

THE GOSPEL IN EZEKIEL

Illustrated in a Series of Discourses

by

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CHAPTER FIVE

GOD'S PUNITIVE JUSTICE

Wherefore I poured my fury upon them for the blood that they had shed upon the land, and for their idols wherewith they had polluted it: And I scattered them among the heathen, and they were dispersed through the countries: according to their way and according to their doings I judged them (Ezekiel 36:18-19).

The dank mossy sward is deceitful: its fresh and glossy carpet invites the traveler to leave the rough moorland track; and, at the first step, horse and rider are buried in the morass. The sea is deceitful. What rage, what furious passions sleep in that placid bosom! and how often—as Vice serves her used-up victims—does she throw the bark that she received into her wanton arms, a wreck upon the shore. The morning is oft deceitful. With bright promise of a brilliant day it lures us from home; ere noon the sky begins to thicken, the sun looks sickly, the sluggish, heavily-laden clouds gather upon the hill-tops, the landscape all around closes in; the lark drops songless into her nest; the wind rises, blowing cold and chill; and at length—like adversities gathering round the grey head of age—tempests, storm, and rain, thicken on the dying day. The desert is deceitful: it mocks the traveler with its mirage. How life kindles in his drooping eye, as he sees the playful waves chase each other to the shore, and the plumes of the palm waving in the watery mirror! Faint, weary, perishing with thirst, he turns to bathe and drink; and, exhausting his remaining strength in pursuit of a phantom, finds, unhappy man! that he has turned to die.

Deceitful above sward, or sea, or sky, or enchanted desert, is the heart of man; nor do I know a more marked or melancholy proof of this than that which our light treatment of such weighty matters as sin and judgment affords. There is no exaggeration in the prophet's language—**"The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked."**

Put a case:—The flames have broken out in some house, and the fire spreads fast; at midnight the roll of the drum wakens the sleeping streets—a fearful sound! soon followed by the hurried yet measured tramp of armed men, and the rush of a crowd, who, guided by a glare that illumines the sky, and turns night into ruddy day, pour on the scene of danger; and where the flames, bursting out from cellar to roof, shed their lurid light on glancing bayonets, strong arms below are working as for life, and daring men above, ever and anon lost among clouds of smoke, turn the stream upon the hissing fire.

In this stirring scene, where is the tenant of the house? How is he engaged? They thunder at the 'door; they call his name; they rear the ladder against the window; and now they shout to him to wake, and haste, and flee, leaving house and furniture to the flames. They listen, but no answer. Alas! he has perished? Help has come too late? No; he lives: he has heard all that horrid din. He smells the smoke; he feels the floor grow hot, and hotter, beneath his feet; and amid the thick and suffocating air the man gasps for breath. He has heard the cries of kindly neighbors; the glass of the window, as a strong hand dashes it in, falls at his feet, and he sees the very ladder resting on its sill. Well; has some ruffian hand bound him neck and heel, that he does not move? or gagged him, that he gives back no answer? Not at all. The man is busy, very busy, ruminating on the question how the fire began; or with some pugnacious neighbor, as insane as himself, he is engaged in keen discussion about when and where it first broke out. Incredible! yet incredible as that appears, this heart is so deceitful, that something less excusable and more incredible still daily meets us in (what shall I call it?) the folly, the insanity, of thousands.

God has sounded the alarm. Roused from sleep—in some sense convinced of sin—in some measure awake to danger—the dream of safety broken in upon—warned that there is no time to Spare—with the flames of wrath above, beneath, around, blocking up all the common avenues of escape—the first, if not the only question, should be, “Oh, Sirs, what shall I do? Where shall I turn? Quick; say, this moment say, **‘What shall I do to be saved?’**”

“Yet, when the only question is, how to escape from impending, imminent danger, hours, days, years, are wasted in inquiries and discussions such as this— How the race came to be exposed to it.

Let theologians settle the metaphysics of the Fall; their business may be to know how we became sinners; our first business is to know how we are to be saved. Leave those who have reached the land to settle how and on what reef the vessel struck; the question with us, who still cling to the shrouds, or are battling with the surf, is, how to gain you blessed shore. In God’s name, and by God’s help, get the fire put out; and then, when the flames are quenched, it will be time enough to consider how they were kindled.

