

The Life of Abraham - Part 7

by W.F. Anderson

This sermon explores the life of Abraham, emphasizing his friendship with God and his compassionate intercession for others, including his son Ishmael and the city of Sodom.

Scripture: Genesis 18:23-32, Genesis 19:29, Job 2:10, Job 2:13

Topics: "Faith And Trust", "Intimacy With God"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker emphasizes the importance of approaching the Bible not just as a source of facts or ammunition, but as a way to understand the heart and mind of God. He encourages listeners to seek God's longings and desires, and to let them become their own. The speaker also highlights the example of Abraham, who poured out his heart and mind to God, demonstrating a deep friendship and trust. The sermon concludes by reminding listeners that God has called them his friends and invites them to come to the Bible with a disciplined approach, but also with a desire to hear the heart of God.

Transcript

I brought out three books this morning because there's only one copy of one of these. And in the field of apologetics and in the field of theology, I like a young theologian by the name of Clark Pinnock. He was teaching at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School outside of Chicago.

He's now up at Regent College in Vancouver. And he has a little book here called *Set Forth Your Case*. It's a rational defense as well as a setting forth of the basic ideas of Christianity, the credentials of Christianity.

You've got young people off in college, people who are questioning the validity of Christianity. This would be a good book to put into their hands. In fact, any of Clark Pinnock's writings would be very, very helpful.

One of the debated areas in Christian doctrine today is the person and work of the Holy Spirit. And one of the, when I say simple, I mean it's easy to understand. One of the simplest books in the whole field is René Poche's *The Person and Work of the Holy Spirit*.

René Poche was principal of Emmaus Bible School in Lausanne, Switzerland, and a well-known theologian and writer. And this will not touch on some of the current controversies, but it will give you a good foundation as to what the Scripture says about the person and work of the Holy Spirit. So there are a number of copies back in the bookstore, and if you want something in the area of the ministry of the Holy

Spirit, René Poche's book is a very good one.

I'll be going on all morning here. One of the neglected areas of Scripture is the Old Testament, particularly the Minor Prophets. And yet I love the Minor Prophets.

Give me Job and the Minor Prophets and I'll eat the rest of my life. But a helpful series on the Minor Prophets was done a number of years ago by Dr. Charles Feinberg. And I see now they're out in paperback.

They've been out of print for a good while, and I got them in hardback a number of years ago. And now they're out in paperback. This is just one in the series on all the Minor Prophets.

It will give you the background of the Minor Prophet, what was going on in Israel or Judah at the time that he prophesied, and the basics of his message. It is not a detailed verse-by-verse examination, but it will give you the basics of the message of each one of the Minor Prophets. And this is one in a series back in the bookstore.

So if you'd like to dig into the Minor Prophets, if you've neglected them, get back into the Minor Prophets. They have a real message for us. So Dr. Feinberg's books on the Minor Prophets are back there in the bookstore.

Now, let's turn this morning again to Genesis chapter 17. We'll begin there, and then we'll look at some verses in chapters 18 and 19 as we look at lessons from the life of Abraham. Chapter 17, where we left off last night, when God promises to Abram that Sarai is going to bear a son.

Are you awake this morning? You're here. Okay. Okay, you're frozen to death, but you're here.

Very good. Okay. And if you go to sleep, don't worry about it.

I'll just assume it was too cold for you to sleep last night. Now, remember what C. H. Spurgeon used to say, that in many church meetings, sleep was a blessing of nature. So, it'll be all right.

Chapter 17 of the book of Genesis, and verse 18. After his joy at the announcement that Sarai was going to bear him a son, this is Abram's plea. Abraham said to God, Oh, that Ishmael might live in thy sight.

God said, No. But Sarai, your wife, shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him.

As for Ishmael, I have heard you. Behold, I will bless him, and make him fruitful, and multiply him exceedingly. He shall be the father of twelve princes, and I will make him a great nation.

Now, chapter 18. Beginning with verse 16. You remember the three men who came to visit Abram.

One of them was God himself, and two others I take to be the angels who went down to Sodom. In the next chapter, verse 16 of chapter 18. Then the men set out from there, and they looked toward Sodom.

