

SAINT

PAUL

1 Thessalonians

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I. INTRODUCTION

The name of Paul looms large in the Holy Scripture of the New Testament and in Christian history. Since his name is associated with thirteen canonical letters, his writings and the ideas attributed to him have had a profound influence on Christians throughout generations.

1 Thessalonians represents Paul's earliest existing correspondence. The study to follow analyzes the purpose of 1 Thessalonians based on the letter itself and the secondary materials. This paper describes evidence from the letter that reveal the intention of the letter. It also examines Paul's strategies to persuade the Thessalonians of his thesis. Finally, this essay identifies the theological significance of the letter as well as the pastoral issues under the lens of Christian ethics.

II. ESCHATOLOGY BEING THE PURPOSE OF 1 THESSALONIANS

According to Michael J. Gorman, the purpose for which Paul is writing 1 Thessalonians is revealed in the letter twice, at the beginning (3:13, prayerful introduction) and ending of the letter (5:23, benediction): “*So that He may establish your hearts without blame in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all His saints*” (1 Thess 3:13). “*Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ*” (1 Thess 5:23; Gorman, 2004: 151). Paul also echoes this notion of eschatology in 1 Thessalonians 2:19; 4:17 and 1 Corinthians 1:8.

To maintain the state of preparedness required for a life in the shadow of the parousia, Paul employs stories of death, resurrection, and eschatology of Jesus to persuade his congregation. Paul urges the believers to expect persecution as normality for all believers. Hope of death's resurrection and the parousia of Jesus is the inspiration for the faithful life of holiness and love even if the cross is their “*destiny*” (1 Thess 3:3). He insists that the Thessalonians live lives of faith, love and hope in relation to God and others. The promise of Jesus' parousia and the resurrection of the dead demand ethical conduct and love among members of the community.

1. EXPECTED PERSECUTION

From the opening lines of the 1 Thessalonians, we encounter references to the *"affliction"* and *"suffering"* that had marked the Thessalonians' experience from the moment of the Thessalonians' conversion (1 Thess 1:6; 2:14). That persecution posed a real threat to the congregation is evident from the fact that Paul explains the sending of Timothy as his effort to sustain them in this crisis (1 Thess 3:1-5). Paul uses a rare word meaning *"shaken," "disturbed"* or *"perturbed"* in 1 Thess 3:3 to convey his concern over their reactions. His narration of what Timothy was commissioned to accomplish, however, does not involve the encouragement of courageous response to persecution as one might expect but deals rather with the question of whether persecution should have been anticipated. Paul reminds the congregation in 1 Thess 3:3 that *"you yourselves know that we have been destined for this,"* which speaks to the question of appropriateness. The issue quite clearly is whether persecution should be expected as a normal concomitant of the faith. The point Paul making here is persecution is normal. Paul reiterates the point of appropriate expectations in 1 Thess 3:4 *"so that no one would be disturbed by these afflictions; for you yourselves know that we have been destined for this."* Not only does this reiteration sound superfluous in light of 1 Thess 1:6 which reveals that they had been converted during persecutions, but it is also hard to see how this kind of rhetoric could be designed to counter cowardice or despair in the face of adversity. It seems to imply instead that the Thessalonians were for some reason surprised or perturbed that persecution would be a part of their life in the new age, and that its presence cast doubt on the validity of their faith. The Thessalonians felt persecution was somehow inconsistent with their faith may be indicated also by 1 Thess 2:14 where Paul defines Christian ethical imitation primarily in terms of suffering persecution.

2. HOPE IN THE PAROUSIA OF JESUS AND THE DEATH'S RESURRECTION

In 1 Thessalonians 4:13, Paul talks about *"those who are asleep."* Paul's purpose here is not to develop an abstract dogma of death and resurrection but to perform his pastoral duty of making up what is lacking in their faith: *"may complete what is lacking in your faith"* (1 Thess 3:10). The two insights he conveys are: 1) that physical death - to *"who are asleep"* - cannot prevent them from sharing in the victory of the risen Lord Jesus (1 Thess 4:13-18); 2) how they are to *"encourage"* one another to prepare in hope for the return of the Lord Jesus (1 Thess 5:1-11).

