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# Returning to Our First Love

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Archibald Alexander

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FROM THE INHERITANCE OF OUR FATHERS  
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## ARCHIBALD ALEXANDER

Archibald Alexander (1772-1851) was born in Virginia and raised in a home with a strong Presbyterian heritage. He was converted at the age of seventeen and then studied theology under William Graham at Liberty Hall Academy. Upon licensure, he served as an itinerant missionary in Virginia and North Carolina, which generated a life-long passion for home and foreign missions. After a short settled pastorate, he served as president of Hampden-Sydney College (1796-1807) in his native Virginia, then ministered in the Pine Street Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia (1807-1812). Alexander was appointed to serve as the first "Professor of Didactic and Polemic Theology" at Princeton Theological Seminary, upon its establishment in 1812. The remaining years of his life were spent as professor in the first Presbyterian seminary founded in the United States. He is best remembered today as an experiential preacher, teacher, and author.

## Returning to Our First Love

*“Nevertheless, I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love. Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candle-stick out of his place, except thou repent.”*

—Revelation 2:4-5

Although our blessed Savior never wrote any thing Himself for the church, yet we have in the evangelists many of His discourses in substance, if not entire; and here we have seven epistles, dictated by Him, and communicated to His beloved John, after His ascension to glory. The first of these was addressed to the church at Ephesus, the capital of proconsular Asia, and the other churches to which epistles were addressed, were situated in the vicinity. As the apostle John had taken up his abode at

Ephesus, these churches would naturally fall under his inspection and care. The angels, through whom these epistles were addressed to the churches, are commonly supposed to have been the pastors; but a late writer of our own country has an ingenious conjecture that these angels were, in fact, the messengers of these seven churches who had been sent by them to attend to and comfort their beloved apostle in his exile in the island of Patmos.

Many interpreters, because these epistles are placed as a preface to a book of prophecy, have been of the opinion that they were of a prophetic character, representing seven successive periods of the history of the Christian church. But there is nothing in these letters to the churches of Asia which has the least appearance of prediction, except the threatenings and blessings which are appended to each epistle. The attempts to apply the supposed prophecies to the several periods of the history of the Christian church have

utterly failed. Such force has been necessary to make out any correspondence between the matter of the epistles and the events of history that every impartial reader must see that there exists no solid foundation for the opinion that these seven epistles to the churches of proconsular Asia were intended to be prophetic.

It may be satisfactory to some to mention that the name *Asia*, as that of *Europe*, was at first confined to a comparatively small district, of which Ephesus was the capital. Most of the cities to which these epistles were addressed are now in a state of utter desolation, and none more so than Ephesus, which was in the days of the apostle one of the most celebrated cities in the world. The threatening against the church in this place, mentioned in our text, has been most signally fulfilled. Not only has the candlestick been removed, but the city in which the church was situated is a total ruin. There is something fearful, and at the same time, admonitory, in viewing

the utter desolation of many ancient cities, which seemed to have as fair a prospect of perpetuity as any which now flourish upon earth.

Does the same doom await our great cities also? Will the candlestick be removed from them? Doubtless, these things were recorded for the admonition and warning of all succeeding churches to the end of the world. There is a greater uniformity in God's government of cities, churches, and nations than most are willing to acknowledge. Without claiming any thing of the spirit of prophecy, it may be predicted, that when the cup of iniquity in our large cities is full (and the filling goes on very rapidly), they also will become desolate; and the ground now so highly appreciated, will become worthless. The churches which have left or shall leave their first love and refuse to repent will be removed; no vestige of them shall remain, as is literally the fact in regard to Ephesus. Already Ichabod may be inscribed on some churches in our land,

for the glory is departed. And as it relates to the different denominations of evangelical Christians, it may be predicted that those which decline most from the truth and from the spirit of genuine piety, will, notwithstanding all their efforts to increase, and although they may for a while flourish in numbers and wealth, be cast off and be doomed to become desolate. Let all Christians, therefore, fear the wrath of that august personage described in the first chapter of this book, out of whose mouth proceeds a sharp two-edged sword.

