

Revelation

**Seven letters to the seven
Churches:**

Laodicea

**Following the Lamb
wherever He goes**

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THE CHURCH AT LAODICEA

Invite someone to read aloud Revelation 3:14-22 and all text below marked “B,” with someone else reading A.

A: Can you imagine being part of a Church which the Lord Jesus could find, quite simply, nothing to praise? This Church was proud because they thought they were doing everything right – but as far as God was concerned they were doing everything wrong. Laodicea was not an *apathetic* church; they were in fact very *busy* in their Christian service – yet something was missing, and the end effect was not pleasing to the Lord.

B: Perhaps the Laodiceans assumed that plans were all that mattered, and that they had only to act and God would “rubber stamp their plans.” Scripture tells us rather to “find out what is pleasing to the Lord” (Eph. 5:10). Despite this, Jesus loved the Laodiceans, just as He loves those of us who are far too taken up by our own plans and self-importance. That is why He tells us to *be earnest and repent* (Rev. 3:19b). It is only when we lay down our pride that there is room for God to come in.

A: All of us have to lay down our achievements and stoop lower in order to hear Jesus’ wonderful promise, ‘I will give you the right to sit with Me on my throne, just as I overcame and sat down with my Father on His throne’ (Rev 3:21b). ‘He who has an ear let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.’ The Laodiceans, however, did not listen – with the result that their church lies long since deserted and in ruins.

INTO THE PAST

A: Geographically Laodicea was a town lying 43 miles southeast of Philadelphia and about 100 miles, clockwise, from Ephesus, one of three towns within sight of each other, including Hierapolis and Colossae. Laodicea was the original Fat City, a town of immense commercial prosperity which not only controlled the trade down the river valley (the River Lycus) towards the sea coast, but also the three roads centred upon it.

B: Financially the Jews were so influential in Laodicea that they were given special privileges to observe their Sabbaths and ancient rites. So many Jews migrated there, in fact, that the Jews of Jerusalem were complaining about it. All of this made it very difficult for Christians to live in this wealthy city, which was the centre of banking arrangements in Asia Minor. So rich was the city that when it was devastated by the same earthquake which laid waste both Sardis and Philadelphia, it refused the offer of grants from the

Emperor Tiberius. Its citizens had cash to spare and could afford the work of rebuilding.

A: So confident were they that they could manage without the help of others, or God, that the Risen Christ was, in effect, saying to them: “You are rich and you are proud of your riches, but in the things that really matter you are poverty-stricken, and you don’t know it.”

B: One source for the wealth was wool. Herds of black sheep from the surrounding countryside produced wool with a glossy, violet darkness which, when spun, created unique cloth for the textile industry. It would have been all the more startling, then, for them to hear that the Risen Christ counsels the Laodiceans to buy white garments ‘that you may be clothed and the shame of your nakedness does not appear.’ Pride in their exported wool could not clothe their naked souls. Obsessed with adorning the body, these people overlooked adorning their souls with godly virtues.

A: Laodicea also boasted a famous medical school, particularly known for a certain ointment, made of nard, which was used to cure eye conditions, as well as an eye powder that was greatly sought after. Renowned for these products worldwide, the Laodiceans would have been proud and self-satisfied.

It is in the face of the Laodicean delusion that the Risen Christ counsels them “to anoint your eyes with eye-salve so that you may see” (3:18). To paraphrase: You are famous all over the world for your eye salve which can cure weak eyes, but the eyes of your soul are blind, and you don’t know it.

B: There is a strangely modern comparison here. The Laodiceans were people who put their trust in material prosperity; in outward luxury and in physical health – in other words, in the things of the world. They strove to build a lasting civilisation on material benefits alone.

A: The aim of the Church, however, is not so much to change conditions as to change people, for when people are changed for the better, life conditions will inevitably improve. The Church of Laodicea stands as a warning to those who put their trust in material things but leave out God in the process.

B: ‘It was the self-deluded members of the church who were being addressed’ (Mounce). It was as though they had excommunicated the Risen Lord from their congregation (p.129). How humble of the Lord to ask permission to enter in and to re-establish fellowship with them! The Lord does not barge in and insist – He extends His invitation graciously. The

faithful are promised that they will eat and drink in His kingdom and sit with Him on His throne (Luke 22:30, cf Matt 26:29, Rev. 19:9 and Matt. 19:28).

