

Where is God in my suffering?

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[0 : 00] Well, please take your Bibles again and turn to Lamentations, chapter 2. It should be on page 830. And I'm going to read the whole of chapter 2.

How the Lord in his anger has set the daughter of Zion under a cloud. He has cast down from heaven to earth the splendor of Israel.

He has not remembered his footstool in the day of his anger. The Lord has swallowed up without mercy all the habitations of Jacob.

In his wrath he has broken down the strongholds of the daughter of Judah. He has brought down to the ground in dishonor the kingdom and its rulers.

He has cut down in fierce anger all the might of Israel. He has withdrawn from them his right hand in the face of the enemy. He has burned like a flaming fire in Jacob, consuming all around.

[1 : 04] He has bent his bow like an enemy, with his right hand set like a foe. And he has killed all who were delightful in our eyes in the tent of the daughter of Zion.

He has poured out his fury like fire. The Lord has become like an enemy. He has swallowed up Israel. He has swallowed up all its palaces.

He has laid in ruins its strongholds. And he has multiplied in the daughter of Judah mourning and lamentation. He has laid waste his booth like a garden, laid in ruins his meeting place.

The Lord has made Zion forget festival and Sabbath, and in his fierce indignation has spurned king and priest. The Lord has scorned his altar, disowned his sanctuary.

He has delivered into the hand of the enemy the walls of her palaces. They raised a clamor in the house of the Lord, as on the day of festival. The Lord determined to lay in ruins the wall of the daughter of Zion.

[2 : 12] He stretched out the measuring line. He did not restrain his hand from destroying. He caused rampart and wall to lament. They languished together.

Her gates have sunk into the ground. He has ruined and broken her bars. Her kings and princes are among the nations. The law is no more, and her prophets find no vision from the Lord.

The elders of the daughter of Zion sit on the ground in silence. They have thrown dust on their heads and put on sackcloth. The young women of Jerusalem have bowed their heads to the ground.

My eyes are spent with weeping. My stomach churns. My bile is poured out to the ground because of the destruction of the daughter of my people. Because infants and babies faint in the streets of the city.

They cry to their mothers, where is bread and wine? As they faint like a wounded man in the streets of the city. As their life is poured out on their mother's bosom.

[3 : 19] What can I say for you? To what compare you, O daughter of Jerusalem? What can I liken to you, O virgin daughter of Zion?

For your ruin is vast as the sea. Who can heal you? Your prophets have seen for you false and deceptive visions.

They have not exposed your iniquity to restore your fortunes. But have seen for you oracles that are false and misleading. All who pass along the way clap their hands at you.

They hiss and wag their heads at the daughter of Jerusalem. Is this the city that was called the perfection of beauty? The joy of all the earth? All your enemies rail against you.

They hiss, they gnash their teeth. They cry, we have swallowed her. Ah, this is the day we longed for. Now we have it, we see it. The Lord has done what he purposed.

[4 : 24] He has carried out his word which he commanded long ago. He has thrown down without pity. He has made the enemy rejoice over you and exalted the might of your foes.

Their heart cried to the Lord. O wall of the daughter of Zion, let tears stream down like a torrent day and night. Give yourself no rest, your eyes no respite.

Arise, cry out in the night at the beginning of the night watches. Pour out your heart like water before the presence of the Lord. Lift your hands to him for the lives of your children who faint for hunger at the head of every street.

Look, O Lord, and see. With whom have you dealt thus? Should women eat the fruit of their womb, the children of their tender care? Should priest and prophet be killed in the sanctuary of the Lord? In the dust of the streets lie the young and the old. My young women and my young men have fallen by the sword. You have killed them in the day of your anger, slaughtering without pity.

[5 : 39] You summoned, as if to a festival day, my terrors on every side. And on the day of the anger of the Lord, no one escaped or survived.

Those whom I held and raised, my enemy destroyed. Thank you, Andrew.

On the 11th of June, 1983, Eric Waltenstorff died tragically in a mountaineering accident. He was climbing snow-covered mountains when he slipped and fell to his death.

He was 25. His father was utterly torn apart by grief. And years later, reflecting on Eric's death, his father, Nicholas, writes a book called Lament for a Son.