Implied in the first instruction is that Jesus is now in the condition of being “Lord,” that is, his glorious existence is life-giving for his followers. Paul makes every effort to eliminate the fears he senses in this young church of Thessalonica; their apocalyptic expectations are now frozen by the death of some members. His topic is the fate of “*those who are asleep*,” that is, Christians who have already died or who will die before the parousia of Jesus. Sleep is a common euphemism for death in both Jewish and Greek literature according to scholars. The issue raised in this theme is the power of their new faith and the certainty of the hope it promises. In becoming Christians they committed their lives to the transcendent destiny they received as gift from God “*in Christ*” (1 Thess 4:16). Their faith encompasses a hope that takes away the sting of death through which unbelievers face bitter grief.

Paul assures the Thessalonians that they have no reason to fear. Believers remain “*in Christ*” whether they are still in this life or undergo physical death. Death cannot take away their hope because the risen life is simply a fuller experience of the grace they receive through faith and baptism. Paul explains this aspect of faith and its implications for their lives only briefly. Readers cannot help but think that these brief instructions were meant to be augmented by Timothy's oral explanations. He will help them recognize that they are different from the pagans “*who have no hope*” (1 Thess 4:13).

It is only the “*dead in Christ*” that “*God will bring with him*” (1 Thess 4:14) to glory. The “*dead in Christ*” (1 Thess 4:14) is not only dead for his sake but in a way it shares in the power of his lordship to give life. By this power “*God will bring*” (1 Thess 4:14) believers into his glory along with the risen Christ. Paul does not say when this will take place. What he stresses is that even in death believers remain “*in Christ*” and are destined for glory.

Here Paul does not try to explain how this is accomplished, but rather gives the basis for hope that it will be done. Our belief that “*Jesus died and rose again*,” (1 Thess 4:14) an integral part of the Christian creed, is the basis of hope. How are these linked? The manner by which Christ returned to his Father's glory, by way of the cross and resurrection, reveals to believers God's power to triumph over evil both in the case of Jesus and in the lives of all who believe in him. Hence, not only is the cross their “*destine*” (1 Thess 3:3) but also Christ's risen glory.

In 1 Thess 3:13 and 5:23, Paul employs a fuller title “*our Lord Jesus Christ*.” His complete use of the formula in these eschatological prayers serves to underline not just the parousia but also the death, resurrection, and profession of faith and therefore the Christological foundation of the believer's hope. The

"*saints*" in 1 Thess 3:13 who come with Jesus may designate either the angels or deceased believers who will be present at the final judgment. According to scholars, since Paul never uses the term "*saints*" for angels elsewhere, the presumption is that he is describing the death - the heroes of sacred history as coming with the glorified Jesus. In both prayers Paul's wish is that his converts be judged blameless by God in view of the Lord's coming.

3. FAITH, LOVE AND HOPE IN GOD AND OTHERS

In preparation for the coming of Jesus, Paul appeals believers to live the lives of faith, love and hope in relation to God as Father, and in relation to other believers (Gorman, 2004: 157). "*May the Lord cause you to increase and abound in love for one another, and for all people, just as we also do for you*" (1 Thess 3:12).

Paul's desire is that their love may grow until it is as strong as his love for them. For Paul is not simply inviting them to be loving but to strive for the same intensity of love that he shows. Just as in 1 Thess 1:6, he is setting himself up as model for their imitation of Christ. Paul affirms that the love they receive in embracing faith in Christ is an abounding and increasing gift from the risen Lord Jesus, who wants them to direct it toward "*one another, and for all people*" (1 Thess 3:12). This love that Jesus communicates is affectionate concern for the good of all as children of the Father. Paul has known this love, has shared it, and it is now impelling him to advance their growth in Christ. The final petition of Paul is for a more specific effect of the Lord's presence in their lives, namely, that he keeps their "*hearts without blame in holiness*" (1 Thess 3:13) in the Father's presence in anticipation of the Son's glorious "*coming*." Paul speaks of the "*heart*" as center of intellectual and ethical action rather than as seat of emotions. In other words, Paul insists on his congregation to think with their heart and thus reach their deepest convictions under the influence of God's grace (1 Thess 2:4). The image behind this prayer is that of the final judgment when all will be called to account for their lives. It is also an image of how life on earth can be as foretaste of heaven, and as a means of showing God's grace to humankind. For Paul, the term "*holiness*" embraced strong moral demands, as revealed in 1 Thess 4:1-8. He saw personal growth in holiness as a necessary prerequisite for being able to support others in love and so to prepare adequately for complete union with the "*Lord*" at his "*coming*," which they greatly desire (1 Thess 1:10). With the eschatological focus, Paul completes the triad of faith, love and hope for which he thanked God at the opening of 1 Thessalonians and from which all Christian holiness takes shape.