Tie the bleeding artery; and when life is saved, settle, if you can, how it was wounded. When you have plucked the drowning man from the water, and laid him on the bank, and the color flushes again on his cheek, and the pulse beats again at his wrist, and speech again returns to these blue and livid lips, then you may speculate on how he fell into the flood. When, in spite of Satan, and by God’s help, we have wakened some careless one to care about his soul, it is one of the devil’s wiles to distract his attention by such subjects, and amid the mazes of their inextricable labyrinth to bewilder him, who should be pressing on to salvation at the top of his speed.

I would have the man who is engaged in such an enterprise to give these questions in the meanwhile the go-by—for once to apply well, words so often applied ill—**“I will hear thee again on this matter:” “when I have a more convenient season I will send for thee.”** These are profound subjects, worthy of the investigations of angels and exalted saints. We could not apply to their study the words of Nehemiah—**“I have a great work to do; therefore I can not come down.”**

But in saving ourselves and others, I am sure that there is enough to do, without occupying our attention with unsatisfactory speculations on moral evil, and the entrance of sin into our world. In the first place, few have time or talent for such studies. In the second place, although we had, we should find that, like going down into a coal-pit, or the depths of ocean, the further, we descended the darker it grew: we should fare no better than the fallen intelligences described by Milton:—

“Others apart sate on a hill retired,
In thoughts more elevate, and reasoned high
Of Providence, foreknowledge, will, and me—
fixed fate, free will foreknowledge absolute—
And found no end, in wandering mazes lost.
Of good and evil much they argued there—
Vain wisdom all, and false philosophy.”

And in the third place, we may postpone these speculations till we enjoy the leisure of eternity, and can examine subjects so obscure in the clear light of heaven. Meanwhile, let it content us to be assured, that the extent of our knowledge shall correspond to the height of our elevation; and that, as a man, from the bartizan of some lofty tower, or the summit of some loftier mountain, commands a wider view and broader landscape, and, in the course of rivers, the ranges of hills, the outlines and indentations of the coast, obtains a far more extensive view of objects, and a much clearer conception of their relative hearings, than he enjoyed in the plain below; so, while some subjects, like the snowy summits of the Himalayas or Andes, may remain forever inaccessible, yet, once raised to heaven, we shall understand many mysteries, and solve many questions, connected with sin and its sorrows, of which it is best now to say, **“Such knowledge is too high for me; I cannot attain unto it.”**

A child seated on the shoulders of a giant may see further than the giant himself; and an infant standing on the top of a mountain very much further than the giant at its feet: and even so, the lisping babe, whom Jesus has taken from a mother’s bosom to his own, excels in knowledge the profoundest of philosophers and the greatest of divines.

In heaven we shall see as we are seen—we shall know as we are known: there **“the light of the moon shall be as the light of the sun, and the light of the sun shall be sevenfold.”**

In considering at greater length the punitive justice of God, I shall not attempt to offer any full or satisfactory explanation of what is beyond our understanding. How a wise, holy, good and gracious God permitted what he certainly could have prevented—permitted sin to exist at all—is at present a mystery, and may forever remain one.

With others, I might contribute some attempts to solve that difficulty; but I believe that, like all preceding efforts, these would throw no more light on this vast and mysterious subject than a candle sheds on a widely extended landscape clothed in mist or wrapped in midnight darkness. Amid these awful and often painful mysteries, we can only cling to the faith, and cherish an unshaken confidence in this, that the Judge of all the earth doeth right, that God at least is a King who can do no wrong.

To the man, then, who asks. Why am I born with a bias to sin? Why has another's hand been permitted to sow germs of evil in me? Why should I, who was no party to the first covenant, be buried in its ruins? if the Bible says in reply to the query—**“What mean ye, that ye use this proverb concerning the land of Israel; the fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge?”**

“As I live, saith the Lord God, ye shall not have occasion any longer to use this proverb in Israel,” why, then, do I suffer for Adam's sin? Why, most virulent of poisons! should this sin infect the blood of a hundred generations? Why should I suffer for a crime committed so long ago as six thousand years, and to which I no more consented than to Cain's murder of Abel, or Herod's massacre of the innocents?