And in it he writes this. Suffering is a mystery, as deep as any in our existence. Suffering keeps its face hid from all, while making itself known to each of us.

[6 : 47] We are all one in suffering. Some are wealthy, some are bright, some are athletic, some admired. But we all suffer. For we all prize and love.

Love in our world is a suffering love. If I hadn't loved him, there wouldn't be this agony. Live long enough in this world and you will suffer.

Many of you here, I guess, will already know the agony of losing someone you love. Suffering threatens to overwhelm us, doesn't it? Our world tries in vain to make sense of it.

Perhaps you're here this morning and you're trying to make sense of it at the moment. Where is God in it all? What does it all mean? Well, over the next three weeks, we're going to be looking at the book of Lamentations in the Old Testament in the Bible.

I guess it's not a book that many of us here are familiar with, but it's unique in the Bible in helping us to understand suffering and grief, to express our grief and how to make sense of our suffering.

[7 : 56] So we're going to look at chapters 1 and 2 today, chapter 3 next week, and then chapters 4 and 5 in the final week. Lamentations was written to express the unimaginable suffering of the Jewish people at the fall of Jerusalem in 587 BC.

It was a type of suffering like no other, far worse than the death of a son. It was the death of a nation. It was cruel, merciless destruction by the Babylonians.

And so the laments that we read a few moments ago, they're not just for the individual who experienced it in chapter 3, as we'll see, but it was for the whole nation. This whole nation are supposed to be God's people.

Now, as we look at the book, it's useful to know a few things. One is the structure of the book. You'll see that in chapters 1, 2, 4, and 5, there are 22 verses.

I don't know if you noticed that as we read chapters 1 and 2. But they're all acrostic poems. So every verse is a letter of the Hebrew alphabet. And chapter 3, which has 66 verses, so there are kind of three for each letter, is the climax of the book.

[9 : 09] So 1, 2, 4, and 5, and then in the middle, there's chapter 3, to show it's the climax of the book. Now, apart from being really beautifully constructed poetry, some people think that giving each verse a letter of the Hebrew alphabet is a way of trying to contain the grief of the author.

We might call it the A to Z of suffering, an attempt to give full expression to the indescribable pain of the nation. And for the poets among you, if you're interested, the poetic meter in Hebrew is called kinar, which is a kind of limping rhythm, as if the poet's been wounded, and he's limping with a deep wound.

Now, traditionally, the author of the book was thought to be the prophet Jeremiah. But there's no mention, actually, of him at all in Lamentations. And one of the reasons why some people think it's not written by him is because he wouldn't have encouraged the people to trust in the pagan nations around them, as we see later in 4.17, or in their king, Zedekiah, in 4.20.

But also, in 2.9, which we read earlier, it says, there are no prophets, which doesn't quite make sense if Jeremiah the prophet was around. So some people think it was perhaps written by one

person or a few different authors.

But whoever wrote it from a human perspective, we know that it's part of Old Testament scripture, meaning it's written ultimately by God. So like the Psalms, it's a word to God, and it's a word from God.

[10:44] Now, before we get into the detail of the text, I want to make it really clear at the start that the suffering in Lamentations is in some ways completely different from our suffering, not just in how great it was or who it affected, but in its theological significance.

Remember that Jerusalem was supposed to be the joy of the whole earth. It's the temple where God himself dwelt. So destroying the temple is far more than just the physical destruction of the temple, the emotional suffering of the people.

It was like defeating God himself. I guess it's difficult for us to quite appreciate how big a deal this was at the time. So we've got to be careful drawing parallels with us, because suffering as a direct result of sin is not the same as getting cancer or falling off a mountain.

So we must be really careful not to see all suffering as the same. But nevertheless, the truths that Lamentations teach us to hold on to are so, they're so glorious and so weighty, that they give us hope in our suffering here and now.

So as we go into Lamentations, it's important not to jump straight to us, but to think, what did it mean for God's people at the time? And then, what does it mean for us in the light of Christ? Good, well, if you've got a service sheet, you'll see on the back a few points to follow as we go along.

[12:07] And the first thing I want us to see from chapter 1 is that Jerusalem has suffered unimaginable grief. I don't know if you've got that sense, as Sarah read it earlier.

Have a look at chapter 1 with me. It starts with the same word as chapters 2 and 4, which is how, 1 verse 1, how, how lonely sits a city that was full of people.

