

"O LORD, TAKE MY LIFE...."

SERIES: ELIJAH: GOD'S INSTRUMENT OF GRACE

by Ron Ritchie

Have you ever had a time when the circumstances of this life felt so overwhelming that you completely lost sight of the Lord Jesus? To lose sight of the Lord allows circumstances to blind us to the reality that he has promised us that he will never leave us and that he will give us an abundant life, which in turn directly affects our sense of our worth in God's sight. We begin to stumble down a series of steps: disappointment, fear, self-pity, isolation, inability to eat or sleep, and finally a cry to God, "Lord, take my life," before we fall asleep in sheer exhaustion. This is what we now call a state of depression. (I am not speaking of the kind of depression caused by some chemical imbalance in our bodies.)

If you have ever felt that way, you are among some of God's wonderful saints whom he allowed to come to that place of depression so that he could show them in time their sin of self-reliance, then graciously draw them back into a loving relationship with him.

Who are some of these saints? Job cried out in the midst of his confusion and self-righteousness (Job 10:18-22):

"Why then hast Thou brought me out of the womb?
Would that I had died and no eye had seen me!
I should have been as though I had not been,
Carried from womb to tomb."

Some one hundred years later (seventh century BC), Jonah took a page out of Elijah's life, which we are about to see. After the city of Nineveh repented as a result of the message he preached, Jonah became depressed and dehydrated by a scorching east wind that was sent by the Lord. In this fainting condition he begged God with all his soul to let him die, saying, "Death is better to me than life" (Jonah 4:8). And here in 1 Kings 19 we will hear our dear prophet Elijah call out to God in a moment of deep depression, "...O LORD, take my life...."

As we open the Scriptures to 1 Kings 19:1-21, we will discover from Elijah's experience some of the steps that could lead us into deep spiritual and emotional depression. We will also discover that behind that depressive state stands a loving and gracious God who is willing to bring healing when we choose to trust him for our lives again regardless of trying circumstances. One of the first steps that takes us down the road to depression is forgetting the presence of the living God in the midst of our trials, temptations, and daily stresses of life.

Elijah forgot God's presence

1 Kings 19:1-8

Now Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, "So may the gods do to me and even more, if I do not make your life as the life of one of them by tomorrow about this time." And he was afraid and arose and ran for his life and came to Beersheba, which belongs to Judah, and left his servant there. But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a juniper tree; and he requested for himself that he might die, and said, "It is enough; now, O LORD, take my life, for I am not better than my fathers." And he lay down and slept under a juniper tree; and behold, there was an angel touching him, and he

said to him, "Arise, eat." Then he looked and behold, there was at his head a bread cake baked on hot stones, and a jar of water. So he ate and drank and lay down again. And the angel of the LORD came again a second time and touched him and said, "Arise, eat, because the journey is too great for you." So he arose and ate and drank, and went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb, the mountain of God.

To review for a moment, in the words of James (5:17), "[Elijah] prayed earnestly that it might not rain; and it did not rain on the earth for three years and six months." Then God sent him to appear before King Ahab, and a contest was set up between the living God of Israel and Baal on Mount Carmel. The true God would be the one who consumed the bull sacrifice with fire. The living God of Israel answered with fire, causing many in Israel to declare their faith in the God of Israel alone. Then in accordance with God's holy war against the Canaanites, Elijah and the godly Jews put the 850 false prophets to death (see Deuteronomy 13:1-5).

Then Elijah returned to the top of Mount Carmel and prayed again to the living and gracious God Jehovah, "and the sky poured rain, and the earth produced its fruit" (James 5:18). Ahab and Elijah returned to the palace in Jezreel. Ahab drove his chariot, but Elijah, empowered by the Spirit, outran the king to the city gates. Reading of that last week, we could sense his joy at the possibility of the kingdom's being reunited and Jerusalem's once again becoming the religious and political center of the nation as in the days of David and Solomon. I'm sure he was also hoping that the Lord would enable him to put the final nail in Baal's coffin with the elimination of Jezebel. He may even have had dreams of being placed in King Ahab's palace as the "prophet in residence." But as the Scottish poet Robert Burns once wrote:

"The best laid schemes o' mice an' men
Gang aft a-gley."

