

In Christ Alone

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[0 : 00] The following message is given by Walt Alexander, lead pastor of Trinity Grace Church in Athens, Tennessee. For more information about Trinity Grace, please visit us at TrinityGraceAthens.com.

! Or of mice and men.

Surprisingly, one author writes that one of the saddest books of the modern world is Mark Bittman's *How to Cook Everything*. Not because the plot is heartbreaking, it's a cookbook.

Or because it documents the ravages of worldwide hunger, which is heart-wrenching. And what's sad is that we need it. It's a cookbook for a society that has forgotten how to cook.

The author goes on, in other cookbooks many things are assumed, but nothing is assumed in this cookbook. Mr. Bittman teaches you how to use a knife.

[1 : 18] He teaches you what a sifter is. Now, I might need that instruction. He teaches you what appliances should be in the kitchen. Nothing is assumed for Mr. Bittman when he writes how to cook everything.

He tells you how to do everything. How to boil water. How to crack eggs. How to slice with that knife that should be in your kitchen. The sadness, he says, of this type of cookbook is that we need it.

While we've pressed on and progressed in many ways and loaded the kitchen with countless appliances that you must have, we've forgotten how to crack an egg.

We've forgotten how to cook. We've forgotten how to cook. We've forgotten how to cook. We failed to pass down the most basic things in cooking. There's a similar danger that remains for us as a church.

We could grow. We could add new members. We could add new programs. One day we could even enjoy gathering in our own building.

[2 : 31] And yet, if we fail in our mission and forget the most basic thing, the most fundamental thing about us, we will fail altogether.

If we fail to hold on to the gospel of Jesus Christ, we will fail ultimately in our mission. Together, J.I. Packer writes, summarizing it so well as he often does, whatever cultural shifts take place around us, whatever socio-political concerns claim our attention, whatever anxieties we may feel about the church as an institution, Jesus Christ crucified, risen, reigning, and now in the power of his atonement, calling, drawing, welcoming, pardoning, renewing, strengthening, preserving, and bringing joy remains the heart of the Christian message.

The focus of Christian worship and the fountain of the Christian life. Other things may change. This does not.

And so this morning, we're going to pause our study of the Psalms to consider the heart of Christianity again. The truth of Jesus Christ and him crucified.

I felt impressed this week to go to this text. And so the Apostle Paul is going to be our guide. In just a minute, I'm going to read from 1 Timothy 1.

[4 : 02] In these six verses, it's littered with 11 personal pronouns. The Apostle sets out to persuade us that the truth that Jesus Christ saves guilty sinners, he sets out to persuade us of that by pointing to his own life.

And in the same way that houses need spring cleaning, needing the cobwebs to be removed and the dust to be wiped away, my prayer is that God would do a little spring cleaning in our hearts.

So that we'd once again derive all our joy in life from the finished work of Christ alone. So look with me again. These lovely verses, beginning in verse 12.

Word of God. God. I thank him who has given me strength. Christ Jesus, our Lord, because he judged me faithful, appointing me to his service.

Though formerly, I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief.

[5 : 14] And the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.

But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life.

To the king of ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever.

Amen. In a word, where we're going is all you have to do is believe that Jesus saves guilty sinners. All you have to do is believe that Jesus saves guilty sinners.

We're going to break this out in three points. The first is your obedience does not qualify you. Your obedience does not qualify you. Now, Paul begins this, our text, he begins with thanksgiving.

[6 : 34] Look, he says in verse 12, I thank him who's given me strength, Christ Jesus our Lord.

Now, Paul often begins his letters. In fact, 12 out of 13 of his letters, he begins with thanksgiving.

But the focus here is unique. He's not thanking the people, he's not thanking Timothy for his relationship to him or a church that he's addressing for the good, or the grace, the faith and love that he sees in that church.

He's thanking God for calling him. Though he's an apostle of the first rank, having been called up to the third heaven. Though he's a teacher of what is good, though he's nearing death now.

Writing from prison and can rejoice in a faithful, fruitful gospel minister. When he gives thanks, his mind is absorbed with a deep sense of his unworthiness.

