

JONAH---DELIVERING GOD'S MESSAGE

Series: As God's Messenger, Should I Not Be Concerned?

by Doug Goins

Do you ever listen to yourself while you are talking about the Lord? Sometimes when we do that we find that our heart doesn't exactly match up with our words. We might catch ourselves singing a hymn of praise without being in sync with its truth. Or we might be talking about biblical reality with a friend and realize that our heart is not in the advice we are giving. Or we might be praying with somebody but sense that there is a bit of hypocrisy in what we are expressing.

At times I have recognized the nagging sense that I am not really living out what I am affirming verbally about faith in Christ Jesus as the Savior of sinners and the Lord of our lives. And we see an example of this in Jonah's strong condemnation of idolatry and adamant commitment to praise, worship, and obedience to God in Jonah 2 verses 8 and 9. He says:

"Those who pay regard to vain idols
forsake their true loyalty.
But I with the voice of thanksgiving
will sacrifice to thee;
what I have vowed I will pay.
Deliverance belongs to the LORD!"

That is great truth, but within Jonah we are going to find a bit of cognitive dissonance going on. Before we pursue that any further, let's review the story of Jonah.

Remember, God called Jonah the Israelite prophet to a ministry of reconciliation in the capital city of the Assyrian empire, Nineveh. In chapter 1 verse 2 God said to Jonah, "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry against it; for their wickedness has come up before me." But Jonah disagreed with that calling and disobeyed God, running the opposite direction. We saw in 2 Kings 14 that prior to this Jonah had enjoyed a successful prophetic ministry to his own nation of Israel. Nineveh, however, was an evil, violent city of cruelty and idolatrous disregard for Israel's God; and Jonah hated the Ninevites. I can't say that enough because I want you to get the point! He was convinced that these people were fully deserving of any wrath, punishment, or judgment that God could throw at them.

Jonah wanted no part of preaching against their wickedness, because there was the strong possibility that if he did preach judgment, the people would repent of their sin and be forgiven by God. From the beginning of the story Jonah admitted that he didn't want the Ninevites to experience God's salvation. In chapter 4 verse 2 he was arguing with God and said, "Is not this what I said when I was yet in my own country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that thou art a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and repentest of evil."

Chapters 1 and 2 tell us of Jonah's attempt to avoid his calling as God's ambassador, and of God's miraculous intervention first through a powerful ocean storm and then through a whale to capture this rebellious prophet. He confronted him with the fact that nothing was going to work out in his life without submission to God's purposes and plan for him.

Verses 8 and 9 are the conclusion of Jonah's prayer of gratitude for God's saving activity in his life. The final line of the prayer in verse 9, "Salvation is from the Lord," falls at the exact center point of the story structurally. Jonah deliberately crafted the story that way. This statement is the central theme of this prophetic message that he writes for his own nation Israel. In this book Jonah shares with us his struggle, as he gradually gave territory inch by inch to the Lord, to understand the universality of that truth that salvation is

from the Lord. God is sovereign over whom he saves, and Jonah could not pick and choose the recipients of God's grace and love.

Finally---Obedience!

As we come to chapter 3 we find Jonah finally ready to deliver God's message of salvation to Nineveh. The great English preacher Charles Spurgeon said, "Faith and obedience are bound up in the same bundle. He who obeys God trusts God, and he who trusts God obeys God." Remember, when God first called Jonah to go to Nineveh, Jonah simply couldn't trust that God was right in giving his enemies an opportunity to repent. He didn't think that God knew what he was doing.

Now, we have no reason to assume that Jonah has changed his basic prejudices about the Ninevites when the second call to Nineveh comes. His harrowing escape from death in the ocean did force him to trust God for his own survival and did shock him into promising that he would obey God. So God starts over again, accepts Jonah's verbal commitment to obedience, and says, "All right, I'm going to use you." The willful prophet had run away from God and then in a terrible crisis he had run back to God. And now in chapter 3 he is going to run with God in delivering this message of salvation.