4. ETHICAL MANDATE

Paul has been lavish in his praise of the Thessalonians thus far. He took a gentle stance toward them, in keeping with the image that he is their *"nurse"* (1 Thess 2:7). But now he presses them on to a full commitment to the *"will of God"* (1 Thess 4:3) in ethical conduct.

In 1 Thessalonians 4:1-2, Paul reminds the Thessalonians that they have learned from Paul *"you received from us instruction"* (1 Thess 4:1) that they have the necessary divine power to accomplish what he is about to tell them to do. Paul assures them they do not have to fear; he adds nothing to the *"instructions"* he gave them earlier. He looks upon the good news in the same way the Jews considered the law of Moses as the life-giving will of God. By submitting to these instructions believers receive divine power to do the *"will of God"* (1 Thess 4:3). It is their *"sanctification,"* (1 Thess 4:4) a term confined to the Judeo-Christian tradition as the total process - including moral development - by which God purifies and transforms believers into his true worshipers. *"Sanctification"* takes on a wide range of conduct when applied to Christians. It is God's way of making them fitting participants in the life he gives by his *"Holy Spirit"* (1 Thess 4:8). The specific area in which Paul sees the need for improvement is their sexual ethics. He recalls that the *"will of God"* (1 Thess 4:3) demands they *"abstain from sexual immorality,"* (1 Thess 4:3) that is, from all forms of illicit sexual conduct. Then Paul adds another more specific directive, *"that each of you know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor"* (1 Thess 4:4), but offers an alternate possibility in 1 Thess 4:5, *"not in lustful passion, like the Gentiles who do not know God."* Paul calls for a more demanding code of Christian sexual conduct. This demand had become a problem for believers in Thessalonica. After the first fervor of conversion with an overpowering experience of the gift of the Holy Spirit, many believers were now going through a period of trial and finding it difficult to meet the demands of their new way of life. Paul warns them against returning to their former status as pagans when they were subject to *"lustful passion."* He equates lack of control over sexual passions with the situation of being *"like the Gentiles who do not know God"* (1 Thess 4:5). He saw paganism's refusal to accept the *"will of God"* (1 Thess 4:3) as the origin of a torrent of sins that engulfed humanity (Rom 1:24-32). Lack of chastity in marriage is a serious offense against mutual brotherly love; it is a form of deceit that destroys marriages. In addition, it makes men *"transgress"* (1 Thess 4:5) the law of God. No wonder that *"the Lord is the avenger in all these things."* (1 Thess 4:6) When? In the

final judgment - a reality never far from Paul's mind; he hastens to soften the force of this demand by stating that he is not telling them something new. He had *"warned"* (1 Thess 4:6) them when he preached the good news there.

An aspect of this warning may appear strange to modern readers that Paul exhibits what today considered a low level of motivation, namely, the threat of punishment by the Lord as *"the avenger"* (1 Thess 4:6). But Paul goes on to balance this negative approach by offering more lofty motivation in 1 Thess 4:7-8. Their life of faith is a special gift. God lovingly called them, inviting them to holiness, a higher form of conduct. This call is important and not to be ignored because our destiny is subject to his power. God's call is not empty for he *"gives his Holy Spirit"* (1 Thess 4:8) to believers. Here the action of the Holy Spirit in believers is manifest by the holiness that the Father achieves in them through the Son. God's desires are not empty but effective. In this case they result in the gift of the Holy Spirit who makes their holiness possible. Paul's theology of the Trinitarian exhibits in calling attention to the activity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit in the growth of believer's holiness.