And the Lord's word in Proverbs 16:9 says:

"The mind of man plans his way,
But the LORD directs his steps."

Now the scene opens as Ahab arrives home at his summer palace in Jezreel. With a heart filled with the amazing presence of Jehovah on Mount Carmel and the joy of the rain falling on his kingdom once again, he called for Queen Jezebel to share the adventures he had experienced with Elijah. However, the story about the power of the living God, the fire from heaven, and the thunder and rain that came after Elijah prayed got drowned out when the king got around to mentioning the elimination of all Jezebel's prophets by the hand of the prophet of God. At that point all the wrath of hell poured out of her mouth in the spirit of the Canaanite goddesses she worshiped, who were, according to Canaanite literature, the most vicious and violent figures imaginable. Jezebel, a Canaanite and a Phoenician, reflected much of their cruel and vicious character in her own. And she immediately planned the death of one more prophet.

Meanwhile King Ahab stood by passively (like King Adam) and let his queen take matters into her own hands. She proceeded to put a contract out on the life of Elijah. Elijah received a message from her that read, "To Elijah, troubler of Israel: So may the gods do to me and even more, if I do not make your life as the life of one of my dead prophets by tomorrow about this time. Signed, Queen Jezebel." Jezebel was not only vicious but clever. She could have ordered Elijah killed immediately, but then without her own prophets to protect her, she might have lost her life at the hands of the new Jewish converts. But if she threatened to kill him within twenty-four hours, Elijah might slip into a posture of self-defensive and flee, the new converts might be spiritually demoralized without their leader, and Jehovah might be discredited. And it worked!

"And he was afraid..." The Hebrew could be translated "he saw." That is, he saw Jezebel rather than remembering that the Lord was working behind the scenes. And so he became afraid. Keep in mind that as James has reminded us (5:17), "Elijah was a man with a nature like ours..." He had times of great courage, mercy, and strength, all provided by the Lord; and then he had times when his flesh overwhelmed him, and this was one of the latter.

Elijah had just had one of the most wonderful experiences of his life before the Lord, his enemies, and the Jewish nation. God was still among his people, and his people after years of idolatry had become willing once again to acknowledge him as their only God and to seek to fulfill the commandment of Deuteronomy 6: "Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one! And you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might." But then in fear Elijah took Jezebel's threat to his life personally and forgot the presence and power of God. This threat also flushed out several of Elijah's spiritual problems. As we shall see in a moment, he had what I call the "I and My" Syndrome. "*I* have been very zealous for the LORD..." he said, "And *I* alone am left...they seek *my* life...." In the midst of the contest on Mount Carmel he had begun to get the sense that he himself had a lot to do with the victory over Baalism. And he was hoping that now King Ahab was going to stand up for him when Queen Jezebel threatened him, but it did not happen. So Elijah's fleshly pride was shattered.

The road to depression was gradually paved with (1) a great moment of glory and victory over the enemies of God; (2) lack of food, water, and sleep combined with exhaustion from his seventeen-mile run; (3) Jezebel's death threat and the lack of support from King Ahab; resulting in (4) disappointment in God, fear for his life, and a hundred-mile escape on foot into the desert; filling his heart with (5) self-pity. Leaving his servant he then (6) became isolated; causing him to cry out to God in (7) total despair as he (8) compared his life against his fathers': "It is enough; now, O LORD, take my life, for I am not better than my fathers." He felt like a complete failure as he fell asleep.

Then at the right time God sent an angel to tell him to arise and eat. As the Lord had provided the brook and the ravens to feed him morning and night in the desert as well as the Gentile widow to feed him during the drought, now the Lord provided the angel. When Elijah looked he saw some freshly baked bread and a jar of water. It seemed that God was not going to take his life as he had requested, but that he was perhaps going to be fed and put back on his feet eventually. He ate and fell asleep again, then was awakened a second time and given another meal. At this second meal the angel told him that he must eat that meal because God was going to direct his steps into the wilderness. He arose and drank and found himself walking into the Sinai wilderness for forty days and nights, covering some two hundred miles, until he arrived at Mount Sinai, the place where Moses had met God.

