

Bristol Conference 1976-16 Studies in the Judges

by Bob Clark

The sermon emphasizes the importance of true leadership amongst God's people and the need to learn to esteem it, using the story of Abimelech as an illustration.

Duration: 40:22

Scripture: Jeremiah 24:1, Luke 22:27

Topics: "Bible Conference"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher focuses on the concept of serving others and the spiritual deterioration of the nation. The sermon begins with a reference to Jesus describing himself as one who serves. The preacher then discusses a passage from the book of Jeremiah, where the prophet sees two baskets of figs, one good and one bad, symbolizing the spiritual condition of the people. The sermon then shifts to a parable in the Bible, which is the first parable mentioned in the Bible. The parable serves as a lesson on true leadership and the qualities that God looks for in guiding his people. The preacher emphasizes the importance of aspiring to and esteeming this kind of leadership. The sermon concludes with a story of a pretender who manipulates his way into power, committing terrible acts to ensure his dominance.

Transcript

I have found sweet peace that I never have known, And so since I did your divine, my wonderful, I desire that my life shall be yielded to, O thou ancient gift give thee praise, My wonderful, my hope, my hope, Thank you so much, brother and sister, appreciate it. If you are here for the first time, you might be facing the same dilemma as I. I have faithfully visited the bookstore and wondered how they could be so incompetent and careless that the store was always closed. It was never open.

I found out that I was going to a bookstore down this direction in the corridor and being here for almost a whole week, and nobody told me where the bookstore was to be found, even though the books were advertised. So if you're in the same position that I am, if you go out this door and turn right, it's very convenient in access, and there are some very good books there. One of them is a book called Born Again.

It's not the type of book that you might want to buy for yourself, but the average preacher or elder or an older godly person that's maybe having a birthday soon and you'd like to invest around eight dollars for

them, give them something worthwhile that they might not spend themselves, written by Charles Colton. An excellent book, giving a little panoramic view of the corruption in government and its development and deterioration, and yet the faithful testimony that's going on. Men like Secretary Burns, who is meeting faithfully and leading others in prayer with exercise of soul.

A very valuable testimony, and it'll be refreshing or interesting to older, mature believers who have time to read something like that. So it might make a good gift. If you have ten dollars, you'll get about nearly two dollars change from this book, and you can buy a little paperback book called *Abide in Christ* by Murray.

Very nice. It makes nice devotional reading, short chapter, one day, one chapter a day for a whole month. Mothers, I doubt if your husbands would be interested, and they won't even read the book, unfortunately.

But you should really get *Dare to Discipline* by Mr. Dobson. Guidance and direction concerning the training and directives for children, and then when that's been put under your belt, if you maybe already have it, don't miss *Hide and Seek*. A very good book, showing us a really valuable perspective, how we have damaged and offended the work of the Spirit in the heart of some of our young by our overly critical dispositions or attitudes, and how to cultivate a real sense of maturity and worth in a proper balance in a child.

The bookstore is not too far away, and for just a couple of dollars, you can bring something very valuably home. I trust that you'd go over and visit. Judges, chapter 9. Now, the story of Abimelech is unique in the book of Judges.

Abimelech is not a judge. A great amount of space is given to him, 57 verses in this book, and yet he is not actually a judge. He never delivered the country from oppressors.

He was crowned as king in Shechem, and for three years he had an improper reign, and then he died a violent and humiliating death as part of the judgment of God upon himself. Abimelech represents, unfortunately, a principle that is very evident amongst God's people. Diographies like he sought place and recognition and authority, desire to be common, he had absolutely no brotherly love or consideration, and in this record that's given to us, there's not a single spiritual feature that is gleanable concerning this man.

Why is this included in Scripture? There are many lessons to learn, and most of them are very negative lessons, but they're valuable lessons. So I would like to suggest to you that you might even want to jot down that there are four reasons for the inclusion of Gideon, or rather Abimelech, in this part of the Scripture. First is, it shows a tendency toward kingship.

God's people are looking for some visible and are susceptible for some tangible local ruler, some kind of authority that they could lean upon. The inclination that God's people have toward the king, and this increases, as we'll see through the book, in preparation for their great cry to Samuel, "Give us a king that we might be like the nation!" Secondly, the extent of Baal worship is permeated, and Shiloh is only about 15 to 20 miles away, and yet we find actual temples of Baal. Not just worshipping areas, but temples themselves, central worshipping places of Baal worship, right near to the very place of God's worship.