To these questions this is my reply: I shrink from sitting in judgment upon my Judge. Clouds and darkness are round about the Lord now; but I am confident that, when expiring Time cries, **“It is finished,”** and the vail of a present economy is rent, it shall be seen that righteousness and judgment are the pillars of his throne—that **“there is no unrighteousness with God.”**

These questions open up an abyss respecting which man's business is to adore, and not explore; and to them, meanwhile, I have no other answer than the great Apostle's, **“Who art thou, man! that repliest against thy Maker? Shall the thing made say to him who made it, why hast thou made me thus?”**

But although the permission of sin is a mystery, the fact of its punishment is no mystery at all; for, while every answer to the question, How did God permit sin? leaves us unsatisfied, to my mind nothing is plainer than this, that, whatever was his reason for permitting it to exist, God could not permit it to exist unpunished.

In proof of that, I observe—

I. The truth of God requires the punishment of sin.

“Take now thy son, thine only son, Isaac, whom thou lovest, and offer him for a burnt offering on a mountain that I will tell thee of.”

Startling announcement!— so startling, that it is not possible to suppose that the alarmed, amazed, confounded patriarch received it at once—believed it without a dreadful struggle. No; there never rung from mailed hand or battle-axe such a stunning blow. What man, or father, doubts that it made Abraham stagger, and brought him to his knees? I think I hear him saying,

“Take Isaac—take my son, the son of my love, the son of promise, the miraculous gift of heaven—offer Isaac for a burnt-offering! Surely I dream. What a dreadful fancy! Did my ears deceive me? No: there was a voice; I heard it. It sounded like the voice of God: could it be so? Was it for this that angels announced his birth? Was it to be thus rudely shaken off, that the old stock was made to blossom, and this sweet fruit to grow on a withered tree?

“Although this trembling hand could plunge the knife into Isaac’s bosom, would it not be most honor to God to conclude that some demon, with false and wicked mimicry, had borrowed the Lord’s voice to lure me into a foul and monstrous crime, and, getting me to imbue these hands in Isaac’s blood, by this horrid sacrifice to quench the light of heaven and the hope of earth—in this sweet bud to crush an unblown salvation and unborn Saviour?”

Now, whatever room Abraham might have had for doubt—whatever struggle faith had with unbelief in that father’s heart—we have no room nor pretence to doubt that, however terrible its punishment, God has threatened to punish sin, and, true to his word, shall pour out his fury on the sinner’s head. Christ is offered; and ye cannot escape, if ye neglect this great salvation.

Had that truth been written only in one solitary passage— within the whole compass of the Bible had there been but one line to that effect— we might have succeeded in persuading ourselves that its sense was mistaken, and its terms misunderstood. But is it so? Ah! no: there is letter upon letter, **“line upon line, precept upon precept, here a little and there a little.”** God has recorded his irrevocable resolution, not in one, but in a hundred passages; and reiterated in a thousand ways the awful sentence—**“The soul that sinneth, it shall die.”**

Some have fancied that they honor God most when, sinking all other attributes in mercy— in discriminating mercy—they represent him as embracing the world in his arms—and receiving to his bottom with equal affection the sinners that hate, and the saints that love Him. They cannot claim originality for this idea: its authorship belongs to the **“father of lies.”**

Satan said so before them. It is the very doctrine that damned this world. The serpent said to the woman, **“Thou shalt not surely die.”** Do you rest your hope of salvation on such a baseless fancy? If so, have you seriously considered in what aspect this theory presents the God for whose honor you profess such tender regard. We almost shrink from explaining it.

You save the creature, but at a price more costly than was paid for sinners upon the cross of Calvary. Is there something dearer than life to me?—to God there was something more precious than even the blood of Jesus. I can part with my life, but not my honor— and God could part with his Son, but not with his truth.

But let sin go unpunished, either in person or substitute: this saves the sinner—no doubt of that; but at what price? You save the creature’s life at the expense of the Creator’s honor. Your scheme exalts man; but far more than man is exalted is God degraded. By this scheme no man is lost; but there is a greater loss—something more awful happens: the truth of God is lost; his crown loses its topmost jewel, and the throne of the universe is shaken to its foundations. It is as manifest as daylight that God’s truth and your scheme cannot stand together. “Liar” stands against either God or you; and, in the words of the Apostle, you **“make God a liar.”**

Nor is that all: my faith has lost the very rock it stood on, and stood on— as I flattered myself— steadfast, immovable; for, however awful the threatenings in his Word may be, if God is not true to them, what security have I, or any man, that he will be true to its gracious promises? The rod which bends in one direction will prove as supple in another.