This "angel of the Lord" is the same preincarnate Christ Jesus who appeared to Abraham, Jacob, Moses, Gideon, and David, and later to Elisha and other future prophets. He usually appears on behalf of his people at a turning point in their history. The "angel of the Lord" is the guardian angel of the chosen race. This is seen in Isaiah 63:8-9:

"For He said, 'Surely they are My people...'
In all their affliction He was afflicted,
And the angel of His presence saved them;
In His love and in His mercy He redeemed them;
And He lifted them and carried them all the days of old."

When Moses had met God on Mount Sinai, God had just judged his people for worshiping the golden calf. Moses then appeared before God with a burning concern for the welfare of his people and asked God if he could see God's glory as a sign that God would not forsake them and as a sign that he would be strengthened by God for the ministry ahead: "...If I have found favor in Thy sight, let me know Thy ways, that I may know Thee...show me Thy glory! And He said, "I Myself will make all My goodness pass before you...You cannot see My face, for no man can see me and live!...Behold, there is a place by Me, and you shall stand there on the rock; and it will come about, while My glory is passing by, that I will put you in the cleft of the rock and cover you with My hand until I have passed by. Then I will take My hand away and you shall see My back, but My face shall not be seen." (Exodus 33:13-23). And as God passed by, Moses learned of his grace, mercy, and lovingkindness. Elijah, on the other hand, in deep depression, needed a renewed view of God, because the prophet's zeal was not in harmony with the love, grace, and long-suffering of God for his people. But it is fascinating to me that in the ministry of Jesus we will find Jesus himself, Moses, and Elijah together on the mount of transfiguration [see Luke 9:28f.] Moses represented the law, Elijah the prophets, and Jesus

the fulfillment of both.

The number forty in the Scriptures is associated with testing as well as preparation for ministry. Within this wilderness experience we find the saints of God entering into a personal dialogue with their Creator; fasting; and being tested, purified, and prepared to face a new ministry in the strength of the Lord. Twice Moses had spent forty days and nights with the Lord on Mount Sinai followed by forty years in the wilderness with the people of God. This all foreshadowed our Lord's forty days and nights on the mountain of temptation before he began his public ministry. As Moses and the Lord Jesus himself went to the mountain to sit in the presence of the one and only living God to be challenged and led into their future ministries, so Elijah now arrived at the place where he would be spiritually challenged to discover once again the character of God and to get his life lined up with the will of God.

In the last two weeks I have received calls or personal visits from three young pastors of churches outside the area. Each one has been tempted to start down the road of depression because of threats to their personal walk with the Lord or to their preaching or teaching ministry, or because of allegations of their insensitivity to many of the people in their churches. One of these men in the wisdom of the Lord called and told me that he was convinced that God had called him to his current ministry. He took four days off and went to a retreat center outside his home town. There he sat before the Lord Jesus, opened up his heart, and prayed that the Lord would show him his sins and weaknesses as well as his confirm his spiritual gifts. He then prayed that the Lord would give him the courage and humility to return home and continue to be a faithful shepherd to God's people in a growing ministry. What an encouragement he was to my own heart! Discouragement or depression is a part of life that God allows to come in order to cleanse us. All three of these men had some things to work out before the Lord--just as Moses, Elijah, Job, and Jonah did--which were destroying their relationship with the Lord.

Not only did Elijah forget the presence of God in the face of Jezebel's threat, but...

Elijah forgot the character of God

1 Kings 19:9-14

Then he came there to a cave, and lodged there; and behold, the word of the LORD came to him, and He said to him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" And he said, "I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the sons of Israel have forsaken Thy covenant, torn down Thine altars and killed Thy prophets with the sword. And I alone am left; and they seek my life, to take it away." So He said, "Go forth, and stand on the mountain before the LORD." And behold, the LORD was passing by! And a great and strong wind was rending the mountains and breaking in pieces the rocks before the LORD; but the LORD was not in the wind. And after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. And after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of a gentle blowing. And it came about when Elijah heard it, that he wrapped his face in his mantle, and went out and stood in the entrance of the cave. And behold, a voice came to him and said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" Then he said, "I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the sons of Israel have forsaken Thy covenant, torn down Thine altars and killed Thy prophets with the sword. And I alone am left; and they seek my life, to take it away."

