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## **HINDRANCES TO EXPERIENCING, MAINTAINING AND DEEPENING THE FULLNESS OF THE SPIRIT**

In this last message on the Spirit-filled life, we will be reflecting on the hindrances to experiencing the fullness of the Holy Spirit. Whatever hinders us from experiencing the fullness of the Spirit will also hinder us from maintaining and deepening the fullness of the Spirit in our lives.

To be a Christian and not be filled with the Spirit is a very unsatisfactory state. It can be frustrating to find ourselves failing and faltering, unable to obey the many exhortations in the Scriptures and unable to overcome sin or the world. We know from the Scriptures there is much that God intends for His children, yet we experience very little of the reality. The abundant life that the Lord Jesus came to give us seems elusive.

Some of us may have sought the Lord to fill us with the Spirit and may wonder why we are not filled. The Lord Jesus has already been exalted and glorified, and the Holy Spirit has been poured forth. God's will is for all His children to be filled with the Holy Spirit and it is feasible for every believer to be filled. Experiencing the fullness of the Spirit is vital if we want to grow well and serve God effectively. We should therefore give priority to this issue.

If we have sought the Lord for the fullness of the Spirit and are not experiencing it, we should seek to understand what hindrances are in our way and take the necessary steps to remove them. This is the subject of this message. The hindrances that we will be considering will also be relevant for those who have experienced the fullness of the Spirit and desire to understand what hinders them from maintaining and deepening the fullness of the Spirit in their lives. If we have a good grasp of these issues, we will also be able to help others.

### **Hindrances to the fullness of the Spirit**

Whatever is contrary to the role and ministry of the Holy Spirit would hinder us from experiencing and deepening the fullness of the Spirit in our lives. We have considered the role and ministry of the Holy Spirit in earlier messages. It is helpful for us to prayerfully reflect over them as we consider the hindrances to living in the fullness of the Spirit.

### 1. *Grieving the Holy Spirit*

In Ephesians 4:30, the apostle Paul warns us not to grieve the Holy Spirit.

#### **Ephesians 4:30**

Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.

This is a very important area that we must pay heed to throughout our lives. If we want to live a Spirit-filled life, we must take care never to grieve the Holy Spirit, for whatever grieves the Holy Spirit will hinder us from living a Spirit-filled life. The Holy Spirit must have the freedom to work in our lives, to speak to us, guide us, teach us, and mould us.

The context of Ephesians 4:30 can help us reflect over and pay attention to some of the areas and issues involved. It includes Ephesians 4:17-5:5.

Paul warns us not to grieve the Holy Spirit in the context of telling us to give up our former manner of life (Eph. 4:22), which is a major hindrance to the fullness of the Spirit. He emphasises the importance of the issue by saying that he is affirming this area of truth "together with the Lord" (v. 17).

#### **Ephesians 4:17-29**

17 So this I say, and affirm together with the Lord, that you walk no longer just as the Gentiles also walk, in the futility of their mind,  
18 being darkened in their understanding, excluded from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the hardness of their heart;  
19 and they, having become callous, have given themselves over to sensuality for the practice of every kind of impurity with greediness.  
20 But you did not learn Christ in this way,  
21 if indeed you have heard Him and have been taught in Him, just as truth is in Jesus,  
22 that, in reference to your former manner of life, you lay aside the old self, which is being corrupted in accordance with the lusts of deceit,  
23 and that you be renewed in the spirit of your mind,  
24 and put on the new self, which in the likeness of God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth.  
25 Therefore, laying aside falsehood, speak truth each one of you with his neighbor, for we are members of one another.  
26 Be angry, and yet do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger,  
27 and do not give the devil an opportunity.  
28 He who steals must steal no longer; but rather he must labor, performing with his own hands what is good, so that he will have something to share with one who has need.

29 Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment, so that it will give grace to those who hear.

We used to walk in darkness, ignorance, hardness of heart, impurity and greediness. Now, as God's children, we must lay aside this old way of life and learn from the Lord Jesus, learning to walk in truth and righteousness and be renewed in the spirit of our mind.

