The Firstborn's Failure

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[0:00] Genesis chapter 4, let's start at verse 1. Now Adam knew Eve, his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain, saying, I have gotten a man with the help of the Lord.

And again, she bore his brother Abel. Abel was a keeper of sheep, Cain a worker of the ground. In the course of time, Cain brought to the Lord an offering of the fruit of the ground.
Abel also brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat portions. The Lord had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering, he had no regard.
So Cain was very angry, and his face fell. The Lord said to Cain, why are you angry? Why is your face fallen?
If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not well, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is contrary to you, but you must rule over it.
[1:08] Cain spoke to his brother. And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him. Then the Lord said to Cain, where is Abel your brother?

He said, I do not know. Am I my brother's keeper? The Lord said, what have you done? The voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground.
And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. When you work the ground, it shall no longer yield to you its strength.
You shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth. Cain said to the Lord, my punishment is too great. It's greater than I can bear.
Behold, you've driven me today away from the ground. And from your face, I shall be hidden. I shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth. And whoever finds me will kill me.
[2:14] The Lord said to him, not so. If anyone kills Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold. And the Lord put a mark on Cain, lest any who found him should attack him.

And Cain went away from the presence of the Lord, settled in the land of Nod, east of Eden. Amen.
The opening lines of this text are teeming with redemptive potential.
Chapter 3 described for us how Adam and Eve's sin brought the reign of death on humanity, invoking the judgment of God.
And yet it also reveals to us the great grace of God in judgment. He promised that he would bring from the woman and from her seed a deliverer.
A deliverer who would deal a mortal blow to the head of the serpent who had deceived her. As we saw last week, Adam and Eve trusted God's promise by faith.
[3:24] And the first sign of its fulfillment came in the birth of their firstborn son, Cain. And Eve understood the redemptive potential of this birth immediately.

It's seen in her exclamation in verse 1. Just set your eyes on it again. Adam knew his wife. She conceived and bore Cain. And she said, I have gotten a man with the help of the Lord.
The Lord blessed her with a son. Only she didn't use the term for son, but the term for man. Literally, Adam.
The Lord. From the Lord I have gotten an Adam. Eve's firstborn son represents a new Adam with the potential of fulfilling God's redemptive purpose that was pronounced for us back in chapter 3.
But of course, that potential was ruined by Cain's indwelling sin. Not only would he commit terrible sin, he would prove himself to be a seed of the serpent at war against God and those who righteously trust and obey God.
[4:52] We see Eve had another son, Abel. And the two brothers were as different as any other brother. Cain was a worker of the ground like his dad.

Abel, a shepherd of sheep. And Abel is certainly an important figure here in the text for a number of reasons. In fact, we might find by the time we get to the end of our text, we might find that Abel in

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some sense is the most important figure in the text.
But at the end, this is really Cain's story. It's not Abel's story. Cain is the focus here. It's fundamentally a story of sin and judgment.
As the firstborn son, Cain would have had a privileged status. There would have been an expectation on him to mediate the blessings of God to the rest of the family.
And yet failing to trust God and obey God, he faced the severity of God's judgment instead. Now I want you to consider who would have been the first audience of this book.
[6:03] It's the ancient Israelites, is it not? Wondering in the wilderness of Sinai. They have been given the law of God through Moses.

They are the audience. And do you remember in Exodus 4 as God is preparing Moses to send him to Pharaoh? What is it that he tells him to tell Pharaoh?
He says, tell Pharaoh, Israel is my firstborn son. And you must let them go or else I'm going to take your firstborn son.
It's Exodus 4.22. What is the story of Cain then to the people of Israel as they wandered in the wilderness? Israel, God's firstborn, had a privileged status.
They were God's chosen people. It was through them that he would mediate his blessings to the rest of the world. This story of Cain comes as a sobering lesson for them.
[7:04] That their privileged status as God's chosen people would not preclude God's judgment against them if they were to fail in the same way that Cain, Eve's firstborn, failed.

