

How Can We Maintain A Living Hope In The Midst Of Suffering?

by Ron. R. Ritchie

On April 5th, 1943, Dietrich Bonhoeffer was arrested and imprisoned by the Gestapo for his political activities against the German Nazi regime. He had been speaking out against the Nazis, but eventually his words caught up with him. He saw that the church of Jesus Christ was being persecuted and that his country was heading toward the abyss and he decided to do something about it. Looking back, he felt he had become involved in some situations that he perhaps should have avoided.

Two years later he found himself facing the death sentence. On the day when the sentence was to be carried out, a Sunday, he led a service in the prison which housed men of various nationalities. One prisoner, an English army officer who was also facing the death sentence but was later set free, wrote these words describing the last day of Bonhoeffer's life:

Bonhoeffer always seemed to me to spread an atmosphere of happiness and joy over the least incident and profound gratitude for the mere fact that he was alive . . . He was one of the very few persons I have ever met for whom God was real and always near . . . On Sunday, April 8, 1945, Pastor Bonhoeffer conducted a little service of worship and spoke to us in a way that went to the heart of all of us. He found just the right words to express the spirit of our imprisonment, the thoughts and the resolutions it had brought us. He had hardly ended his last prayer when the door opened and two civilians entered. They said, "Prisoner Bonhoeffer, come with us." That had only one meaning for all prisoners--the gallows. We said good-by to him. He took me aside: "This is the end, but for me it is the beginning of life." The next day he was hanged in Flossenburg.

"This is the end, but for me it is the beginning of life." What was it that so possessed this man that at the very moment of his death he could say that? What was the hope that he possessed, and why was he able to cling to it? Why could not even the sentence of death take it away? As we look at a passage in I Peter this morning we will discover that the Christian's hope is a "living hope," placed in our hearts by a living Savior, Jesus Christ. The question we are facing in these times of rapid change is: How can we maintain a living hope in the midst of suffering, whether it is political suffering, such as Bonhoeffer faced, social suffering, or personal suffering? What will hold us together in such a time; and what will be the fruit of such suffering?

Let us set the context of this letter of I Peter. Following the Council of Jerusalem in 49 A.D., it appears that Peter went to minister in the area of what today is modern Turkey. There the apostle ministered to Jewish believers who were converted in Jerusalem at Pentecost, and Gentile believers who had come under the apostle Paul's ministry and were now involved in house churches throughout that area. At the time Peter wrote the letter, in 63 or 64 A.D., these Christians were undergoing political, social and personal suffering. The apostle wanted to encourage them that in spite of their present circumstances they could experience peace through the indwelling Christ as they contemplated two realities. First, they should remember that they were "aliens" (verse 1). They were on the earth for a short season before they returned home. This world was not their home; they were merely passing through.

Writing about these Christians in his book, "Wanderings: A History of the Jews," the contemporary Jewish author Chaim Potok says:

Unlike the troublesome Jews, Christians belonged to no nation and were without roots or history. They claimed their country was heaven. They lived in densely populated cities but remained aloof from pagans all around them. They would not eat meat sacrificed to gods . . .

They would not send their children to pagan schools because the textbooks contained stories of the gods, the poetry of Homer and Virgil. The Roman authorities, whether emperors, senators, counsuls or governors, gazed upon the flutterings of the early church with, at best, benign contempt, and, at worst, violent hostility. Still the sect survived and grew.

Why did this group continue to grow, despite all they were made to suffer? They realized they were aliens on this earth. But, secondly, they realized that although they were aliens, God the Father had "chosen" them (verse 1) for salvation before the foundation of the world; they had been set apart by the Holy Spirit to believe the truth of the gospel; and they had been given power by the Son, Jesus Christ, to walk in obedience to the truth being constantly cleansed of their failures as they grew in him.

How, then, can Christians maintain a living hope in the midst of suffering? In verses 3 through 5 of chapter 1 of his letter, Peter shares with these first century Christians the secret of maintaining their hope. First, they were to realize the power of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Verse 3:

1. Realize the power of the resurrection 1:3

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to his great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead . . .

The first thing Peter wants them to do is lift their eyes above and beyond their immediate, pressure-filled circumstances and bless God; to realize that the Living Clod is in charge of their circumstances so there is nothing to fear.

Secondly, Peter wants them to bless and praise God the Father because he is the God of all the universe. There is no one else out there; there is no one else to turn to; there is no hope beyond the Living God. Peter may well have been remembering what David prayed in a time of suffering. Psalm 28:6-9:

**Blessed be the Lord,
Because he has heard the voice of my supplication.
The Lord is my strength and my shield;
My heart trusts in him, and I am helped;
Therefore my heart exults,
And with my song I shall thank him.
The Lord is their strength,
And he is a saving defense to his anointed.
Save thy people, and bless thine inheritance;
Be their shepherd also, and carry them forever.**

Thirdly, Peter wants these Christians to bless God because God is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, whom we also have come to know as God the Father of our Lord, who now is also our Father because we are in Christ. (John 20:17) Once when I was sitting under the palm trees on a beautiful Hawaiian beach I could not help but look up and think, "The God who created all this is my Father, and the Father of my Lord Jesus Christ." The Christian has an intimacy with God that the world knows nothing about. The world is attracted by the beauty of creation, but the Christian is attracted by the Creator.

Fourthly, Peter says God is to be blessed because Jesus is the personal Savior of Christians. He is the One who takes away our sins, the great Anointed One of God, the Messiah. When you call Jesus your Lord, according to the Old Testament, you are calling him God. Bless our Lord God, Jesus our Savior, Christ our Messiah, the great Promised One of old.

Fifthly, Peter says God is to be blessed because, "according to his great mercy he has caused us to be born again." Grace and mercy are a form of God's love: grace is offered to those who are worthless; mercy is offered to those who are helpless. Such was our condition before we met Jesus Christ: we were worthless and helpless.

As a Jew, Peter would recall the many times God extended his mercy to Israel in the past. He would recall the time when, having spoken with God, Moses came down from the mountain with the Ten Commandments, by which Israel could live in wholeness, peace and joy if they would but obey those commandments. But Moses found his people dancing around the golden calf. He knew that they deserved death for this, yet he ran back into the very presence of God and begged him to extend mercy to them. And God did extend mercy to the Israelites that day.

Peter would also recall David's words in Psalm 86: "Thou, O Lord, art a God merciful and gracious. Slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness and truth." He would recall the days when Jeremiah prophesied to Israel and Judah in the midst of their rebellion against God. The prophet had told them that there was coming a New Covenant, when God would place his law in their minds and on their hearts and promised, "I will be merciful to their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more," said the Lord.

Peter wanted to show these Christians in Asia Minor that the mercy of God had been extended to them, and he was stressing again that their election originated with God. Without God, the bottom line for mankind is eternal death. You can only understand this truth as you come closer and closer to the very character of God. This issue is so deep we are all made to feel like Job, who had many questions to ask of God about his suffering, but when God appeared before him in a whirlwind Job was left speechless. God said to him, "Before I answer your questions, let me ask you some. Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Do you know the time the mountain goats give birth? Did you give the horse his might? and three dozen other questions. All Job could say in reply was, "I wish I had never opened my mouth."

Peter wants to drive home to these Christians the truth that "none are righteous, no, not one," as the psalmist wrote. None of us do any good. "All have sinned and come short of the glory of God," Paul writes in Romans. "For God has shut up all (Jew and Gentile) in disobedience, that he might show mercy to all." (Romans 11) When we come to understand that truth we are, humbled by who we are in light of who God is. Of course, if we look around us we will find that in some ways we are better than others, more talented or better looking than others, perhaps. But when God reveals the evil of your own heart such comparisons are of no consequence. Then you understand that "all land that includes you and me] have fallen short of the glory of God."

