

# RIGHT IN ROMANS

Studies in the Epistle of Paul to the Romans

by

C. Norman Bartlett

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## CHAPTER FOUR

### PART ONE – CONDEMNATION FOR SIN (1:18-3:20)

#### A. GUILT OF THE GENTILES (1:18-32)

1. Night for light (vv. 18-23)

a) God's right to condemn (vv. 18, 19a)

**“For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who hold [hinder, suppress] the truth in unrighteousness . . .”** Being holy, God can never condone but must ever condemn every form of sin. It rests with men whether they will experience the love or the wrath of God.

b) The light from God is twofold (vv. 19b, 20)

In these two verses we have a clear reminder that the light from God is twofold, namely, the light of conscience and the light of nature—and these two are closely related.

**“ . . . that which may be known of God is manifest in them; for God hath shewed it unto them.”** There is that within man— bestowed by the Creator Himself—which should find enough of the power and wisdom of God in nature to keep him from plunging into the sea of idolatry and worshiping the creature rather than the Creator. Pride blinds to truth. But men are held accountable for the knowable as well as the known truth of God. They are responsible for receiving the truth that God wants to bestow. Conscience is the power of moral perception, a lamp that God has lighted in the soul. Persistent sin will blot out this inner light. **“If the light therefore that is in thee be darkness, how great is that darkness!”** (Matthew 6:23).

The magnifying of self rather than the glorifying of God in the works of His hands results in the blinding of conscience.

**“For the invisible things of him from [since] the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead [divinity], so that they are without excuse . . .”**

We do not really see the visible and temporal creation unless we see it through the invisible and eternal. He, for example, who does not perceive the glory of the ocean, the majesty of the mountains, or the splendor of the sunset, does not really see these scenic masterpieces of nature even though they be objectively presented to his organs of vision. In their pride men allow the world of nature (which God intended to be a revelation to men of His power, wisdom, and beauty) to conceal the Creator from their eyes and remove Him from their thoughts.

c) The night of idolatry (vv. 21-23)

**“ . . . because that, when they knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations [reasonings] and their foolish [senseless] heart was darkened. Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools . . . ”** Here we find thanklessness (21a) issuing in senselessness (21b, 22), and senselessness culminating in godlessness. The sequence is admonitory.

Failing to thank God for His revelation of Himself in conscience and in nature, it was not long before the heathen fell into abysmal ignorance, and lost the knowledge of God they had once possessed. Error thrives when truth is spurned.

**“ . . . and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like to corruptible man, and to birds, and fourfooted beasts, and creeping things.”** Just as a vine, if it be not provided with a trellis to climb, will cling to something else, even so men who will not yield to the truth are bound to fall victims to the false.

What men reject as a way to God they often convert into a way from God. Men today are being destroyed by the gods they have made for themselves. The world today needs fewer man-made gods and more God-made men. It is because of a superabundance of false gods that human society is in such a terrible plight. When men scorn the revelation of God, the tides of truth go out and leave them stranded on the mudflats of degradation.

2. A threefold abandonment (vv. 24-32)

In these verses Paul describes in lurid colors how the Gentiles having abandoned God for idolatry have been abandoned by God to iniquity. This abandonment is threefold.

a) The abandonment to carnal immorality (vv. 24, 25)

**“Wherefore God also gave them up to uncleanness through the lusts of their own hearts, to dishonour their own bodies between themselves . . . ”** In the spiritual, as in the natural realm, decay sets in when the source of life is withdrawn. Men cannot turn from God without turning to sin. Divorced from religion, morality, like flowers torn up by the roots, is destined to wither and die.

Man can rise no higher than the object he worships. He must be drawn upward to escape being pulled downward. In the history of paganism idolatry and immorality are inseparable.

“ . . . **Who changed the truth of God into a lie, and worshipped and served the creature . . .**” We abuse the truth we refuse. We emulate what we idolize. There are countless men and women today even in so-called Christian lands who give themselves over shamelessly to the worship and service of the things of sense and to the products of their own hands.