And Abraham went with them to set them on their way. The Lord said, Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, seeing that Abraham shall become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall bless themselves by him, or be blessed in him? No. For I have chosen him, that he may charge his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice,

so that the Lord may bring to Abraham what he has promised him.

Then the Lord said, and of course he's talking to Abraham now, Because the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is great, and their sin is very grave, I will go down to see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry which has come to me, and if not, I will know. So the men turned from there and went toward Sodom. But Abraham still stood before the Lord.

By the way, there's an ancient rabbinical teaching that this verse was turned around. And what it originally read, now there's no textual evidence for it, but it's a rabbinical teaching. What it originally read was that God stood still before Abraham, as though waiting for Abraham to do what he now proceeds to do.

Then Abraham drew near and said, Wilt thou indeed destroy the righteous with the wicked? Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city. Wilt thou then destroy the place and not spare it for the fifty righteous who are in it? Far be it from thee to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked. Far be that from thee.

Shall not the judge of all the earth do right? And the Lord said, If I find at Sodom fifty righteous in the city, I will spare the whole place for their sake. Abraham answered, Behold, I have taken upon myself to speak to the Lord, I who am but dust and ashes. Suppose five of the fifty righteous are lacking.

Wilt thou destroy the whole city for lack of five? And he said, I will not destroy it if I find forty-five there. Again he spoke to him and said, Suppose forty are found there. He answered, For the sake of forty I will not do it.

Then he said, Oh, let not the Lord be angry, and I will speak. Suppose thirty are found there. He answered, I will not do it if I find thirty there.

He said, Behold, I have taken upon myself to speak to the Lord. Suppose twenty are found there. He answered, For the sake of twenty I will not destroy it.

Then he said, Oh, let not the Lord be angry, and I will speak again but this once. Suppose ten are found there. He answered, For the sake of ten I will not destroy it.

And the Lord went his way when he had finished speaking to Abraham, and Abraham returned to his place. Chapter 19 and verse 29. So it was that when God destroyed the cities of the valley, God remembered Abraham and sent Lot out of the midst of the overthrow, when he overthrew the cities in which Lot dwelt.

One of the greatest honors that we can pay to an individual is to call him a friend in the genuine sense of the word. There are all sorts of definitions of a friend. A friend is one who knows everything about you and loves you anyhow.

Scripture talks about friends a great deal. And in the true sense of the word, not in our friendliness atmosphere of our Western culture, but in the true sense of friend, one with whom you share your heart and mind, the greatest compliment you can pay an individual is genuinely to say he is your friend. Abraham had the high honor in Isaiah chapter 41 of being called the friend of God.

And what that means is that God shared his heart and mind with Abraham, as he did here in this 18th chapter of Genesis. Our Lord used the same term when he talked about his disciples in John chapter 15.

He said, I don't call you servants, I call you friends.

And the reason he could call them friends, at least the evidence that they were his friends, was what he immediately said. All that the Father has made known to me, I have told to you. And he had around him a group of men with whom he could fully share his heart and mind.

And those people he designated as friends. And that's a good definition of a friend. It's one with whom you can share all your heart and mind.

There are some people with whom you cannot do that, of course. People who don't understand. People who sit in judgment on you.

But if you honestly tell them what is in your heart, what you get back is a lecture why it shouldn't be there. Job found that with his friends. He thought they were his friends.

Now, I better not get started on the book of Job. It happens to be one of my favorites, as some of you know. But to his wife, he could say what he was supposed to say.

And I don't mean it wasn't honest from his heart. The Lord gave, the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord.

Shall we receive good from the hand of the Lord, and shall we not receive evil? And he said all the right things, even to his wife. But when his friends came and sat, he thought, here are people who will really understand me. And in chapter 3, he just pours out everything else that's in his heart.

Because he thought they were his friends. And he could tell them what he was really thinking. Of course, he was wrong in assuming they would understand.

But nevertheless, he thought they were his friends. And building on the idea of friendship, he poured out his heart and his mind to those three men. He regretted it, but he did it.

But that's a friend, one to whom you can pour out your heart and mind without fear, without concern of what they will think. With the realization they will at least try to understand, and they will help you in it. Abram was called the friend of God.