The conditions in the central part of the country are described to us. Yesterday we saw what it was to the east of Jordan, and now to the west of Jordan, and we're getting a good overall picture that the nation is spiritually deteriorating. And then the last is the spiritual lessons to be learned, and there's one great spiritual lesson to be gleaned from this particular portion of Scripture that we would like to center our

thoughts upon.

Chapter 9, verses 1-6. Give us the pretender. He has no place in rule or authority, and these six verses tell us the simple story of Gideon's heavy influence and how susceptible Abimelech was.

Our blessed Lord said something that is very difficult for most of us, including myself, to genuinely lay hold of. The Lord Jesus said, "Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me, for I am meek and lowly in heart. You shall find rest to your soul.

Many of us have found the rest of coming to Christ the first time. Many of us have not found the rest that he speaks of by coming to him the second time. He offered once to come unto him and find rest.

That was the initial coming of salvation. But then the coming of sanctification, the coming of yielding to his yoke, and the very tones of being meek and lowly in heart do not accommodate themselves to our temperament or the general disposition of the world around." It's a sad thing, but it is very true that it's hard for me to genuinely be meek and lowly of heart, to think less of myself and more of others, to be kinder to others, no matter what they say or do or think of me, to genuinely sit in judgment upon my own affections and preferences and priorities, and to seek to honor the Lord in my attitudes and dispositions, no matter what is going on around me. It's very much of a challenge, but if ever I arrive at that place, I know that I shall find rest, the cessation of strife and anxiety for my own soul.

Abimelech did not have it. Gideon played a heavy role in misguiding this son. Seventy sons lived in his immediate area, and Abimelech was the child of a concubine.

His name means, as we noted last evening, My Father is a King. Gideon lived like a king. He raised an enormous family, hardly the picture of vigor and self-sacrifice and restraint, but rather he lived a life of ease, reflection, self-indulgence.

And Abimelech absorbed this, and it became the emphasis for him that when his father died, he takes the initiative. And you'll notice that he begins now, in his own efforts, to raise up some that will join him. He goes to his mother's brethren and communed with them, with all the family of the house of his mother's father, saying, Seek, I pray you, in the ears of all the men of Shechem, whether it is better for you either that all the sons of Jeroboam, which are threescore and ten persons, reign over you, or that one reign over you.

Remember also that I am your bone and your flesh. It makes a two-pronged attack. One, that it's reasonable.

It's much better to have one king than seventy. He automatically assumes that what his father had begun, by subtle implication, is going to be perpetuated, and that is, there must be a ruler, someone to live like a king and control and dominate God's people. That, of course, is efficient thinking, something that comes out of modern business as well.

But you have to have somebody that rules the local church, and there's nobody better than the most efficient executive in the local church. We sometimes fall to those kind of ideas by means of the aggressiveness, the choleric disposition or temperament, whatever it is as a vigor in the control of the person, we are susceptible to this kind of thinking. It seemed reasonable, too, that he was making appeal on the basis that I am your flesh and your bone.

I'm identified with a Shechemite. You should put me in. And so they did.

They reigned. They enthroned him. They crowned him there in Shechem, and then gave seventy pieces of silver that he might go to the altar of an alien, heathen god, and at Baal Bereth draw out and buy some vain, empty, wicked men to follow him.

Then there was a terrible atrocity performed, a massacre of his own family. In order to gantee rule and to assure dominance, he takes and kills every one of his brothers, sixty-nine of them in all, and one by the name of Jilsum escapes. In verse five, he went into his father's house at Ophir and slew his brethren, the sons of Jeroboam, being threescore and ten persons upon one stone.

Notwithstanding, yet Jilsum, the youngest son of Jeroboam, was left, for he hid himself. And all the men of Shechem gathered together, and all the house of Milo went, and made of him a king on the plain of the pillar that was in Shechem. This violent atrocity, you know, lust for power, will cause us to do outrageous things, completely contradictory to what we profess to believe, even.

