

God is at Work

Isaiah 6:1-9

By [Seth Starkey](#)

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Good evening. Let me first thank the Missions Committee, the Session, and the Reverend Mr. Strain for this invitation. Indeed not one I take lightly. It's a privilege to stand in this pulpit. As you all know, Second Pres. Greenville is Dr. Duncan's home church so I felt connected to this place for years before I ever actually saw the church, so we've been loving for y'all and praying for you from afar and before we ever knew what Belhaven was and what RUF Belhaven would be in my future.

If you have your Bibles, please turn to the book of Isaiah, chapter 6, as we will look at verses 1 through 9a, or as we will look at verses 1 through the word, "go," this evening. I came here to preach, not to tell you about Belhaven RUF, but if you will allow me just a few minutes I will do that as well. It's unbelievable how the semester has gone despite myself. We have interns and student leaders who have done a phenomenal job reaching students for Christ and equipping them to serve, some who are here this evening. God has been faithful, God is at work, and He has been good to Belhaven RUF. We thank you for your long years of support, love, and prayers, and again we ask that that would continue and we thank you that so far that has been true. Before we consider God's Word this evening, let's pray and ask His blessing.

Almighty God, Your people are gathered here this evening to hear what the Spirit says to the Church, but we're tired, we're weary. We live in a world that beats us. We live in a world that daily reminds us we are pilgrims, that we are sojourners. We live in a world that reminds us that we have not yet experienced the comforts of home, truly and fully. But sir, we would see Jesus. Yes, in this Old Testament passage, we would see Jesus and just a glimpse of our Savior would satisfy us. So Holy Spirit, come in power, for we know that You would be that great spotlight to show us the cross and to show us the Lover of our souls. And now may the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts together always be acceptable in Thy sight, Thou who art our Lord, our Strength, and our Redeemer. Amen.

Isaiah chapter 6, beginning in verse 1:

In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called to another and said:

"Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!"

And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. And I said: "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!"

Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar. And he touched my mouth and said: "Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for."

And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" Then I said, "Here am I! Send me." And he said, "Go."

Here ends the reading of God's holy Word and to His name be praise and glory.

Isaiah and Mission

As you looked at your bulletin tonight you might have thought to yourself, "What is the young campus minister who has only been here for a month doing preaching from Isaiah? Why not go to the Great Commission passage? Why not go to a passage that's universally familiar to everybody? Why not go and do some work in one of the Pauline epistles, one we've studied and one we've taught and one we've memorized? Why Isaiah? Why Isaiah?" Here's why. Missions is one of those subjects that's extremely difficult for a pastor of any age and any range of experience to preach on, to teach on, to a congregation. It's kind of like the fourth commandment that I had to chew off and somehow devour and then spread back out to my students last night. They're not hard topics theologically; we understand mission, we understand the fourth commandment, we understand what Sabbath rest is. They're not hard in the sense that they're boring. What I mean when I say that ministers don't like to preach on them is this - you stand up in the fourth commandment and you're kind of stuck with the situation where, "Well, the commandment says six days you are to work and on the seventh you're not," and then you look up and you realized, "Well hardly any of us pay much attention to this."

And then we have to make sure that we're not getting on a soapbox and just laying a guilt trip down, which is the temptation for mission. You all heard the

Great Commission and yet, the statistics show, that only so and so number amount of you will do this, only so and so of you have ever given to missions, and it's very easy if you're not careful to take a subject so familiar and just bash people over the head with it. And so this past Lord's Day we saw the foundation for mission, the goal for mission, but I wanted to simplify things even more tonight and ask and answer the question about the "Why?" of mission. You know it's so important in life to stop, no matter what you're doing - in marriage, in your job, in your gardening in the yard - it's so important to stop from time to time and ask and answer the question of "Why?" just to make sure we all know what we're doing. This passage, Isaiah 6, answers the question "Why?" for us in regards to mission.