How is it possible this terrible thing has happened? I don't know if many of you have seen the photos of the city of Mosul in Iraq after Islamic State had been conquered, but they show utter devastation.

Bombed-out buildings, rubble everywhere, absolutely no signs of life whatsoever. A thriving community, completely destroyed. How do you describe that sort of horror?

The author of Lamentations describes it like a woman. I wonder if you noticed that. He has a variety of different images of a woman, a daughter who is brought to her knees. Let's have a look at 1 verse 1.

[13:13] How lowly sits a city that was full of people, like a widow she has become. She who was great among the nations. She was a princess among the provinces, but she's become a slave.

Verse 2, she weeps bitterly in the night. Among all her lovers, she's none to comfort her. She's been faithless to her lovers, and none of them are interested in her anymore.

In verse 3, she goes into exile, and she has no rest. She finds no resting place. Verse 4, End of verse 5, It's the image of a woman brought low, and the captives going astray are those who weren't killed by the Babylonians who were taken off into exile.

And the author continues in the same vein over the next few verses, and there's a bit of a gear change in verse 11, in the end of verse 11, have a look. He then says, Look, O Lord, and see, for I am despised.

And then verse 12, which I guess sums up the whole of chapter 1. He says, Look and see, if there's any sorrow, like my sorrow. So if you're a bit lost by all the different verses, verse 12 is a key verse to chapter 1.

[14:39] The sense of it is saying, is there any pain like my pain? How can I put it into words? How can I describe the anguish and the torment that my people have gone through? And he goes on.

I just pick a few verses out for us. Verse 13, he says, It's like fire inside my bones. Verse 20, he says, It's like my stomach churns.

My heart is wrung within me. And then verse 22, end of verse 22, he says, My groans are many, and my heart is faint.

It's so difficult for him to put into words. The deep cry of chapter 1 is that Jerusalem has suffered unimaginable grief. I don't know about you, but I guess one of the difficult things with suffering is that no one else experiences quite what we experience.

You can say to someone, can't you, I know what you're going through. But you don't. Not in quite the same way as they are experiencing it. And so suffering, it naturally takes us, makes us turn in

on ourselves and isolates us.

[15:48] But here in Lamentations, the author expresses his grief. He says, Look, O Lord, and see, for I am despised. And he trusts that God does see.

He knows exactly what we're experiencing. So if you are suffering now or if you suffer in the future, pour out your heart to God like the writer of Lamentations.

Tell him what it's like. I guess many of us here, we're not really used to pouring our hearts out before God to express what's really going on because we're not used to expressing it to anyone else often.

It's just easier to keep it inside. But the author of Lamentations, he doesn't turn in on himself. He carefully and beautifully expresses his pain and anguish in these 22 verses of chapter one.

And he expresses it to the God he knows is there. Maybe it would help you to express your anguish, your suffering to God in a letter or a poem or a song in some way to give expression to it.

[17:00] Chapter one shows that Jerusalem has suffered unimaginable grief. The second thing I want to see in these two chapters is from chapter two. So have a look at chapter two with me.

And it's that God himself has done this to punish sin. Now remember I said at the beginning that not all suffering is the same. The destruction of Jerusalem was a unique event.

So it's really important to say, I don't think we can say enough, that your suffering, now if you're going through it, is not a direct punishment for sin. And if you're interested in making notes, Jesus was clear about this in Luke 13 verse three.

He was really clear that it's not that if you suffer, you have sinned any worse than other people. But in the Old Testament for Jerusalem, it was. Because God tells them that it was.

The fall of Jerusalem was a direct result of their sin. And so the reason that God can use this unimaginable suffering is because he's in sovereign control over the evil and suffering in the world.

[18:05] I don't know how you feel when you hear someone saying that God is in control of evil, but it is a difficult concept to swallow, isn't it? And the idea that God was not only in control back then, but actually intended the destruction of Jerusalem, really is difficult to swallow.

Perhaps you're sitting here thinking, how can anyone believe in a God like this? A God who deliberately brings about suffering. I mean, how can a God like that be good? Well, if that's you, then hang on in here because we'll see this book is one of the clearest places where we see both God's compassion and his punishment for sin.