“ . . . **more than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen.**” Paul was horrified as he contemplated the idolatries and iniquities of paganism. His soul felt stifled. The fumes seemed to burn his inmost being. Sickened to the very soul by this contemplation of heathenism, Paul turns to God in an outburst of doxology. Do we succumb to the prevalent idolatries of our day, or do we turn our eyes from them in utter revulsion? The worship of mammon that we behold on every hand should serve only to rekindle our adoration of the true God and cause our zeal for Him to burn at white heat.

b) Abandonment to carnal abnormality (vv. 26, 27)

These verses have reference to such depths of carnal abnormality in the heathen world of Paul's day as would be incredible were it not for the fact that in the writings of pagan authors themselves and in uncovered ancient ruins there is a superabundance of confirmation of these frightful moral perversions to which the apostle refers.

Whereas verses 24 and 25 deal with unbridled indulgence in natural lusts, the following two verses have to do with surrender to passions that are against nature. Yielding immoderately to desires that in themselves are divinely implanted for a beneficent purpose all too often leads into bondage to worse passions, those of sensual abnormality. The appetite grows by what it feeds upon. Sins, like alcoholic beverages, grow tame and call for ever more potent satisfactions.

c) Abandonment to moral perversity (vv. 28-32)

This passage is a frightful catalogue of sins. They are sins of the mind rather than of the flesh, and may roughly be brought under the broad twofold classification of hate and pride. Sin comes in when God goes out. Souls not cultivated for God become overrun with all manner of noxious growths. Not to make an exhaustive analysis of the sins enumerated in these verses, let us just touch upon two or three of the most significant phrases.

“**And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a reprobate mind . . .**” A reprobate mind is a mind in which the distinction between right and wrong is confused or lost. But it is to be remembered that such defects of the moral sense do not absolve from guilt. Man is held accountable for living up to the light which he can obtain, not to the light which he actually possesses. Willing ignorance of the truth spells not bliss but doom.

“ . . . **haters of God** [hateful to God]. . .” It is instructive to note this reference to men's attitude to God dropped into the list of their sins of pride and hate toward one another. Severance from God frequently leads to injury to men. Godlessness and lovelessness are close neighbors. We are all too likely to hurt men when we do not love God, viewing them as means rather than as ends in themselves.

**“ . . . who, knowing the judgment of God, that they which commit [practice] such things are worthy of death, not only do the same, but also have pleasure in them that do them.”** The apostle here lays his finger upon a very common feature of sin. More is implied in the words than is stated. It is not simply approval of those who share in the life of sin that is meant, but ill-disguised contempt for all who live on a higher plane. One of the terrible results of violating the conscience is that men begin to brag of their sins and try to drag others down to their own low level.

## **B. JEW AND GENTILE ALIKE SUBJECT TO JUDGMENT OF GOD (2:1-16)**

### 1. In judging others men condemn themselves (vv. 1-3)

In these verses, while Paul does not mention the Jews by name, we may readily infer from the closing part of the chapter that they are the ones he has here particularly in mind.

**“And thinkest thou this, O man, that judgest them which do such things, and doest the same, that thou shalt escape the judgment of God?”**

Paul does not mean that the Jew does the same identical things as the Gentile, but that his conduct is the same in that he sins against the light. In other words, sin is sin although sins differ. And yet freedom from this or that type of sin often blinds men to the presence of sin in their hearts.

Not a few of the Jews of Paul's day undoubtedly felt that the vials of condemnation they poured out upon the wickedness of other men erased much of their own obligation to keep the law. We, too, can be very angry at the sins in the world at large and still have plenty of the poison in our own hearts. Our rebuking sin in others affords no excuse for condoning sin in ourselves.

### 2. Impenitence converts God's grace into wrath (vv. 4, 5)

**“Or despisest thou the riches of his goodness . . . but after thy hardness and impenitent heart treasurest up for thyself wrath in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God . . .”** “The riches of his goodness” means the kindness which disposes one to do good. The Jew relied upon his peculiar racial privileges to insure him against divine condemnation. He tended to despise the mercy of God as good-natured indifference to sin. Against such easy-going presumption the apostle inveighs most heavily. Impenitence converts grace into wrath. Electricity is a kind servant but a hard master. An aid to life when obeyed, it means an end to life when defied. Fire may cheer or it may ruin. It amounts to contempt of God's goodness if a man forgets that its end is not to permit him to sin but to lead him to repentance. The divine goodness bestowed on us should make us seek the moral goodness required of us.