A: INTO THE WORD

3:14 In this verse it is as though the Lord is saying that He alone is the ‘Amen,’ is the personification and the affirmation of the truth of God. Jesus is seen as essential in God’s creation; He is the source and origin rather than just the ‘beginning’ (All things were made by him and without Him was not anything made that was made John 1:3) Jesus, the source of all creation, was therefore a reliable witness to the truth.

3:15,16 Laodicea was close to Colossae, and part of Paul’s instructions to the Church there was to pass the letter on to Laodicea (Col. 4:16). The writer of Revelation would therefore have been familiar with Paul’s Epistle to the Colossians. At nearby Hieropolis the hot, mineral laden water was renowned for its healing properties, but by the time it reached Laodicea, it had become sickly and insipid. If some unsuspecting visitor tried sipping it, they would instantly spit it out again. This is how Christ feels when He encounters lukewarm religion.

The Norovirus reminds us how horrible vomiting is. We do not want to be “vomited out” because we are taking in and digesting the wrong things in our stomachs. The Lord wants us to come right into the fullness of His Kingdom.

John Stott suggests that what was missing from the church at Laodicea was ‘Zeal, heat, fire, passion’ (*What Christ Thinks of the Church*, p.116). Undivided, wholehearted allegiance to Jesus is more important to Him than growing a big “McChurch”: “beefed up” with its own programs, slick service, and steady diet of affluence and good intentions.

3:18 We all prefer the wide and easy way at times. The question is, are we hot or cold? It is a matter of being willing to yield all we have and are to the Lord, not ten percent, not ninety percent, but a hundred per cent. We are to live as stewards of what we have, rather than as owners – to use everything lovingly for His Kingdom as if it was not ours to keep, and as if not engrossed in it, “for this world in its present form is passing away (1 Cor. 7:30-31).

What does the concept of “buying gold” mean to you? Bearing up under suffering? What are you doing that is of eternal value – as opposed to things that ultimately rank as wood, hay and stubble?

3:19 Laodicea was coping only too well without God. The Risen Christ summons the people of Laodicea to be zealous and repent. The command is in the imperative and requires definite action. ‘Make your decision,’ the Lord is saying, and then all your life go on sharing your zeal and living in close fellowship with Me.

In verse 19 the Risen Christ says, ‘As many as I love I will rebuke and chasten.’ It is always the best athlete who is given the most rigorous training, and the finest student who is set the most demanding task. It is a worrying sign if God withdraws His hands of discipline from someone and lets them get away with doing what they want. Rather than despising or resenting His chastising, we should regard it as a compliment. It means He cares enough for us to invest in our spiritual and emotional development.

3:20 In all this there is a training process. The Lord, the lover of our souls, is also the perfect trainer. He is knocking on the door of our hearts individually, longing for us to sup with Him. The supper, or ‘*deipnon*,’ was the main meal of the day in Bible times, at which people sat and talked at length because the day’s work had ended. There is something very lovely here. It is not a mere courtesy call, paid in passing, which Jesus offers us. He desires to come in to “sit long” with us while the candles burn low, and to wait with us as long as we wish Him to stay. He offers us no rushed visit in passing, but the lingering of His presence, without haste. Yet He will not force an entrance. The door of the human heart must always be opened from the inside.

INTO THE HEART

***Option: Guided Door of the Heart Meditation.** Leaders should feel free to adapt the text below as the Spirit leads in the moment. Observe the pauses after each question, as indicated by the three dots, to give people time to “fill in the details.” Pray at the outset for God to guide the imagination.

‘Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in.’ Rev. 3:20

Get comfortable where you’re sitting, close your eyes, and take at least three deep breaths. . . Good. Now take three more as I pray. . . Holy Spirit, we ask you to baptize our imaginations now, for your glory. Guard us from all evil as we seek to draw closer today. Help us respond to Your Spirit each step of the way. Amen.

Keep your eyes closed and your body relaxed. Imagine your innermost being as a place with a door. What is that door made of? How big is it? What does it feel like to the touch? Notice what holds this door closed – be it latch, knob, padlock, or bar . . .