I guess we already got a hint, didn't we, of God's punishment for sin in chapter one, verse five, when we read that the Lord has afflicted her? And one, verse 12, that the Lord has afflicted on the day of his fierce anger.

But chapter two is absolutely explicit. I don't know if you noticed that as Andrew read it. Every single verse is completely clear, isn't it? The author doesn't put any punches. He doesn't say, well, I'm a bit embarrassed about this.

I mean, perhaps God just kind of took his eye off the ball. I'm not quite sure why Jerusalem got destroyed. Is there some way of kind of explaining it away? No, he doesn't, does he? He doesn't say that God wasn't powerful enough to stop the Babylonians or that, you know, it's all those Babylonians' fault, those rotten Babylonians.

[19:29] He doesn't even mention them by name once. It's quite a surprise, isn't it? His entire focus is that God deliberately intended the destruction of Jerusalem in order to punish their sin.

I don't know how well you know of the man Booker Prize, but loads of people get nominations each year. And I guess Lamentations wouldn't get many nominations for the man Booker Prize, would it? It's about as unpopular as you can get.

But the author doesn't apologise for God's actions. He doesn't try and justify God's ways to man. Instead, he says, God is just being true to who he is.

So have a look at chapter 2 with me, verse 1. Look at the number of times it talks about the Lord or he the Lord. Verse 1, how the Lord in his anger has set the daughter of Zion under a cloud.

He is cast down from heaven to earth. He has not remembered his footstool in the day of his anger. Or verse 2, the Lord has swallowed up without mercy. In his wrath he's broken down.

[20:34] He is brought down to the ground in dishonour. Verse 3, he has cut down in fierce anger. He has withdrawn from them his right hand. Or verse 4, he has bent his bow like an enemy with his right hand set like a foe.

And then verse 5, which again sums up the whole of chapter 2, the Lord became like an enemy. So again, if you easily get bogged down in all of these different verses, remember chapter 2 is summed up by verse 5, the Lord became like an enemy.

Imagine that. How outrageous. God had chosen Jerusalem to be his joy, his treasured possession. But because of their sin, he's become like an enemy to them, swallowing them up.

Chapter 2 could not be more explicit, could it? Have a look at two other verses just to underline this. Chapter 2, verse 8, the Lord determined to lay in ruins.

Or chapter 2, verse 17, the Lord has done what he purposed. The command which he carried out, he purposed to carry out long ago.

[21 : 46] So why? Why has God done this? If he really has been so intentional? Well, it's because he is righteous. Have a look back at 1, verse 18.

It's easy to miss. Have a look at 1, verse 18, the beginning of the verse. The author says, the Lord is in the right.

In other words, the Lord is righteous, for I have rebelled against his word. The author knows that God is righteous. He knows that God must punish sin. So rather than blaming himself or blaming the Babylonians, blaming God or blaming the Babylonians, he takes responsibility himself and says in 1, verse 22, it's because of all my transgressions.

So the Bible teaches, doesn't it, time and time again that God is righteous. In other words, he's good. The God of the universe is good. He can't overlook corruption or evil like a corrupt judge and sweep it under the carpet.

He must deal with it. He must destroy it. So it's good news for our world. Think about all the evil in the world. I don't know what you would list first, but knife crime, people trafficking, wars, tearing communities apart come to mind.

[22 : 59] God will do away with it all because he's righteous. He's good. But that means judging people, doesn't it? Because people are almost always part of the problem.

And throughout Israel's history, through the prophets, he'd warned them again and again and again. He sent prophets like Jeremiah, but they didn't listen. It's quite difficult for us to sit here and kind of really appreciate the extent of what God's people were doing.

So have a look back at Jeremiah chapter 7 with me. It's page 768 in your Bibles. It's the sort of thing that God's people were doing around this time.

So Jeremiah chapter 7, you can see it's entitled Evil in the Land. So let's just have a few, a look at a few of the verses. Jeremiah chapter 7, verse 9.

Listen to what they're doing. Will you still murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, the false god, and go after other gods that you've not known, and then come and stand before me in this house which is called by my name, and say, we're delivered.