What hope, then, does anyone have to be saved from the wrath of God? None, except for the love and mercy of God reaching out to the helpless. In this context the helpless are the Gentiles, to whom Peter says in chapter 2 verse 10 of this letter: "for once you were not a people, but now you are a people of God; you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy." Of this wonderful mercy, Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy." You cannot extend mercy until you recognize that you have received mercy, then you will want to extend mercy to others.

We all need to come to a realization of this marvelous cycle: first, who God is; second, who we are; third, the fact that we are the recipients of mercy, and, because God has been so merciful to us we now must extend mercy to others. And that mercy is the love of God offered to those who are helpless. As we understand the part the mercy of God played in our own salvation we must arrive at a place of humility, a place where we can say to God, "Thank you and bless you and praise you."

Peter continues, "This great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead." There are two wonderful and encouraging truths in this verse that have profound effect on our daily lives, regardless of the outward circumstances.

First, "God the Father . . . has caused us to be born again." What does it mean to be "born again"? The first mention of these words in the New Testament was when Jesus addressed them to Nicodemus. To be "born again" means to have a new beginning, to be born from above, to start over. How many times have you wanted to start over? Just like the movie makers do when they shoot and reshoot a scene until they get it right, have you ever longed to have a second chance at life? But life isn't that kind, is it? Much of the wrong we do in this life stays with us throughout our life. But to be "born again" means to have a new beginning, only this time God initiates the birth. Jesus said, "Unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God. Unless one is born of water (repentance for sins), and the Spirit he cannot enter the kingdom of God."

Why is that? The problem is because we were born with the nature of Adam, a nature of rebellion against God, a nature that seeks to live life on its own, without God. That is what keeps us out of fellowship with God, and separated from the mercy and love of God, so that we are living without "life," without power, without hope and without God. But God offers a solution to the problem of our rebellion, and that solution is, to be "born again." Children seem to grasp this truth much quicker than adults. I used to teach this solution to the problem of man's rebellion to children in a black ghetto in Philadelphia and they got it right away. Jesus' wonderful words, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believes in him would not perish but have everlasting life," grabbed their attention and they understood them.

And what is the process? We have already seen that the Holy Spirit sets apart the chosen ones, using the Word of God to bring us to a place where we acknowledge that we have sinned against God and we are in need of a Savior. It's amazing how many people don't think they need a Savior. They are so blinded by their own selfishness, their own sin and their own rebellion they can't see their need. It takes the work of the Holy Spirit to open their eyes to recognize their need. Why do you need a Savior when you're healthy, when you can run five miles each day, they ask? Why do you need a Savior when you have a nice house and a new car, when everything is going right for you? But your need for a Savior has nothing to do with outward circumstances, rather it has to do with who you are inside--and who you are inside is killing you and you know it! God keeps pointing that out to you, telling you there is a Savior available, and his name is Jesus. The book of Acts says "There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved." Man's responsibility in this salvation process is to come in humility before the Lord with the understanding that the only contribution he himself can make to his salvation is his own sin! Then he must repent of that and allow Jesus to become his Lord and Savior.

What happens when we do that? That is when God's blessing comes in. Romans 10:13:

But what does it say? "The word is near you, in Your mouth and in your heart" _that is, the word of faith which we are preaching, that if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you shall be saved; for with the heart man believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation. For the Scriptures says, "Whoever believes in him will not be disappointed." For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, abounding in riches for all who call upon Him; for "Whoever will call upon the name of the Lord will be saved."

Following last Sunday's service I had an appointment with a young woman who wanted to talk about her life and how it related to Jesus Christ. After talking to her for a long time I asked her if she would like to receive Jesus as her Lord and Savior and be set free from the bondage of sin, set free to experience a living hope, eternal life and the forgiveness of her sins. Like a child, she bowed her head and accepted Jesus Christ. Then she looked up and there were tears in her eyes. She said, "Is that the Christian in me?" I said, "Not only the Christian, but the Christ, the Living Christ, the One who has given you eternal life."