And, since the truth of a Heaven stands upon the very same foundation as the truth of a Hell—the one upon the promise, the other upon the threatening, and both alike upon the simple word of God—why, then, the scheme which quenches the fears of the wicked extinguishes the hopes of the just.

If he that believeth not shall not be condemned, farewell—a long and sad farewell—to my happy confidence that he that believeth shall be saved. I cannot consent that you should pull down my heaven, to build with its ruins, not a temple to justice, but an asylum for crime. Away with such a scheme. It is fatal to the peace of God's people. It is essentially blasphemous and dishonoring to their God. It makes God a liar. Making him do wrong, how can it be right? making him untrue, it must be itself untrue. We reject it with horror. It is a snare of the Evil One; and happy should we be to think that we had helped any of his captives out, and sent them singing, as on wings of faith they soared away to heaven, **“My soul is escaped as a bird out of the fowler's snare: the snare is broken, and I am escaped.”**

II. The love of God requires that sin should be punished.

You may start at this. Love requires punishment? Had we said the justice, or holiness, or purity of God, we, no doubt, should have used an expression less startling, and more sure to command a ready assent. These attributes present strong positions, within which it may be admitted that we could entrench this doctrine—impregnable to all assaults.

On that very account it is that in this brief discussion we pass these by, and, confident in the strength of our cause, select, of very purpose, although some may think unwisely, what they deem the weakest argument and point of defense.

Now I find one of the strongest and most affecting proofs that the impenitent and unbelieving shall not go unpunished, just in that tenderest of all subjects, the love of God; and I think that I could close with the man who uses this love to prove that sin shall go unpunished; and having wrested that weapon from his hand, take off the head of his argument with his own sword. I say of this love of God, what David said of Goliath's sword, **“there is none like that, give it me.”**

Lend me your candid attention—open your minds—and I think it will not be difficult to convince you, that the love of God—which is a sevenfold shield to the believer—not merely consents, to, but demands, the condemnation, as it aggravates the guilt, of the impenitent.

Let me at once prove and illustrate the point by a piece of plain analogy:—This city, nay, the whole land, is shaken by the news of some most cruel, bloody, monstrous crime. Fear seizes hold of the public mind; pale horror sits on all men's faces; doors are double barred; and justice lets loose the hounds of law on the track of the criminal. At length, to the relief and joy of all honest citizens, he is caught. He is tried, condemned, laid in irons, and waits but the sentence to be signed. To save or slay—to hang or pardon—is now the question with him whose prerogative it is to do either; and by what motive is the sovereign impelled to shut up his bowels of mercy. and sign the warrant for execution? Is it want of pity? No; the pen is taken with reluctance; it trembles in his hand, and tears of compassion for this guilty wretch drop on the page he signs.

Now it is not so much abhorrence of the guilty, as love of the innocent, and regard for their peace, purity, and honor, that dooms this man to die. If he were pardoned, and his crime allowed to go unpunished, neither man's life nor woman's virtue were safe; unless this felon dies, the peace and purity of a thousand happy families lie open to foul attack; and thus, love for those who have the best claim on a sovereign's protection, requires that the guilty die. That the community may live in peace, each man sitting beneath his own vine and fig tree, that the citizen may feel himself safe in the bosom of his family—that streets may be safe to walk on—that beds may be safe to lie in—that our land may be a country fit to live in—crime must be punished.

The magistrate who would reward obedience must punish rebellion; nor can he be a praise and protection to them that do good, but by making himself a terror to them that do evil.

There are scenes of domestic suffering which present another, no less convincing, and more touching analogy. I refer to those distressing cases where natural affection yields to the holiest parental duty; and where, although she thereby inflicts on her own bosom a wound time never heals, Love seizes the knife, and, lest the canker should extend to the other branches, lops off some once pleasant bough from the family tree. It has happened that, from love and regard to the interest of his other children—to save them from a brother's contamination—a kind parent has felt constrained to banish his son, and forbid him a mother's house. It is sad to think that he may be lost; the dread of that goes like a knife into the heart; yet, bitter truth! painful conclusion! it is better that one child be lost than a whole family be lost. These lambs claim protection from the wolf; he must be driven forth from the fold; weeping.