And God poured out what was in his heart and mind. Shall I hide from Abram the thing that I am about to do? No. No.

I can tell Abraham. And so God told Abraham what was in his heart and mind. Isn't it great to be the friend of God? All of us are, you know.

He has given us his word. He has poured out his heart and mind to us. Things that Peter says angels desire to look into.

Things that Peter says the prophets wrote. Didn't understand the fulfillment of it. And inquired of God about it.

Prophets and angels. And what do we do with it? And God has trusted us as his friends and has poured out his heart and his mind to us. How do we treat it? Is it a textbook where we find ammunition? Do we go to it just to find those things that support our already preconceived notions? Or do we come to the Bible as

the outpouring of God's heart and mind to us? That God has let us in on his own heart.

If I come to it that way, I'm not coming just for facts. I'm not coming just for Bible knowledge. I'm coming to understand what is important to the heart and mind of God.

How does he think? What is important to him? What are God's longings? What are his great yearnings? And with the prayer that those will become mine as well as his. That delivers us from becoming cold Bible students. It delivers us from using the scriptures as a club to beat our opponents into submission.

It lets us into the heart and mind of God. And our Lord has paid us the high honor of calling us his friends. It's the kind of relationship we need to build with each other.

And I'm afraid in too many of our churches, with each other we have to say the right thing or else get rebuked for it. And very often the right thing isn't what's in my heart and mind. Very often I'm deeply puzzled by what's going on.

Very often I don't understand the ways of God in my own life. In the lives of my family, I don't understand the ways of God. And very often like Job, I want to cry out against God.

God, what are you doing? Why don't you answer me? Why do you let that thing go on like that? But there are very, very few friends with whom I can share that. When I pray in the assembly, I have to say the right thing. It's a great thing to have friends.

It would be great to have an assembly like that where you could share your heart and mind and know that your brothers and sisters would understand and help you through it. Correct you, yes, but help you through it. We need that kind of relationship with each other.

At least I do. I need friends. I need to be able to say to a friend, as I sometimes have had to do, I am angry at God.

And he's not going to get shocked. He's going to hear me out. And in the very process of hearing me out, he is going to bring me to repentance.

I need friends like that. People to whom I can open my heart and my mind. But what a high honor God pays us in calling us his friends.

He has opened his heart and his mind to us. He has told us his griefs. He has told us his ambitions for us.

He has told us his sorrows. He has told us of his loves. He has told us of his disappointments.

They're all here. And we get a glimpse into the heart of God. You see it in the life of Jesus Christ.

And yet we read the life of Jesus Christ just for proof text for his deity. And as you see him as he lived here, you are listening to the heartbeat of God. As you see the way he lived among men.

How do we come to the Bible? It's a thing I used to fight in the classroom at Emmaus all the time. I don't think I ever succeeded, but I used to try to fight it. Just having an academic discipline.

I need that. I need that very disciplined approach to the study of the word of God. But I need more than that.

I need to hear the heart of God. But God poured out his heart to Abraham. He told him what he was going to do.

In regard to Sodom and Gomorrah and the other three cities that formed five in that plain. Now, there's reasons for it. After all, this is one of the effects of Abraham's progress in faith.

Do you think God could have gone down to Lot and done with Lot what he did with Abraham? Do you think Lot could have stood before God and interceded for Sodom and Gomorrah? But it's because Abraham has made this progress in faith that God can do what he did. I know Abraham. God says, I know Abraham.

And I can trust Abraham with what I'm going to do. It was the kind of man Abraham was. Not perfect by a long shot.

The kind of man Abraham was that enabled God to pour out what he was going to do into the mind and heart of Abraham. And what a response Abraham made. Abraham, the friend of God.

Now, that has to come first, before you can take the second step and see Abraham as the friend of sinners. It's because he was the friend of God that he could be the friend of sinners. And there are two ways in which it seems to me Abraham was the friend of sinners, and that's why I read first of all in chapter 17, Dear Ishmael, Abraham's son, as Paul says, after the flesh.