He said, I thank him who gave me strength, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he judged me faithful. Appointing me to his service. Though formerly, I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent.

[7 : 40] When he thinks of his calling, he doesn't think of his gifts, his talents, his churches, his successes.

He thinks of his unworthiness. There's no smugness in these verses. No self-satisfaction, no self-congratulation that is all too common in our culture and in our churches.

There's a deep sense of unworthiness. Because when he thinks about his calling, he thinks about the Damascus Road. I'm sure you remember Paul's conversion in the ninth chapter of Acts.

Paul was a Jew. In fact, Paul was a Pharisee. One of the most rigorous groups of Jews. And he was educated at the feet, he says, of Gamaliel.

Paul, which is a very honored and esteemed rabbi in the Pharisee sect. He knew the law. He kept the law.

[8 : 42] He tells us in Philippians 3 that he was blameless in accord with the law. No one could bring anything from the law against him because he was blameless. And when followers of Christ continue to preach that Jesus is the Messiah and the Son of God, Paul became furious.

According to his definition, he was a blasphemer. That's not saying he's blasphemed God. What he's saying is he slandered and cursed the name of Jesus Christ.

He's obviously in so doing, blaspheming God. He hated Christ and hated the followers of Christ. He was a persecutor. The very first person that was killed for following Jesus Christ was Stephen.

And he was killed with Paul's approval. Then there's a great persecution that breaks out in Jerusalem where men and women who followed Christ were dragged out of their houses to prison.

He was a persecutor of the church. He's an insolent opponent. He was vile and violent. One commentator says, a thoroughly objectionable person.

[10 : 00] This is who he was. This is what he was up to. This is where he was going. He was on the road to Damascus, not to find a temple or synagogue to worship, Jesus Christ in, but to find more Christians to drag back to Jerusalem.

I love the way Acts 9 brings us into the middle of this scene. We have these verses for you. But Paul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found anyone, any belonging to the way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.

But now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven shone around him.

You capture the vividness. He's still breathing the threats. They're still coming out of his mouth. And then this light comes down around him. We know the story that within a few days, the scales, so to speak, fell from his eyes, and he was baptized and began following Christ.

But why is Paul reminding Timothy of his conversion right here? Because Timothy is in Ephesus and among teachers who are teaching another gospel.

[11:30] Look at verse 8. He says, Now we know that the law is good if one uses it lawfully, understanding this, that the law is not laid down for the just, but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane, for those who strike their fathers and mothers for murderers.

And he keeps going. The sexual immoral, those who practice homosexuality, enslavers, liars, perjurers, whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine. What he's saying is we know that the law is laid down.

He's telling Timothy, We know the law is laid down for the unjust. Just like Romans 3 says, The law is laid down so that it's revealing the character of God and thus revealing the sinfulness of man so that every mouth, Romans 3 20, might be shut before the presence of God.

But these guys were saying the law is not for the unjust, but for the just. It's for the people who are already followers of Christ that they might prove that they are followers of Christ by their obedience to the law.

Not just the law of God, but the laws that are being added to it. And so he's saying, they're trying to prove that they're righteous and just, that they're acceptable to God, by how they obey the law.

[12:46] They're teaching a form of legalism. And so Paul is telling his story to confront the teaching that is being heard there. And Paul's emphasis could not be more clear.

What he's saying is it is not his obedience that qualified him and made him an object of salvation. God does not believe in a form of preparationism where you prepare yourself to be an object of salvation.

What Paul is saying is what made him an object of salvation, a needed object and an object of salvation, was his disobedience. He was not merely, in fact, disobeying God.

He was blaspheming the name of Christ, persecuting followers of Christ, opposing the gospel. But God intervened. God rescued him.

What Paul is helping us to see, that if you are a Christian, if you are a Christian, we are only a Christian because God chased us down when we were running the other way. God called us out of sin that we were loving and the death we were chasing.

[13:56] We're not Christians because our parents were Christians. My parents were Christians. Come from a line of four or five generations of Christians. We're not Christians because we were baptized, right?