Before speaking of the declension of these Ephesian Christians, it will be proper to say something of what is here called "first love." The prominent characteristic of every soul truly converted to Christianity, is *love* to the Savior. The faith which is the gift of God, and which is wrought in Christians by the Holy Spirit, always works by love. Love is, therefore, set down as the first and principal fruit of the Spirit. Now, there is something pecu-

liar in the exercise of this first love of the young convert. Its exercise is fervent and tender—not founded, indeed, on such accurate views of the character of Christ as are afterwards acquired, and commonly less pure from mere natural excitement than that of the mature Christian, but accompanied with more joy and exultation.

These joyful frames, so common in new converts, may be ascribed to several causes. The first is the recent transition of the soul from a conviction of condemnation, ruin, and helplessness, to a state of favor and reconciliation. When the views of the way of salvation are clear, and faith strong, there is commonly a joyful persuasion of safety and pardon; and even the hope of pardon after a dark season of distress and conscious condemnation is like life from the dead. This case is well illustrated by that of a criminal reprieved from death when under the gallows. His first feelings will be ecstatic, and though his safety is as certain years afterwards, he

never will experience the same liveliness of joy.

Another thing which stamps a peculiarity on the first love of the Christian is the novelty of the objects and scenes which are now presented to his enlightened mind. All his lifetime he has been in darkness respecting the true nature of spiritual things; for "the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness unto him, neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned." But now the eyes of his understanding being opened, and the true light shining into them, every thing appears new and attractive; and sometimes a divine glory is exhibited to the contemplation of the enlightened mind. This light is, therefore, called "marvelous" by an apostle, and the love which accompanies it partakes of its marvelous nature. "Whom," says the apostle Peter, "having not seen, ye love; in whom, though now ye see him not, yet believing, ye rejoice

with joy unspeakable and full of glory” (1 Peter 1:8).

Again, God deals with His children in the infancy of their spiritual life as mothers with their children while they are young. They nurse them with tender affection, and do everything in their power to render them comfortable. They furnish them with the sweetest nutriment, cherish them in their bosoms, carry them in their arms, and rock them in the cradle. But when they have been weaned and have grown strong, they are turned out to make ends meet for themselves. They must now learn to work and endure hardships, and are no longer cherished at the breast or dandled on the mother’s knee.

Thus, our heavenly Father, who exercises a warmer and more tender affection for His children than the kindest mother, is pleased to deal very tenderly with young converts; and often pours streams of divine comfort into their moldable hearts. They are for a season led in smooth

and pleasant paths; though dark clouds may occasionally come over them, and "weeping may endure for a night; yet joy cometh in the morning." In their prayers and other religious exercises, they enjoy liberty of access to their heavenly Father; and much of their time is spent in grateful songs of praise for redeeming love and converting grace. The state of the soul at this period is beautifully expressed by the poet in the hymn which begins:

*Sweet was the time when first I felt  
The Savior's pardoning blood....*

Earthly things now have little or no attraction. The thoughts and feelings, the conversation and actions, are chiefly occupied with religion. These are indeed peaceful days, and will be often afterwards remembered with a mournful pleasure, when the scene is greatly changed; and especially when inbred corruption grows strong, when temptations vex the soul, and when the heart seems to have lost all tenderness; and when, in-

stead of joy, darkness and trouble almost overwhelm the soul. Then is often uttered the exclamation of Job, "Oh that I were as in months past" (Job 29:2).

The union of the believer to Christ is, in Scripture, often compared to marriage; and the joy of the young convert is like the joy experienced in the day of espousals (Jer. 2:2).

The early days of the true Christian may also be well illustrated by the feelings of the newly enlisted soldier. He rejoices in the "pomp and circumstance" of the military life; is animated by the sound of martial music, and by the sight of splendid banners, and the gorgeous costume of his officers; and leads a life of idleness, while his bounty money supplies him with such luxuries as he desires. But how different are the condition and feelings of the same person when he receives marching orders, and especially when he is led into battle, when all his energies are required, and his life is placed in imminent danger!

But the change in the Ephesian church of which the ascended Savior complains, and on account of which He brings a charge against them, is not that which naturally occurs by a change of circumstances, which may take place without any real declension in the vigor of piety. When He says, "thou hast left thy first love," He charges them with actual backsliding. And the declension of a church supposes that of the members of which it is composed.