A Picture of the Triune God and His Glory

Now before we get started, two comments about this passage. One is this - let's make sure we realize when we see God the Lord, when we see this majestic Being referenced, it's Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It's a picture of the Triune God in all three glorious persons that Isaiah presents us with, that Isaiah himself sees. So let's make sure we're not thinking simply that the Father is revealed or simply that the Son is revealed or simply that the Spirit is revealed, but rather that all three persons are before us and before Isaiah in this passage.

The second thing I want you to think of as you hear this passage unpacked is this. Dr. Douglas Kelly used to frequently say to us in seminary, "If you as a minister, if you as a Christian, can get a hold of the glorious vision that is the Triune God that Isaiah saw in this passage," he would look at us young divinity students and he would say, "you'll never burn out in ministry. You'll never burn out as a father. You'll never burn out as a husband. If you can get a hold of the beauty and glory and power and strength and love and sufficiency of this God in this passage, you will never tire and grow weary of what you're doing. You'll have hard days but you will not burn out." And I want y'all to think about that hope, think about that promise as we consider this passage tonight.

I. Why Mission? Because of His Kingship

Four ways in which this passage answers the question of the "Why?" in regard to mission. First we see it's because of His kingship in verse 1. In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple." The death of King Uzziah is a traumatic event. He was king for a long time. Not only that, as most commentators agree, he was the most stable, enjoyable, positive king since Solomon perhaps. And we can't fully enjoy what it would be like for this event to happen, but it really would have been earth-shattering for the people in this original audience. "The king is dead. What will happen now? The king is dead. What will become of us? The king is dead. Will we go through what our ancestors have gone through

when a wicked king came in power? What will it cost us? How awful will it be? What will the outcome look like now that King Uzziah is no longer with us?" You see, they saw right before their very eyes the stability and the cornerstone of their very existence going away. And with the burial of the king was the burial of normalcy, was the burial of comfort. And it was something they knew. And Isaiah's people would have been terrified.

And this is why quickly after he states this fact that the king has died, he takes us to the throne room of the true King of Kings and the true Lord of Lords and he says, "This King remains seated, firmly fixed on His throne."

Now how does this apply to us? For us it might be, and I was thinking about this, for us it might be the loss of a family member, that patriarch or matriarch grandmother or grandfather. And you go through an unexpected or a planned death in the family and you stop and ask the question, "What will life look like now?" There's uncertainty. There's lack of hope. There's lack of vision casting because he or she was the one who kept the family glued together and now you're worried that you're going to scatter to the four corners and never speak again. I would say as it relates to the topic of mission it's more like cultural events that happen that are transformational, that are substantial. Obviously I wasn't old enough, but I suspect that there were Session meetings across the old southern church and across the country that when abortion was legalized, I'll bet you there were a room full of pastors and a room full of elders that said, "What do we do now? Are we losing hope? Are we losing everything we know to be true? What is happening to us?" And I was sitting in the Session meeting after the first state started legalizing homosexual unions, homosexual marriage, and again the questions asked by the old guard elders, "What does this mean for us? What do we do now? Is there any hope?"

Tempted to Despair

And every time we see something drastic happen in our society the temptation for us is to do like that - you might have seen the movie, I think it's called "The Village" and it's this fascinating movie where people were tired of sin and people were tired of the tragedy that happens in a fallen world and they literally took all their families out in the woods and lived a primitive life as if the world didn't exist. And Christian, I'm here to tell you that when it comes to the topic of mission, when it comes to the topic of Christianity as we live out our faith, every time something contrary to Scripture happens in society and every time we as individuals and we as the church lose something that is comfortable, something that is known to us, the temptation will be to build the fortress and hide. It will be to become monastic. It will be to withdraw from society. It will become us versus them. And Isaiah brings this to us tonight to show us clearly that that can never be the response to the uncertainties of this world because our God remains King.

Now may this not be a clique that we simply repeat when things go awful, but

rather would this reality that God will forever be King seated on His throne, would this fuel every uncertainty and every unfounded fear that we have - that the King is sovereign, the King is coming, the King is love. He cannot be shaken from His throne. The one thing that I had forgotten about doing ministry in the local church now doing RUF again is that college students are fickle; no offense! They'll cancel on you and reschedule the same meeting they canceled and forget they canceled the first time. I mean it is the craziest thing I've seen! Everything in life for us is somewhat immovable; nothing's set in stone, so that we can come together and say that our God is fixed. Our God is sure. Our God is the same yesterday and today and forevermore. It is an incredible comfort that we must not turn into a clique, that we must not overlook or underutilize as Christians. We must face the fears of this world and the uncertainties and sorrows of today and tomorrow with the reality that God remains King.