Christian parents would go to a Christian school. We're Christians because God intervened when we were running the opposite way. I love the way Paul takes this up. This is the way he preaches the gospel. And so we see the same type of emphasis in Romans 5.

Now I just plucked out a few phrases here, but you should read all of Romans 5. And he says, while we were still weak, Christ died for the ungodly. While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

While we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his son. You see what he's doing? He's overturning anything that would prepare God to accept you because of what you've done.

And so Paul commands Timothy to remain in Ephesus to oppose these men by preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ. Paul is commanding Timothy to remain there so that he might confront legalism.

[15:07] Legalism is just seeking to be accepted by God, before God, by obedience to God. Obedience is obviously good.

But obeying to be accepted by God is bad. The truth is, nothing we ever do contributes to our being accepted by God.

That's the whole point of Paul's story. Sinclair Ferguson helpfully says, the glory of the gospel is that God has declared, declared sinners to be rightly related to him in spite of their sin.

But our greatest temptation and mistake is to try to smuggle character into his work of grace. How easily we fall into the trap of assuming that we can only remain justified so long as there are grounds in our character for justification.

But Paul's teaching is that nothing we ever do contributes to our justification. justification. We confess that truth, and yet we so often fall into the trap of assuming we only remain justified as we show forth grounds for our justification.

[16:36] While we know we may contribute nothing to being accepted before God, we stumble into believing we must prove ourselves worthy of his love. We assume God sees us how we see ourselves.

We assume he's waiting on us to pick up the slack, work harder. We suppose he's disappointed with our slowness and our many struggles. We conclude that he's happy with us on our good days, frustrated with us on our bad days.

We begin to believe that we're only acceptable to God as long as we make ourselves acceptable in our daily life. And so we strive to not just be a faithful Christian or parent or co-worker or whatever. We try to be a perfect one. We fall into this game of juggling plates, trying to present ourselves to God in a way that would be acceptable.

And when we do, we're actually smuggling in character to his work of grace. And all the peace and joy that were meant to be derived from Jesus Christ alone begin to be focused on the ups and downs, the seesaw of our performance.

[17:51] Point two, your disobedience does not disqualify you. Your obedience does not qualify you. The reverse is true.

Your disobedience does not disqualify you. Look in verse 13, halfway through. He says, but I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly and in unbelief.

Now this but is very emphatic, strong, signaling a dramatic change of events, just like the change of events that happened in Acts 9 on the Damascus road.

Paul was a blasphemer, persecutor, insolent opponent, but God intervened. God gave mercy. Now legalism is this system where you're always trying to get what you think you deserve.

You're angling constantly for what you think you deserve. It's all about getting justice, but salvation is always about getting what you don't deserve. It's about getting mercy.

[19:03] Now mercy is one of those sigh of relief words, one of those most moving words in the English language. Mercy is the response of forgiveness to those who would be otherwise condemned.

No one deserves mercy. No one earns mercy. No one merits mercy. The only qualification for receiving mercy is not deserving it.

So look at the way Paul puts this sentence. I feel like we just read sometimes, we read the Bible because we've read it so many other times before that we don't capture the drama in it. He said, how would you finish this sentence?

But I receive mercy because I prayed the prayer. I went down the aisle. because I was a good Christian. I don't know.

I'm not trying to sound trite or something, but I received mercy because, look at the way Paul finishes it, I received mercy because I acted ignorantly in unbelief.

[20:06] I received mercy because I didn't deserve it. I received mercy because I ran from it and I ran from God and was opposing God. You can't receive mercy in any other way.

There's no ground for you to receive mercy if you think you deserve it. To receive mercy is to be undeserving. Even more than that is to be ill-deserving. I'm a bit of an emotional person, but have you ever noticed that we cry at times when we're really happy?

Now, last night, we were crying, not crying because we were really happy, but when a father returns, these are the ones that get me on social media, when a father returns home early from the war, surprises the kid.

I mean, it's probably been done just thousands and thousands of times. Every time. Sometimes I just don't even watch it. I can't handle this emotional outbreak right now. I'm not going to watch it. He surprises his family and they just buckle over. Or when friends gather unexpectedly to surround you in a dark moment. There's no moment, though, where we're so happy that we begin to cry than when we receive mercy.