As I started out to say, there is some hypocrisy or cognitive dissonance in the message he delivers, for in chapter 4 he is going to explode in anger against God and what God does. But right now he does and says what God asks him to, and out of that obedience, a great revival breaks out. There is no parallel to it in all of the Old Testament Scriptures.

Let's look at Jonah 3 verses 1 through 4, where we're introduced to the God of second chances and new beginnings:

Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time, saying, "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you." So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, three days' journey in breadth. Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's journey. And he cried, "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown [or destroyed]!"

This section opens with Jonah's being recalled to ministry. In chapter 1 verse 1 he was identified as Jonah the son of Amittai, but here in chapter 3 verse 1 his parentage is dropped and in its place is the phrase "a second time." This emphasizes the need for a chance to start over. The call that God issues him has a different preposition as well. In chapter 1 verse 2 Jonah was charged to cry *against* the great city. But here he is instructed to preach or proclaim *to* the city. Perhaps after Jonah's experience at sea he is prepared to communicate more mercy than before. God hasn't changed in his message or purpose, but he has a more cooperative, submissive servant to work with this time around. The text emphasizes that fact in the contrast again between chapters 1 and 3; here he arose and went, whereas in chapter 1 he arose and fled. There is identical movement, just opposite directions.

Finally, in verse 3 it says that Jonah went "according to the word of the Lord." Remember, Jonah has composed this for us very carefully. He wants us to understand the change in him. He will do what God says.

As I was thinking about these verses in the context of the whole story, it occurred to me to think about my own responses to God over a lifetime. The question is probably more significant the longer you live the life of faith and the more history you have with the Lord. Let me ask you: Has the discipline of God, the distress that God has brought into your life because of sin, made you more obedient or less obedient to him? In the long haul have you become more flexible or less flexible in responding to God's heart desires? Are you more submissive to his will or less submissive? Has the stress made you bitter toward God, or better in serving him and following him? Are you more consistent in running with him and agreeing with him?

I thought of two men in our body who are friends of mine, men I consider older brothers, and look up to in the Lord. I thought of the parallels in both their lives to the life of Jonah to this point. Both of these men in very different ways had been used powerfully and effectively of God among us through the years. And both of

these men made a choice to run away, disobey, and disregard God's heart for the world and for them. They both experienced severe consequences; there have been suffering and struggle for them. They have both had to wrestle with their failure. They have both experienced God's severe mercy toward them and come back, and there has been wonderful reconciliation and restoration. In a sense they too were recalled to ministry, because today both of them again serve among us very effectively and faithfully. But the thing that struck me is that the kind of suffering they have experienced as a consequence of sinful choices has softened them. It has made them more submissive and pliable to the Lord Jesus. They both have very gentle servant hearts; they are responsive and sensitive to people, especially with regard to the struggles that people have with their own rebellion. God has made both these men healers and reconcilers.

Now, verse 3 tells us two things about the city of Nineveh to which Jonah is called: its size and its significance. Jonah says that it took three days to walk through it. Archaeological excavations of Tel Nineveh show that there was a walled city that was relatively small around which sprawled many suburbs like a big metropolitan area. That greater Nineveh area was probably sixty miles in circumference. It would very easily take three days to walk across a city of that size. In the hill country of Israel the cities were made up of multilevel buildings scrunched together in a compact space. Here in the Mesopotamian plain the cities were all spread out.

Nineveh was the capital city of Assyria and its center of military, economic, and religious power. It was an overwhelming city in terms of its importance, a world-class city as I have said before. I remember reading that the population of Samaria, the capital of Judah, was only thirty thousand people. In Israel that was a big city. So this city is enormous from Jonah's perspective. But verse 3 also calls it "an exceedingly great city," literally in the Hebrew, "a great city to God." Jonah wants us to understand that God cares a lot about this city and the people who live there. Yes, it was important politically and because it was big, but God has sovereignly chosen to extend grace and mercy to this city. From his perspective it is really important.