Encouraged and Invigorated by His Kingship

Now this might be a sermon that's geared more toward the missionaries who are here than the rest of you, but for those who are laboring on the field and seen hard days, I know you've taken to this. I know this has been a comfort for you. But I would say this applies to this church. You lost a senior minister who had been here seventeen years. You are in a transitional phase. You need it said to you that God is King, that He remains seated on His throne. When I moved eight hours away and I did something that I said I would never do, I said "I'll never leave the state of South Carolina" - don't ever do something like that folks. I needed people to tell me that God is King. When nothing went right, I needed people to tell me that God is King. And that's precisely what Isaiah is doing here. That's precisely what the Lord was doing for His prophet. He was saying, "All is well no matter what you see with your eyes presently." God was showing him the unknown and visible reality that in heaven there is a throne room that is forever occupied.

You see, the problem with us is that one event happens - one bad election, somebody gets elected that we don't want to get elected, things go wrong in politics, some traumatic event happens in the church, and we start thinking the sky is falling. We start thinking we're going to the proverbial "hell in a hand-basket." Folks, this passage is to remind us that when the end comes for those in Christ it's a glorious consummation we're awaiting, not an out of control spiral. The uncertainty of this day does not affect the certainty that Christ will come again in glory, that Christ will make all wrongs right, that Christ will bring perfect justice to this universe. And my friends, as we try to be missionaries, each of us, disciples, each of us, in this crazy uncertain world, we've got to remember that King Jesus is seated on His throne orchestrating the events of our lives and the entirety of His kingdom. And all the while He is gathering a people from every tribe, tongue, people and nation. So what is one of the four "Whys?" that this passage shows us of mission? Because our God is King. Because our God rules over hearts. He rules over circumstances. He rules over false world

systems and certainly over the true Biblical worldview. He is King over all.

II. Why Mission? Because of His Holiness

But we see in the second place, in verses 2 through 5, the “Why?” to mission is because of His holiness. It’s extremely rare to find an authority figure in a fallen world who doesn’t abuse his authority. That’s one aspect of God’s holiness that I think we’ve overlooked, or at least should at least receive a footnote in a systematic theology - that our God is a God who, in His holiness, properly uses His authority 100% of the time. It’s never in vain, it’s never abusive, it’s never overreaching. God always uses His authority to accomplish means that are good for us and that bring glory to His name. So you’ve heard and you’ve seen in old westerns, old Clint Eastwood movies, the chain gang having to take dirt out of the ditch and put it in the road and then they take it from the road and put it back in the ditch. God is never going to use His authority to break us. He says later on in this book, “the bruised reed He will not break.” And so we see this beautiful coupling here of sovereignty, of kingship, but then of holiness. You see His holiness reminds us that we aren’t God; He is. His holiness reminds us that it is He who the seraphim had to cover themselves in His presence. He was so great, He was so splendid, that they literally, those beautiful beings that we would all wish to see, could not stand in His presence. And we know the beauty of their song, the song that we will join in singing in heaven forever and ever more, “Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of hosts! The whole earth is full of His glory!”

A Full-Orbed Picture of the Lord God

Now how does this relate to mission? You see, verse 5 is a reality, a message, a true statement that must be proclaimed throughout the world. “I am a man of unclean lips and I cannot stand in the presence of the King.” You see, part of being balanced and Biblical is to make sure that our message tells the whole truth and the whole truth is that our God is a consuming fire who will indeed punish the guilty. His kingship demands it. His holiness demands it. This is a cry that first and foremost we must remember. This is a true statement that first and foremost we must remember. We were born in sin, not righteousness. We were born in Adam, not in Christ. And that glorious transformation in our conversion in justification had to take place, had to happen because His holiness demanded it, because His holiness demanded it.