And God wants to expose to us a horrendous example of what it means to seek to be a dominant feature amongst God's people, to control God's people, not being raised up of God, not by example, not by influencing our peers for good and for God, but rather just this aggressive, dominant person. There's an illustration that we'd like to draw from in the 3rd John, and we'll look at that a little bit later. But they are diocretes who love us to have the free eminence, and there shall always be those when given proper direction and superintendency and enough correction, they can be vigorous leaders amongst God's people.

But not so with Abimelech. He must rule and reign in control. So, verses 1-6, the Pretender.

Now, in verse 7-21, we have the parable. Now, the parable that is told here is very important for two simple reasons, and there may be more. One, it's the first parable told in the Bible.

So by this reason, it's the basis of future interpretations, and it's the principle of biblical parables. And secondly, there is pictured for us here a most remarkable illustration, the embodiment of what is real leadership amongst God's people. Clear understanding of what God is looking for to be true leadership in the direction and the guidance of God's people.

And it's a very valuable lesson for each of us to learn, that we might aspire for it, and secondly, that we might learn to esteem it. And that is just as important. There are those in our local assemblies that, seeking to circumscribe their life and walk with what God is looking for in their lives, and yet you have not valued it enough to respect their ministration and to put ourselves under them, and to see them as those that God has raised up to rule over us.

It is important that we learn to have spiritual perception, and I think this is a dramatic lesson in just such a truth to be absorbed. Verse 7, When they told it unto Joseph, he went and stood in the top of Mount Gerizim, and lifted up his voice, and cried, and said unto them, Hearken unto me, ye men of Sheol, that God may hearken unto you. The trees went forth on a time to anoint a king over them, and they said unto the olive tree, Rain thou over us.

But the olive said unto them, Should I leave my fatness? Wherewith by me they honour God and man, and go to be promoted over the trees. And the tree said unto the fig tree, Come thou and rain over us. But the fig tree said, Should I forsake my sweetness and my good fruit to go to be promoted over the trees? Then

said the trees unto the vine, Come thou and rain over us.

And the vine said unto them, Should I leave my wine, which cheereth God and man, and go to be promoted over the trees? Then said all the trees unto the bramble, Come thou and rain over us. And the bramble said unto the trees, If in truth you anoint me king, then come and put your trust in my shadow, and if not, let fire come out of the bramble, and devour the cedars of Lebanon. Now therefore, if you have done truly and sincerely in that you have made Abimelech king, if you have dealt well with Jeroboam and his house, and have done unto him according to the deserving of his hands, for my father fought for you, and adventured his life far, and delivered you out of the hand of Midian, and you were risen up against my father's house this day, and have slain his sons, threescore and ten persons, upon one stone, and have made Abimelech the son of his maidservant king over the men of Shechem, because he is your brother.

If you then have dealt truly and sincerely with Jeroboam and with his house this day, then rejoice ye in Abimelech, and let him also rejoice in you. But if not, let fire come out from Abimelech, and devour the men of Shechem and the house of Milo, and let fire come from the men of Shechem and from the house of Milo, and devour Abimelech." In other words, he prophesies there will be a tremendous civil war as a result of their misguidance and misjudgment, and that civil war will lead into the death of Abimelech, the destruction of the house of Shechem, terror and bloodshed and division and strife amongst God's people because of their inability to accept true leadership as God raises it up. One of the marked weaknesses and failures of the day is that we feel it a necessity to assume the responsibility to make appointment to the leadership of God's people.

To the best of my knowledge, in Holy Scripture there is no such prerogative given to the church. God raises up leadership, and he does it in a fashion that is illustrated here not by one who takes leadership, but by one who merits and deserves leadership because of his life. You'll notice up on the little outline there are four trees, an olive, a fig, a vine, and then the bramble.

The olive speaks to us of usefulness, the fig of fruitfulness, the vine of joyfulness, and the bramble of worthlessness. We have to make our choice the type and the character that we're going to be to qualify for guiding and leading God's people. Very simple, but a very profound lesson for each of us to learn.

Bring thou over us. We need somebody to be leadership, and to whom shall we turn? To the olive tree first. Select the olive tree.

The olive tree is a good tree. Remember now, according to the parable, these are the cedars of Lebanon. High, majestic, massive, statuesque, impressive things.

