yourself again.

PARENTING | THE STORY OF GENERATIVITY

Be radically on the side of your kid.

If your kid is in a story that isn't right for them,
that doesn't mean they are broken.

Trust your instincts.

Anyone living inside the wrong story will show it in their behavior—distraction, emotional volatility, outbursts, frustration, irritability. Put me in a kitchen with a complicated recipe and you'll see exactly what I mean. Yikes.

So if you're seeing this in your child, hear me clearly: your child is not broken. And—barring true outlier cases—not mentally ill. Don't saddle them with that story. It doesn't produce resilience. More often than not, what needs to change isn't the child—it's the setting or the story adults expect that child to live into.

Our children are fearfully and wonderfully made. Their personalities are designed to carry meaning into the world. And that meaning doesn't look the same for everyone. Some are meant to be professors or scientists. Others will run into burning buildings. One day, someone's life may depend on your kid's frenetic energy. We need people like that—despite what our culture says.

So don't feel pressured into a diagnosis, treatment plan, or medication that forces your child to live inside the wrong story. Trust your gut. They were made with the traits they're meant to have. Lean into that. Help them harness who they are and aim it upward. Give them room to live inside the right story—and watch them flourish.

That may mean homeschooling. It may mean pulling back from extracurriculars to make room for free play. It may mean changing your own priorities to give your family more time and attention. It could mean more noise as your child comes off meds—or fewer appointments in favor of Saturday morning, one-on-one brunch.

Cut out anything—and anyone—that doesn't fit the story you want to build for your child. Follow the right story boldly. See what changes. And if you hate it, you can always go back. (I don't think you will.)



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Review the story your child is living in. Is it meeting them where they are? Or expecting something they can't deliver? Instead of changing your child to fit a bad story, what change can *you* make? Change of setting? Of expectations? Don't be afraid to be bold and make sacrifices here. For example, we homeschool for this very reason.

“Family-based interventions
can help prevent the onset of
mental health conditions and
mitigate its consequences.”

Family factors contribute to mental health conditions – a systematic review in Oxford Journals,
The European Journal of Public Health
S Marth, N Cook, P Bain and J Lindert

Past Story | Where you come from and why that matters

Your kid is the living culmination of generations who came before them—warriors, explorers, builders, innovators, and nurturers. Their courage, creativity, and resilience run through your child's veins. They are what was dreamed of when your ancestors imagined the future. Dig into your family tree to uncover their stories (We love Familysearch.com - it's a free crowd-sourced genealogy.). Build a family culture that remembers and talks about where you came from. Be proud of your heritage.

Present Story | What your family values & who you are as a unit

Give your children a clear narrative of what your family values and stands for. Revisit it often. Make it tangible. We have a family crest and intentionally select photos for our walls that capture our values in action. We regularly watch family videos that tell our story. These storytelling rituals reinforce identity & strengthen **autobiographical memory**, which research shows supports emotional well-being and can help guard against depression and even cognitive decline.

Future Story | How to build a life where you are loved, cherished & respected

Culture tells our kids success means status, stuff, and constant achievement. But the richer story is one of love, devotion, and service - the deep fulfillment of family and partnership. Look way into the future with your kids - who will be there for you when you are elderly? What will they say about you at your funeral? What do you want your legacy to be? These questions put things into the right perspective and set the stage for you to remind them that marriage and parenthood aren't the end of the journey; they're the point of it.

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Start using stories from your family tree to remind your kid daily that they can do hard things, they can focus, they can achieve. Because they came from people who did just that. Then expect greatness from them. They will live up to your expectations.



1 Family | The Story of Legacy

Legacy isn't just about what we leave behind—it's the stories our kids live in right now. When they know their roots, their place, and their direction, they grow in confidence and emotional health. Intentionally tell these stories. Without them, the empty space gets filled with insecurity, anxiety, and whoever happens to pop up on TikTok. Unfounded, digital noise can quietly shape your child's identity. Leading to mental health issues like depression, anxiety and hopelessness. Don't let that happen. Tell them who they are.

Sacrifice The Story of Work 2

TOIL vs WORK

Toil is relentless, dehumanizing labor—the kind people have learned to overcome through creativity and innovation. (A kitchen faucet beats hauling water from a river. Am I right?!) Work, however, is different.

We're wired to build, create, and improve life for ourselves and others. This kind of work should be celebrated and embraced. Most modern jobs—even entry-level or homemaking ones—aren't toil; they're purposeful, aspirational steps in the larger story of meaningful work. They are the meeting of worship and life.