It is important not to give the evil one an opportunity to work in our lives (v. 27). We must exercise care with our speech (v. 29), so that what we say will not have a negative impact on the hearers, but a positive impact instead. As we look to the Spirit of God to guide us, He will help us speak words of wisdom that edify others, "according to the need of the moment". "There must be no filthiness and silly talk, or coarse jesting, which are not fitting, but rather giving of thanks" (Eph. 5:4).

### **Ephesians 4:31-32**

31 Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice.

32 Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you.

We grieve the Holy Spirit if we harbour bitterness, wrath and malice in our heart. All these are contrary to the spirit of love and kindness. Whatever wrongs others may have done to us, we must be willing to forgive, "just as God in Christ also has forgiven you". The Scriptures warns us that if we do not forgive others, God will also not forgive us (Matt. 6:14-15). An unforgiving spirit will grieve the Holy Spirit and hinder His working in our lives.

Some say they have difficulty to "forgive and forget". The Scriptures does not say we must forget the wrong done to us, but that we must have a forgiving spirit. This means we must not be bitter, or bear a grudge against those who have done us wrong, or harbour a retaliatory spirit or ill-will towards those who have done us wrong. However, it does not mean we are blind to the faults and failures and the wrongdoings of others. There is a place to exercise care and wisdom in the way we relate with others. Sometimes it is wise to keep a distance from those who may harm us. It is not appropriate to forgive those who are unrepentant. Having a forgiving spirit is different from forgiving the unrepentant.

The presence of a wrong or negative spirit within us will grieve the Holy Spirit. Therefore, we must learn to walk in love, just as Christ also loved us and gave Himself up for us (Eph. 5:2).

If we have truly consecrated our lives to God and if we maintain a prayerful spirit, the Holy Spirit will help us recognise aspects in our lives and conduct which grieve Him. It is important that we do not harden our hearts and refuse to acknowledge

what is not right in our lives. Let us ask God to help us put right what needs to be put right.

## *2. Pride and self-exaltation*

The Scriptures clearly teaches that God is opposed to the proud but gives grace to the humble (1 Pet. 5:5). Pride is very destructive to our lives. Although it is a common problem, it may not be obvious and we may not be conscious of its subtle manifestations in our lives.

Self-exaltation can also be manifested in subtle ways, even in the context of serving God. We may be genuinely seeking to serve God and others, but if we are also seeking to be exalted, recognised and appreciated, the Holy Spirit will be hindered from coming into our lives in a fuller measure. Remember, the role of the Holy Spirit is to glorify Christ, not us.

## *3. Self-centredness, self-confidence, self-sufficiency and self-desires*

An attitude of self-centredness, self-confidence, self-sufficiency and seeking to satisfy our personal desires is a major hindrance to the Holy Spirit working in our lives. It is contrary to a spirit of consecration, submission to and reliance upon the Lord, which is at the heart of readiness to receive the fullness of the Holy Spirit. Such an attitude is a manifestation of self-life, and causes us to focus and rely on ourselves instead of on the Lord.

One effective way of dealing with the issue of self-life is to ask ourselves: What is the starting point in my life? Is my starting point self or God? Do my thoughts, words and actions arise out of fellowship with God or do they proceed basically from me? Are they motivated by my love for God and others, or by self-interests?

We need to make a definite and decisive choice to have God as the starting point in our life, and then work it out day by day, moment by moment. Evaluate from time to time: Is my focus and concentration on the Lord? Am I living in fellowship with Him? Am I seeking to do His will according to His guidance and enabling? Or am I seeking to do my own will, in my own strength? If we are able to have God as the starting point in our life and live well in this way, we will be dealing with self-life at its root. The Holy Spirit will gladly help us walk in fellowship with God, according to His ways, guidance and enabling.

## *4. Love for the world*

Love for the world is a significant hindrance to the Spirit of God filling us. As we live in this fallen world, it is easy to be preoccupied with the affairs of this life and to be gripped by the spirit of the world. The apostle James has strong words for those who become friends of the world.

**James 4:4**

You adulteresses, do you not know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.