5. THE ESCHATOLOGICAL COMMUNITY

Paul's prayer in 1 Thess 3:11-13 form a hinge for the two major sections of the letter, concludes with a petition for love among members of the community so that God *"may establish your hearts without blame in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all His saints"* (1 Thess 3:13). And Paul's comforting exhortation in 1 Thess 4:13-17 is grounded in God's and Christ's actions which ensure the eternal constitution of the community: *"God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep"* (1 Thess 4:14); those still alive at the parousia *"will not precede those who have fallen asleep"* (1 Thess 4:15); the living *"will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will always be with the Lord"* (1 Thess 4:17). Even death is no threat to the community! This eschatological language, which reinforces the sense of uniqueness and solidarity of the community, itself contains hortatory elements and also provides the perspective for the detailed advice Paul gives.

In view of this understanding of the church, all the items of conduct Paul takes up in the latter half of the letter in one way or another have relationships within the community in view. In his treatment of marriage, transgression is described as fraud of a Christian brother (1 Thess 4:6). Social responsibility is embedded in a setting provided by brotherly love (1 Thess 4:9). The consoling description of the parousia is offered to

enable the grieving Thessalonians to comfort one another (1 Thess 4:18). After an exhortation to live in expectation of the Day of the Lord, Paul again calls on them to encourage one another (1 Thess 5:11). Members of the community of the last days do not live solitary lives. As Paul moves toward the end of the letter, he increasingly brings into view his readers' responsibility for their community's pastoral care. He does not want them to grieve over those who had fallen asleep, so he clarifies the hope they should have (1 Thess 4:13-17). But it is they, because of that hope, who are to comfort one another (1 Thess 4:18). Unlike pagans who sought security in this life, he urges his readers to live in the light of the day (1 Thess 5:1-10), but concludes: *"Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing"* (1 Thess 5:11). It is as the community of the last days *"therefore"* that they are to engage in pastoral care of one another. Paul's specifications of that care have become intensified. In addition to encouragement, he now mentions their edification. More significant is that they are to care for one another. As Paul, in the manner of the spiritual leader, had bestowed his attention on individuals and adapted his care to their needs, so must the Thessalonians now, in effect, follow his example. Paul provides further details about the congregation's mutual exhortation in (1 Thess 5:12-15), to which 1 Thess 5:11 is a transition. The general statement on encouragement and edification then receives further explication. What he then says in 1 Thess 5:12-15 has its counterpart in discussions about the ideal relationships between members of the communities.

Paul concluded 1 Thessalonians with a solemn invocation on behalf of the community in the form of a double petition: 1) God may sanctify them completely; 2) their whole being, spirit, body and soul may be preserved *"blameless"* for the return of Jesus Christ (1 Thess 5:23). In the opening petition, *"may the God of peace Himself"* (1 Thess 5:23), the *"himself"* emphatically affirms that only God can achieve the holiness he has been exhorting the Thessalonians to pursue. *"God of peace"* is the ultimate source and giver of healing and effective blessings needed for human wholeness. Paul prays for the Thessalonians community that God will *"sanctify"* them *"wholly,"* on every level of existence – *"spirit, body and soul"* while waiting for Christ's return. He had previously asserted that God called them to holiness and gave them His Holy Spirit (1 Thess 4:7-8). The Holy Spirit is the gift through which God brings sanctification, which is the first step of salvation in Christ. This petition then once more reminds them that holiness is a gift. The second petition is a synonymous parallel to the first part; it specifies the first request to make complete at the end-time when Jesus returns. Paul's prayer for the Thessalonica community is eschatological in focus.

III. THEOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE AND PASTORAL ISSUES

1. WHOLENESS OF A HUMAN PERSON – BODY, MIND AND SOUL

In the benediction of 1 Thess 5:23, Paul emphasizes the wholeness of the three constitutive components of a human person which are body, mind and spirit: *“Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete [in all of its parts] [and], without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ”* (1 Thess 5:23). Beyond what Paul’s emphasis on the Thessalonians remaining holy and undivided until the return of Christ, there is theological significance to preserve the wholeness of God’s creation in humankind, the indivisibility of body, mind and spirit.