Service through Sacrifice

Sacrifice isn't loss—it's the foundation of a meaningful life. Tell stories that encourage an outward focus, serving and sacrificing for others. It might sound counterintuitive, but ultimately this will benefit you far more than only living for yourself. Our culture gets this wrong. "Sacrifice" sounds outdated, self-focus is celebrated. Parenthood is scoffed at by dinks. Social emotional learning pushed in schools. The results speak for themselves: loneliness, narcissism, and declining mental health.

Teach your kids that work and sacrifice aren't dirty words—they're the building blocks of a strong, purpose-driven life.



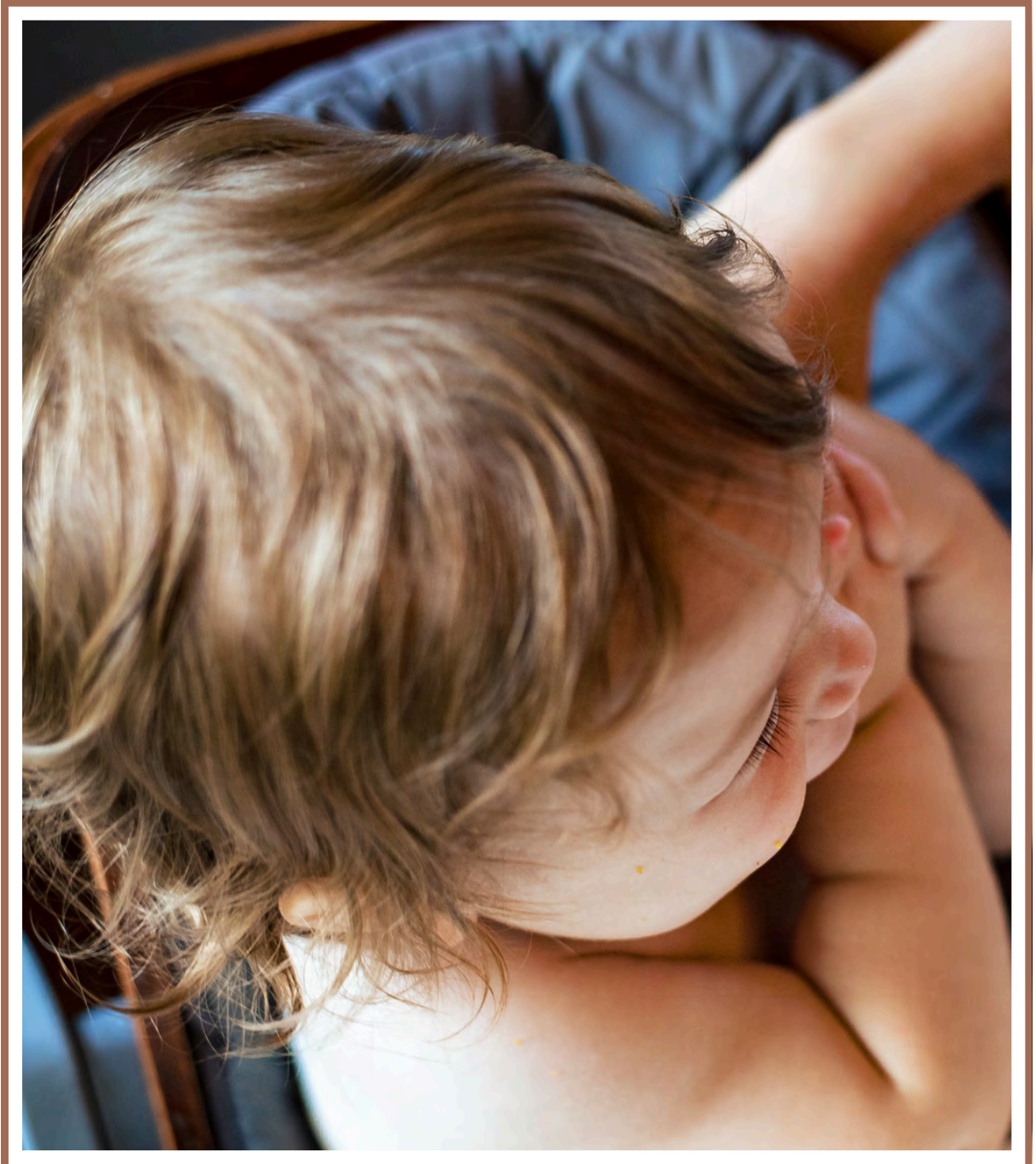
What our children believe about work will shape every part of their lives—from their financial stability and career fulfillment to the strength of their families and friendships. These stories don't just influence success, they are foundational to lasting mental health, and a good life, in adulthood.

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Kids should do two kinds of work at home. 1- Duty work and 2 -Commission work.