James uses the term "adulteresses", which is very strong language, because the fallen world is under the influence of the evil one. There is a negative spiritual dimension in this fallen world and a strong pull in the direction of indulging in the desires of the flesh. If we set our hearts in this direction, we are aligning our hearts with the evil one.

If we love God, we must not love the world. The apostle John tells us: "If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him" (1 John 2:15). Love for the world displaces the love of God in our hearts. The lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life permeate the fallen world (1 John 2:16). We must reject all these negative influences decisively and not succumb to them.

The evil one uses the things in the world to tempt, distract and hinder us in our walk with God and service to Him. This does not mean that all the things in this world are negative. God wants us to love the people of the world and there is a place to make use of the things in this world for our life on earth and to advance God's kingdom. But we have to be vigilant to ensure we are not negatively influenced by the spirit of the world.

**5. Sin**

All sins are contrary to the Holy Spirit because He is the Spirit of holiness. Some sins are more serious and damaging, and some sins can have a tenacious grip on our lives.

The issue is not whether there is sin in our lives but our attitude towards sin. Do we treat sin lightly? Are we indifferent towards it? Do we refuse to acknowledge, confess and forsake sin in our life? It is one thing to have difficulty overcoming sin. It is another to refuse to forsake any area of sin.

Sin has a detrimental effect on our lives. One reason for wanting to be filled with the Spirit must be because we want to overcome sin. It is a very serious matter if you refuse to forsake any area of sin. If you are in such a position, you must cry out to God to help you come to the point where you are prepared to forsake sin in your life.

**6. Wrong understanding**

Wrong understanding and wrong doctrine with regards to being filled with the Spirit hinder many from experiencing the fullness of the Spirit. Wrong understanding can result in wrong emphasis and approach. It also hinders us from exercising true faith because faith must be based on truth.

I have covered a number of wrong ways of understanding this subject in a previous message. I will now go through them briefly, focusing on how they can hinder us from experiencing the fullness of the Spirit.

*Being filled with the Spirit is evidenced by speaking in tongues*

One common wrong understanding is that being filled with the Spirit is evidenced by speaking in tongues. Believers who hold this view tend to place much emphasis on tongues. To be able to speak in tongues becomes very important to them. They may be preoccupied with this issue and may even try to learn how to speak in tongues.

So instead of seeking to understand how to prepare their hearts so that the Spirit of God can have the freedom to fill them, they may be approaching this issue in the wrong way and with the wrong emphasis. Not only that, they may also be vulnerable to being deceived by the evil one as tongues can be counterfeited.

*We need to empty ourselves and surrender our faculties to the Holy Spirit to take control*

Some believers think they need to empty themselves for the Holy Spirit to fill them, and this includes surrendering their faculties to the Holy Spirit to take control of their lives.

It is very dangerous to abdicate the exercise of our faculties and allow another being to exercise them on our behalf. God expects us to exercise our faculties in fellowship with Him and in reliance upon Him and to be responsible for the way we exercise our faculties. If we empty ourselves in that kind of way, the Spirit of God will not come in and take over our lives, but the powers of darkness will be eager to do so. Thus, this wrong approach not only hinders us from being filled with the Spirit, but also renders us vulnerable to serious spiritual bondage.

*Baptism with the Spirit takes place on conversion*

There are those who believe that baptism with the Holy Spirit takes place at the point of conversion. We have seen that the fullness of the Spirit is related to experiencing the baptism with the Holy Spirit. A wrong understanding that one has already been baptised with the Holy Spirit, when in reality it has not taken place, can hinder the believer from understanding and experiencing the fullness of the Spirit.

*Being filled with the Spirit is a gradual process*

Another common wrong understanding is that being filled with the Spirit is a gradual process, a question of yielding to the Spirit already dwelling in you, allowing the Spirit to have more of you rather than you having more of the Spirit.

Believers who hold this view will also not seek the Lord to fill them with the Spirit. They think they just have to yield more and more to the Spirit, be more obedient to Him and gradually experience the fullness of the Spirit in this way.