Only you can open this door. See yourself doing that now . . . What does it sound like?

If your innermost being was an actual room on the other side of this door, what would it look like today? . . . How is the room lit? . . . What's the predominant colour scheme? . . .

What is the temperature? . . . Is there any artwork on the walls? If so, what kind? . . .

How is this room furnished today? . . .

Is Jesus there? . . . If so, is he comfortable? . . . What is He doing? . . . Does He want to rearrange anything? . . . Does He want you to help?

Move closer . . . What name of endearment does He call you today? . . .

Say whatever you need to say to Him now . . . What does He answer?

Take a last look around this inner room . . . Has anything changed since you first entered? . . .

When you're ready, open your eyes and, as the angel said to John in Revelation, write down what you saw and heard – as well as how it made you feel.

***Option: If time allows, and God's Spirit so leads, invite several people to share what they've written.**

3:21 The last verse of our passage today closes with the promise of victory. Not only does Christ offer us His presence in the intimate loneliness of our own hearts; He offers us His presence in the everyday battles of life, so that we emerge from them as changed as the wild man of the tombs in Mark 5:15: newly clothed, delivered from the old nicknames, and in our right mind. No longer conquered, but conquering.

Taken together, the promises Jesus gives to those who overcome the spirit of the world are wonderful rewards. There will be no more curse (22:3). The tree of life that Adam and Eve were forbidden to eat from after the Fall will be centre stage in the garden city of Heaven. And we shall see His face (22:4) – something never experienced throughout the whole of human history.

We have seen the danger of losing our first love at Ephesus, the fear of suffering at Smyrna, doctrinal compromise at Pergamum, moral compromise

at Thyatira, spiritual complacency at Sardis, and now lukewarmness at Laodicea. These are amazingly relevant warnings for the Church in our generation.

We saw at Sardis that the way out of complacency lay in broken-hearted dependence. I came across an historical example recently that struck me as being relevant for our own generation. The early settlers in America were fervent in their faith, but as time passed their children and grandchildren proved to be far less on fire for the Lord. Because rules for church membership were strict, and their children were not coming up to scratch, it was proposed to introduce a 'Half Way Covenant' to make it possible for the children still to participate, in the hope that they would in due time come to a heartfelt conversion for themselves.

In today's terminology, this might equate to the temptation to dumb spiritual matters down by making church so 'entertaining' as to lose its cutting edge. Ironically, or rather providentially, it was the grandson of the man who introduced this somewhat compromised Halfway covenant who railed against it, and insisted on people coming through to a full blown wholehearted encounter with the Lord. His name was Jonathan Edwards, and it was his preaching, in the spiritually complacent township of Enfield in Connecticut, that prepared the way for the great Awakening across America.

Such wholeheartedness is entirely in keeping with the messages we have studied in the opening chapters of Revelation. Remember, there is a sharp two-edged sword coming out of the mouth of the Risen Lord. Those who refuse to take Him seriously will have no part in the kingdom matters that He is most willing to entrust to those who will take Him seriously. Yet when He sees us in our trials, crying out to Him, He is all compassion – and in Him we have the key of David: an open door, and the Name of God as our true and lasting identity.

Are you a Hypocrite?

We looked in the last cluster at whether we are pioneers or settlers. And in the one we looked at that on the issues that make us "touchy". This week we are going to examine whether there is any trace of hypocrisy in us, for if there is it will incline us to be lukewarm.

We normally associate hypocrisy with doing, or saying things that we know we do not mean - but it is also possible to do things we are not aware

of that others might regard as being hypocritical. It is good to pray with the Psalmist, ‘

Who can discern his errors?

Forgive my hidden faults.

I have hidden your word in my heart

that I might not sin against you.

Ps. 19:12; 119:11

What is Hypocrisy? = Beliefs - Actions (Lonnie Lee Best)

(Faith without deeds is dead. James 2:26)

A hypocrite is someone who criticizes something he also does, whose actions contradict their stated or internal beliefs

Reflect for a moment. Are there things you do that you do tell others not to? (Eg swearing), but actually do do yourself, whether ‘in front of the children’ or not.

If you find yourself ‘playing a part’ at times, why is this? Is it:

- to impress (to make yourself look more wise, more spiritual, more wealthy than you really are)?