Love herself demands this sacrifice; and, just because it is most lacerating, most excruciating, to a parent's heart, it is in such a ease the highest and holiest exercise of parental love to bar the door against a child.

There have been parents so weak and foolish as to peril the morals, the fortunes, the souls of their other children, rather than punish one; and in consequence of this I have seen sin, like a fever, infect every member of the family, and vice ferment and spread till it had leavened the whole lump.

Divine Love, however, is no blind Divinity: and that love being as wise as tender, sinners may rest assured, that out of mere pity to them, God will neither sacrifice the interests, nor peril the happiness of his people. Love herself—bleeding, dying, redeeming love—with her own hand will bar the door of heaven, and from its happy, holy precincts, exclude all that could hurt or defile.

Stern words these I and when Love puts on her armor, to fight against, him, what hope for the man who has compelled her to be his enemy? Having armed Love against you, where now are you flying? Look at this scene of judgment. He who died on the cross occupies the throne. Love incarnate presides at that august tribunal. The print of the nail is on the very hand which waves away the lost into perdition. The voice which so often invited the impenitent is that which now condemns and commands them to depart. Calmly, serenely anticipating that day, Faith says, **“It is God that justifieth; who is he that shall condemn?”**

But oh! if Jesus Christ condemn, who shall justify? If he spare not, who shall save? From the wrath of the Lamb which impenitence has changed into the wrath of a Lion, despair turns away a face covered with the blackness of darkness, to cry as she wrings her hands, **“The great day of his wrath is come, and who shall be able to stand?”**

If the Lamb of God— if the Love of God be our adversary, our case is desperate. Oh! take warning in time, that you be not lost for Eternity. **“Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and ye perish from the way, when his wrath is kindled but a little.” “Blessed are all they that put their trust in him.”**

III. Unless sin is to be awfully punished, the language of Scripture appears extravagant.

Next to the suffering is the sight of pain to a man of tender feelings: nor, but for your good, would I ask anyone to cast even a hurried glance on those appalling pictures which the Bible reveals. But if men, for the mere gratification of taste—if the lovers of the fine arts—crowd to Some picture of the damned—a scene of the last Judgment painted by a master’s hand, where hideous demons torment shrieking victims, and drag the seven deadly sins down into the gulf of fire—when, as far as the heavens do the earth, the preacher’s object transcends the painter’s, and the salvation of souls the gratification of taste—when my object is, not to please your fancy, but profit your souls— shall that be condemned in the pulpit which is so much applauded in the painting?

Where the highest interests are at stake, shall I be judged harsh, and showing no regard to feeling and propriety, because I ask you to turn your eyes on this spectacle—on a worm that never dieth, and this fire that is never quenched? Oh! let me beseech, implore you, to read with tears and prayers those passages of Scripture that reveal the miseries of the lost. Blot not from your minds what you cannot blot out of the Book of God.

What is so sad—what so strongly and sadly illustrates the wicked deceitfulness of this heart—as the entertainment which men extract from the solemnities of judgment? Only think of those, who turn away with ill-disguised distaste from the very mention of such subjects in the house of God, crowding a brilliant saloon to hear this same judgment set to music, and listen with loud and rapturous applauses to the hired musicians, who give a bold (shall I say profane) imitation of the trumpet that rends the grave, of the thunders that announce the Judge, the song of adoring angels, the shouts of ransomed saints, and—for any thing I know—the awful shrieks of the damned!

Think of this; think of criminals leaving the bar to set their sentence to music! When their life is a matter of hours, and its few remaining sands should be given to prayer and God’s hook of mercy, think of men, shut up in a cell, and drawing on its walls a wretched caricature of their judge, the gallows, the mighty crowd, the victim turning round on his cord, with eyeballs that protrude beneath the cap, and limbs convulsed in the very agony of death!

The sufferings and misery which awaits the impenitent and unbelieving, God has painted in most appalling colors.