This approach may sound right, but a significant problem here is that if we are not filled with the Spirit, we will not be able to properly yield to Him or to obey the various exhortations in the Scriptures and to live well for the Lord. We may want to overcome sin and Satan and live a life of obedience, but we will find that we often fail because we are not empowered by the Spirit. And we may end up discouraged and frustrated.

It is important to recognise that we need to be filled with the Spirit. We may have been born of the Spirit, the Spirit of God may be dwelling in us, but we may not be filled with the Spirit. We need to be filled and empowered by the Spirit so that we can make good progress in our spiritual life and experience the fullness of life that God intends for us. That is why the apostle Paul urges all believers to be filled with the Spirit (Eph. 5:18).

*Being filled with the Spirit rests on the sovereignty and prerogative of God*

Some believers think that being filled with the Spirit rests on God's sovereign will. Since they view it as God's prerogative, they think there is nothing much they can do about it. They will then not seek to understand how they can be filled, the conditions they need to fulfil, and how to prepare themselves to receive the fullness of the Spirit.

Our God is a God of perfect wisdom. He does not act arbitrarily. If it is true that being filled with the Spirit rests on God's sovereignty and prerogative, He will fill all of us because it is His will for all of us to be filled. But are we ready to be filled?

It is God's will for all to come to salvation and for none to perish, but not all are saved because not all are willing to repent and believe in the gospel. Likewise, it is God's will for all believers to be filled with the Spirit, but not all are filled because not all fulfil the conditions to be filled.

*7. Wrong motives*

When we have wrong motives for wanting to be filled with the Spirit, we will be hindering God from filling us with the Holy Spirit. Let us consider some examples of wrong motives.

*Fleshly desire for power and authority*

A major problem area in relation to believers wanting to be baptised with the Holy Spirit is the fleshly desire for power and authority, often associated with the desire for recognition and self-exaltation.

A prominent example of this in the Scriptures is the man Simon recorded in Acts 8:5-24. Before he became a believer, Simon practised magic. His magic astonished the people of Samaria and they were all giving him attention. He claimed to be someone great and clearly enjoyed the status and recognition from the people. When Philip came to Samaria and proclaimed Christ to the people, Simon also believed and was

baptised. And he was constantly amazed as he observed signs and great miracles taking place through Philip. Then Peter and John came to Samaria and prayed for the believers that they might receive the Holy Spirit. When Simon saw that the Spirit was bestowed through the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money so that he too could have the authority to do so.

**Acts 8:18-19**

18 Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was bestowed through the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money,  
19 saying, "Give this authority to me as well, so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit."

Peter rebuked him severely, saying that his heart was not right and that he was in the gall of bitterness and in the bondage of iniquity.

**Acts 8:20-23**

20 But Peter said to him, "May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money!  
21 "You have no part or portion in this matter, for your heart is not right before God.  
22 "Therefore repent of this wickedness of yours, and pray the Lord that, if possible, the intention of your heart may be forgiven you.  
23 "For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bondage of iniquity."

The "bondage of iniquity" could be a reference to Simon previously practising magic and the evil one still having a hold over him, and this is associated with his negative longing for greatness, power and recognition. Although Simon had professed faith and was even baptised, there were still fleshly desires within him that had not been properly resolved.

When we seek to be filled with the Spirit, we may say it is because we want the power of God to overcome sin and to be obedient to God. While this may be true, we need to honestly search our hearts to see if there is also the presence of fleshly desire for power, status or recognition.

*Fleshly desire for spiritual and emotional experiences*

Another kind of wrong motivation is fleshly desire for spiritual and emotional experiences.

Desire for spiritual experiences in itself need not be negative. It depends on the kind of spiritual experiences we desire, and our reason for seeking such experiences.

Such fleshly desires can come about because of curiosity. We may have heard about people having certain spiritual experiences that seem interesting and desirable and we do not want to miss out on what others have experienced. If what others have



experienced is something positive and our motive is right, it is not wrong to want to experience it. What I am highlighting here is the desire for such experiences that is not bound up with the positive moral dimension, in which the primary motivation is not a desire to live well for God and to be faithful to God. We may have heard of people having pleasant feelings and experiences when they were filled with the Spirit. And we long for such experiences too.