[21:23] I remember years ago, there's a wide receiver in the NFL named Demarius Thomas who unfortunately died a couple years ago. The seizure, and one year, he was in the Super Bowl and his mom had been arrested for drug trafficking and spent 20 years in prison.

Had not seen him play football since Pee Wee. Regardless of what you think, politically, President Obama pardoned her. And the words and the description of someone that was guilty and yet received mercy were stacked.

she went on to see Demarius Thomas win the Super Bowl that weekend. Here's the reality. You and I are in the same desperate need for mercy.

Like, we are condemned. We deserve to be condemned. Along with mercy, Paul continues, comes a flood of grace.

Look at verse 14. These words just stack up on us and they're overwhelming. I received mercy because I acted ignorantly in unbelief and the grace of God overflowed for me.

[22 : 48] Grace is a one-word summary of all that Christ accomplished in his death and resurrection for hell-deserving sinners. And so, the work of grace or the work of Christ does not merely satisfy God's judgment but secures his favor once and for all.

That's what he's saying. And grace overflows. The image is of just water when it overflows. There's nothing more destructive than water.

Water overflows and floods and when it does, it crumbles houses, neighborhoods, and towns.

When the floodwaters rise, everything, everybody runs to higher ground.

And so too with the grace of God. That's what Paul is saying. Where sin abounds, grace abounds all the more. Where sin imprisons and holds captive, grace breaks every bond. Where sin stores up future wrath, grace washes away the debt and secures everlasting life.

The grace of God, I received mercy because I acted ignorant, and the grace of God overflowed, overwhelmed my life. But how could grace and mercy come to the undeserving, even to the ill deserving?

[23 : 58] And this is how we know in this next several words, the grace of the Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Jesus Christ.

There are in fact banks to this grace. There are in fact limits to this grace.

It's completely unlimited in a limited way to those who are in Christ. John Calvin warns us we must understand that as long as Christ remains outside of us and we are separated from Him, all that He suffered, all that He has suffered and done for the salvation of the human race remains useless and of no value to us.

The New Testament is very clear. Salvation only occurs in Christ, and before we can understand, therefore, what it means to be in Christ, we have to understand what it means to be in Adam.

You know the story. The Bible begins with a story about Adam and Eve in a garden. They're tempted by the serpent. They reject serpent. They reject God. They go on their way.

[25 : 09] They sin and ate the apple. But the Scripture says what happened there did not stay there. Adam was the first of the human race. He is our father.

He is our representative. And when he sins, the guilt of his sin not only comes upon him but upon the whole human race. And his sin not only brings guilt upon the human race, it also brings an ingrained desire to reject God and put ourselves first.

And so, you don't have to teach a child to sin. I have three children. We also don't have to be taught to look after ourselves.

You ever notice when you flip back to the yearbook? My kids love to go back to the old pictures of weddings or yearbooks or things like that. If you don't notice when you flip through those things, you flip and find a picture and you go to yourself first.

Because there's this self-focus. You ever had a conflict replaying it in your head in the shower somewhere where you lost. No.

[26 : 25] You always win. You always deliver the landing winning jab. Tracing through the heart of every human being is inherited guilt and inherited corruption.

1 Corinthians 15, 22 gives us the reality of our estate. He says, for as in Adam, all die, so in Christ all shall be made alive.

In Adam, all die. Everyone who's in Adam all dies. And in Adam, all humankind is guilty and we'll have to answer for this guilt and we'll be condemned for this guilt and corruption.

Our problem, therefore, is not most deeply that we sin, that we commit sins here and there throughout the day. Our problem is most deeply that we are sinners. Our problem is most deeply is that we are in Adam and therefore worthy of damnation.

After helping her husband with the murders of Duncan and Banquo, Lady Macbeth's mind breaks under the guilt and shame of what she's done. She sees a spot of blood on her hands and cries out, out, damn spot.