Having been led by the Spirit of God through the wilderness, Elijah finally arrived in the area of Mount Sinai where the foundation of Israel's relationship with the one and only living God had been formed. There he found a cave in which he hid and rested. In Hebrew this is literally "the cave," that is, the one where Moses some five hundred years earlier had had the personal encounter with God on Mount Sinai that I just mentioned (see Exodus 33:21f). But Elijah was still battling emotional and spiritual depression.

So as with Moses, the Lord God again spoke face-to-face with his prophet. He began by asking him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" The Lord God had drawn his prophet to "the cave" in order for him to think about

his relationship with *Yahweh*, himself, and his ministry to a corrupt Israel. He was called to be the instrument of God's truth and grace to an idolatrous generation, yet here he was in a cave some three hundred miles away hiding from Queen Jezebel. The question was not "What are you doing here in this cave?" but "What are you doing in this depressed state?" God was saying, "Elijah, I thought you told everyone that you were the servant of the living God. Did I die?" Depression leaves one with the sense, "God has died and only I am left, and I would like to die too."

Elijah answered God, "I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts...." This sounds like the voice of pride: "Look at me and who I am...and in contrast to me look at the sons of Israel and what they have done: (a) They have forsaken your covenant. (b) Under the royal encouragement of King Ahab and that wicked Queen Jezebel they have torn down your altars. (c) They have killed your prophets with the sword. And I alone am left..." And here is the voice of self-pity that clouds the mind to reality: "All is lost. No one repented, Jezebel reigns, Ahab is a wimp, and I alone am left. And they seek my life, to take it away." And finally this is the voice of fear and despair. He forgot that the Lord had protected him in the court of King Ahab in the beginning of his ministry. The Lord protected him from the sword of King Ahab and Queen Jezebel when he was hiding in the desert and during the two years with the widow in the distress of Sidon, the heartland of "Baal country." He was also protected when he met King Ahab again on a personal visit at the end of the drought, and he was protected from the sword of the prophets of Baal at the top of Mount Carmel. Self-pity and fear can cause all of us to become spiritual blind for a time.

God told Elijah to go and stand in the same place he had had his servant Moses stand when he appeared to him. "And the Lord was passing by!" According to Psalm 18, the natural events that were about to take place were signs of God's character: his terrible majesty and the fiery zeal of his wrath and love, which consumes whatever opposes it (see Exodus 19:16-18). These natural events had also been signs of his judgment in the past when he appeared to Israel in the wilderness of Sinai. And God knew Elijah wanted judgment on Israel--Jezebel, Ahab, and all those who still worshiped Baal. But God was going to show Elijah through these dramatic phenomena what he didn't at that time understand about God's character.

"And a great and strong wind was rending the mountains and breaking in pieces the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind." In the past God had used the east wind by the hand of Moses to bring the plague of locusts to the land of Egypt (see Exodus 10:13). But he had also used the wind to stop the judgment of the flood in the time of Noah (see Genesis 8:1). God had used a great east wind to divide the Red Sea and hold up the water on both sides like a wall as some six hundred thousand Jews walked across the sea on dry land into the wilderness on their way to the Promised Land (see Exodus 14:21f). God had used the wind to bring the quail to feed the Jews in the wilderness (see Numbers 11:31). God had used the east wind to bring the rain on Israel only about forty days earlier, after Elijah's triumph over the prophets of Baal.

God is always present like the wind, and he can use this wind to bring judgment or blessing. In fact, the wind is also the symbol of spiritual life that Christ used to tell Nicodemus of the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, and it was through that medium that they experienced the presence of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. But for Elijah God was not in the wind; that is, he would not use the wind to judge Israel to bring the nation back into a relationship with him.