And that's true for you and me as well. Your proximity to God and whatever that may be externally will not prevent God from judging your sin.
Your privileged status, whatever that may be and however you may consider that and your proximity to Christianity or your proximity to the church, that status in and of itself, the closer you are to Christianity, doesn't mean the less severe God's judgment will be on your sin.
The aim of the text then is to press into our hearts the fact that redemptive potential is ruined by the pervasive presence and power of sin, not only in Cain, but in each and every one of us.
The text acts as a mirror so that as we look at Cain, we see ourselves in its reflection. It exposes the true heart of sin that is ours by nature.
[8:35] It describes the work of sin as our hearts always reveal themselves in real behavior, in real life, in the things that we do, in the things that we say, in the places that we go, in the way that we live.

It's always an exposition of what's true of our hearts. And we find that here. The text also threatens the judgment of God for sin, seen ultimately in the expulsion of the sinner from God's presence and from God's goodness.
That's what this text is about. This is a heavy text. This is not a story to entertain you. This is a mirror to show you who you are. But that doesn't mean that the text is without hope either.
It's only in acknowledging the truth of our sinful condition that we can begin to see the glorious grace of the gospel of Jesus Christ, God's true firstborn son.
We're going to work through this text together. We're going to see ourselves in Cain. But by the time we get to the end, we're going to look at Abel again.
[9:54] Except we're not going to see ourselves in Abel. We're going to see Jesus in Abel. And it's going to make all the difference for us.

So notice with me first, I want you to see the heart of sin here. The heart of sin. Look again at verse 3. In the course of time, Cain brought to the Lord an offering of the fruit of the ground.
And Abel also brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat portions. And the Lord had regard for Abel and his offering. But for Cain and his offering, he had no regard.
Interesting, the conflict of the text begins at church. At a designated time, Cain and Abel appeared before the Lord to offer sacrifices of worship.
This isn't a sacrifice of atonement. It's a tribute to the Lord. It's meant to be an expression of praise and of worship based on the value and the worth that they held for the Lord God.
[11:03] Cain brought the fruit of the ground. Cain brought the fruit of the ground as a worker of the ground. Abel, as a shepherd, brought sheep from his flock.

And the conflict arises here when we read that God had regard for Abel and his offering. He accepted Abel and his offering, but rejected Cain and his offering.

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And the question is, why did God favor one over the other? The explanation, I think, lies in the description and the emphasis of Abel's offering.
Abel gave of the firstborn of his flock and of the best portions of that firstborn. The fat portions, the best of the best.
But Cain did not give the first fruits of his harvest. Abel gave the best of what he had in recognition of the goodness and the perfections and the holiness and the glory of God.
[12:10] Cain reserved the best for himself. And what we find is that both the gift and the giver are under the scrutiny of the Lord because the nature of one's worship reveals the condition of his heart toward God.

And in God's evaluation, there was a fundamental difference in the nature of their worship. And the writer of Hebrews helps us understand what that difference is.
Hebrews 11, 4. By faith, Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain, through which he was commended as righteous.
God commending him by accepting his gifts. And through his faith, though he died, he still speaks.
Do you hear that in the writer of Hebrews' affirmation? It is by faith that Abel offered this sacrifice to the Lord.
[13:15] And it is because of Abel's faith that God received it and counted Abel as righteous. Not on account of the goodness of the sheep, but on account of the faith that Abel had as he offered it.

God didn't accept his offering because he prefers lambs over grain. Both of them are represented throughout the law as pleasing to the Lord. He accepted it because Abel demonstrated a true heart of worship that believed God, trusted God, and therefore obeyed God.
But Cain's offering, on the other hand, revealed something different. It wasn't a heart filled with faith and trust in the Lord's promise. It was a heart filled with pride.
A pride that said, I'll bring what I want to bring to God and he'll have to accept it for what it is.
There's an echo of Adam and Eve and the seduction of that tree and what it represented.
A life chosen to be lived in moral autonomy. We see that, an echo of it here in Cain. And the heart of the problem proved to be a problem of his heart.
[14:39] Now here's the thing with this. The terrifying reality here is we just see this begin to unfold in the narrative. The terrifying reality is that even when our acts of worship appear to be genuine and joyful, God sees beyond the act itself to the condition of the heart of the one who has come to worship.