### 3. God rewards every man according to his works (vv. 6-9a)

**“ . . . who will render to every man according to his works . . .”** God's judgments are unerring because His knowledge is infallible and His standards are inflexible.

God sees truly because He knows fully. His perfect knowledge of what is right involves perfect knowledge of what is wrong. The fount of justice in God is a pledge of justice to man. No man, however, can be saved by his works. Paul is writing of those under the law.

a) Blessedness for the good (v. 7)

**“ . . . to them that by patient continuance in well doing seek for glory and honour and immortality, eternal life . . . ”** Blessedness for the righteous and misery for the wicked is not an arbitrary judgment but an inherently inevitable result, God and man being what they are. The objects sought for as mentioned in verse 7 are spiritual and eternal in their nature, namely, the glory of the future life, honor with God, the very life of God in the soul which transcends all the barriers of time and space.

They who truly seek eternal life have it, such is the apostle's contention. The sincerity of man's seeking is shown in his meeting the conditions for obtaining the eternal life that God sets forth.

b) Wretchedness for the bad (vv. 8, 9a)

**“ . . . but unto them that are contentious [factious], and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, shall be wrath and indignation, indignation and wrath . . . ”** Those referred to here are the men and women who resist God as wholeheartedly as the righteous obey Him. Sin brings its own penalty.

- It breaks down wholesome restraints.
- It stores the cellars of the soul with bombs liable to explode at any time.
- It poisons the springs of life.
- It pours vinegar into God's cream.

As truly as nature obeys the man who obeys nature, and destroys him who defies her, so surely does God bless the man who keeps His law and condemn the man who flouts it. The laws of the moral cosmos are as inviolable as those that rule in the world of nature. His we are to whom we bow the knee. Rejection of the Saviour is subjection to the devil. Neutrality is out of the question.

4. Jew and Gentile alike fall under the judgment (vv. 9b-11)

**“ . . . of the Jew first, and also of the Gentile; but glory and honor and peace to every man that worketh for good, to the Jew first and also to the Gentile; for there is no respect of persons with God.”** Men are judged according to their works, regardless of all racial and national distinctions, irrespective of whether they have had, or have not had, the special revelation given to Israel.

5. Men will be judged by the light they have (vv. 12-16)

a) Jews by the written and Gentiles by the unwritten law (vv. 12, 13)

**“For as many as have sinned without the law shall also perish without law; and as many as have sinned in the law shall be judged by the law; (for not the hearers of the law are just before God, but the doers of the law shall be justified).”** In other words, the basis of judgment is not the hearing but the doing of the law. Men are to be judged not by the law they do not have, but by the law they do have.

The Jews thought that because they knew the law they needed not to worry about condemnation or punishment. They overlooked the fact that education in the law of God is no substitute for dedication to the will of God. There can be no fellowship with God apart from obedience. Wealth of knowledge does not atone for lack of practice.

b) Gentiles have the unwritten law of conscience (vv. 14-16)

As the Jews had the law written on tablets of stone, the Gentiles have the law written on their conscience (see interpretation of 1:19), and by this law will they be judged.

**“ . . . in the day when God shall judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ according to my gospel.”** We must not let the shifting standards of the world blind us to the changelessness of the divine requirements. The fashion of sin is not changed by making it fashionable. Customs do not create ethics. The will of God has been revealed in His Son. God will judge the secrets of men by the Lord Jesus. That is a solemnizing thought. Men may have secret sins, may cherish hatred and all kinds of things offensive to God, which may not in this life break out into open sin; but the time is coming when all hidden iniquity will be uncovered and judged by none other than our Lord Jesus Christ.

### **C. THE JEW JUDGED NOT BY HIS HAVING, BUT BY HIS DOING OF THE LAW (2:17-29)**

1. The Jew takes pride in the law (vv. 17-20)

a) In having the law (vv. 17, 18)

**“Behold, thou art called a Jew, and retest in the law, and makest thy boast of God . . .”** The Jews boasted of having the law, and gloried in God as an exclusive possession. How do we glory in God? Selfishly or unselfishly? Do we think more of how God may advance our interests, or of how we may advance His interests?