Jotham is really flattering his brethren at Shechem and likening them to these great cedars of Lebanon. But God's people, and the government of God, has indeed a stature and a quality and a charm about it. But they wisely know that that which is fruitful, not merely massive amounts of wood and leaf and shade, but that which is fruitful is what is important.

Productivity is the import of real leadership. And so they turn to the olive. Why to the olive? Because of the oil, because of the illumination that it affords, whether in the home or in the temple, because it's used to anoint and satisfy the instruments of the tabernacle, or the anointing of a priest.

It's useful for God and man. It's anointment that was put upon the face and the complexion, not only to aid complexion, but to bring a glow of warmth and beauty. It was a form of cosmetic.

It was a very useful commodity, the olive and the oil. It sustained and afforded medication. It had a healing quality.

Why not turn to the olive tree? What tremendous usefulness, what real value it was. Why, this is much that we can have. We should have the olive tree.

Are you a useful person? Do you bring blessing and honor to God and man? Does administration in your Sunday school class, the personal conversations that you have in your home, a little cup of tea after a meeting is over, or an afternoon visit with a friend, does it become useful? Is it nourishing? Are you a medicant? Are you food and sustenance and nourishment? It's a blessing to be in the fellowship and companionship of some who have been able to sift out the important things of life and direct our thoughts toward them, a source of sustenance and food. Now, this is what is real leadership amongst God's people, real usefulness. The psalmist says in Psalm 52 and 8, I am like a green olive tree, dependent upon the loving kindness of God.

The suggestion is that the olive tree is aware that its all-sustaining and its great productivity and its wonderful usefulness to God and man comes from God itself. Take his yoke upon you and learn of him, and be meek and lowly in heart. Find that blessed rest to your own soul, child of God, brother or sister, young or old.

It shall be maybe one of the most difficult lessons to learn for those of us who are teenagers. There's the potential for some of us in our twenties, but the grand opportunity is if you were in your thirties or forties, you have the psychological bent to begin to appreciate, by contrast to the leadership and the abuses that you have seen, we learn the quality just by a circumferal look around us of what is real value in our lives. For the first time, some of you men are beginning to appreciate a wife and her consistency, her holiness, and her perpetual faithful care for her own children.

We're beginning to evaluate and come out of ourselves. Some of us in our thirties or forties have gotten to somewhere near the place where we've accepted our lot in life, what we look like and our capacities and our limitations, and by such we are then especially prepared to accept this ministration that God can be yoke to you, and you can assume this yoke and find genuine humility and meekness and lowliness of heart. Thankful for any gift that's been given, unbegrudgingly to acknowledge the frailties and weaknesses, and thus become more useful to God.

Come thou and reign over us! We need the useful, the persons that are productive, that demonstrate that they lean on God and are truthful for God. Why should I leave my fatness and my productivity? Why should I be a leader? I'm perfectly happy where I am, so the cedars turn then to the fig tree. That's next and logical in line.

And the tree said unto the fig tree, come thou and reign over us. But the fig tree said unto them, should I forsake my sweetness and my good fruit and go to be promoted over the tree? The fig tree suggests fruitfulness, the sweet, succulent, nourishing, refreshing, sustaining fruit of the fig. Makes no difference if it's fresh or if it's dried, it still has its own sweetness.

And the fruit of the spirit is love and joy and peace, long-suffering, gentleness, meekness, kindness, temperance, goodness, faith. Do you appreciate sweetness? Now, by that I do not mean the affectation of social amenability. I mean genuine humbleness of spirit and soul, genuine evidence of a tender, sensitive soul.

In 2 Corinthians chapter 10, the apostle in a spirit of agony and burden of heart, not for himself, he had been thoroughly despised, the portion tells us. They had set him aside because of his facial or external appearances, ineptness, his weakness. He was vain and empty as far as those carnal Christians at Corinth were concerned, and he fled with them.

Now, it's not often a man that has apostolic and divine power will humbly plead with God's people, and yet the apostle says, I beseech you by the meekness and gentleness of Christ. Do you value those qualities, or are you still engulfed in respecting the aggressive, brazen, self-confident activity of the flesh? Now, it may work in business, and it may cost somebody in the world a ramp, but we must make a delineation between the house of God and his family and spiritual leadership. What was it that the Lord said? The Gentiles exercise lordship, but we serve.