And that's terrifying. That's why the writer of Hebrews again says, let us offer to God acceptable worship based on how God has told us to worship.
But he says, let us offer it with reverence and awe. That is, with faith. Why? For our God is a consuming fire.
And Cain finds that out soon enough. But then we find a word of warning here. Look again at verse 5. All of this happens. We see this is just the narrative taking place.
And now we find a response. Second half of verse 5. So Cain was very angry about this. And his face fell.
[16:01] And the Lord said to Cain, why are you angry? And why has your face fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And here's the warning.

If you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is to master you, Cain. But you must rule over it.
There's a tremendous irony in Cain's response, isn't there? Do you see the irony here? His offering proved that he had no regard for God.
And yet he becomes angry when God has no regard for him. And his countenance falls. A mixture of fury and of shame that can be seen now.
Not merely in his heart, but in the reflection of his expression toward the Lord and toward others. It's all over his face, so to speak. And yet God is still patient with him, isn't he?
[17:11] What does God begin to do? He begins to lead Cain toward the path of repentance. Why are you angry? The question's rhetorical.

God's not looking for information. He's doing the same thing with Cain that he did with Adam and Eve. He's not looking for information. He's declaring that Cain has no right to be angry. How foolish for any of us to ever think that we have a right to be angry at God.

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Cain's circumstances were of his own making. He had no one to blame but himself because he's the one who failed to trust God.
He's the one who failed to obey God. And he did not offer acceptable worship to God. And like his father before him, he chooses rather to shift the responsibility of his own sin to God.
He's angry at God because he thinks it's really God's fault. There's no problem in what I brought. There's a problem in God. Do you see the issue of his heart here?
[18:25] He does wrong, but he refuses to acknowledge it. The Holy One tries to help him acknowledge it, to see it, to see the reality of his own sinfulness and of his own failure.

And yet he refuses. Why? Because his heart is hardened. And yet there's still hope for repentance and restoration.
Notice what God tells him. If Cain would acknowledge his wrong, if he would do well by trusting and obeying God, he would be accepted. Literally, it means his face would be lifted.
His countenance, which has fallen, would now be lifted up in a good conscience before God. He would not have the fury and the shame because he will have done what God was worthy of.
He will have done what God commanded. He would have trusted God. But then there's the warning. If he will not act in faith and obedience, sin will dominate him like a wild animal ready to pounce and devour its prey.
[19:38] And here's where we find ourselves. Cain's reaction to God's correction is now the critical issue of the text. He's disobeyed.

He's lacked faith. There's an issue of his heart. Now God has very graciously intervened and he's calling him to repentance. What will Cain do? That's the issue now.
We turn to God by faith. Will he persist rather in his anger, be mastered by his sin, and face God's judgment?
And that may be the critical issue for you this morning. Perhaps you're at a place where God is beginning to expose to you the sinfulness of your own heart.
Will you hear him? Will you repent? We believe. Or will you continue to be mastered by sin and harden your heart and persist in anger against him?
[20:44] That's the critical issue now. You see the heart of sin here. Next I want you to see the work of sin. The work of sin. Look at verse 8. What will Cain do?

Cain spoke to Abel, his brother. And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him.
I just want to let that marinate for a second. It's fast in the text, isn't it? It comes and it quickly goes. Just think about what's happening.
Cain kills his brother. And the Lord intervenes again. He says to Cain, where is your brother Abel? He says, I don't know. Am I responsible for him? Should I care? Am I his keeper? And the Lord said, what have you done?
[21:47] The voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground. It's interesting. Adam and Eve had to be talked into sin. Cain could not be talked out of sin even by the very word of God.