One can argue that the tendency to downplay the significance of body and soul in comparison with the spirit correlates with several of the other tendencies of the Thessalonians as in chapter 4 and 5 of 1 Thessalonians. The challenge to the traditional sexual ethic (1 Thess 4:1-8) is obviously related to body and soul as understood in the Greco-Roman world, and the tendency to place the spirit beyond ethical or societal norms (1 Thess 5:19-22) would fit with a dualistic understanding of Paul’s anthropological view. Scholars believe that the most likely explanation of the unprecedented dualism, therefore, is that Paul is citing and correcting a doctrine current in Thessalonica. If so, there were dualistic tendencies in Thessalonica that stood close to Gnosticism, viewing the physical side of humans as the source of corruption and contrasting it with a divine portion of the human self.

Paul’s theology potentially prevents heretical implications such as Gnosticism present in the first-century period which believes the dualisms of a human person; spirit is perfect and has nothing to do with the body and mind which is considered evil. Out of the desire to know the unknowable God, an evil god was formed and it was this evil god that created the body and the physical world. The danger of Gnosticism is its denial of the incarnation of God as the Son. The Biblical tradition teaches that God made humans in His image (Genesis 1:27) and God saw that it was very good (Genesis 1:31). Despite the consequences of original sin, humankind is still inherently God’s good creation. Were it not so, God would not sustain its existence!

2. THE ISSUE OF SEXUALITY IN OUR MODERN DAY

There are few human experiences that carry as broad a range of meanings and values as sexuality. Sex can be ranging from an unethically monetary transaction, to a profound experience of loving union between husband and wife. In a moral way, sex can help a couple develop a deeper understanding of themselves, their spouse, and God. Sex is God's creative way for humans to procreate, and in so doing seek to perpetuate themselves in another iteration of humanity who we hope will grow to live and love in turn. One of the ways that sex may be understood is that it can symbolize a close relationship between people. The Biblical term for the legitimate sexual relationship, "*to know*," is an experience of reality. To know someone is to be involved with that person at the deepest possible level.

Paul constantly dealt with ethical issues and urged the members of the church at Thessalonica and Corinth to act in a Christian way. Paul felt compelled to instruct them in the right way of dealing with these matters and to urge them to act properly. The sexual immorality of Paul's times remains a present day issue. In 2006, the USCCB released four documents - two on sexual issues, one on norms for Holy Communion, and one on the Iraq war. Due to the complexity and magnitude of the issue of sexuality, the two reports on sexuality were a combined ten times the length of the document on the Iraq War.

On the basis of biblical teachings we can make several affirmations about human sexuality. First, sex is a part of our God-given nature. In biblical terms, all creation is the work of God and God has made us the way we are... Humankind was made "male and female" (Genesis 1:27) and was commanded, as were the other creatures, to "be fruitful and multiply." Sexuality, therefore, is characteristic of all human beings. Second, our sexuality is good, not evil ... Like everything else that God made; we can abuse and corrupt it. We can even use it to destroy ourselves, doing something evil with what God has created as good. Since sexuality was gifted to humans with a purpose to procreate and to even deepen the bond of couples in holy matrimony, sexuality, in its purest form, should be understood as good. In contrast though, when abused, sexuality becomes complex and cheapened. This can be seen when sexuality is equated with the lust of pop-culture.

People tend to equate lust with sexual desire. But sexual desire is a normal and holy aspect of our embodied humanity, and as such it cannot be wrong in itself, any more than hunger for food cannot be wrong in itself. What makes lust wrong is that lust seeks only the body of the sex partner as an object for pleasure.

Christian virtue demands integration of our sexual desire with our *“spirit and soul and body”* (1 Thess 5:23) *“not in lustful passion, like the Gentiles who do not know God”* (1 Thess 4:5). Christians are called to be chaste and respect the gift of sexuality and to use it in the way God intended *“For this is the will of God, your sanctification; that is, that you abstain from sexual immorality.”* The gifts of the Holy Spirit at baptism and confirmation graciously bestow on us to keep our desires in check and acts morally as *“he who rejects this is not rejecting man but the God who gives His Holy Spirit to you”* (1 Thess 4:8). Thus, sexual sins are rejection of the Holy Spirit.