- to fit in?

- to cover up something that you feel is different about yourself?

- to avoid ridicule, judgement, financial loss, rejection?

- to avoid admitting things to yourself?

Some of us are so determined not to be hypocrites that we reduce our beliefs to match our experience (or rather, their lack of it). It is far better if we can amend our actions (and the way we are) to more nearly come in line with our beliefs!

Many of us allow our “carnal desires” to cause us to act in ways that are not in keeping with what we really believe is right. The question is, what are we going to be do about this? Are we going to limp along with what we sense is probably not the Lord’s best for our lives, or are we prepared to be radical enough to take appropriate action?

It is best not to be hypocritical, but I would rather be an honest hypocrite than a person who tries to make truth conform around his or her own desires and imperfections. In other words, I would rather be an honest hypocrite than lie about my imperfections. (Lonnie Lee Best)

One of the most poignant phrases in Scripture was uttered by Judas Iscariot, when he asked ‘Is it I, Lord?’ (Matt. 6:22) We may presume the question to have been dripping with saccharine-sweet hypocrisy as he sought to mask the deadliest betrayal the world has ever known. It may also have contained more than a hint of fear to ward off a last minute exposure of his plans! The question itself, however, is one we do well to ask ourselves from time to time. It may require a considerable amount of humble soul-searching but the answer may help to bring us more of the Lord’s power and presence.

There are sound reasons why the prayer of self-examination features prominently in almost all monastic routines. Why? Because the heart is deceitful above all things (Jeremiah 17:9). It is almost beyond belief how self-deluded we can be in certain areas of our life. That is why it pays to study our track record carefully. Can we identify areas where we are regularly right or routinely wrong?

The heart will teach us to blame anyone other than ourselves, but there are times when it is right to ask the question, ‘Lord, is it I who have gone things out of perspective and am out of step with you, and am therefore spreading something other than the fragrance of Christ?’

The life of the Spirit is rather like an electric ring: it only needs the ‘contact’ to break at one point in the ring for the whole thing to short out. When the Sisters of Jesus were building their wonderful complex in Darmstadt, the whole project was a miracle of faith and provision from start to finish. But whenever they ran short of provision, they would stop and ask the cause: and often the Spirit of the Lord would highlight some wrong words or attitude between the sisters. The cause they were so actively pursuing had effectively become like a mini-curse, and the Lord allowed the work to grind to a halt until they faced up to relational issues.

When these were properly addressed, the Lord again released His blessings – pressed down and running over. May it be so in our lives too. Lord, search us, try, us know us, love us . . . and we will respond to that loving with all of our hearts. In the name of the One who alone knows the hearts’ true motivation, Amen.

Getting down to such self-examination

The simplest way to embark on such times is to set aside a dedicated portion of time for doing this – and nothing else. For many of us this will come at the end of the day. Our aim here is to simply wait on the Lord, both to find out what He is saying about the things that have happened (externally) and

the things we will do well to pay attention to (internally). As with most spiritual issues, the external ones are the easiest to handle. As we replay the events that have happened, watching them as it were on a video screen.

It may be that the Lord will have you ‘pause the footage’ as we rediscover issues to attend to, of the greatest befits of this is that it enables us to ‘rediscover’ nudges that have come our way but which we have done nothing about. It’s like having a second bite of the cherry. If we fail to make a note of them at this stage, there is a real danger that they will simply pass into the deep blue of the ether from which they may never be recovered: unkind words we have spoken, opportunities to express forgiveness that we have not given or received and so on.

All of this is a precious way of entering fully into life. Rather than letting events flow past unheeded, it shows that we are prepared to reflect upon their meaning, and to honour the people we come into contact with. It is the very opposite of saying ‘we couldn’t care less.’

Taken together, the one building on the other, these sins of omission and commission can become a huge dam between ourselves and the flow of God’s Holy Spirit. ‘But Lord there are so many such issues: it’s not just an occasional weed, it’s creepy bindweed or Japanese knot weed – ten metres deep#thick? wound round and round my heart!’ If that is how you feel, take heart: God knows how to dig out even the deepest and most persistent weeds from our #your/our? lives!