I was thinking about times when I have ridden on horseback up to the top of Windy Hill Preserve on Skyline Boulevard with Don Miller. I remember realizing one especially crystal-clear day that as far north as I could see to San Francisco, and as far east as I could see to the East Bay hills, and as far south as I could see to the Santa Clara valley, there was city sprawling in every direction. It struck me that this was a very beautiful area, but what the Lord put on my heart at that time was that it was populated with millions of people, the vast majority of whom had no relationship with the Savior and were captives of sinful choices, living in blindness.

That is the sort of perspective that God has for the city of Nineveh: It is a big, important city filled with lost people. In chapter 4 verse 11, God's final word about the city in his ongoing argument with Jonah, he asks, "And should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left?" His words are a picture of people who don't know right from wrong, like babies who have not yet developed any moral or ethical sense.

The Message of Judgment

In verse 4 Jonah enters the city and immediately begins to communicate God's concern for it, preaching the message that God promises to give him in verse 2. God says to Jonah, "Say what I tell you to say, and nothing else. I will give you the message." The sermon is very simple: "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" It surely had to have been longer than that, but Jonah purposely and with great humility and honesty minimizes his role as an orator. He wants to focus on the heart of the issue that these people were confronted with. He himself is going to disappear from the story as soon as the message is delivered. He is trying to back himself out of the picture, because what we're going to see is the work of the sovereign God of the universe, who has decided that it is time for him to confront this people.

Jonah says two things in the condensed sermon. First, he says there are forty days before judgment will come. Throughout the ancient Near East that would have had religious significance. It always suggested a time of waiting for divine activity, or a period of divine activity. Think of some of the instances in the Old Testament: Forty years that Israel wanders in the wilderness, forty days of the flood. And in other ancient Near Eastern cultures it had similar religious significance. So when they hear that in forty days something bad is going to happen, it comes like a trumpet blast of warning: "There is danger coming and you had better pay attention!"

And all ears would prick up.

The other thing Jonah says is that Nineveh is going to be destroyed or overthrown. This is an unambiguous announcement of judgment or divine wrath. Remember, in God's first call to Jonah in chapter 1 he said, "Cry against [this great city]; because their wickedness has come up before me." Nineveh is going to be destroyed as a consequence of its sinfulness. That is really the heart of the message. And sin is always going to be judged in the life of an individual, a community, or a nation; that message is very consistent in the Scriptures.

In the next section beginning in verse 5, we are going to be surprised at the immediate and wholesale response to this simple message of impending judgment. But what was it at work in Jonah and these five words that convicted the Ninevites?

In Matthew 12 the Lord Jesus identifies himself with the prophet Jonah. (In fact Jonah is the only Old Testament prophet with whom Jesus personally identifies himself.) Confronted by the Pharisees' desire for some kind of miraculous sign authenticating his claims, he says to them in Matthew 12:39,

"An evil and adulterous generation craves for a sign; and yet no sign shall be given to it but the sign of Jonah the prophet, for just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so shall the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. The men of Nineveh shall stand up with this generation at the judgment and shall condemn it because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and behold, something greater than Jonah is here."

In the parallel account in Luke 11, Luke adds another note to Jesus' response to the Pharisees. Jesus said, "...just as Jonah became a sign to the Ninevites, so shall the Son of Man be to this generation." There were two things at work in both Jesus and Jonah that authenticated this common ministry of salvation that they had been called to. First, both Jesus and Jonah spoke only the words that God gave them. Jesus emphasized over and over again that his words could be trusted because he said only what his heavenly Father told him to say. There was no being creative with the truth or ad-libbing about spiritual reality.

Secondly, Jonah's miraculous deliverance from the whale prefigured Jesus' own deliverance from the grave. Both of these men demonstrated the power of the resurrection at work. Your own faith in Jesus Christ is grounded on his death and resurrection. "If you...believe in your heart that God raised [Jesus] from the dead, you shall be saved." (Romans 10:9.) It is foundational for our faith. And Nineveh's response to the message of judgment that Jonah delivered to them was based on his own authenticating experience of deliverance from the belly of the whale.