The question comes down to our individual acts: do we express our sexual natures in accordance with the authentic purposes and natural methods laid down by God, or do we go our own way and try to determine for ourselves what constitutes sexual morality, thereby justifying our own deviations? After all, there are many who will claim that if it is possible to do, then it is perfectly natural. But in making that claim, they are relegating humans to an animal nature that need not and cannot be overcome; this becomes an important issue for today's society, because we have socially chosen to declare that everything is natural, and that condemnation of acts constitutes unjust condemnation of persons. Pope John Paul II has a great quote "Yes, but which man?" He asks if we are going to be just man the animal, slave to the base, or man redeemed by his use of his freedom to overcome sin, the man created for a destiny beyond anything this world has to offer (I probably heard this quote in listening to Catholic radio on the way to work).

In summary, Christian ethics stress the importance of sex belonging only in marriage because God creates sex for new life, loving union of husband and wife, joy and pleasure within marriage. Scripture and Tradition teach that sexuality is God's gift to human kind. It is so great that the book of erotic love, Song of Solomon and two out of ten commandments (the sixth and the ninth) are devoted to remind us of God's gift and that misuse of it results in great harm. In short, sexual ethics requires that sexual activity must always be an act of total self-gift in the deep loving union of Christian marriage and open to procreation to fulfill God's initial mandate, given in the Garden of Eden, to "be fruitful and multiply," and more importantly to work with God to "complete creation."

3. THE ISSUE OF IDOLATRY IN OUR MODERN DAY

As in the times of Prophet Hosea - the Iron Age approximately from 750 to 725 B.C.E., the Israelites found the commandments that God placed before them to be far less attractive than the rules that they

perceived from the surrounding worldly cultures. What was the attraction of the world that the Israelites were introduced then? The Canaanites practiced a pagan religion that was based upon ignorance and sensuality, much like the worldly cultures at the time of Paul. He urged the believers to “*flee from idolatry*” (1 Corinthians 10:14, Galatians 5:20, Colossians 3:5 and 1 Thessalonians 1:9).

The people were taught that they would be rewarded by the pantheon of gods by practicing religious rituals that included child and animal sacrifice, temple prostitution, and the burning of incense. By doing so, the Israelites rejected the authority of the one true God. Our contemporary culture is no different, and its philosophies are simply the product of ancient Greek culture. Rather than using the words “child sacrifice” people practice abortion as a form of birth control, which kills a baby every 23 seconds in America. The sensualities of this world are practiced in the consumption of drugs, prostitution, and pornography – a two billion dollar industry; everyday 200 new porn sites appear on the internet. It is an epidemic of our time! Power in today’s world is practiced in corruption, extortion, and material possessions. Just as the high-powered sensuality of this culture can attract people away from Christ, the same world existed in the time of early Israel and early Christians and they were equally attracted.

Richard Niebuhr expresses this truth perfectly: “the most vicious thing, of course, is social, pagan religion, with its polytheism and idolatry, its beliefs and rites, its sensuality and its commercialization. Such religion, however, is interfused with all the other activities and institutions of society, so that the Christian is in constant danger of compromising his loyalty to the Lord.”

V. CONCLUSION

In this paper, we explore how Paul challenges his young congregation at Thessalonica to embrace the demands of the cross at every level of existence “*body, mind and spirit*” in preparation for the coming of Jesus. Paul recognized that they were at a crossroad. They had to push forward “*in the Lord*” or they would be overwhelmed by their former way of life as pagans. He has been leading up to these instructions by means of his long opening thanksgiving, by his exhortations and by his personal sharing. He completes his apostolic responsibility by making clear to the community how its members are to recommit themselves to the faith, love and hope they are called to celebrate.

Because all Christians of every age face basically the same challenges and choices, early Christians read, reread and shared this letter until it was incorporated into the official canon of scripture. Through 1 Thessalonians, Paul continues to encourage and motivate us about our destiny. He reminds us the goal and purpose of our lives, and to renew our faith in the Lord's coming again in glory to settle accounts with us. This inspired writing continues to call the entire Christian community to self-identity, especially when it is proclaimed in liturgical celebration. True faith offers sure hope.

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