For Duty work, be sure to share how their sacrifice serves others in the family. Be generous with your praise. Tell them you are proud. Let them know they are part of building this great thing called your family. Let them feel rooted in the joy of being needed.

For the second kind, pay them for completing that work with excellence. Pay them weekly. Require them to give some, save some ,and spend some of all the money they earn.



Note: This is not an invitation to steam-roll, helicopter or dictate. We have to let our kids live our their own lives. So don't force them to be a doctor or quarterback just because you want them to be.

3

Purpose | The Story of Meaning

We all have one...more than one actually. Guide your kids in seeking them out.

Purpose can get a bad rap—it can feel too big or abstract - so we ignore it. But that's a mistake, especially for parents who want to raise mentally healthy kids. Purpose changes as we grow. Our job as parents is to tell stories that help our children see they do have purpose. In fact, they have many purposes. And discovering what they are in each stage of life brings meaning and direction.

Being a Christ-follower has been a lifelong purpose of mine. But when I was young, my other purposes included being a good friend, student, and daughter. I lived that out by taking out the trash and babysitting my siblings. Today, being a good daughter is still part of who I am, but it's taken a backseat to my main purposes of being a wife and mother.

Helping kids see their roles and duties as part of their purpose builds traits like responsibility, conscientiousness, and diligence—qualities that strengthen mental health and protect against anxiety, depression, and aimlessness.

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Talk about it with them: What are your roles right now? What duties come with them? Even small, intentional conversations can shape a lifelong narrative of meaning and resilience. Tell them they have meaning - even on days when life is hard. You get bonus points if you do something special for this conversation. One-on-one brunch. Novelty kickstarts systems in our brain responsible for learning - a new location or special experience will help cement the message you want to send.

4 Suffering | The Story of Hope

Little one, you'll fight dragons. And I'll have to let you.
My job is to help you see that you have the strength to overcome.



WE ALL WANT TO PROTECT OUR KIDS...

But the truth is, they will face heartbreak, loss, and seasons of hardship. We can't shield them from every struggle or pretend it won't happen. Instead, we need to prepare them—with honesty and hope. Without frightening them, let them know that life includes battles to fight and dragons to face. But with the story of hope, they'll learn that they can overcome difficulty when they face it head on—and that those very trials often shape the best parts of their lives.

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Share your own experiences. That is key. Kids don't yet have the benefit of hindsight—they can't see how hard things eventually work out. They need strong stories to lean on until they have their own. So don't shy away from the truth: life can be hard, but it's also an adventure. The highs mean more because of the lows—and through it all, we have a God who walks with us every step of the way. Again, introduce novelty - a walk somewhere special or a Saturday morning brunch - to share some stories from your life. Don't be afraid to let them know you more (especially in the teen years).

“Since it is so likely that
(children) will meet cruel
enemies, let them at least have
heard of brave knights and
heroic courage. Otherwise you
are making their destiny not
brighter but darker.”

CS LEWIS

Why the story you tell about the origin of life matters

Pascal's Wager says it's wiser to believe in God—because if you believe and are wrong, you lose little, but if you don't believe and are wrong, you lose everything. And he was right—maybe more than he knew.

When our culture started following Darwin's ideas all the way down to the “slimy goop” he said we came from, something in us shifted. We lost some of our humanity. If life is just an accident—if we're nothing more than advanced animals or clumps of cells—then it's easy to forget that our lives have meaning. And that loss takes a real toll on mental health. Our kids need a truer story—one that reminds them they were created with intention and incredible worth.

Inherent worth, dignity & the origin of rights

Tell your kids stories that proclaim their inherent worth and dignity. Deep in their soul they will feel it. Remind them that every person they meet carries that same God-given value. This is where they will begin to understand fundamental rights. Rights don't come from bureaucrats who can change their mind anytime. They come from God who will never change his mind about how much you matter.

When kids grow up with this story of humanity, they respect others, value justice, and understand authority in its proper place. That kind of truth builds confidence, peace, and strong mental health—and it's the foundation of a civilized society. That's where I want my kids to live. I'm sure you do too.

Ask big questions

Whew. This one is a lot. But getting started is simple. Stop scrolling and **ask big questions**. Investigate as a family. What do we believe about what life is? Where did it start? Where does consciousness come from? Is there a right and wrong? Where does that come from? Why do we value things like taking care of the needy?

(Pro Tip: If you aren't sure, start with the Bible. It's a best-selling, world-changing book and has profoundly interesting things to say on these topics. Whether you are a believer or not.)