Let us, then, consider the causes and symptoms of backsliding; and the imperative duty of all who may unhappily have fallen into this state.

Declensions in vital piety are owing to a variety of causes, internal and external. Some of these operate in one case and different ones in others; the whole, however, may be attributed to the temptations of Satan, the allurements of the world, and the inbred corruptions of the heart. Declensions in religion are very commonly

produced by too much intercourse with a careless, money-loving, pleasure-seeking world. Vital religion is a delicate plant, and, being surrounded by many unfavorable circumstances, is liable to receive injury from contact with a polluted world. He who is clothed in garments white and clean will find it difficult to avoid contracting spots which deform and defile his robes when he is obliged to live in a filthy house. Piety is not the natural state of the heart, but is brought in by a foreign influence, and finds many things inimical to its preservation and growth in the soul in which it has taken up its abode.

For a while, at first, the young convert thinks but little about the business and cares of the world. Perhaps he is culpably inattentive to those duties which are required in making provision for the body. But soon he finds that he must serve God in a lawful calling—he must make honest provision for his own wants and those of his family. It is hard to pursue the world

just as far as duty calls, and then to stop. When the efforts to acquire property are successful, a pleasure is naturally experienced in the acquisition of good things. After a while, an undue love of the world is apt to be generated insensibly. The evil creeps in insidiously, and nothing unjust is thought of; but the undue love of the world, whether of its riches, its honors, or its pleasures, will soon injuriously influence the love of the soul to its Savior. The thoughts are too much drawn off from the contemplation of divine things, and the relish for spiritual duties and enjoyments is sensibly diminished. The duties of the closet are no longer anticipated with delight; and the hours consecrated to private devotion, which were wont to be the most pleasant in the whole day, do not now afford the same comfort as formerly. The lack of enjoyment in religious duties, the wandering thoughts in the midst of them, and the lack of lively feeling naturally tend to produce a backwardness to en-

gage in them, so that were not the person forced, as it were, by conscience to enter his closet, he would often omit the duty altogether. But when secret prayer is attended to, the person on whom the world has had an undue influence, hurries over the service; and often the omission would be better than the performance, where the service is merely formal, and the knee is bowed and words uttered without one devotional emotion.

Worldly company and too much occupation in secular affairs are almost sure to deaden our pious affections and to disqualify us for spiritual exercises. At first, the soul which has in it the "root of the matter," is alarmed at the defect of spiritual enjoyment, and makes, it may be, some inefficient efforts to recover the ground which has been lost; but these not proving successful, it gives itself up to a kind of indifference. It avoids serious reflection on its former state of lively feeling; or perhaps is tempted to think that

there was more enthusiasm than real religion in those joyful frames which were once so highly valued. This temptation derives strength from the recollection of our ignorance, and the many false impressions to which we were then subject. Just so far as this temptation has influence, the backslider loses all present desire of having his former exercises of religion renewed. This is a fearful and dangerous delusion. In this state of delusion, the person tries to persuade himself that he has lost nothing, that sober thought and rational feeling have taken the place of enthusiastic fervors. But where there is any spiritual life, there will be seasons of uneasiness and an irrepressible feeling that all is not right. These, however, are but waking moments in the sleep of carnal security, into which the soul has fallen. For the most part, the conscience is lulled into a false security and is so little awake to give warning of danger that many things now appear to be lawful and innocent, which would

have been avoided as highly criminal in the time of its first love. Indeed, while in this state of slumbering, you can perceive very little difference between the declining professor and the mere moralist who makes no pretensions to religion. The people of the world are surprised and gratified to find that those whom they once shunned, on account of their seriousness, are so much like themselves, and can join with them in frivolous conversation and participate in their amusements without scruple.