We expose ourselves to danger when we are drawn towards spiritual experiences that are unusual, thrilling or exhilarating. This is one way the evil one seeks to entice, deceive and ensnare us.

#### *Mixed motives*

We need to beware of mixed motives within us. It is very easy for mixed motives to be present and yet we are unaware of it.

We may say we want to be filled with the Spirit so that we can love God, serve and honour Him more effectively, which may be true. But we may also be motivated by fleshly desire for power and authority or for spiritual and emotional experiences not bound up with the positive moral dimension – various important positive moral and spiritual aspects have been mentioned in the earlier message AR182.

We need to look to the Lord to search our hearts, to see if there are improper desires within us, and ask Him to help us to forsake them entirely.

#### *8. Unwillingness to pay the price*

A major problem area with regards to experiencing the fullness of the Spirit is that we often desire a Spirit-filled life but are unwilling to pay the price for it. The Spirit-filled life goes together with a life of consecration and submission to God. But we are often unwilling to pay this price. We still hold on to personal desires and inclinations which are contrary to the will of God. We are not prepared to submit to God and live on the basis of truth when it involves significant difficulties and hardships in the path of true discipleship. So even though we keep crying out to God to fill us with the Spirit, we find that we are not experiencing it.

#### *9. Unwillingness to be disciplined and diligent in the truth*

Another problem is the unwillingness to be disciplined and diligent in the truth. This is related to lack of love for the truth. If we love the Lord, we will love the truth. And if we love the truth, we must be disciplined and diligent in the truth. We must make the effort to understand the truth and be willing to walk in it even when it is painful and difficult. The Spirit of truth fills us in order that we may know the truth and walk in truth. So we must be prepared to be helped in that direction. If we are not even prepared to be helped in that direction, how can we be ready to be filled with the Spirit?

Reflect on Paul's words of exhortation in 2 Timothy 2:3-7. These are very rich verses. I will not elaborate on them now but will just highlight a few things in relation to what we are considering.

Paul says in verse 3: "Suffer hardship with me, as a good soldier of Christ Jesus". If we want to be good soldiers of Christ, we must be prepared to suffer hardship in fellowship with the brethren.

Verse 4: "No soldier in active service entangles himself in the affairs of everyday life, so that he may please the one who enlisted him as a soldier". To please the Lord, we must be prepared not to be entangled in the affairs of this life.

Verse 5: "Also if anyone competes as an athlete, he does not win the prize unless he competes according to the rules". Paul is seeking to communicate a very important truth here. Just as an athlete has to compete according to the rules, a true disciple of the Lord must abide by the principles in God's kingdom. God has ordained various moral and spiritual principles that are very important for our well-being, growth and service together. They flow forth from God's character and wisdom and are related to the fulfilment of God's purposes. We must understand and live by these principles. If we violate them, we will not fare well in God's kingdom.

Verse 6: "The hard-working farmer ought to be the first to receive his share of the crops". This speaks of the importance of diligence. If we want to experience the fullness of the Spirit, we cannot afford to remain lazy.

### *10. Indifference*

A significant hindrance to the experience of the fullness of the Spirit is indifference. We often pay much more attention to relatively unimportant things, but insufficient attention to this important issue of being filled with the Spirit.

Indifference is the opposite of the attitude reflected in the parables of the treasure hidden in the field and the pearl of great value (Matt. 13:44-46). The Lord Jesus was talking about the kind of attitude we should have towards the kingdom of God. How much do we value God's kingdom? Is it as valuable to us as the treasure in the field is to the finder and the pearl of great value is to the merchant? Are we prepared to give our all for it? Will we seek for it with all our heart? And being filled with the Spirit is a vital issue we need to pay careful attention to if we want to fare well in God's kingdom and enter into the richness of life in Christ. Paul tells us the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit (Rom. 14:17).

It is very undesirable and dangerous for us to be lukewarm about the things concerning God's kingdom.

Pay heed to the strong words of the Lord Jesus to the church in Laodicea in Revelation 3:15-20. In verses 15 and 16, He warns against being lukewarm.