The one who fought with him that was born after the Spirit. Deep grief in that household. But as God talks to Abraham in chapter 17 about the birth of Isaac, the one born after the Spirit, Paul says, as he talks about Isaac, and Abraham can rejoice over Isaac, immediately, oh, that Ishmael might live before thee.

I'm not sure I can call Ishmael Abraham's prodigal son, but maybe I could. It was Abraham's prodigality that brought Ishmael into the world to begin with, but maybe I could call Ishmael Abraham's prodigal son. By this time, the boy was nearly 13 years of age.

At least in modern Judaism, he'd be going through his bar mitzvah. He would become a son of the commandment. He would be held responsible before God for fulfilling God's commands.

He would be looked on as a man. And that was Ishmael, Abraham's own and only child. Abraham had a great love for that boy.

After all, he was his own flesh and blood. Born of Hagar, it is true, but nevertheless Abraham's own flesh and blood. And he had great love for that boy.

Great hopes for him. And yet there must have been a growing doubt in Abraham's mind about Ishmael. There had been no revelation from God about him.

The only word he had about Ishmael would come through Hagar and the words that the angel had given to her before the child was born. And that growing doubt and his growing love for the boy finally erupted in this prayer before God, O that Ishmael might live before thee. Yes, I'm glad you're going to give me Isaac.

But in my heart, Isaac can never take the place of Ishmael. And he pleads for Ishmael. What a heart this man had.

He's very much like the Apostle Paul. Romans chapter 9. Paul talks about his great grief and his continual sorrow in his heart for his brethren after the flesh. My heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is that

they might be saved.

Israel, from whom did Paul's persecution come? Every city he went to was the unbelieving Jews who stirred the populace up against him. From whom did his doctrinal opposition come? The Judaizers who followed his steps, went into the churches he had founded, spread the doctrine of Judaism and caused him endless grief and heartache among the people of God. What is Paul's response? Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is that they might be saved.

I could wish myself a curse. What a statement. For their sake.

O that Ishmael might live before thee. And our Lord pictures our Heavenly Father in the story of the prodigal son in Luke 15. He had a very obedient son at home.

A son who could say in his self-righteousness, I've never disobeyed one of your commands. That was a lie, but nevertheless he said it. But he would be one of those very obedient sons at home who never gives their father a moment's worry, who never stays out late at night, who when he borrows the family car, that's why the father can give him the keys without a second thought.

The father doesn't have to stay up half the night praying for him, but did that satisfy the father of Luke 15? As that father went about his daily responsibilities, he was always looking out the window down the road that the prodigal son took. Never passed a window on that side of the house, but he wasn't looking down that road. And when he went out to work in the yard and trimmed the flowers and cut the grass, he only had half his mind on the job.

He was looking down the road, waiting for that prodigal to come home. God has his prodigal children. You hear his great cry for them in Hosea chapter 11.

Even as he's bringing judgment on them. Inevitable. How can I give thee up, O Ephraim? I can't do it.

My heart is moved within me, God says. Abraham is very much like God. Oh, that Ishmael might live before thee.

Maybe we have our own prodigal children. If you have, you realize that none of your obedient children will make up for them. And you feel like God.

I can't give you up. And you pray like Abraham. Oh, that Ishmael might live before thee.

Ishmael is not Isaac. I realize that. But oh, that Ishmael might live before thee.

And Abraham was a friend of sinners. But not only in regard to Ishmael. In regard to Sodom.

And you have this in chapter 18, as all of you know, in the section that we've read. Abraham's prayer for Sodom. It's a remarkable thing.

Sodom and the cities around it were thoroughly pagan cities. Stood outside the covenant God had made with Abraham. They were Gentiles.

They had no part in the covenant that God had made with Abraham. They were not part of the chosen people. And Sodom stands to this present day as a symbol of utter degradation.

Its word has come down, its name has come down into our own English vocabulary. You find it so in the book of Jude. Sodom.

One of the most perverted cities in the Near East in the days of Abraham. And over against that, here is Abraham. The chosen of God.

Man who stands within the covenant. The man who in his growing faith and in his righteousness is the total opposite of the way of life of Sodom. There couldn't have been a greater contrast than that between the way Abraham lived and the way the people of Sodom lived.