[27 : 45] who would have thought the old man could have so much blood? Nothing can remove her stain. She keeps washing and washing and washing and the truth of the Bible, the truth of Scripture is that the whole human race stands with her.

The stain and guilt of Adam's sin marks us all. We were born in sin, guilty because of sin, captive to sin, and unable to free ourselves from sin.

No amount of washing, no amount of obedience, no amount of working, no amount of praying, no amount of going to church, no amount of good things, none of those things will do. The only way to be rescued from the wrath that is coming for sin is being found in Christ.

As in Adam, all die, so in Christ, all shall be made alive. Paul is bringing us into the heart of our story, the heart of our message, the heart of the gospel.

The power of the gospel is not in the mocking Jesus endured. It's not in the physical pain Jesus suffered. Years ago, the Passion came out.

[29 : 01] Passion was a provoking movie. I saw it once. I'll never watch it again. But it got it wrong. Because the deepest agony of the cross was not in the physical pain or the torture that Jesus Christ endured.

The deepest pain, the deepest agony, the deepest mystery of the cross is that Jesus Christ drank the cup of wrath that was there for sinners. The Bible says that Jesus became like us in every respect, yet He never sinned in word, thought, or deed so that He might be like a lamb without blemish, that He might be a sacrifice that is perfect.

The Bible says He was put forward as a sacrifice. On the cross, the Bible says that Jesus became sin, that all our sins and iniquities and transgressions were credited to Him in such a way that it was as if He committed each one of them.

The mystery, the deepest mystery of the cross is that while it was a Roman form of torture, on that dark day on Golgotha, it was an altar.

An altar on which God the Father set and put forward God the Son to suffer and drink and exhaust His furious wrath for sinners.

[30 : 26] The mystery of the cross is not in the pain, not in the spitting or the mocking or the slapping of Jesus Christ. the Lord who is the ruler of every creature that walks under this earth. The mystery of the cross is that Jesus Christ was mangled and placed on an altar to endure the wrath of God for sinners like you and me for three hours.

the Father poured out His wrath on Jesus Christ. For three hours the world was dark because the physical suffering had stopped or at least that inflicted by human hands because the Son of God was enduring a much more furious and despicable agonizing suffering bearing the sin of you and me and drinking the wrath we deserve.

and then after three hours there's nothing calm and composed about the cross that is one thing Mel Gibson got right after three hours Jesus cries out it is finished and the curtain was ripped in two Why?

Because through the finished work of Christ sinners are made acceptable to God once for all and forever. J.I. Packer says it well Jesus Christ our Lord moved by a love that was determined to do everything necessary to save us endured and exhausted the destructive divine judgment for which we were otherwise inescapably destined and so one forgiveness adoption and glory believers are in debt to Christ specifically for this for that for standing in our place in my place condemned he said the hymn writer says and this is the mainspring of all their joy and peace and praise both now and for eternity that's it that's the main spring that's where all the joy comes from

I remember a couple years ago we bought our house here and we we had a pipe clogged in our house and my buddy Eddie who is our plumber came and and cut out the section of pipe and he came and my wife I was at work my wife sent me a picture of the inside of the pipe and it was just completely clogged with all that you expect from galvanized piping for 50 years just completely no wonder the water didn't come through well the same and then thankfully he put in a new piece of PVC and we got water again well the same thing goes on in the Christian life when we begin to load ourselves up with all we must do for God we miss out on how the pipe is plunged clean it's plunged clean again and again day after day through the finished work of Jesus Christ because this alone is the mainspring of all our joy and praise and peace now and forever so no wonder Paul moves on to

this glorious phrase the saying is trustworthy verse 15 deserving of full complete absolute acceptance that Christ

[34 : 33] Jesus came into the world to save sinners I did not come for the righteous did not come for those who need no physician I came for sinners and that Christ Jesus came to save sinners of whom I am the foremost point three God's patience welcomes you God's patience welcomes you not only does your obedience not qualify you or your disobedience not disqualify you God's patience invites you Paul turns from his discussion of what happened and tells us what it means for us look at verse 16 he says I received mercy mercy he's hanging on that theme of mercy again that in me as the foremost Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life twice in these verses Paul refers to him as the foremost of sinners in response to the cross