But let a lively Christian attempt to engage such persons in spiritual and experimental conversation on religion, and see what repugnance they will manifest to lay open the state of their hearts. Soon they will contrive to change the subject; and while it continues, they assent with painful feelings, to what may be said. "Out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaketh." There is no surer sign of declension from our first love than an aver-

sion to conversation respecting Christ and His love, and our great obligations to love, honor, and praise Him to the utmost of our power. Many leave their first love to Christ, who never fall into open transgression, but some are not so much favored. They are "overtaken in a fault," under some sudden temptation, as Peter. Others gradually sink into a state of carnal security, until like David, they become entangled by some insidious lust. When off their guard, the enemy comes in, and presenting the bait of sensual pleasure, they are overcome and remain for a season under the dominion of sin.

Often it becomes necessary to exclude such from the communion of the church, for conduct which is dishonorable to their sacred profession. And the judicious exercise of discipline is sometimes made the effectual means of recovering true Christians from a state of shameful backsliding. Discipline is not intended for the destruction of those on whom it is exercised, but

that they may be saved by destruction of their pride and sinful propensities.

A more common means of restoring backsliders is the rod of affliction. The reason why God scourgeth every son that He receiveth is because all have faults and imperfections, which a kind Father aims to correct by the use of the rod. By affliction, the vanity of the world is seen. The infatuation produced by the love of the world is broken. In the dark day of adversity, when the idols of the backsliding Christian have been snatched away, when sickness has invaded his dwelling, and either in his own person or those as dear to him as his own soul, he is excruciated with strong pain, and no earthly resource remains on which he can rely for consolation, he is filled with sorrow for having departed from the fountain of living water and is driven to seek refuge and comfort in the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The last thing which we propose to consider is the return of the soul to its first

love. Backsliding Christians might, in justice, be cast off forever; but God, who has entered into covenant with His people, is faithful; and one of the promises of the new covenant is that He will "heal their backsliding" (Hos. 14:4). The good Shepherd looks after His wandering sheep, and restores them. But this He does by bringing them to a deep conviction of their sin. Their renewed conversion is, like the first, attended with many painful and anxious feelings, but after many discouragements, they are enabled to come to Christ and cast themselves upon His mercy; and to their astonishment, their reception is most gracious. They are welcomed as though they had never offended and are restored to the joy of the divine favor.

But let us attend to the directions given in the text to the Ephesian Christians. The first is to remember whence we have fallen. In a state of declension, there is a strange forgetfulness of former experience in the divine life. It is, therefore, very sig-

nificantly represented by a state of sleep. The very first step towards a return to God is to be awakened from this spiritual slumber, to remember what we once possessed and enjoyed, and to compare our present condition with our former. This awakened recollection will lead the soul to understand the cause of its departure from God, and to trace all the steps of its retrograde course. Memory is a valuable faculty of our minds and its exercise is of much avail in religion.

My hearers, our exalted Savior seems to address this word to us. Let us, then, remember what we once were; what lively feelings of penitence, love, and joy sweetly mingled their emotions in our early experience in religion. Let us remember what hopes we then cherished, what resolutions we formed—yes, what solemn vows we made and recorded in the house of God. Did we then suppose that we should ever become so cold and indifferent in our religious feelings as at present? When aged

Christians warned us of our danger, we were disposed to think that their solicitude in our behalf was superfluous, for we were confident that we should never decline from the walk of faith. Our foresight was, indeed, short; by insensible degrees we left our first love and have wandered like straying sheep. But now, again, the Good Shepherd causes us to hear His voice. And His first call to us is to “remember”—to remember whence we have fallen. This is in order to the next step, which is to repent.

Be sorry for what you have done. We should be willing to admit the painful, humbling conviction that we have grievously and foolishly sinned in departing from the living God. Sin is embittered to none more than to the penitent backslider; especially the sin of ingratitude breaks his heart. He is astonished at his own blindness and unbelief which prevented him from seeing the snare which the enemy spread to entangle his feet. Oh what infatuation, after having tasted the joy of

pardoned sin, and after being favored with the spirit of adoption, to turn again to folly! This fills him, on the recollection, with astonishment and regret; and he now asks himself, "What fruit had ye then in those things whereof ye are now ashamed?" (Rom. 6:21). Where now are the promised pleasures of sin? Alas! That which was sweet in the mouth is turned to gall and wormwood in the stomach. Remember, then, from whence thou hast fallen and repent.