And just let me say this in passing. We should never apologize for God’s holiness. We should never apologize as Christians that His holiness demands justice. We should never apologize that our God will punish the guilty, for after all, if God were not to do this, if God were not to be a God who is to be feared, if God were not this consuming fire, this glorious triune Being, then He would be just like us and He would be of no use and He would simply be a figment of our imagination, not this glorious God we see laid out before us in Isaiah. No, there

was a reason that they sang out, “Holy, holy, holy” and this is a message that we need to proclaim; this is a message that we need to believe. Yes, He is Father. Yes, He is Lover of our souls. Yes, in Christ we are welcome to run to Him and to cry out, “Abba!” Yes, we have a seat at the banquet table forever and ever, but we must always remember that in His character, in His attributes, He is this perfect, glorious God.

III. Why Mission? Because of His Forgiveness

Well we have seen that His kingship, His sovereignty gives us a motivation, a reason for mission. We have seen that His holiness likewise does. But thirdly we see that one of the reasons for mission is because of His forgiveness. You see, we now have the benefit of ending our time together tonight looking at the rest of this passage, but when Isaiah was standing before this holy God you had to know there was a tension because we have to remember this statement in verse 5 is accurate. If God were not to intervene, he would have been ruined because he had seen a holy God. He could not stand in His presence unless something, unless God were to intervene, unless something was to be done. And so we see in verse 6 and 7 this grand Old Testament scene foreshadowing and clearly pointing us to the cross of Jesus Christ. We see before us the Gospel pictured, this beautiful picture of the King who is holy, making provision for a sinful man and then allowing that sinful man to be in His presence. Isaiah could not cleanse himself. Isaiah could not provide in and of himself what he needed to remain safe and welcome before this glorious presence. No. You see, the coal had to be applied.

A Picture of Redemption

And don't we see how beautiful this message of forgiveness is in light of His holiness? Don't you see how this, in a small picture, is the story of redemption. There's a holy God whose righteousness has been offended, whose wrath now burns. Then there must be, because of His holiness, a provision made. And we know that this passage is pointing to the Lord Jesus Christ. We know that this burning coal is representative of the person and work, the body and blood of Jesus Christ, and we know that here before our eyes we see the Gospel. We see a beautiful God who loves His people well.

A Picture of Atonement

And notice the sufficiency of this forgiveness - guilt taken away, sin atoned for. It wasn't, “Hey, the burning coal gives you a one-time ‘get out of jail free’ card but I don't ever want to find you here again.” It wasn't, “Hey, you're safe for today but let's hope you don't mess up after you leave.” No, this is Old Testament language translated into the New Testament of propitiation, of covering, of guilt being removed, of a penalty being paid. This is the language of Christ dying for

our sins and giving us His righteousness in Old Testament language. Now I will note that most commentators think that this is actually not Isaiah's conversion; this is his commission. Most commentators think that this was a reminder for Isaiah what had been done and what must have been done for him in order to be a disciple, in order to be a servant, in order to be a prophet, in order to be a Christian, a believer. This was showing him very plainly and very clearly what had been done on his behalf, that God made provision for an unrighteous man.

A Message Worth Telling

But don't you see how, once again, this is a story too good to keep to ourselves. First, if we want to be effective at mission we have to believe the Gospel ourselves. If we want to be effective at mission we have to apply this beautiful picture of redemption, this beautiful picture of atonement and cleansing and each day we have to say to ourselves, "This is true of me who is in Jesus Christ." It's not modern to say that we need to remind ourselves daily of the Gospel. The Puritans said that; the Puritans wrote about that. All the way back in our history our theologians have said, "You, Christian, must daily remind yourself and must daily take large doses of the Gospel lest you forget, lest you forget." And so as missionaries come off the field and as some of you are here for a week of rest, before you go and tell anybody about the Good News, do you believe it? No, not did you pass a theology exam that included the language. Do you believe it? Are you appropriating the gifts of the risen Lord Jesus Christ to your life as you deal with failure, as you deal with trials, as you deal with uncertainty? Do you believe that God loves you because of Jesus? You see, because if we can't get that down we've lost our primary motivation. For anything we do. Not our only motivation. There are other good motivations but we've lost our primary motivation for doing mission. It's that we've forgotten the Good News and therefore we become uncertain. "Well where do we stand with this God? Well how does He relate to me?" Again, you would never fail these things on a theology exam but if we were able to film you for a week like a reality TV show, how many times could we say of ourselves, "In that moment I totally lived as if the Gospel was not true"? And in the gruesome, never-ending task of mission, we cannot be afore those who forget the Gospel because we who come in Christ come as those who have been forgiven, the guilt taken away, removed as far as the east is from the west.