Then there was an earthquake, but God was not in the earthquake. God had used an earthquake to judge the rebellion of Korah in the wilderness (see Numbers 16). Earthquakes are able to shake all the physical foundations of this earth and bring down mountains as well as kingdoms, as they will in the days of the great tribulation. Yet at this time God was not in the earthquake; that is, he would neither judge Israel's sin nor destroy Israel's enemies in this way.

Then there was fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. In the past God had used fire to judge the sin of Sodom and to judge the nation of Egypt with fire from heaven the likes of which Egypt had never seen in its recorded history (see Exodus 9:22f). God had appeared before Moses in the burning bush and on Mount Horeb in fire. As well, each night he was a pillar of fire to lead his people through the wilderness. And fire came forth from the Lord and consumed the 250 men who were offering the incense in the rebellion of Korah (see Numbers 16:35). Fire, as we saw earlier, was a spiritual symbol of purity, judgment, and cleansing of sin. But God would not use fire to bring judgment to Israel or her enemies.

Finally there was a sound of a gentle blowing (literally the tone of a gentle blowing). "Elijah," God was saying, "I am not going to use the wind, an earthquake, or fire to judge Israel or destroy her enemies as I have in the past. This time I am going to use the gentle wind of my Spirit to speak to each man's and woman's conscience." For when God had passed by Moses in this same spot after the cutting of the second set of the Ten Commandments, he had proclaimed to Moses, "The LORD, the LORD God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin...." (Exodus 34:1-9.) Elijah slowly began to understand that God was going to deal with Israel in grace, mercy, and love through him, Elisha, and the seven thousand who had not bowed their knee to Baal. He was to be an instrument of God's grace seeking by God's message to draw the people back to the living God in the same way Jesus would, who said, "Take My yoke upon you, and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart; and you shall find rest for your souls" (Matthew 11:29). Jesus would also tell his disciples, "Blessed are the gentle [those whose strength is under the control of the Holy Spirit], for they shall inherit the earth" (Matthew 5:5).

Elijah heard the voice of the Lord, and then he came to the mouth of the cave and the Lord spoke to him a second time with the same question: "Elijah, in light of what I just told you about how I am going to use a gentle blowing to bring conviction to my people, what are you doing standing here?" But Elijah was still gripped by pride, self-righteousness, self-pity, despair, and fear. He kicked in the same blind response he had used the first time: "I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the sons of Israel have forsaken Thy covenant, torn down Thine altars and killed Thy prophets with the sword. And I alone am left; and they seek my life, to take it away." Healing from a state of depression takes love, truth, and then time.

The late sixties and early seventies were awesome days to be a Christian and to minister among the "flower children" in the Bay Area and across the country. It was a wild and exciting time as we saw thousands of young people from all walks of life open up their hearts to Christ as Lord and Savior. Baptisms were happening everywhere---bathtubs, back-yard pools, water fountains, lakes, rivers, and the ocean. Bible studies were springing up everywhere too, especially on school and university campuses. One could not keep up with the work of the Lord as it appeared to come with the power of a strong wind, an earthquake, and fire from heaven, so to speak. Whenever I get together with other men and women who served the Lord in those days, I notice that many of us are like Elijah of old, hungering for a return of a little wind, earthquake, and fire---a message not of judgment, but of salvation, for God was shaking the people in that time.

And yet as one looks out on the lives of the faithful men and women among us, it appears to be a time of a gentle but very effective blowing of the Lord moving among us today. You can see it in the faithfulness of parents passing on the truth of salvation in Jesus to their children. You can see it in the ministries of the Crisis Pregnancy Center, Familias Unidas en Cristo, Green Pastures, the mission to Romania, Mexicali, Discovery Publishing, Discovery Center, Sunday School, etc., etc. They are all staffed by people just like the seven thousand quiet but faithful men and women who would not bow their knee to Baal.

Not only did Elijah forget the presence and character of God, but...