In the ancient Near East, both in Israel and in all the surrounding nations, it was important to have two or three eyewitnesses to confirm any event in a court of law. Jesus said Jonah became a sign to the Ninevites, which indicates that it was a process. Probably when he was vomited up on the shore by the whale back in Palestine, there were witnesses who saw him crawl out of the mouth of the whale, perhaps even some Assyrian traders traveling in caravans who attested to the sign of Jonah as he preached: "You wouldn't believe what happened to this guy. We saw it!" And so Jonah became a sign to the Ninevites as that miraculous event authenticated his message.

Jonah, just like the Lord Jesus, was living evidence in his own being that God meant what he said about judging sin. Remember, Jonah's sin was judged and he ended up in the ocean. Jesus took on himself the sins of the world, and he was crucified and buried. They both suffered because of sin. Jonah brought a message to Nineveh that because of sin there would be judgment, and the people believed him. Look at their response in verse 5. Revival breaks out instantaneously, starting at the grass roots:

And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them.

Notice that Jonah doesn't say that the people believed his preaching; he says they believed God. They hear God speaking through this reluctant, perhaps somewhat self-righteous prophet. And now God sovereignly moves in the hearts of the Ninevites. In the little phrase, "they believed God," the Hebrew text makes it clear that they personally trust God; it is a response of faith. The exact same construction is used in Exodus 14 to describe Israel's response of faith for what God had done to release them from Egyptian bondage.

It is clear in the Scriptures that faith is a gift only God can give; it is not a human achievement. Jonah wrote this first for his own people, and this account of God's sovereignly endowing faith on the Ninevites would have had a profound impact on them. Their view of saving faith was very narrow, limited, and exclusive. It would blow all their categories to read this--the pagan Ninevites repented! They had thought that was their province and their privilege. Jonah wrote this book partly to expose their distortion of the grace of God at work in the world, as well as to expose the limitations of their faith.

In verse 5 these Ninevites don't just believe cognitively, but they act in two ways: fasting and putting on sackcloth. These were both common acts of repentance in the ancient world. The entire city responds in sincerity; the phrase "from the greatest of them to the least of them" includes young and old, rich and poor, powerful and weak--every stratum of society.

Word of the revival spreads very quickly up to the royal court. Look at what happens when the king gets wind of it in verses 6-8:

Then tidings reached the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, removed his robe, and covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. And he made proclamation and published through Nineveh, "By the decree of the king and his nobles: Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything; let them not feed, or drink water, but let man and beast be covered with sackcloth; and let them cry mightily to God; yea, let everyone turn from his evil way and from the violence which is in his hands."

It is amazing that what the king is doing is following the lead of his people as he exchanges his own royal robes for sackcloth. To put on that scratchy burlap covering acknowledges that one deserves God's judgment and affliction. It symbolizes grieving over one's own sin. For the king to sit in ashes means he leaves his seat of authority and humiliates himself. He prostrates himself before God in repentance. These are powerful symbolic actions in leadership. When the king issues this royal decree, although it comes in response to the people's initiation of mourning and fasting, it does add official sanction and impetus to what is already going on.

Some interpreters have seen humor in the king's edict requiring that even the animals have sackcloth put on them and that they fast along with their owners. But it speaks of the seriousness of it all that the animals along with the humans with whom their lives are totally intertwined must symbolically represent the heart of the whole population, like visual aids, so that everybody sees, wherever they turn, humans and animals alike prostrating themselves before God, grieving over their own sin and the judgment it is bringing upon them.

In verse 8 there are three important phrases in what the king asks the people to do. He says first of all to "cry mightily to God." That refers to wholehearted prayers of repentance, physically using one's whole being to cry out to God. Second, he talks about the fruit of repentance, or the evidence that there has been genuine "turning from their evil way." The phrase "evil way" is a description of a general lifestyle of immorality and disregard for the Lord. The king tells them to turn their backs on that lifestyle. And he further tells them to turn from "the violence which is in your hands," which is always used in the Old Testament to denote social injustice or taking advantage of other people because of one's superior position. This king is not calling the people to some sort of simple, short-term reform. He is talking about a radical lifestyle change for himself, one hundred twenty thousand adults, and their children.