But our obedience must not be confined to the feelings and affections of the heart, however pious and penitent these may be. A good tree will produce good fruit. Our Lord, therefore, adds, "and do the first works." Immediately, on a sinner's first conversion, he begins to work. "Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?" is the language of every renewed heart. "He that hath my commandments, and keepeth them," saith our Lord, "he it is that loveth me" (John 14:21). "If ye love me keep my

commandments" (John 14:15). But in a state of backsliding, the commandments of Christ are neglected, or obeyed in a very imperfect manner. Undue conformity to the world takes the place of self-denial and formality is substituted for spirituality in the worship of God. But when the backslider is reclaimed—which is really like a new conversion—he is again led to engage cordially in the service of God. He now returns to the performance of his first works, as well as to the exercise of his first love. He again abounds in prayer and praise, makes the Sabbath a delight, and counts it honorable; draws nigh to God in the Holy Supper; and is found walking in all the commandments of the Lord blameless. He does justly, loves mercy, and walks humbly with his God. The heart of a reclaimed backslider is sure to be more humble and distrustful of itself than before. There is also, now, more caution and watchfulness in regard to the heart. It has been found to be "deceitful

above all things," and, therefore, ought not to be trusted. The vain self-confidence of such is now completely cured. The reclaimed penitent knows experimentally that his standing is not in himself; that unless he is preserved by the grace of God, he will certainly fall away again.

The penitent backslider is especially on his guard against those sins and temptations by which he was overcome when he departed from God, so that, in all his future life, he is more secure from these than from other sins.

Two feelings are predominant in the exercises of a returning backslider: shame and a lively feeling of the baseness of ingratitude. Such a soul is ashamed to look up, and is often so confounded and overwhelmed with this feeling, that it remains silent before God. This frame of mind is vividly described by Ezekiel in the following language: "That thou mayest remember, and be confounded, and never open thy mouth any more because of thy

shame, when I am pacified toward thee for all that thou hast done, saith the Lord GOD" (Ezek. 16:63).

The mercy of God in graciously receiving the returning backslider appears to him more wonderful than it did upon his first being converted, and his admiration of the long-suffering of the Lord is greatly enhanced. It is true, then, that God in His wisdom overrules even the falls and declensions of His people to increase their humility and watchfulness. The reclaimed backslider is also rendered more charitable and forbearing to his brethren, when they appear delinquent in duty, or are overtaken in a fault.

Let all churches make the inquiry seriously and honestly, whether they have not left their first love. With many, the fact is notorious; their departure from God may be said to be visible and great. Where is now that fervent affection and ardent zeal which once characterized them? Where now is that spirit of earnest, wrestling

prayer, which seemed as if it would give God no rest until he should cause the righteousness of Zion to go forth as brightness, and the salvation thereof as a lamp that burneth? Where now is that fruitfulness in works of piety, mercy, and benevolence, which adorned your profession?

“Remember, therefore, from whence ye are fallen and repent, and do your first works.” Otherwise, the threatening against Ephesus, so fearfully executed, may be realized in your case. Your candlestick may be removed. Darkness may succeed to light. Error may overspread the church. Faithful ministers may be withdrawn, and false teachers may come in their place. For your own sakes, and that of your posterity, awake out of your sleep. Seek the Lord for the return of His grieved Spirit. Cry mightily to God for His reviving influences.

As every church consists of individuals, I would call upon all professors to consider their ways. Examine yourselves, whether

you be in the faith, and whether you are in a growing, thriving condition; for if not, you are surely in a state of declension. There is no standing still in religion. If you are not pressing forward, you are certainly retrograding. You are, this day, solemnly called upon to remember the times and seasons which are past—to remember the love and joy of your espousals unto Christ, when the candle of the Lord shone upon your tabernacle; and when your chief delight was in the service of God; when the very name of Jesus was as ointment poured forth—when He gave you songs in the night, and in the morning, your first thoughts spontaneously arose to God your Redeemer. Then you could say, “It is good for me to draw near to God.” “Whom have I in heaven but thee? and there is none upon earth that I desire beside thee.” “For a day in thy courts is better than a thousand. I had rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God, than to dwell in the tents of wickedness.” “I rejoiced when they said

to me, 'Come, let us go up to the house of the Lord'" (Ps. 73:28, 25; 84:10; 122:10)