**“ . . . and knowest his will, and approvest the things that are more excellent, being instructed out of the law . . .”** The Jewish people did know the law; they were well educated in it. They did have ethical discernment. They were highly trained in the principles of religion and morality. But knowledge is not practice. Approvals are not achievements. Instruction is not fulfillment. The Jew knew the law, but did not obey it as he should have done.

b) In teaching the law (vv. 19, 20)

**“. . . and art confident that thou thyself art a guide of the blind, a light of them which are in darkness, a instructor of the foolish, a teacher of babes, which hast the form of knowledge and of the truth in the Law.”** Now it was a highly praiseworthy aim on the part of the Jew that, having the law, he should seek to teach and to instruct those who were unlearned in the way of righteousness. But he did this in an arrogant way, feeling himself under little or no obligation to practice what he preached. The Jews were meant by God to be guides for the Gentiles, for salvation is of the Jews. But this purpose of the Lord had been hampered by their pride of privilege. And we on our part should learn to view our blessings in the light of our stewardship.

## 2. The Jew sins in breaking the law he teaches (vv. 21-23)

In these verses the apostle puts several very pertinent and searching questions whereby he seeks to waken the Jewish conscience to the futility of not living up to their own moral instruction imparted to others. The Jew did not always practice what he preached. There were flagrant violations of the law.

**“Thou that sayest a man should not commit adultery, dost thou commit adultery?”** The Talmud, which was the book of oral traditions that had accumulated over a course of centuries, charged the crime of adultery to three of the most illustrious rabbis.

**“Thou that abhorrest idols, dost thou commit sacrilege?”** Not a few of the Jews had been guilty of robbing idol temples in spite of their professed horror of idol worship.

The charges that Paul brings against the Jews can be applied to others. **“Thou therefore that teachest another, teachest thou not thyself?”** It is fatally easy even for teachers of religion and ethics not to take home to themselves the truths they seek to impress upon their students. We who light the way for others must let the Lord keep our own lamps lit. Our language must not outrun our knowledge.

Profession must not outstrip possession. Except we experience that to which we bear witness, our teaching is but empty vaporizing. Wrongdoing offsets right teaching. Riper wisdom brings greater duty in its train. We must do what we know. Our lives must back up our words. How can we hope to commend the truth we fail to obey?

## 3. Jewish transgression provokes Gentile derision of the law (v. 24)

**“For the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles through [because of] you, even as it is written.”** The Jews were so jealous of the holy name of God that they dared not even pronounce it; they were kept from uttering it by a paralyzing superstitious fear. And yet, charges Paul, many of them lived such inconsistent and scandalous lives as caused Gentiles to blaspheme the name of the Lord.

This is a staggering accusation that may well drive us to a most searching self-examination. It is a solemn thought that unworthy conduct on our part may make men despise the faith that their souls need for eternal salvation.

Inconsistent Christian living makes religion appear to be a farce rather than a force. We are to make it a force by affording it abundant channels for working in and through us for the good of men and the glory of God. We need ever to be on our guard lest our departures from the path of Christian probity and rectitude provide unbelievers with excuses for rejecting Christ, excuses that will prove but millstones to drag them down to eternal death in the sea of perdition.

But there is another side to the matter to which those outside the fold do well to pay heed, and it is this: although men may think they are excused from becoming Christians because of hypocrites in the church, such is not the case; every man stands or falls because of his personal faith or lack of faith in Jesus Christ.

4. Transgression nullifies possession of the law (v. 25)

**“For circumcision verily profiteth, if thou keep the law; but if thou be a breaker of the law, thy circumcision is made uncircumcision.”** We reveal that we do not truly possess what we lightly transgress. Forms, Paul says in effect, are of value if they are indices or outward signs of inward possession. But they are worthless if made a substitute for truth, if they take the place of reality it is their function merely to subserve. They are then like plates without food, purses without money, gangplanks after the ship has sailed. Rites when rightly used may be an aid to grace; when wrongly used they become a means of death.