[24 : 10] Only to go on doing all these abominations. You can see the hypocrisy and the evil of God's people. So it's no surprise, he says in Jeremiah 7, verse 20, just down toward the bottom of the page, verse 20, therefore thus says the Lord God, behold, my anger and my wrath will be poured out on this place upon man and beast and the trees of the ground and the fruit, trees of the ground and the fruit of the field.

It will burn and not be quenched. I guess some people think, don't they, that God of the Bible is like an angry child. He just kind of flies off the handle, you can't predict it, you can't reason with him, he gets crossed sometimes, and that's just it.

But it couldn't be further from the truth, could it? God is much more like a patient, loving father who has warned his son numerous times, for decades and decades God warned his people that if they turned from him, he would punish them.

He's more like a loving father who reluctantly, but eventually punishes his son in order to restore his relationship with them. God is completely good and righteous.

He can't turn a blind eye to sin. But think about how God punishes his people. He uses the Babylonians.

[25 : 34] Not sure what you think about that, but that means, doesn't it, that God must be in control of the Babylonians. He must be in complete control of evil. Every thought that any of the Babylonian army have is under God's control.

So that means that God's sovereign, doesn't it, over evil. It's not to say that God does evil, but rather he uses evil for good, in this case to punish sin. And I guess we've seen that in Lamentations

2, haven't we?

Time and time again that God has used this to punish sin. There's no suggestion that God's kind of at the mercy of the free will of the Babylonians or that he can't quite control the future.

He sort of, you know, does the best he can have a bad job. No, the author of Lamentations is amazingly clear that God is completely behind the destruction of Jerusalem. Now next week we're going to look at chapter 3 to kind of see God's heart in all this a bit more, but it's worth turning to chapter 3 verse 32 back in Lamentations with me just to kind of counter this.

We're seeing God's heart in it all. So we've seen that God's deliberately punished the people for their sins, but look at 3 verse 32. Though he cause grief, he will have compassion according to the abundance of his steadfast love, for he does not willingly afflict or grieve the children of men.

[26 : 59] In other words, God's punishment is not his heart, it's not what he loves doing. He loves saving people. We see in the New Testament, don't we, in 2 Peter 3 verse 9, that God's patient with us.

He doesn't fly off the handle, he's patient, not wishing that any should perish, but all come to repentance. But his patience will not last forever. He must punish sin because he's righteous. So perhaps you're sitting here and you're thinking, well, this is heavy stuff, how does it apply to us today? I mean, how does it, is God's deliberate, sovereignly plan, destruction of Jerusalem in 587 BC?

How does it apply to us here? Well, I think two big things. Firstly, it gives us confidence that God is in complete control of evil and suffering because, it shows, doesn't it, that the suffering of Jerusalem is not random.

It wasn't an accident. It was specifically because of their sin. Now, I've said again that our suffering today is not a result of our sin.

[28 : 11] It's not a direct punishment for sin. But nevertheless, if Lamentations is true, it would suggest that God is in control of both. So however hard you find to swallow the idea that God is in control of all of the evil in the world, take comfort that he is, because it means he can make an end to it, and he will in a new creation, a new world that he will make.

It gives us confidence that God is in control of suffering and evil. And secondly, we need to have a think about the fact that God's suffering, God's punishing for sin, wasn't completed by the fall of Jerusalem.

It didn't kind of get rid of sin once and for all, did it? We've had centuries and centuries of suffering and evil. Just look around the world. So in the Bible timeline, the book of Lamentations is pointing us forward to God's ultimate judgment and destruction of sin and evil in hell.

And like the people of Jerusalem, if you and I don't listen to God's word, if we don't turn back to him, we too will face his judgment. Lamentations says loud and clear, God punishes sin with utter destruction.

And although it's very difficult to hear, the Bible shows is that there are two places that God will, has and will punish sin. The first is on the cross of Christ and the second is in hell.

[29 : 43] And Lamentations points us to both. So thirdly and finally, you can follow on your sheet there, thirdly, God determined to punish Christ instead of us.

That's the third thing I wanted to see from these verses. And I've put chapter 2, verse 5 and 2, verse 17 as well as Acts 4, verse 28. God determined to punish Christ instead of us.

What a relief. What an utter relief that Christ has punished instead of us. I don't know how you're feeling as Andrew read the chapter 2, but by the end we're feeling like there's no way out.