Abraham, the man in touch with God. Now, what's his response to this city? As God tells him about the outcry of the wickedness of Sodom. And God is coming down to see if it's really like that.

And if it is, then God knows what he will do. And Abraham knows what God will do. And what is Abraham's response to this? He didn't despise the Sodomites.

He could hate the way they lived, but he did not despise the Sodomites. He saw them as human beings. Perverted? Yes.

Wicked? Exceedingly so. But he did not despise them. Nor did he rejoice at their judgment.

I fear for a preacher who can preach on the subject of hell with obvious delight. Abraham did not rejoice at the impending judgment of Sodom. What Abraham did do was intervene.

Twice he intervened for Sodom. Once in chapter 14, when he took his armed men out to deliver them when they had been captured. Now when the judgment is not the judgment of a coalition of nations at war, but now it's the judgment of God.

No 318 servants are going to do any good now. But now Abraham interposes himself and his intercession for the people of Sodom. How do we look on the non-Christian world around us? How do you folks here look upon the non-Christians over in Keystone Heights? Do we form our little Christian community and literally let the world go to hell? The fact that we are safe and they are under the judgment of God does not move us.

Do we pray for the people over here in Keystone Heights and the surrounding areas? Do we try to reach out to them with the message of the good news of Jesus Christ? Are there contacts that we could make as a friend of sinners and be the means in God's hands of delivering them from the judgment that is just ahead of them? Or do I find in my own heart that terrible, terrible attitude it's just what they deserve? Abraham, the friend of sinners, interceding not just for Lot, oh no, for all the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah and the three others with him. Now I want to look at the basis of his intercession. It seems to me there are two bases that Abraham proceeds on when he intercedes before God.

The first is the righteousness of God. Do you see how this man has grown? Shall not the judge of all the earth do right? He could on his own behalf plead what God had promised. Now he dares to plead before God on the basis of what God is.

Shall not the judge of all the earth do right? What boldness! Are you really going to go down and destroy all the righteous with the wicked down there? God, you can't do that because you only do what is right, and it wouldn't be right to do that. And it gives him great boldness in his intercession. He's pleading with

God on the basis of God's own character.

A holy God cannot do what is wrong. And that's the basis of his intercession. Not the mercy of God, the righteousness of God.

Not God be kind. That may be our plea, but God do what is right. You have to do what is right because that's the way you are.

And he's pleading with God on the basis of shall not the judge of all the earth do right. I know you are the judge of all the earth. I know there are intolerable situations with which you finally must deal, but when you do, you've got to do it right.

Not because I say so, but because you're God. And he pleads with God on the basis of what God is. It seems to me there's a second basis on which Abraham pleads with God, and that's what Abraham is.

Not just as a friend of God now, but as he says to God as dust and ashes, with no rights before God at all. I am only dust and ashes, and I've taken on me to speak to God. Dust and ashes.

That's what Sodom and Gomorrah were going to become. And it was his kinship with all the people of Sodom and Gomorrah. What did Abraham deserve? Just what Sodom and Gomorrah got.

Why was he any different? The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was yet in Ur of the Chaldees. What are those people in Sodom and Gomorrah? Pagan idolaters. What was Abraham in Ur of the Chaldees? A pagan idolater.

A worshiper of the moon god Sin. What did Abraham deserve along with the rest of the people in Ur of the Chaldees? To be wiped out. And Abraham never forgot that.

I who am but dust and ashes, I have no right before you. It's all of your mercy. And he recognized his kinship by nature with the people of Sodom and Gomorrah.

Sometimes we forget that. And yet I remember in Titus chapter 3 where Paul says we are not to speak evil of other people. Why not? For we ourselves were one time foolish and disobedient.

There was one day when we were just like them. What has made the difference? The grace of God. The grace of God.

Sometimes I get the idea in my own heart that the reason I am different from the non-Christian world is because I deserve to be different. And the only way I can despise the non-Christian world is because I have forgotten the grace of God. Oh, I know we use the statement there but for the grace of God go I. But we don't really mean it.