It's Spurgeon who is noted for saying in a sermon on Jeremiah 1 that the same son which melts the wax hardens the clay. And the same gospel which melts some persons to repentance hardens others in their sin.
Cain heard the message of the gospel from the Lord of himself. But he rather than repent and believe, he persisted in the sin of his angry heart.
And sure enough, the unrepentant heart produced murderous fruit. And Cain's action toward Abel here is it's not spontaneous.
It is premeditated. He lured his brother into the isolation of the field so that he might take his life. But why? If it was God who didn't accept Cain's gift, why is it Abel that Cain is frustrated with?
[23:02] Why is it Abel that he exacts his frustrations on? It's because Abel's righteousness was a constant reminder of Cain's sin.

His life was a memorial of the fact that God accepted his offering but rejected Cain. And rather than repent, Cain chose to destroy the thing that most convicted, his guilty conscience.
And does that not sound very much like us? God brings something or someone into our lives meant to draw us toward repentance and expose our sin.
And rather than repent and believe God, we do our very best to destroy the thing that God brought as a sign of faithfulness and of righteousness. Evil hates righteousness.

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It hates it. John helps us to understand this even more in 1 John 3. He says, We should not be like Cain who was of the evil one, a seed of the serpent, and murdered his brother.
[24:07] And why did he murder him, John asked? Because his own deeds were evil and his brother's righteous. And yet, even after the heinousness of his deed, the Lord sought to draw Cain into genuine confession and repentance with this question.

Where's your brother, Cain? Where are you, Adam? Where's your brother, Cain? Who told you you were naked, Adam?
Where's Abel, Cain? He's drawing him out, isn't he? Isn't this the grace of God at work in the text? There was still an opportunity for Cain to acknowledge his guilt, to cry out to God for mercy.
If he would have just said, God, I've done a terrible thing. Will you please have mercy on me? The indication is that God would have indeed responded in mercy, but Cain doesn't do that.
His heart was too hard. He outright lies to the Lord first. He says that he doesn't know, but even more, his famous quip, am I my brother's keeper?
[25:20] It reveals the callousness of his heart. His resentment toward God led to a resentment of God's image. But God knew exactly what Cain had done, and it required an act of God's perfect justice.

And for the first time in the scriptures, we begin to see just how heinous of a sin murder actually is. The blood of your brother is crying out to me, Cain.
I know what you did. I know where he is. An old German theologian said this, according to the Old Testament view, blood and life belong to God alone.
Wherever a man commits murder, he attacks God's very own right of possession. To destroy life goes far beyond man's proper sphere.
Spilled blood cannot be shoveled underground. It cries aloud to heaven and complains directly to the Lord of life. Did you catch that?
[26:39] Wherever a man commits murder, he attacks God's very own right of possession, a possession of his own image. Such is the dignity of human life that to take it is to attack God's very own right of possession.

And it's for this reason that Christians not only resist these acts, but they are to fight against the murderous impulses of our culture. Whether that be the abortion of the pre-born, whether it be unjust and immoral wars, whether it be ethnic genocide, which is happening all over the place, whether it be physician-assisted suicide, from womb to the tomb, your life belongs to God and everyone else's life belongs to God.
And for us to enter and encroach upon that is to attack God's very own right of possession of his own image. This is a terrible sin.
Just as the blood of Abel cries out to God for justice, so does the blood of every life taken against the will of God. And God will have his vengeance against those who walk in the way of Cain, no matter how they might try to justify what they've done.
But murder is only one possible expression of sin from an unrepentant heart.
[28:14] Just because you haven't killed someone doesn't mean that you're not also walking in the way of Cain. Heart that is fundamentally set against God's will will always expose itself to the work of sin.