And he turned to his disciples and described his own life by saying, I am among you as one that serves. I tell you it's a delightful thing, if God can touch your soul, that you might begin to appreciate the tender, sweet fruits of the Spirit in the heart of God's people. Jeremiah illustrated just a little bit before chapter 27 that Tom drew our attention to that unique time when he was ministering to God's people and offered them the opportunity to please just surrender, give ourselves up to God, and accept what God had for us.

Well, just prior to that announcement, in chapter 24, Jeremiah was urged of God. He says, Jeremiah, what do you see? And I say, two baskets of figs. One very, very succulent, juicy, good basket of figs, and the other basket of figs naughty, sour, tart, unpalatable figs.

He says, all right, such is God's people. He said, those of you who resent the discipline of God, those of you that shall try to escape to Egypt, those of you who will take up arms and fight and defend yourself, tart, naughty, unpalatable figs, but any of you in Israel that will passively accept the discipline of God, any of you who are willing to see and to be exercised and bear the peaceable fruits of righteousness, you shall be like rich, good, sweet, succulent figs. Sweetness, the acceptance of discipline, receiving this discipline in the government of God in our lives, and allowing it to produce, not with arms that hang down in Hebrews 12, not with a resentment of spirit, but seeing the love of our Father.

Ah, yes, let's have the fig tree rule over us, the one that's gone through the trying experience, the one that's weathered the storm and deepened their faith, the one that's been exercised by the disciplines and the growth of soul and maturity, that one who shall be able to minister to us, and the same comfort wherewith he or she has been comforted, they comfort those around them. And we become a thriving, maturing, growing, someone who's youthful, someone who's fruitful. But the fig says, no, I'm perfectly happy where I am.

Well, right, let's turn to the vine. Verse 12, Then said the trees unto the vine, Come, bow and reign over us. And the vine said unto them, Should I leave my wine, which cheereth God and man, and go to be promoted over the trees? Joyfulness, the joy that comes to the heart of God's people, its wine that cheereth, maketh glad the heart of man.

In its modest form it brings warmth and exhilaration and refreshment, and God put his approbation upon it. It was used also as an offering poured out and consumed in flame, and it became a blessing to God and an ornament to the offering to him. It brings joy, the fullness of the joy.

Yesterday, one of our brethren led us in prayer and reminded us that the joy of the Lord is our strength. A joyful believer, one who is youthful, one who is fruitful, and one who is joyful. Now, that is leadership.

Why? Because each has drawn their nourishment from God. Whether it's from private Bible study, it's near being exhorted, meditative reflectiveness, intimate communion with the living vine. O beloved of God, where are our lives? Am I a joyful, youthful, fruitful believer? Oh my, go to trials and I sometimes hear myself complain, seldom audibly because I'm not a very expressive person, but oftentimes secreted away in my soul.

I'll tell you a secret as an illustration. I have not learned to accept discipline from God. I used to be a rather physically active and healthy person.

God has seen fit to afflict my physical body, not merely with age, as my white hair indicates, but with a constant nagging discomfort and pain. And I don't care for it, and I sometimes resent it, and it makes me weary. And oftentimes, late at night, when seeking to comfort or deal with others, I'm afraid I become rather irritable and tired.

Not very fruitful, losing an awful lot of the joy that's potential. But ah, there's leadership. When you find that child of God that is truly useful in the hands of God, producing the sweet fruits of the Spirit, exuding not just humorosity and laughter, but a deep, settled joy.

The Lord said, if you know that I have these commandments, happy are ye if you do them. John says, these things have I written unto you, that your joy might be full. That we might be a warm, settled, happy people, enjoying the fellowship of one another in God's people.

And we can be led and directed when moment we begin to venerate spiritual, moral characteristics rather than the mere external. There must be a cessation in our lives to show the respective person, or gift, when it comes to leadership. There's a careful mark between gift and leadership.

Leadership is the quality of the man, the character, the fruit of the Spirit born in the life, from a proximity to our blessed Lord, and a mirroring of his glorious person. And, beloved of God, that's available to every one of you. Every single one of you have your copy of Holy Scripture, and have time to spend in his presence, and then reflect his grace and love and humility.

May you do better than I. May we dispose ourselves to spend time with our blessed Lord Jesus, and reflect his tender, meek, humble quality. He is the head of the church. Well, of course, he's turned down because he's perfectly happy to bring joy to God and to man.