We have a sneaking idea in our hearts there but for the grace of God and my worthwhileness go I. And the reason the grace of God came to me is because I was a little bit better and God could see how good I was or how good I was going to be. And we really in our attitude deny what we say with our mouths. There but for the grace of God go I. And Abraham is saying that there but for the grace of God am I under the judgment of God in Sodom and Gomorrah.

And he pled with God for those people out of a kindred feeling. Do we really see that? That if we are on our way to heaven if we are part of God's family the only reason we are and people in Keystone Heights

are not is the grace of God. That's the only reason.

And we need to feel again our kinship to all who stand under the judgment of God left to ourselves we would be there too. And so Abraham pleads not for a lot not only for a lot but for all the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. Now what happens as a result of that? Taking that position he pled before God six times.

Now sometimes you read stories or ideas that say well Abraham should have gone further than the ten. But let me remind you that Abraham was not bargaining with God. Abraham was feeling his way along in faith and trust and love.

He wasn't bargaining with God. And Abraham wasn't begging. Begging as J.P. Lange of Germany points out knows no limits.

Prayer has moral limits to it. Begging doesn't. Abraham was not begging, he was praying.

And he was not bargaining with God. And there are moral limits to prayer. And the second thing you have to remember is that God broke the whole thing off, not Abraham.

When God had finished speaking to Abraham he went his way. Not when Abraham had finished speaking to God then God went his way. When God had finished speaking to Abraham the last verse says he went his way.

God broke it off, not Abraham. So I think it's unfair to Abraham to say if he'd gone a little further he could have saved the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham started out with 50 righteous.

And if he was praying for all five of the cities of the plain that would mean ten righteous people in a city. And he got down to ten which would have meant two righteous people in a city. And asked God to save the cities for two righteous people apiece.

Sometimes, and when I talk about the moral limits of prayer you have to be aware that there is no way that a city like Sodom and Gomorrah could be saved. Could be spared. No way.

They've just gone too far. God says that about Jerusalem. And he tells Ezekiel, look if Noah, Daniel and Job were to pray if they were in the city of Jerusalem they couldn't save it.

I'd save them, but I wouldn't spare the city. And way back down in Jerusalem God is saying practically the same thing to Jeremiah. He tells Jeremiah, shut up.

I don't want you to pray for them anymore. I'm not going to listen to you. There's no way the city of Jerusalem can be spared.

So you just might as well stop praying. There were moral limits to it. So I think it's very unfair to say that if Abraham had kept on the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah could have been spared.

Well, what was the result? That's why I read 1929. Why did Lot get out of Sodom? God remembered Abraham. Not God remembered Lot.

God remembered Abraham and delivered Lot. Beautiful. Beautiful.

What do I get out of this? Two things. One, God's people are the salt of the earth. Salt is preservative.

Preservative from what? Well, preservative from corruption, but preservative from judgment. The most important people in any nation are the Christians. They are the only thing that hold it together.

Now, I know the politicians and the military strategists and all the rest of it would scoff at the idea, but that's the only thing that holds the nation together are the Christians. And the only thing that could have saved Sodom and Gomorrah from God's judgment would have been the presence of enough Christians. I'll use that term.

And God said he would have spared it. Christians are in reality the salt of the earth. The second thing I get out of it is the high privilege of being in partnership with God.

God wants the spare, if at all possible. And Abraham yoked himself up with God to try to save Sodom and Gomorrah. Sometimes people have a great deal of difficulty with prayer.

Does prayer really make a difference? Of course it makes a difference. And C.S. Lewis says, Why should I stumble at prayer making a difference when I don't stumble at our efforts making a difference? Doesn't God work through our work? Isn't it necessary that those early disciples and those apostles heed the command of Jesus Christ to go into all the world? How did God reach the world? Through their work. Then why should I be surprised if he does something through my prayer? If he is willing to depend on my efforts, why is it a strange thing if he should depend on my prayer? And we have the glorious opportunity of working in partnership with God, of being in Abraham, so that God remembered Abraham and delivered Lot to be a friend of God and a friend of sinners.

Let's pray. And again we pray, our Father, that they will make us increasingly like our Lord Jesus in that lovely title of his that so thrills us, even to this day, that he was a friend of sinners. Your intimate and ours.

Help us, we pray, to follow in his train. We ask in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

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