Listen to how Paul talked about this in Romans 1. This sounds a lot like Cain, doesn't it? Since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, that is, to trust him and obey him, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done.
He removed his restraining grace and what happened when these people, these sinners, sinners like you and like me did what they really wanted to do.
They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, Paul says, evil, covetousness, malice. They're full of envy and murder and strife and deceit and maliciousness.
They are gossips and slanderers and haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil things, disobedient to their parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless.
[29:38] Though they know God's righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them, but they give approval to those who practice them. This is utter depravity.

It is the way of Cain and it exists in each and every one of us by our very nature. It's easy to read Romans 1 and emphasize the they's, but the truth is that everything that we just read is just as

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easily read as I's.
I am full of all manner of unrighteousness. I am a gossip. I am a slanderer. I am disobedient to the authorities that God has put over me.
I am foolish and faithless and ruthless. I do these things and I often give approval to others who do them as well. It's the work of sin flowing out of the heart of sin.
But there's another step in the text. It's the judgment for sin. Verse 11, God continues his statement to Cain, and now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand.
[30:50] When you work the ground, it shall no longer yield to you its strength. You shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth. And notice Cain's response.

Cain said to the Lord, my punishment is greater than I can bear. Not, my guilt is greater than I can bear. My punishment is greater than I can bear.
Behold, you've driven me today away from the ground and from your face, I shall be hidden. You have made me a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth. And whoever finds me, this is Cain's fear, will kill me.
Now, who might find him? Well, as far as we know, there's really only one possibility here, and that's his own parents. But Cain acknowledges there's going to be more people that come.
He knows that God will do what he said he will do, even as his heart is hardened toward the very God who will do it. And the Lord said to him, not so, it's emphatic, isn't it?
[31:51] Not so. If anyone kills Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold. Vengeance from who? Vengeance from God. So the Lord marked him, lest any who found him should attack him.

And Cain went away from the presence of the Lord, settled in the land of Nod, which means wondering. He's a vagabond for the rest of his life. And all of this, of course, symbolizes being east of Eden.
The presentation of God's judgment against Cain, it goes beyond the mere consequences of his sinful deed. It's not less than consequence, but there's more here for us to see.
Like Adam, Cain's ability to reap the fruit of the ground is impacted here, only it's different than in Adam. In this case, it's not the ground that's cursed, it's Cain himself that's cursed.
That's significant. Adam was banished from the garden, in that most holy of holy places in God's created world.
[33:00] Cain is banished from Eden altogether. He's cut off from his family. He's cut off from the community in which God will do his promised work of redemption.

Cain is cut off from that entirely. If you're an Israelite wandering in the wilderness, you will envision with this being cast outside of the camp, cut off from the blessing of God, cut off from the people of God, dead.
This is a portrait of perpetual exile. It's an existence that moving forward is totally detached from God's blessing and God's goodness.
And the curse that is put on Cain, it establishes him in the text and in the context as a seed of the serpent, and he will share in the serpent's fate.
But even in judgment, Cain's heart is hardened. He shows no inclination whatsoever toward repentance.
[34:18] Writes Kent Hughes, Cain falls to pieces here, but not because he felt any compassion for Abel or for his parents, or even because he had sinned against God.

His cry was one of terror and self-pity. He, the wolf, feared that he would now be devoured. This is not repentance or remorse.
It's fear. It's hatred. Rather than seek God's mercy, even in the pronouncement of judgment, Cain accused God of being unjust himself.
What you're doing is too much. This is an injustice at God's hand that he would do this. At least that's what Cain thinks.
His heart is totally set against God and inclined to evil. And it's God's justice that becomes most prevalent in this part of the narrative.
[35:27] God's justice is not limited to Cain. Notice it extends to all who would seek vengeance against Cain apart from God's will. Now we need to think on this.

Life and death are God's prerogative which he does not share with anyone apart from his divine sanction. Should Adam or anyone else wrongfully take God's life apart from God's sanction, he too

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will face God's justice.
So that we come to understand in the justice of God and in the perfect holiness of God that our sin toward him and toward anyone else is never justified by the measure of their wickedness toward us. And God will answer every injustice, whether perpetrated against the righteous ones who belong to him or the wicked ones who do not.
The final judgment for sin we find is permanent expulsion from the presence of God. That's typified in Cain's judgment but it's shared by everyone who like him refuses to repent and turn to God in faith and obedience.
[36:55] Just hear the words of Jesus. Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish just like Cain.