So the first great truth of verse 3 is that "God the Father has caused us to be born again. " The second truth which Peter wants Christians to see is that we have been born again "to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead." Regardless of their present political, social and personal suffering, regardless of the outward circumstances, Christians have a present, inward spiritual reality, a "living hope."

This hope cannot fail. It can no more pass away than the Living God can pass away. It is a hope by which we can live today, a future expectation, a happy anticipation of good. This hope is living, pulsating, present, invisible, but as real as you and I are at this moment. Before we were born again we had no hope because we had no God. Any hope we had was temporary. We placed our hope in people, in the uncertainty of riches, the uncertainty of idols, and in the uncertainty of our own lives. But those things will fail us every time. A first century Greek poet expressed the hearts of his fellow citizens in these words: "Not to be born at all is by far the best fortune. The second best is, as soon as one is born with all speed to return to whence he came." A Greek tombstone in the catacombs had the epitaph, "No Hope." Billy Graham has said, "One of the joys of living right now is that men and women still have hope, even such simple hopes as 'I hope to go to the

baseball game tomorrow'; 'I hope we eat'; 'I hope I get a new car'; 'I hope I get a promotion'; 'I hope we have children'; I hope, I hope, I hope! This is the time when we can hope, but when you die without Jesus Christ and go to hell you will never have any more hope; you will never ever be able to say, again 'I hope.' "

Contrasting the foolishness of men without God to the living hope in the hearts of believers, David wrote in Psalm 33: 13-22:

**The Lord looks from heaven;
He sees all the sons of men;
From His dwelling place He looks out
On all the inhabitants of the earth,
He who fashions the hearts of them all,
He who understands all their works.
The king is not saved by a mighty army;
A warrior is not delivered by great strength.
A horse is a false hope for victory;
Nor does it deliver anyone by its great strength.
Behold, the eye of the Lord is on those who fear Him
On those who hope for His lovingkindness,
To deliver their soul from death,
And to keep them alive in famine.
Our soul waits for the Lord
He is our help and our shield.
For our heart rejoices in Him,
Because we trust in His holy name.
Let Thy lovingkindness, O Lord, be upon us,
According as we have hoped in Thee.**

What is our living hope? According to Peter, it is the life of Christ in the heart of a believer; it is the security of our salvation (verse 6); it is the hope of the second coming of Jesus Christ in power and honor and glory; it is the full realization of our salvation when we are glorified; and it is the realization that we will one day join our Lord and Savior for ever and ever.

Don't you feel there must be more to life than filling out income tax forms? You feel there are so many people who don't know who you are, the gifts you have been given, your talents, people who have never dipped into the well of your being? When you feel like that then you are tasting eternity. It's drawing you. But those who have this living hope that Peter writes about can say with absolute certainty that they will one day experience the fullness of life.

Then what does the resurrection of Jesus Christ have to do with our living hope? Everything! It is because of the mercy of God and the resurrection of Christ that we have mercy extended to us and we are born again. Paul says, "If we only hope in Christ in this life we of all men are to be pitied." However, he goes on to say, "But Christ has risen from the dead, the first fruits of those who sleep." The resurrection is the central theme of Christianity, the key to our living hope, as well as the key to our present spiritual reality.

And that living hope has certain effects upon us. 1 John 3 says, "See how great a love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God; and such we are. For this reason the world does not know us, because it did not know him. "

In an airport in Spokane recently I was watching a young man, and I went over to him and asked him, "Are you a Christian?" He said, "Yes. How did you know?" How did I know? Because we know Jesus we know each other. There's something about us. The woman who accepted Christ last Sunday saw the people coming into the evening service and she said, "Will I be able to smile like that? Will I have eyes like those people?" For some reason Christians seem to light up. A new life, the life of Christ, is imparted to us and it flows through our earthen vessels.

John continues, "Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we shall be. We

know that, when he appears, we shall be like him, because we shall see him just as he is. And every one who has this hope fixed on him purifies himself, just as he is pure."