Paul cannot shake a deep sense of his unworthiness in fact as different writers have pointed out Paul's sense of unworthiness grows as he aged in AD 53 1 Corinthians 15 9 he says I am the least of all the apostles AD 62 Ephesians 3 8 I am the least of all the saints AD 64 1 Timothy 1 he says I am the foremost of sinners I wonder if our sense of unworthiness is a wonderful downward spiral as well now there's nothing commendable in someone who continues to beat themselves up for sins they have done but there's great danger in forgetting what we deserve so he continues and uncovers why it is important for us to know he received mercy mercy was for himself obviously he was saved by the mercy of God in Jesus

Christ but he says I receive mercy so that God might display his perfect patience I find this striking Paul says it's the patience of God that stands behind his conversion it's not the love of God or the mercy of God or the kindness of God it's the patience patience it's the patience of God patience is just a word for long suffering for refusing to lash out refusing to retaliate and now we're beginning to see why Paul attributes his salvation to patience for three years he provoked God he was blaspheming in the name of Jesus Christ persecuting followers opposing the gospel of Christ yet God did not strike him down talking this morning with my son whom God did strike down in the sense of fire in Acts 5 but God did not strike Paul down he did not lash out he did not retaliate God was patient God had mercy on him and opened his eyes and gave him the gift of faith but Paul says God was patient with him so that it might be an example to us this word example is hugely important it's translated in different ways in the New Testament like a pattern a mold a model it comes from a word that means to blow or strike and so there's this idea that this word focuses on the impression left after a strike after something is struck or beaten or molded it takes a certain shape that's what he's talking about it becomes a mold or a pattern and so in the assembly lines a mold is formed on which everything else is formed and so God Paul is saying that he is an example for all who will believe but what does that mean well the idea is this is an argument from the greater to the lesser!

Paul does that in a number of places this is an argument from the greater lesser this is what he's saying if God is patient toward me the foremost of sinners then he will have mercy on you regardless of how great your sins are if God was patient with me the chief of sinners the grand poobah of sinners then God will definitely have mercy on you no matter how great your sins are they could not be as great as mine that's what Paul is saying so there's no sins you've committed that would disqualify you from receiving mercy from God there's no sin there's no report card that could be so bad that would disqualify you from receiving mercy as Richard Sibbes has said there's more mercy in Christ than sin in you and so if you're in Christ call you to marvel at the patience of how many times did you try him how many times did you sin against him how many times have we strayed from him if you're not in

[40 : 04] Christ let the patience of God urge you to come how many times have you sinned against him how many times have you rejected his rule and yet God has not lashed out God has not struck you down the very presence of you in this assembly this morning is the fact that God has been patient with you and there's no other explanation for your survival up until this day than the patience of God God 2 Peter 3 says but do not overlook this one fact beloved that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years and a thousand years is as one day the Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness but is patient toward you not wishing that any should perish but that all should reach repentance and so let the patience of God invite you there's no other explanation that you're alive than God's patience his long suffering so I urge you to come to Jesus

Christ regardless of what home you grew up in regardless of what things you've done the days you've had regardless of the way you strayed regardless of how often you've heard of these things patience of God would urge you to come and to rest in Jesus all you have to do is believe that God saves guilty sinners and all the grace and mercy in Jesus is yours wonderfully the apostle concludes appropriately in this text with praise to the king of ages to the eternal king the alpha and omega to the one who is immortal unchanging never corrupting or fading or decaying with brilliant majesty and power the one who's invisible the one who dwells in unapproachable light the only God be honor and glory forever and ever amen let us pray father in heaven we marvel at your patience that you are God merciful and gracious slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithful when we are faithless you remain faithful while we were yet sinners Christ died for us while we were yet enemies of God you reconciled us to yourself through Jesus Christ oh Lord I pray for anyone in this room that's not aware of where they stand before you not sure they would marvel at the patience of God to bring them to this day that they might run to Jesus the savior of the undeserving and the ill deserving we thank you in Christ's name amen you've been listening to a message given by Walt

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