Now, we don't know who this king was; there is no mention of him in all of the historical records of the Assyrian kings, which are quite extensive. But I am not surprised, as arrogant as these people were in recording their histories and always exalting the kings, that there is no record of a lone Israelite prophet coming

into the city and turning it upside-down for the Lord. That is not the kind of thing the Assyrians were going to keep records of. But this king's leadership is amazing in his being willing to exercise this kind of spiritual modeling as he gives this edict. We know that he is really going against the grain of what kings normally did in Assyria. The kings of Assyria ruled with an iron fist. They were despots who controlled the religious, economic, and military establishments with cruelty. They tried to cultivate terror of them and their position in the populace.

I wonder what member of the court had the courage to bring the king word of this revival going on in the city. Imagine what would have happened if the king had refused the stirrings of the Spirit of God within him and rejected him. That could have suppressed the spiritual renewal in the city or caused a bloodbath.

Let me ask you, as you think about evil kings or people who are in positions of political authority over us collectively, how you view your responsibility toward them, especially political leaders that we have named as the spiritual enemy, leaders whose influence we fear and oppose. I remember when some of you defined the Bush Administration as the hated Ninevites, deserving God's judgment and figuring that what Bush experienced when Clinton was elected was probably the judgment of God on the Republican party. But since November I have heard others of you express anger and fear and frustration about the influence of this Democratic administration and its priorities, and now we have Clinton as the "king of Nineveh." But no matter which side of the aisle you are on politically, it is easy to feel helpless about having any spiritual influence on your political leadership, especially those with whom we disagree on issues of biblical ethics and morality. Who is bold enough to walk into the king's chamber to bring truth, to tell him what God is doing in his land?

Craig Duncan told me a story this week that he had just heard from Joe Kempston, the Young Life director in Santa Cruz and Monterey Counties. Joe told Craig of six women who had spent their careers ministering to teens through Young Life. They are now in their fifties and sixties and retired from that work. A few years ago they moved to Washington, D.C. to work with the ministry of The Fellowship, an organization that has great evangelistic influence on Capitol Hill under the leadership of Doug Coe. On the staff of The Fellowship these women have been performing ministries of hospitality and caring for people who travel through. They also have a ministry of regular intercessory prayer for the issues on Capitol Hill and the people in leadership, and they of course were praying fervently through the process of transition for the Republican and Democratic administrations.

But these women felt burdened to do more practically, so they came up with a wonderful, creative adventure. They wrote a letter to Hillary Clinton and Tipper Gore introducing themselves and inviting them to lunch. They said, "We are concerned about the pressures you are under in your positions. And we just want to offer you some gifts to help you during your husbands' tenure." Mrs. Clinton and Mrs. Gore accepted the invitation and had lunch with them. At first the two were concerned about what the agenda was and why they were there. But what these women had done was put each fruit of the Spirit in Galatians on a 3x5 card; and with it they had written a biblical summary of its significance, how this fruit of the Spirit at work in the lives of these women would affect them, and what the resource was that it provided them. They said, "We're committed to praying for you, and we're going to pray that you allow Jesus Christ to be Lord in your lives, and that he would express these fruits of the Spirit through you." Both Mrs. Clinton and Mrs. Gore were amazed by their openness. That was a courageous, creative, and constructive way for these women to speak truth to political leaders they may have opposed or feared.

Verses 9-10 give us the conclusion of the king's decree and God's response of compassion:

"Who knows, God may yet repent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we perish not?"

When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God repented of the evil which he had said he would do to them; and he did not do it.

The king of Nineveh came to understand some profound theology during this time of crisis. You could call it a theology of repentance. He came to understand that, at least from a human perspective, repentance seems to work two different ways: repentance toward God and repentance from God. If the king and the people

sincerely repented, or turned from their wickedness, it would appear from a human perspective that God might turn from his decision to destroy the city and change his mind about judgment. The king says in verse 8, "Let everyone turn from his evil way...." That is the Hebrew expression for repent. "...God may yet repent and turn from his fierce anger." The same word in Hebrew is used for both the people's repentance and God's repentance. Then Jonah adds in verse 10 that when God sees the people's repentance, he repents of his plan to destroy the evil city.