And so the trees turn to the bramble, the box thorn, which carpets the area. It's a plague to the poor farmer. Choking out, laying right on the ground, sprawling around.

Lower and lower these fruits have become, until now the great cedars have come to the bramble. That's absolutely worthless. It's not even good for fire.

But it does create a fire. In the dry summer, it endangers all the cedars, if they're in and around it, because it'll easily ignite. And the old thorn, the bramble, it's going to cause a lot of trouble.

But it'll be glad to rain. Be pleased to rule, if you cedars get under my shadow. God's people have to bow low in order to put themselves under the kind of leadership that's suggested by Abimelech.

The application is very obvious. God is looking for fruitfulness, for usefulness, for joyfulness in you and me. That's the quality of real leadership.

Those are the persons that need not even say, follow me. But their example is charming and warming and encouraging. You know them.

Every assembly has a few. Some women, some men, a few young people. Once in a while, a married couple are willing to surrender some of themselves to cultivate these interests and these moral qualities.

From verse 22 on to the end of the chapter is the punishment that's levied by God. The civil war that strikes a contention has come out of this whole experience. In 3 John, there's a New Testament commentary on this portion.

In 3 John, the elder unto the well-beloved Gaius clears one. A fruitful, joyful, productive man, whom I love in truth. Beloved, I wish above all things that thou mayest prosper and be in health even as thy soul prospereth.

For I rejoiced greatly when the brethren came and testified of the truth that is in thee, even as thou walkest in the truth. I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth. Thou doest faithfully whatsoever thou doest to the brethren and to strangers which have borne witness of thy love before the church.

Whom must thou bring forward on their journey after a godly tour? Thou shalt do well, because after his namesake they went forth taking nothing of the Gentiles. We, therefore, ought to receive such that we might be fellow-helpers to the truth. I wrote unto the assembly, but diatrophies who love us to have the free eminence among them receiveth us not.

Gaius loving, caring, sacrificing, sharing, giving, and diatrophies wanting that dominant place of leadership. We have our choice, too, either to be in our lives a Bimelech, or to acknowledge a Bimelech characteristic, or to cultivate within usefulness, fruitfulness, and by the grace of God, a joyfulness that is a blessing and a nourishment to God's people. Now, we mentioned that a Bimelech suggests something in a period of the church's history.

Now, this is not an interpretation of the book of Judges. This is not the reason why the book of Judges was written. Judges was written as a historical book with some practical, temporal lessons and illustrations of eternal truths, qualities that are illustrated in the New.

But this is a little something that I believe will give some kind of symmetry and interest to the book of Judges. Othniel, Ahud, and Shambart suggest to us the qualities and characteristics that God is looking for at the earliest time in the church's history, on the left-hand side, all the way up to the coming of the Lord, the irregular line on the right-hand side of the chart. The latter time of the church's history, there is a raising up of women, pictured in Deborah taking a place of gifted leadership, raising up men like Barak, which immediately precedes the coming of the Lord, and after that, chapter 5, the judgment seat.

Gideon introduced to us many of the good qualities and characteristics whose influence continues in an irregular line all the way across to the end. The dark ages, times of division, times when the potpourri and the whole scheme of the Roman church is introduced by Abimelech. Something that substantiates this is when we read the parallel between Abimelech's end with a millstone being dropped on his head, and in the book of Revelation, chapter 18, the end that comes to the city Babylon with a great millstone crushes it.

There's enough of a similarity between its aggressiveness and care and oppressiveness, and the great influence of religious power and the inherent quality of passing on leadership and apostolic authority as suggested by Abimelech, and it's similar to that which is instituted by the great Roman church. We shall see following, subsequent to Rome, there came a great period of time that was marked by division and confusion, but deal and power, and that was the time of the Reformers, and that comes under Jesper a little bit later in the church's history, and then at the end time there is suggested sense and like quality, and these things should be drawn to our attention as we come to them. But the important lesson to learn, I would feel or suggest for us today, is that we learn in our own soul that true spiritual leadership is spiritual and moral character.

It is neither gift nor aggressive boldness of temperament or personality. We need to see and to esteem for our own selves, and to venerate as God allows whatever he is able to work in the heart of his people youthfulness, fruitfulness, and true joyfulness.

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