But this is not just a balm for the missionary. This is the message that we must proclaim. Oh yes, we talk about His holiness, yes, we talk about His kingship, yes, we talk about His rights as sovereign over creation to demand things from us, but the other half of the news is a proclamation that in Jesus this holy God is satisfied, that in Jesus, holiness meets holiness, that in Jesus, guilt is taken away, that in Jesus, you have hope, that in Jesus fear is removed, that in Jesus you have certainty - something absolute. I know this sounds counterintuitive, but believe me, in a postmodern world where the philosophy of our age is uncertainty or the philosophy of our age is skepticism or the philosophy of our age is, "Who's

to say anything?" deep down inside, because of common grace and because of us all being image bearers, people around you and people around me are crying out for somebody to tell them something that's true. And you're not compromising anything if you tell them that God is love. You're not watering down the message if, with a smile on your face, you tell them, "Believe in Jesus and you will be saved." That's what missions is. That's what a conference like this is to do - it's to gather people to love and pray for those who have given their life vocationally to proclaim this message.

You know I actually was going to ask this before I started but I'm going to take a guess here. You'll notice that you are one of the few churches that refers to everything as "mission" not "missions" and I've let it slip and put an "s" on the end about ten times tonight! I think this is why your Session and why your publications have no "s" on the end. Make disciples is the mission given to the church, so let's be specific on this. The reason we're here is to encourage, pray for, and financially support people who have given their life to go make disciples. But for us to have the zeal or the vigor to see that this is important, we ourselves must constantly be appropriating the Good News of Jesus Christ.

IV. Why Mission? Because of His Plea

We do mission because of His kingship, we do mission because of His holiness, we do mission because of this glorious forgiveness, and finally we do mission because of this plea He gives us at the end of the passage. Isaiah's standing there - "I heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?' Then I said, 'Here am I, send me.' And he said, 'Go.'" Now I want us to pause for a minute and be struck with wonder at what just happened right here. The King of Kings, the Lord of Lords, the one who was just pictured for us that the seraphim could not see, just asked sinful man to be a servant in this kingdom and join in the glorious work of redemption and be a mouthpiece for God to go and proclaim the Good News. Let me make sure you don't think I'm talking about simply Isaiah. God not only knows the sinfulness in our hearts and sinful actions of the past, God knows every failure and every shortcoming you will have until you see Him, and He nonetheless calls us to join in mission. If I was a businessman, if I owned a company, and my business was to go make disciples, I would not hire me. That would be a bad investment and we would all have to say that of ourselves. But He calls us.

A God of Unlikely Candidates

You go to Hebrews 11. I'm pretty sure y'all have preached through that recently. You go to Hebrews 11 and look who He called. You look at some folks who have come out of this church, and by the way, I'm going to say this not to give y'all a big head but just to keep you humble. You'll never know the impact this church has had on the larger scene of Christians throughout the world. You'll never

know the impact this church has had just by getting behind people who had a vision for God, a vision for mission. You'll never know the impact you've had. And you know what? Most of the men who've been effective on the outside, they're not the prettiest, they're not the flashiest, they weren't the smartest, and yet I could go down lists and lists of people who have been effected and converted under their ministries. I can find you RUF campus ministers who came out of your midst who do not look like they have what it takes to do the job and there are elders and deacons and pastors at every church in this state who came out of their ministry. Never stop marveling at the fact that God is pleased to use you and to use me. It's a sign you've forgotten the Good News if you do. Never forget it. He uses our feeble attempts, He uses our doubt, He uses our insufficiencies and He, working behind the scene, He, providing the Holy Spirit, He, providing the compass for us, He works this for good for His glory.