To save us from them, his Son left the heavens and died on a cross. When Paul thought of these, he wept like a woman. A dauntless man, who shook his chain in the face of kings—whose spirit no sufferings could subdue, and whose heart no dangers could appall—who stood as unmoved amid a thousand perils as ever rock amid a thousand billows, he could not contemplate these without the deepest emotion; his tears fell fast and thick upon the page where he wrote, **“of whom I have told you often, and now tell you even weeping, whose god is their belly, whose end is destruction.”**

What horror did David feel at the sight and fate of sinners? With his blind face turned up to heaven, you see a man approach the edge of an awful precipice: every step brings him nearer—still nearer, the brink. Now he reaches it: he stands on the grassy edge. Oh for an arm to reach him—for a voice to warn him—for a blow to send him staggering back upon the ground! But he has lifted his foot; it is projected beyond the brink; another moment, a breath of wind, the least change of balance, and he is whirling twenty fathoms down. You stop your ears, close your eyes, turn away your head; horror has taken hold of you.

And such were David’s feelings when he contemplated the sins and fate of the wicked: **“Horror hath taken hold upon me, because of the wicked that forsake thy law: rivers of water run down mine eyes, because they keep not thy law, O God.”**

The wrath of God is the key to David’s sorrow, to an Apostle’s tears, to the bloody mysteries of the Cross. That was the necessity which drew a Saviour down. Had that wrath been tolerable or terminable, the sword of Justice had never been dyed with the blood, nor sheathed in the body of such a noble victim; and if there is a need be for the lightest cross that lies on a good man’s lot, how great the necessity for that upon which the Saviour died! God is not willing that you should perish, and by these terrors of the Lord we would persuade you. Meditate on these words: pray over them—

- **“Woe to the man that striveth with his Maker!”**
- **“Who can lie down in everlasting burnings?”**
- **“The wicked shall be cast into hell, and all the nations that forget God.”**

Rather than that you should perish, I would even thus persuade you. Oh! there are terrors enough in the Bible to make a man’s hair stand on end. Surely, were God but for one moment to let this world hear the weeping and wail of the lost, that sound, more terrible than Egypt’s midnight cry, would rouse the student at his books, arrest the foot of dancer in the ball, stop armies in the very fury of the fight, and, calling a sleeping world from their beds, would bend the most stubborn knees, and extort from all the one loud cry, **“Lord, save me, I perish!”**

Still it is not terror which is the mighty power of God. The Gospel, like most medicines for the body, is of a compound nature; but, whatever else enters into its composition, its curative element is love.

No man yet was ever driven to heaven: he must be drawn to it; and I wish to draw you.

The Gospel has terror in it, no doubt. But it is like our atmosphere— occasionally riven by the thunder, and illuminated by the fatal flash—it is at times the path of the stealthy pestilence— charged with elements of destruction, and impregnated with the seeds of disease; but how much more is not a great magazine of health, filled with the most harmonious sounds, fragrant with the sweetest odors, hung .with golden drapery, the pathway of sunbeams, the womb of showers, the feeder of flowing streams, full of God’s goodness, and the fountain of all Earth’s life!

And, just as in that atmosphere, which God has wrapped round this world, there is much more health than sickness, much more food than famine, much more life than death, so in the Bible there is much more love than terror.

The terror is not only subordinate to love, but subservient to it, God, indeed, tells us of hell, but it is to persuade us to go to heaven; and, as a skillful painter fills the background of his picture with his darker colors, God puts in the smoke of torment and the black clouds of Sinai, to give brighter prominence to Jesus, the cross of Calvary, and his love to the chief of sinners.

His voice of terror is like the scream of the mother bird when the hawk is in the sky. She alarms her brood that they may run and hide beneath her feathers; and as I believe that God had left that mother dumb unless he had given her wings to cover her little ones, I am sure that He, who is very **“pitiful,”** and has no pleasure in any creature’s pain, had never turned our eyes to the horrible gulf unless for the voice that cries, **“Deliver from going down to the pit, for I have found a ransom.”**

“We had never heard of sin had there been no Saviour; nor of hell had there been no heaven.

“Sufficient for the day is the evil thereof;” and never had Bible light been flashed before the eyes of the sleeping felon to wake him from his happy dream, but that he might see the smiling form of Mercy, and hear her, as she says with pointing finger, **“Behold, I have set before thee an open door.”**

~ end of chapter 5 ~

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