But how is it with you now? What does conscience testify as to your present condition? What testimony would your closet give, if it could speak? Alas! What a change! Where now are your religious comforts? What has become of that sweet peace you once enjoyed? Perhaps you even doubt of the reality or genuineness of your former experiences. You have, like the virgins in the parable, fallen into a slumbering state, in which the awful truths of religion are dimly perceived, and make but a slight and transient impression on your mind when they occur to your thoughts. To you, I would say, "Awake thou that sleepest, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give thee light" (Eph. 5:14). Remember from whence you have fallen; repent and do your first works. Your present situation is one of extreme danger. While in this deadening state, you cannot possess satisfactory ev-

idence of the genuineness of your piety. While in this state you cannot glorify God, nor be useful to men according to your ability and opportunity. And how sad your condition, if death should find you in this unprepared state! "O that they were wise...that they would consider their latter end" (Deut. 32:29).

If there should be any who have been made sensible of their sinful departure from God and who are sunk in discouragement and agonized with fear, lest they have sinned beyond the reach of mercy and bounds of forgiveness, and who, by these views are prevented from returning, to such I would say, dishonor not God by entertaining such hard and unbelieving thoughts. His mercy is infinite. As high as are the heavens above the earth, so high are His thoughts of mercy above our conception. He has left special promises for the encouragement of such as you; and He has never rejected one who came unto Him. You cannot gratify the heart of your

sympathizing Savior more than by exercising confidence in His power and willingness to save you.

I would conclude by addressing you in the language of God by the prophet Hosea: "O Israel, return unto the LORD thy God; for thou hast fallen by thine iniquity. Take with you words and turn to the LORD: say unto him, Take away all iniquity, and receive us graciously...for in thee the fatherless findeth mercy." To which His gracious answer is, "I will heal their backsliding, and I will love them freely: for my anger is turned away from him. I will be as the dew unto Israel: he shall grow as the lily, and cast forth his roots as Lebanon. His branches shall spread, and his beauty shall be as the olive-tree, and his smell as Lebanon. They that dwell under his shadow shall return; they shall revive as the corn, and grow as the vine: the scent thereof shall be as the wine of Lebanon. Ephraim shall say, What have I to do any more with idols?" (Hos. 14:1-8).

## Of Sanctification

*The Holy Ghost in Scripture saith  
Expressly in one part,  
Speaking by Peter's mouth, "By faith  
God purifies the heart."*

*Now what in holy writ He says,  
In part or through the whole  
The self-same truths, by various ways  
He teaches in the soul*

*Experience likewise tells us this:  
Before the Savior's blood  
Has washed us clean, and made our peace,  
We can do nothing good.*

*But here, my friends, the danger lies;  
Errors of different kind  
Will still creep in; which devils devise  
To cheat the human mind.*

*"I want no work within," says one,  
" 'Tis all in Christ the Head."  
Thus careless, he goes blindly on,  
And trusts a faith that's dead.*

*" 'Tis dangerous," another cries,  
"To trust to faith alone;  
Christ's righteousness will not suffice,  
Except I add my own."*

*Thus he, that he may something do  
To shun the impending curse;  
Upon the old will patch the new,  
And make the rent still worse.*

*Others affirm the Spirit of God,  
To true believers given,  
Makes all their thoughts and acts so good,  
They're always fit for heaven.*

*The babe of Christ, at hearing this,  
Is filled with anxious fear  
Conscience condemns, corruptions rise,  
And drive him near despair.*

*These trials weaklings suffer here,  
Censure and scorn without;  
And from within, (what's worse to bear),  
Despondency and doubt.*

*But, gracious Lord, who once didst feel  
What weakness is, and fears;  
Who got'st Thy victory over hell  
With groans, and cries, and tears;*

*Do Thou direct our feeble hearts  
To trust Thee for the whole;  
The work of grace in all its parts,  
Accomplish in the soul.*

*Thy Holy Spirit into us breathe;  
A perfect Savior prove;  
Lord, give us faith, and let that faith  
Work all Thy will by love.*

—J. Hart

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