We need to understand here that God's plans and purposes for humanity never change. He himself is immutable; he does not change. He is always committed to judging evil wherever he finds it. But he is also always committed to forgiving anyone who repents of evil. He is always against sin, but he is always for us in relationship to sin. The apostle Paul wrote in 1 Timothy 2:3-4 of "God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth." And the apostle Peter wrote in 2 Peter 3:9, "The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish, but for all to come to repentance."

God's heart is merciful, long-suffering, loving, and committed to salvation, but we can never presume on his compassion. We cannot fly in the face of his righteousness and justice. The words we have just read do not connote some sort of naive or superficial universalism in which everyone is going to be saved because of God's great heart. No, the Scriptures are clear that the wages of sin is death, and Jonah experienced that. God persists in warning us and confronting us until we turn away from sin and accept his forgiveness. He did that to Jonah through circumstances that got his attention. And he did it to the city of Nineveh through the preaching of judgment by Jonah.

But what is even more awesome to me is that God is the one who instigates our ability to repent and turn back to him. His activity precedes as well as follows our repentance in a three-step process. In this account we see God first sovereignly choosing the city of Nineveh on which to focus his love; out of grace he elects these people to salvation. Second, the people respond to God's word through Jonah and repent of their sin. And then third, God seems to repent in granting forgiveness for sin and withholding judgment, but in fact that was his purpose all along. So in the story of the king and people of Nineveh, the full circle of repentance takes place, and Jonah is strategic in that process because of his obedience, ambivalent as it is, to God's will and God's message. There is an unparalleled outpouring of God's Spirit in Nineveh. A revival like this never happened even in Israel throughout biblical history.

Every one of us has the same struggle as Jonah in trusting God's heart for the world. Let me ask you about a very specific group in our culture that you may struggle with viewing as Jonah viewed the Ninevites: What is your attitude toward the homosexual and lesbian population in our country? Do you have a degree of ambivalence toward those people, either the whole group or the individuals that you find yourself face-to-face with? Is there within you a degree of homophobia, an out-of-control fear of these people and their influence on us and our culture? Are you convinced, as Jonah was about Nineveh, that in their wickedness they deserve all the wrath and judgment God can pour out on them?

How did you deal with the march and the rally in Washington, D.C. last weekend and in the early part of the week? Like you, I saw all the media coverage of that event. I've talked to many people in this body this week, and I asked specifically what their reactions to it were. I got an amazing variety of responses. Some people were in denial and didn't want to deal with it at all. Some people were incensed at what they saw. And yet those homosexuals and lesbians, three hundred thousand in number, don't know their right hand from their left; they are in bondage, totally confused about their identity and their sexuality. They don't have a clue about how God views them.

There is a young man in our church who would not in any way consider himself a spiritual hero, and yet God used him uniquely last weekend in Washington, D.C. He had been there on business the week before, and on that Thursday he realized that this event was coming up. He is a rather shy young man, not a charismatic, powerful communicator. But he said God burdened him for what he could do to make a difference, to witness to these homosexuals and lesbians. So he went to a quick copy place, rented a Macintosh computer, and adapted Campus Crusade's "Four Spiritual Laws" booklet to homosexual and lesbian people. He told them how much God loved them and how they were created in his image. He told them how sin had distorted that

image and separated them from relationship with God. He printed up twelve hundred copies and went out by himself all day Saturday and handed them out. He was surprised at the openness and responsiveness, and he had some very good conversations with homosexuals and lesbians.

On Sunday he went to a church that had been recommended to him and told the people there about what had happened on Saturday. He asked many of them to help him go out with him again on Sunday. But he couldn't get one person to go with him to the mall to pass out fliers. And Sunday was much more difficult when he went out; he met with much resistance and anger.

Again, in no way would this young man consider himself a hero. But he is beginning to understand God's heart of redemptive love for a segment of our population that is totally lost and confused. He was willing as Jonah was to walk into a frightening city like Nineveh. He was scared, but he did it out of obedience because he was convinced that this was what God wanted him to do. I pray there will be a growing desire in each of us to want to live that way, too.

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Doug Goins
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