2, verse 5, God's become like an enemy to his people. 2, verse 17, God had done what he purposed beforehand. Where's the way out?

Well, the good news is that God had always determined something else. He'd also determined and planned for the worst suffering to fall on himself. In the person of Jesus, God took the punishment that we deserve for our sins.

[30 : 52] Jesus willingly went to the cross in our place. So think about Lamentations and Jesus. They're not that dissimilar. In Lamentations we saw that God's judgment was for the people's sin, and Jesus died on the cross for our sin.

We saw in Lamentations that God deliberately intended to punish sin. And in Acts 4, verse 28, in the New Testament, we're told that God deliberately intended for Jesus to die on the cross.

In other words, the same God who planned to destroy Jerusalem and because of the people's sin is the same God who planned for Jesus to die for our sins.

And I wonder if you noticed what happened on the cross. On the cross, God became like an enemy to Jesus. We read in 2, verse 5, didn't we, in Lamentations, God became like an enemy to his people.

But on the cross, Jesus cried out, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why does it feel like you're an enemy? Jesus was separated from the loving relationship with his father he'd had from all eternity.

[31 : 59] It was utterly terrifying, but God became like an enemy to Jesus, so he didn't have to become like an enemy to us. I guess no one can fully understand the pain of a father who loses a son in a Mount Eerie accident.

No one can fully grasp the suffering of the writer of Lamentations at the fall of Jerusalem in 587 BC. And no one can come close to understanding the agony that Jesus went through on the cross.

But he did it because he loves us. In his book Lament for a Son, Nicholas Wathomstorff goes on to write, reflecting on the death of his son Eric, he says God is love.

That is why he suffers. To love our suffering, sinful world is to suffer. God so loved the world that he gave up his son to suffering.

The one who doesn't see God suffering will never see his love. God is suffering love. We'll see more of God's love next week in chapter 3.

[33 : 09] But if you don't trust in his suffering for you at the cross, you won't see his love and your sin will still deserve God's punishment. punishment. So ask yourself the question, where will my sins be paid for?

I've lived in God's world, but I've completely ignored him. I've turned my back on him. I've gone my own way. I've rejected the God who made me. My sin deserves death, but where will it be paid?

There are only two places, either on the cross or in hell. And the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 BC is nothing compared to the unimaginable wrath in hell for eternity.

But God has made a way in Jesus for him to be punished instead of us. So I would urge you, trust in the cross of Christ. We began by thinking about how difficult it is to make sense of our suffering.

It threatens to overwhelm us. And it has to be said, doesn't it, that there is mystery in suffering. We don't know how or why God chooses for us to suffer in the way we do.

[34 : 13] But the Bible helps us to make sense of it. We suffer because we live in a broken world cut off from God. And the suffering of Jerusalem we get here in Lamentations is a specific expression of God's judgment against sin.

One day all suffering and evil will be done away with. But our current suffering points us to Jesus, doesn't it? The one who suffered in our place. He suffered unimaginable grief so that we wouldn't have to.

So the author of Lamentations would urge us to look. Look at the devastation of Jerusalem. Look at the anguish of the author of Lamentations. Look at the infinitely worse judgment to come in hell for those who have rejected the God who made them.

And then look at Christ and put your life in his hands. The good news is that Lamentations is not the final word.

The poetry of eternity is not lament. You'll be pleased to know because Jesus didn't stay dead. And the Bible says that once the suffering of this world is complete, God will create a new world, a world with no suffering.

[35 : 21] The poetry of eternity is full of thankfulness for Jesus' death in our place. So how do you make sense of suffering? What does it all mean?

Well because God is in sovereign control of all the evil and suffering in the world, it means we can trust him. We can put our lives in his hands. We can look to the cross where God's suffering love was shown in the person of Jesus Christ.

And we can look forward to a world without suffering because Jesus took the suffering that we deserve. Let's pray. Father, we thank you so much that the Bible is honest about grief and pain.

We thank you that you are in complete control of suffering and evil. people. And we pray, Father, you'd help us to put our lives in your hands, whatever suffering we're going through.

And we pray, Father, that we wouldn't ignore you like the people of Jerusalem, but we would escape your judgment to come by trusting in Jesus' death for us. Amen. Amen.

[36 : 26] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.
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