The resurrection and the coming again of Jesus has an affect on our lives because when we meet him we will not want to be ashamed. We will want to meet him as men and women in the process of becoming like him. Because Jesus Christ arose from the dead and now rules his spiritual kingdom as Lord of lords, we who have placed our faith in him as Lord and Savior are "born again," and we find our hearts filled with a living hope. As our Living Lord he fills our lives with his life, his power, his peace, his joy and his hope; hope of his second coming, hope of eternal life, hope of being with him forever; and until we see him we will desire to walk in purity.

How can we maintain a living hope in the midst of suffering? First, we must realize the power of the resurrection of Jesus Christ; it is the difference between life and death. And the way we can realize that power is to come into a personal relationship with him, the only Savior the world has ever had. All other saviors--including ourselves--have failed.

2. Realize the riches of our inheritance 1:4

The second reason is a realize the riches of our inheritance (verse 4): "to obtain an inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you." What is our "inheritance"? In this context it is a gift, a portion of an estate, a material gift. To the Jews, this would refer to the land of Israel which was promised to Abraham and his seed. The Old Testament saints also thought of this gift as God himself. "The Lord is the portion of my inheritance and my cup," David wrote in Psalm 16. Together with David, Peter saw this inheritance as a spiritual, rather than a physical inheritance.

How do we experience our inheritance? Peter would perhaps recall our Lord's words, "Blessed are those who have been persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is [present tense] the kingdom of heaven." These Christians to whom the apostle was writing could call on the resources of their King at any time. That is true of us also in our day. In Romans 14 Paul wrote, "The kingdom of God is not eating or drinking, but righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit." He was speaking of an invisible but perfectly true reality. Then in Ephesians, Paul says that Christ is our inheritance, while we are his inheritance.

In his book, "Riches In Christ," Ray Stedman says this about Paul's words:

Paul refers to "the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints." It is necessary to understand what that means. There is a double inheritance in the Christian life. We inherit Jesus. He is our inheritance. He is our resource from which we draw. If you receive an inheritance you live on it; you use your inheritance to enrich yourself. So Jesus is our inheritance. We can enrich ourselves with him at any moment. He is our power, our strength, our love, our life, our wisdom, our truth. He is what we live by. Christ is our life.

But, and this is the wonderful thing, we are his inheritance. He draws on us. Our bodies and souls, our full humanity, are to be his to use to manifest the new creation in the midst of the destruction of the old. That is "his inheritance in the saints." That produces riches, not only in our lives but in the lives of others as well, and the world in general--the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints.

What a joy to know that when we have accepted Jesus Christ we receive him as our inheritance and we in turn become his inheritance. We draw on him; he draws on us. What a way to live! If we are living life in this way--the way life was intended to be lived--we will find that we are forever drawing on Jesus for everything necessary to cope with the reality of our everyday experiences. On the other hand, if we are not drawing on Christ we do not really understand reality. We are isolated from it.

What are the characteristics of our inheritance in Christ? Contrasting the promise of the land with our spiritual inheritance, Peter says that our inheritance is "imperishable" (untouched by death); it is "undefiled" (unstained by evil); it is "unfading" (unimpaired by time). Our Lord himself gave a glimpse of our inheritance when he

said that the Kingdom of God is a place where thieves don't break in, where neither moth nor rust consume. After working on my house all day yesterday. I would add to this, "The Kingdom of God is a place where dry rot does not consume, either!"

How accessible is this inheritance? Peter says it is "reserved in heaven" for us. I used to think that heaven was way "out there" someplace; that my spiritual inheritance was reserved for me way out in space and one day when I died I could go and pick it up as it was being kept there for me. But the New Testament tells us that when we accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior we immediately begin to experience eternal life. He becomes our inheritance, and, as such, we can draw on him constantly. Our inheritance is "reserved," it is kept for us and no one can take it away from us. In the context of Peter's letter, then, the apostle is saying that God gives Christians free access to their inheritance so that they may be able to deal with suffering.