Elijah forgot God's sovereign rule

1 Kings 19:15-21

And the LORD said to him, "Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus, and when you have arrived, you shall anoint Hazael king over Syria; and Jehu the son of Nimshi you shall anoint king over Israel; and Elisha the son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah you shall anoint as prophet in your place. And it shall come about, the one who escapes from the sword of Hazael, Jehu shall put to death, and the one who escapes from the sword of Jehu, Elisha shall put to death. Yet I will leave 7000 in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal and every mouth that has not kissed him."

So he departed from there and found Elisha the son of Shaphat, while he was plowing with twelve pairs of oxen before him, and he with the twelfth. And Elijah passed over to him and

threw his mantle on him. And he left the oxen and ran after Elijah and said, "Please let me kiss my father and my mother, then I will follow you." And he said to him, "Go back again, for what have I done to you?" So he returned from following him, and took the pair of oxen and sacrificed them and boiled their flesh with the implements of the oxen, and gave it to the people and they ate. Then he arose and followed Elijah and ministered to him.

God's judgment against the house of Ahab would come not by a strong wind, earthquake, or fire but through another man named Elisha who would set in motion the political and military forces that would take his wicked house down. Meanwhile God would work behind and within Elijah's ministry like a very gentle but powerfully effective blowing in the course of human events.

Elijah needed to get his eyes off himself so that he could again see with the eyes of faith the Lord and see how he would deal with his idolatrous people. This would be the secret of overcoming his personal depression, which had all begun with his disappointment with God when "he saw" only Jezebel and became afraid instead of continuing to believe in the presence of the Lord. When God said, "Go," he encouraged the prophet to make a choice to obey his word, and once Elijah made that choice God would provide the power to enable him to believe him, get up out of his depressive state, and accomplish three tasks: (1) Anoint Hazael king over Syria, Israel's present enemy, who then would be used as a rod of discipline against them; (2) anoint Jehu king over Israel (after the death of Ahab and his son Ahaziah); and (3) anoint Elisha as a prophet in his own place. And God wanted him to know that the wicked in Israel would not go unpunished.

God gave Elijah a final rebuke: "Elijah, in the depth of your spiritual depression that was built on the foundation of fear, self-pity, and self-righteousness, you told me twice, 'I alone am left.' Well, just for the record at this moment, within this idolatrous nation there are seven thousand men and women who will not suffer any judgment from the sword because they have not bowed their knee to Baal nor kissed his statue." Among them would be Obadiah, the one hundred prophets he saved, the many who came back to the Lord on Mount Carmel, and as we will find later, a godly prophet named Micaiah.

Restored to spiritual health, Elijah made the choice to obey God's command to "go," and God gave him the power to walk out of the wilderness. He found a rich young man named Elisha (whose name means God is His Salvation) and anointed him as the prophet to take his place. Elisha killed the oxen that he was plowing with and sacrificed them to the Lord, and his family and friends ate a farewell feast together. Then the two prophets left town to follow the will of the Lord. Elijah anointed Elisha first, and then it was left up to Elisha after Elijah's departure from this earth to anoint Hazael king over Syria and Jehu king of Israel. At this point Elijah, as we now know, became the symbol of the future forerunner of the Messiah, John the Baptist, who would call God's people to repent of their sins. Elisha's ministry in turn would reflect the ministry of Jesus in healing, teaching, and convicting men and women of sin.

Elijah had wanted the Lord to take his life because in his disappointment (1) he had forgotten the consistent presence of the one and only living God; (2) he had forgotten the awesome character of God's love, grace and mercy; and (3) he had forgotten God's sovereign rule over the hearts and affairs of men and women in Israel and the surrounding nations. This truth was nailed home when he heard the Lord tell him that he was not the only godly man left in Israel but that the Lord knew of seven thousand others who had not bent their knee to Baal.

After the apostle Paul and his disciples came out of a very depressing trial in Asia, Paul wrote the Corinthians the lesson he had learned: "...we were burdened excessively, beyond our strength, so that we despaired even of life; indeed, we had the sentence of death within ourselves in order that we should not trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead; who delivered us from so great a peril of death and will deliver us, He on whom we have set our hope." (2 Corinthians 1:8-9.)

In whom are we trusting?

In ourselves? Here begins the road to depression...

In Jesus Christ? Here begins the road to abundant life!

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