Most of the time what is called for isn’t quite so radical: less a ‘drains up’ session than just a wash of the clothes that have become muddy as cars speed past and splash us. If, as often happens, we have been in close proximity to hurt and angry people, or complex situations, some of the mud may have stuck, in which case it is not wise just to turn out the light and hope that time and sleep will wash it all away. It is right to offer the whole situation to the Lord and to set ourselves free from any contamination that may have been involved.

What about those times when we are only too aware that we ourselves are caught in a quagmire of complex emotions? In such cases it is even more important to seek the Lord’s perspective. One word from God can tell us what to do and provide a way forward. If that takes the form of a specific promise or mandate, then we can proceed with confidence. But if He just encourages us to wait on Him, don’t be tempted to flounder around in search of man-made solutions. No matter how pressing the needs may appear, to take matters back into our own hands is ultimately as unwise as for someone

trapped in a bog to flail and flounder around. Some things really cannot be dealt with until God's chosen moment dawns.

Richard Foster has written an outstanding book called 'Prayer: Finding the Heart's true Home' (Harper, San Francisco). The book is a gem, less concerned with 'how we can acquire things through prayer than with how God will help us to discover Him through prayer' (Lewis Smedes). I cannot recommend it too highly. The third chapter deals with this issue of self examination (The Scrutin *#is this right?* of Love) precisely because it is something our generation is not so good at doing. We are better at doing than being, and we are expert at defending ourselves. We make it hard for God's Love to penetrate to the core of our being. We have learnt to keep God at a safe distance – so much so that we barely notice how impoverished our prayer life has become. My conclusion is that it is those who are prepared to sound the depths of sorrow, and to explore the heart's intricacies and allow the Lord to do the searching are the ones who emerge in the power of the Spirit.

Additional Meditations

'The Lamb in the midst of the throne: They follow the Lamb wherever He goes.' (Rev. 14:4)

This verse would make an ideal way to conclude our study of the book of Revelation, for the Lamb of God is also the Lion of Judah.

Have someone prepare the following in advance and share it aloud.

At the end of the voyage of the Dawn Treader, after all their adventures, Lucy and Edmund see a lamb on the green grass who invites them to come and have breakfast.

Lucy asks, 'Please, Lamb, is this the way to Aslan's Country?' She is told that for her the door to Aslan's country is from her own world.

'There is a way into my country from all the worlds,' said the Lamb; but as he spoke, his snowy-white flushed into tawny-gold and his size changed, and he was Aslan himself, towering above them and scattering light from his mane.

'Oh, Aslan,' said Lucy, 'Will you tell us how to get into your country from our world?'

'I shall be telling you all the time,' said Aslan. 'But I will not tell you how long or short the way will be; only that it lies across a river. But do not fear

that, for I am the Great Bridge Builder. And now come; I will open the door in the sky and send you to your own land.’ (*Voyage of the Dawn Treader*)

INTO THE WORD

Grace, freedom, forgiveness and healing are all bound up in the minds of the worshippers of those who worship#? with the Lamb on the throne of heaven.

John the Baptist pointed the way for Jesus’ ministry by declaring, ‘Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.’ (John 12:29)

Just as the Lord provided a lamb to rescue Abraham in the nick of time when He called him to sacrifice his own son, (Gen 22:1-14) so the Lord provided Jesus to be the sacrificial lamb for our sins.

In the book of Enoch, which John the Baptist would have known, the Lamb takes on a different role. Here he becomes a great horned ram who leads the flock to victory. In Revelation 5:6 we see Jesus “no longer as the vulnerable Lamb who was slain, no longer meek and broken glorious in the victory of suffering love, but the victorious horned Lamb at the centre of heaven.’

In the suffering and death of Jesus of Nazareth we see only vulnerability and the service of suffering love – so much so that some who had hoped that he would be proclaimed King of Israel were disappointed – but here we see the exalted Christ of glory, Jesus ascended at the Father’s right hand, we see the King whose power and authority were expressed through that vulnerability and pain.’ (Atkinson)

The Lamb is also the Judge before whom all are called to account. . . . for the Lamb standing before the throne is also the Lion (Revelation 5:5-6). His roar is the inescapable judgement of heaven. In Him evil is finally punished.

The rest of the book of Revelation unveils something of the workings of this divine Kingdom on the stage of world history.