How can we maintain a living hope in the midst of suffering? First, we must realize the power of the resurrection of Jesus Christ; and secondly, we must realize the riches of our inheritance in Christ.

3. Realize the security of our salvation 1:5

Thirdly, Peter says, Christians should realize the security of their salvation (verse 5). They are

protected by the power of God through faith for salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

These believers to whom Peter was writing were under a lot of pressure. They didn't know whether they could trust God or not. Thus, Peter must have been thinking of Jesus' words in John 14: "Let not your heart be troubled; believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you to myself; that where I am, there you may be also. . ."

Peter confirms for these believers three basic, eternal truths. First, we are protected by the power of God. We need protection because we are involved in a spiritual battle. Our enemies are the world, the flesh, and the devil. All of these are seeking to consume us, to discourage us, to depress us, to fill our hearts with anxiety and fear. But we are protected from these things by God. The moment we are born again our salvation is secure and protected.

The idea behind this word 'protected' is that the Christian's heart is guarded in the same way a military post is guarded by soldiers. God sets up a military guard in our hearts, thus no one can interfere with our salvation. No one can interfere with our salvation in its completed form either, which is to be with Christ Jesus for ever. Jesus himself said this in John 10: "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me; and I give eternal life to them, and they shall never perish; and no one shall snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all [that includes the world, the flesh, and the devil, and all that would try to afflict us]; and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand."

Secondly, Christians are protected by the power of God himself, the same power that created the universe, the same power that resurrected Jesus from the dead, the same power that gave us our new life in Christ. That is the power that protects us as we walk by faith in Christ. As we continually rely on him our lives are not shattered by fear and anxiety. Remember Paul's wonderful words in Philippians, "Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which passes all comprehension, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ." Only God can put a guard on our intellects and our emotions. Without that guard we would have to live just like the world lives.

Thirdly, we are "protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time."

There are three stages in this salvation that Peter speaks of. The first is justification, that is, a divine act of a holy God in which he judicially declares a believing sinner to be righteous, and he accepts him because Christ

has paid for his sins on the cross. God then sets that believing sinner free from the penalty of sin.

The second stage of salvation is the one we are experiencing now, which is sanctification, i.e., the divine act of a holy God whereby he sets the believer aside for his purposes to be used to express the life of the resurrected Christ. This sets us free from the power of sin. The thing that disturbs me most is that when I sin I have an instant realization that I didn't have to sin; that the Living God had provided the power to enable me to walk out of that situation but I choose not to. Sometimes I grieve over the fact that I did not choose the right thing more than I grieve over the sin itself. I made the wrong choice, but I know I could have gotten out of it.

The third stage of salvation (the one Peter is writing about in these verses) is glorification. That is, the divine act of a holy God whereby a believer at his physical death is removed from time and space to a spiritual heavenly kingdom to live in his new body before the Lord and for the glory of the Lord forever. That is when the believer is set free from the presence of sin. That is what Bonhoeffer was referring to when he said on the day of his execution, "This is the end, but for me it is the beginning."

How can we maintain a living hope in the midst of suffering? First, by realizing the power of the resurrection of Jesus Christ in our lives. The power is Christ himself. He will provide all the power necessary to cope with reality, to cope with outward circumstances. He will fortify us with his life.

Secondly, by realizing the riches of our inheritance. We have the Living God residing in us and we can draw on him at any time. Do you need courage today? Do you need wisdom? How about forgiveness? Do you need peace? Come to Christ and draw from his rich resources.

Thirdly, rest in the knowledge that your salvation is secure. "No one is able to snatch you out of my Father's hand," Jesus promised. It is as if we were a little bird, sitting in the palm of the Father's hand. We are as secure as that bird because the Lord of the universe himself is holding us. No man, no spirit, can snatch us from his hand.

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1 Peter 1:3-5
Second message
Ron R. Ritchie
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[Back to Index Page](#)

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