6 powerful narratives every kid needs



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Humanity | The Story of What We Are

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It's no secret that as our world has grown more secular, our mental health has suffered. The stories our culture lives by strip away the very things that make us human. Our kids suffer for it - life starts to seem hollow. To raise healthy, grounded kids, we need to bring back the stories that remind us who we are, why we matter, and what's truly good. Those are the stories that anchor and heal us.

Faith | The Story Beyond Ourselves

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God.
John 1:1

The Logos | Truth, Beauty, Goodness

John calls Jesus the Word—the Logos—the divine truth that fills the universe with truth, beauty, and goodness. Isn't it awesome that he used the word Word? Words are information. And what are you? Information—written into you, all the way down to your DNA. Interestingly, the stories you live by actually turn on and off genes (they communicate information, even at a cellular level), and change who you are.

You carry the imprint of the Logos Himself because God made you in His image. That makes you (and your kids) *like* God. Noble heirs who create because God creates, love because God loves, and tell stories because He is the great storyteller. What an incredible truth—and what healing it brings to know that our worth, purpose, and creativity all flow from that logos - who spoke us into being and whose truth is written into everything. Including our story.

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Crafted by God

Maybe you struggle with belief in God. Maybe you've been burned by a church full of less than perfect people. I know I have. But deep calls to deep. So get quiet and listen. Encourage your kids to do the same. At the core of your being you know (at least) that your children are beautiful and precious. Deeply, truly, and unconditionally loved. They aren't a cosmic accident. They are crafted by God, who created them to be exactly who they are, so they can do good work in the world. That's the story they need to hear. God often whispers, so get quiet. Listen to your conscience and see what happens.

Logos
from the Greek
λόγος
literally "word"

Rich, multi-layered concept that pulls together:
Truth. Beauty. Reason. Meaning. The good.
The rational structure underlying all of reality.
The force that gives nature its order, lawfulness, and purpose. Jesus is the logos personified.



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how to build narrative | RECAP

Practical, easy steps to start building a better story for your family today.

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Commit to yourself that you will go with your gut for the next month on your parenting decisions. Start to trust yourself again.

Take a good look at the story your child is living in. Don't be afraid to be bold and make sacrifices to get them into a better setting or under expectations that fit their personality. Remember, they are NOT broken. If they are struggling, a change of story can make all the difference.

Use familysearch.org to build out your family tree. Use stories from your family history to remind your kid daily that the blood that runs in their veins comes from people who did extraordinary and hard things. So they can too. They have the genetics to hack it. Then expect greatness from them. They will live up to your expectations.

Set up work for your kid to do at home. (Duty work and Commission work). Then praise them for their contribution wildly. Pay them on time and expect financial responsibility. Watch them learn to love work.

Discuss roles, duty and responsibility. It's not a dirty word. Let them feel some weight of purpose. Endless entertainment will leave them feeling empty. Expect more. Discuss their meaning. Even small conversations can make a big impact.





how to build narrative | RECAP continued

Take your kid out for a special date and talk to them about some of the hard things you have gone through in life. Age-appropriately share the pain you experienced, how you got through and how you see that experience now.

Also introduce great literature as a wonderful way to talk through suffering and hope. Narnia is a fantastic read aloud for younger kids to learn about this at their level.

Unbusy yourself enough to have time to ask big questions as a family.

What is the meaning of life? Where do you believe we came from? Why is the human brain the most complex thing in the world? Read the Bible and other great thinkers on these subjects. Dig in. It will set your child's brain on the wonder of our world and help them to frame their world.

Get quiet and listen. Pray. Read the Bible. Together. Individually.
Commit to doing this daily for 2 weeks. See how your life changes. I promise it will.



Start with these simple, easy, (and free) narrative building strategies.
Follow us to continue learning more research-backed methods.

STRONG FAMILIES TELL STORIES

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NEXT STEPS

Learn more about
building narrative.



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Join our community
buildnarrative.com/join



Email to chat
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Dig Deeper

All the work you've read here is research-based.

Check out the scholarly sources I used to learn more about the topics we discussed in this quick start guide.



Autobiographical Memory

Köhler, C. A., Carvalho, A. F., Alves, G. S., McIntyre, R. S., Hyphantis, T. N., & Cammarota, M. (2015). Autobiographical memory disturbances in depression: A novel therapeutic target? *Neural Plasticity*, 2015, Article ID 759139. <https://doi.org/10.1155/2015/759139>

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Family Values - Learn more about using values to make your family happy.

Feiler, Bruce. *The Secrets of Happy Families: Improve Your Mornings, Tell Your Family History, Fight Smarter, Go Out and Play, and Much More*. William Morrow/HarperCollins Publishers, 2013.

Parental Self-Efficacy

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Suffering & Hardship - A great book to read with your kids about facing hard things.

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The Holy Bible: New King James Version. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982.



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