‘For the Christ in glory at the centre is the one who walked this earth in the Judean desert when John was baptizing and pointing to him as the Lamb of God . . . The book of Revelation is that of a cosmic Christ ‘engaged in cosmic warfare against evil.’

(Jesus, Lamb of God, David Atkinson SP CK.)

INTO THE PRESENT

Because of the mercies of the Lamb, the world has not been delivered to a blind and cruel fate; neither is it limited to the outworking of market forces on a global and political scale. Rather than asking what the world is coming to, which everybody from moralists to the tabloid newspapers are asking, we would do better to ask ‘to Whom is the world coming?’ The book of Revelation has much to say about the spectacular and glorious return of Jesus to Earth. But it also describes a time when the world is effectively taken over by oppressive forces.

One example of oppressive technology was described years ago by America’s President Eisenhower. He warned against the development of what he called a ‘military industrial complex’ – a combination of military technologists and leaders in the defence industries, who together could, if not checked, take over the role of politicians in dictating priorities for action in international conflict and preparation for defence. The power of new military technology might become the driving force for political decisions. (Atkinson)

Another example of potentially oppressive technology lies in the medical world, given that the ability to sustain life is now greater than is necessarily wise or appropriate to facilitate the dying process – which is also part of the way God has designed life.

The authority prescribed for the Church – which is meant to demonstrate the standards of God’s kingdom – is an authority not of status nor of power, but of service. The servant is one who is prepared to suffer for the sake of those he serves (See 1 Peter 2:21; 5:2-3). Ministry should be seen

not as coercing others, but as serving them, facilitating other’s gifts, being one among many within the body of Christ – such a style will not catch the headlines, but may be nearer to the heart of the Servant Lamb (Atkinson).

INTO THE FUTURE

- Jesus, who once served as a humble carpenter in Galilee, is the firstborn of all creation, and the day is fast coming when Jesus will be made known to all creation as the Leader and Saviour of all the nations. ‘He is the Lord before whom every knee shall bow. He is the Centre of the Worship of Heaven and earth’ (Atkinson).

- All judgement has been entrusted to Jesus, the Lamb who was slain, the King of Glory. (John 5:22)

- World history and world destiny come to their focus and fulfilment in Him. When that day comes, righteousness and peace will kiss each other, there will no more inequities, no more tears, no more pain, no more death. In the Kingdom of Christ's glory, creation itself is made whole (Atkinson).

- The Lamb is also the judge behind all the vagaries, the achievements, the grandeur, the guilt and the evil of world history, their lies the operation of the kingdom of the Lamb. The book of Revelation unveils something of the workings of this divine Kingdom on the stage of world history.

- The Lamb is also the Judge before whom all are called to account. . . for the Lamb standing before the throne is also the Lion (Revelation 5:5-6). His roar is the inescapable judgement of heaven. In Him evil is finally punished.

- In the worship of heaven, everything which is disordered, broken, polluted, evil and worthy of wrath will be either mended or destroyed. The Lamb's all-seeing seven eyes will no longer look on any evil (Revelation 5:6).

- The Lamb is also the Provider. In a lovely mix of images, the Lamb becomes the Shepherd, for the Lamb at the centre of the throne will be their Shepherd (Revelation 7:17). In great tenderness He cares for His flock; He will lead them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.

Finally, the Lamb is the Bridegroom (Rev 21:9). The bride is Christ's church and the marriage feast celebrates the final victory of God over all the powers of darkness (Atkinson).

INTO THE HEART

‘As the people of Moses’ day celebrated their deliverance from Egypt, so the multitudes of heaven sing the Song of the Lamb, who is at the centre of peoples’ worship. . . . the Lamb shares the throne of honour with God, for He is the Ruler.’ (Atkinson)

Even as Lucy shared breakfast with the Lamb/Aslan whilst listening for His voice, enjoy the rolls and beverages provided today as you work on your response.

‘The whole of Christian discipleship can be summed up in this thought:

“God give us grace to follow the Lamb wherever He goes.” (Atkinson)

From the throne of God and the Lamb flow the water of life (21:1) and His servants shall worship Him. And they will see His face and His name will be on their foreheads. There will be no more night. They will not need the light of the lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever (22:4-5).

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