**Revelation 3:15-16**

15 'I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot; I wish that you were cold or hot.

16 'So because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of My mouth.

The literal translation for "spit" is vomit. The Laodiceans thought they were rich and did not need anything. They did not know they were wretched, poor and blind (v. 17). If we are lukewarm, we are also wretched, poor and blind. We need to come to the Lord to obtain gold refined by fire, so that we may become truly rich, white garments, so that we may be clothed with true righteousness, and eye salve to anoint our eyes, so that we may have true insight (v. 18). The Lord reproves and disciplines those whom He loves. If we are lukewarm or indifferent, we must repent and ask the Lord to help us to be zealous. Only then can we dine with the Lord and have meaningful fellowship with Him (vs. 19-20).

**Concluding remarks**

As this is the last message on the Spirit-filled life, I will end with some words of encouragement.

*There is hope if we are willing to change*

Having considered the hindrances to being filled with the Spirit, some of us who have yet to experience the fullness of the Spirit may be thinking: The Spirit-filled life is not for me because I have many weaknesses and deficiencies. I am entangled in the affairs of this life. My spirit is negative from time to time. There is no hope for me to be filled.

Well, if we are prepared to humbly acknowledge our weaknesses, deficiencies and wrongdoing, and if we are contrite and willing to change, then there is hope.

If we think we must deal with all the negative areas and deficiencies in our lives and be walking well with God before we can be ready to ask God to fill us with the Holy Spirit, then we will never be ready.

The key issue is: Do we want to change? Are we willing to change? If we are willing to change, then there is hope.

Even if we lack the positive qualities of patience, kindness, meekness, self-control, even if we lack love for the Lord, for truth and for people, and even if our longing for these things is deficient, this does not mean we are in a hopeless state.

If we keep struggling on our own to live well for the Lord, we will keep failing and we will end up discouraged and frustrated. We must recognise we are weak and inadequate, and that we need God's grace, and we look to Him to help us.

If we recognise the qualities and longings that are important and we want the Lord to help us change for the better, there is still hope. The Lord will help us. He knows we are inadequate in ourselves. He will work in our hearts. He will help us come to the point of being ready to be filled with the Spirit. He will fill us so that we can nurture positive qualities and overcome negative traits. Are we prepared to respond to the Spirit of God as He seeks to work within us? The Lord desires to fill us with the Holy Spirit so that we can overcome the weakness of the flesh, the world and the evil one. God filling us with the Holy Spirit is actually a very vital part of the process of the Lord changing and transforming us so that we can be conformed to the image of Christ and be faithful to Him.

*Consecrate every aspect of our life to the Lord*

If we desire to live the Spirit-filled life, we must seek to consecrate every aspect of our life to the Lord, putting right every area and forsaking all that displease the Lord and all that grieve the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit will draw us in that direction. We must not harden our hearts or resist the Holy Spirit. Instead, we must be willing to be helped and we must respond positively to what the Lord is seeking to do in our lives.

If this is our approach, it is possible for us to rise to a higher level in our walk with God. So we need not be discouraged.

When we experience the fullness of the Spirit, we cannot assume we have consecrated every aspect of our life to the Lord. We should seek to do so, as much as we are able to by God's grace. The Lord in His mercy and grace is willing to fill us with the Spirit even though He knows there are still deficiencies in us and that some aspects of our life are still not right. He will fill us when there is a certain degree of meaningfulness in our response. As mentioned in an earlier message, the depth and quality of consecration of those who experience the fullness of the Spirit varies.

Any subsequent failure does not mean that we are no longer filled with the Spirit. However, we must never become presumptuous or careless, especially in moral and spiritual areas. Some areas are more significant than others and some can be very damaging. It is possible to grieve the Spirit so that we are no longer filled with the Spirit. We must always maintain a contrite and repentant spirit. When we fail, we can confess to the Lord, ask Him to forgive us and cleanse us, and carry on.

It is helpful from time to time to review our lives before the Lord, ask Him to forgive us and wash away our sins, reaffirm our consecration and commitment to the Lord and ask Him to fill us afresh with the Holy Spirit.

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