This is a heavy text. It's a necessary text. It's not a story to entertain us. It's a mirror to reflect the nature of our own heart and the work of our own sin and the threat of God's judgment against sinners for God alone is holy and just.
You are not able in this text and I am not able in this text. We are Cain. But is there any hope for us here?
Well, yeah, there is. And it comes through another firstborn son. So that in Cain, we see the redemptive potential of a new Adam ruined by sin.
But in Christ, we find redemption provided by the greater Adam through his becoming a substitute for sinners.
[38:11] Do you see the connection here? There's a firstborn failure in Genesis 4. Cain fails and the redemptive potential is ruined by sin.

But when we look to Christ, the firstborn of God, we find that redemption is truly provided not because he's a sinner himself but because he becomes a substitute for sinners.
And how can we know this? Again, the writer of Hebrews helps us. Hebrews 12, 24. By faith, we come to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.
He's thinking about this story as he's writing chapter 12, verse 24. What does he mean? Remember what God says to Cain.
The blood of your brother Abel, it cries out to me from the ground. It cries out for justice. And now the writer of Hebrews in reflection on that, he says, we come to Jesus whose blood speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.
[39:24] How? Christ's blood represents God's justice poured out not on sinners but on his sinless son in the place of sinners.

Therefore, while Abel's blood cries out for justice, Christ's blood cries out for mercy for all who are in him.
In other words, Jesus is the true and better Abel who in his perfect righteousness received God's justice so that sinners like Cain and like you and like me might receive God's mercy instead.
And what we find as we read our Bibles is that God in his justice will judge every sin committed by every sinner who has ever lived and who will ever live.
But he does so in one of two ways. First is the way of Cain. He judges Cain's sin by expelling him from his presence and he judges those who walk in the way of Cain by expelling them from his presence in eternal hell.
[40:38] And thus he pours out his justice against them for their sin. But there's another way that he pours out his justice. He pours out his justice in the way of Christ which is by judging Christ in their place.

When we come to Christ what is happening there in your forgiveness is not God turning a blind eye to your sin and pretending that it never happened.
No, when you come to God and he forgives you no, he's actually pouring out the justice for your sin on this sinless and perfect son on the cross.
God judges every sin. The question is will you pay the penalty for your sin in death and hell or will you come to Christ and receive the payment that he has made for sin on behalf of sinners?
Because here's the truth of it. Christ's perfection is so complete that his redemptive work on the cross is sufficient to forgive the sins of every sinner.
[41:59] He is that good and God freely offers his mercy through Christ in the gospel.

In the proclamation of the gospel that he gives to Cain and that he gives to you now that if you will do good will you not be accepted? Not do good in the sense of earning your way in but do good in

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the sense of trusting Christ alone in your faith like Abel's being counted to you as righteousness. It's a gracious gift. It's not earned by works of righteousness on our part. It's received rather by repentance and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ as the fulfillment of the promise in Genesis 3.14 which of course we see notably in a number of passages maybe most familiar in John 3 for God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten firstborn son that whoever will believe in him will not perish like Cain and will not perish like the ones that Jesus pronounced those woes against but will have eternal life in his presence and in his goodness.
So don't walk in the way of Cain. I want you to feel the urgency of the gospel in this text now is the time today is the day of salvation.
Don't be like Cain who will not hear the word of God and acknowledge his sin and turn in faith. Hear the word of the Lord.
[44:00] Repent and believe. Don't wait. sin is crouching at the door and it will lead to God's judgment.

Look to Jesus then and live. Let's pray together. do that. start with that. Let's pray together.
build like that have to go... ... ... back in that it will be going to go on the hope to

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