A God Who Equips and Enables

And the response Isaiah gives scares me to death. Isaiah did something that you never do in life. He said "Yes" before asking for any details. If I had time to read through the rest of the passage, his job description is absolutely terrible. "Go tell them that they're not going to see because their eyes are going to be heavy. Go tell them that their ears are going to be stopped up. And go tell them that their cities are going to lie in waste without inhabitants." What inspired him to say "Yes" without knowing the details? He had just seen what the Gospel looks like in his life. He had just seen what it looks like when a holy God pours out His love, affection, and forgiveness on a sinner. He had just seen that what God gave him in forgiveness was all the equipping and all the training he needed to do anything God asked and required of him. Do we or do we not believe those verses in the New Testament? Do we or do we not believe that His divine power has granted us all things that pertain to life and godliness? Do we not believe that Ephesians tells us in Christ we have every spiritual blessing? Isaiah didn't need the details. Now I'm not telling you to be a "fly by the seat of your pants, don't seek counsel, just go stick a shingle on the outside and do ministry." But what I'm saying is, the details are insignificant compared to the God who calls and the God who equips. You're never going to have enough time, you're never going to have enough money, you're never going to have enough brains. You're never going to have any of those. Don't want for them. You have a right standing before the Father because of Jesus, and that, my friends, is all that you need to do mission. That, my friends, is all that you need to say, "Here am I. Send me."

Well I would love to preach for another hour but I'm guessing you would not like that as much as I am, so let's try to get off the exit ramp and land this plane here. Statistically speaking, it's likely that nobody in this room will be a vocational missionary. There's not enough people in here for me to get the statistics up that some of you might do it, unless you're already here. Now obviously you're the curb buster. Statistically speaking, a simple majority of you will never go on a mission trip of any kind. Some 49% may. Statistically

speaking - that was three times too hard for me! - statistically speaking, some of you will never give a penny to missions. And yet there's this strange, piercing, sharp, unavoidable word, "Go," in verse 9.

V. Application: The Good News in All of Life

And so what does that mean for us? Where do we go? Allow me some application. Perhaps we need to go into the dressing room where our wives are preparing themselves for the day ahead and tell them that in Christ, they have been reconciled to a kingly, holy God and He loves them. Perhaps we need to tell that their success as a mom that day is not going to define who they are in Jesus. Ladies, perhaps you need to walk into the TV room where the recliner is and say the same thing to your husband and tell him the Good News. Parents, perhaps it's time to tell your sixteen year old child that they need to be reconciled to God or even it might be time for you to call your forty year old child hours away and with tears in your eyes and with every ounce of being say, "Son, are you trusting in Jesus?" Students, perhaps you need to tell your doubting friend that the Good News is greater than his doubts. Neighbor, perhaps it's time to cast off all fear and invite your grilling buddy to church and even speak winsomely and truthfully about his soul, about weighty, eternal matters. Employer, perhaps the way you have treated your employees has been antithetical to the Gospel. Repent and tell and show them the Good News. Tell them and show them what a life of repentance, what a life of Gospel-living looks like. Missionary, you who have come from far away or from nearby - by the way, I win the award for being the closest missionary to come! I came about five blocks. Missionary, it might have been a long year for you. If you belong to an organization that requires you to turn in statistics, you might be terrified because you didn't have one conversion. With your eyes and with the recent history that you can recall, you might not have seen any success. Please do not measure your success based on what your eyes can see. God is at work and He is greater than our vision of the here and now.

And Christian, all of us, perhaps all of us need to take a fresh look at the word, "good," in Good News and rekindle the fire we once had for the living God. From this room tonight, would there be a people without exception who reach out with both hands and drink deeply of the Gospel. Would this room ignite in prayers just momentarily with the reality that the Gospel would set in our hearts like cold in our bones on a winter's day. Dear friends, He is King. He is holy. He is forgiving. He is calling and He is faithfully and persistently at work.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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