5. Gentile fulfillment is a rebuke to Jewish transgression of the law (vv. 26, 27)

**“Shall not uncircumcision which is by nature, if it fulfil the law, judge thee, who by the letter and circumcision dost transgress the law?”** A man swimming without water wings is a rebuke to the man who is sinking with deflated water wings. The savage who instinctively obeys the laws of health although he has never seen a book on medicine or hygiene rebukes the learned physician who, with all his medical knowledge, is digging his own grave by constantly flouting the most elementary principles of healthful living.

So Paul would have his Jewish readers see the utter futility of mistaking circumcision for the reality it was designed to express, namely, the keeping of covenant relations with God. The laws of God point the way to the life of God. A signpost is of no value if one does not follow the path to safety. Because of the very nature of God and of man, men must obey the laws of God. Men can no more enter into a transforming fellowship with God apart from obedience to the commandments of God than chemical transformations can be effected without conforming to the inviolable laws that govern the affinity and combination of chemical elements.

6. The true Jew is one who is a Jew inwardly (vv. 28, 29)

**“For he is not a Jew, which is one outwardly . . . but he is a Jew, which is one inwardly.”** This is in line with New Testament emphasis upon the antipodal contrast between formality and reality. The name does not make the man; the man makes the name. Labels name the products; they do not bring them into being.

A true Jew, says Paul, is one who is living in covenant relations with God, not one who clings to the empty shell after the living reality has escaped. May we not see in this a pertinent application to the indispensability of genuineness in Christian living? The cross is not an ornament to be worn, but a principle to be lived. He is a Christian who possesses as well as professes Christ. Cut flowers are lovely to look at, and are fragrant for a short time, but they soon die. We may be able to make a favorable impression for a while, but unless we are living in Christ like the plant in the soil, we may be Christians outwardly, but certainly not inwardly.

#### **D. ADVANTAGE OF THE JEW WORKS HIS GREATER CONDEMNATION (3:1-8)**

1. He has the stewardship of revelation (vv. 1, 2)

**“What advantage then hath the Jew? or what profit is there of circumcision?”** The apostle realizes that the Jew, in view of this terrific indictment, may well ask, if that be so, what advantage do we have? Why have we been made the recipients of God's peculiar favor and blessing down through the centuries if we are to be condemned with all the rest of the people?

**“Much every way: chiefly, because that unto them were committed the oracles of God.”** What were these oracles of God? Some scholars think they were only the Pentateuch, others regard them as referring to the prophecies; but the most reasonable interpretation is that they comprise the entire Old Testament, which from beginning to end points to the coming One, even Jesus Christ.

The Jews as a chosen people were made the recipients of special revelation in order that through them the truth might be brought to the world. Judaism proved to be a remarkable preparation for the coming of Christianity. After the captivity in Babylon, only about 40,000 returned to Jerusalem. Following the conquest of Alexander the Great, hundreds of thousands of Jews settled in the Greek cities founded by him. Wherever they went they disseminated the belief in one God and the hope of the Messiah.

The Old Testament was translated into the Greek Septuagint, and through it, many Gentiles were brought to embrace the basic tenets of the Hebrew faith and of the moral laws of Moses. Synagogues dotted the known world, and it was in them that the Gospel was first proclaimed in many important centers. So, in a very real way, the Hebrew dispersion served, in the providence of God, to prepare the way for the spread of the Gospel. But the pity and tragedy of it is that when Christ came, the Jews as a nation rejected him.

2. Faithlessness of the Jews a foil to the faithfulness of God (vv. 3, 4)

**“For what if some did not believe? Shall their unbelief make the faith of God without effect?”** The point Paul is making is this: The Jews as a people, despite many notable individual exceptions, have refused belief in the Gospel as the fulfillment of the promises in the Old Testament; does this unbelief on their part impugn or call in question God's faithfulness in keeping His Word? Merely to ask such a question, implies the apostle, is to answer it in an emphatic negative. This question is treated at length in chapters 9, 10, and 11.

**“God forbid: yea, let God be true, but every man a liar.” “He cannot deny himself”** (II Timothy 2:13). Let us stake our faith upon the fact that God never can and never will be untrue to His own nature as holy love. Apparent contradictions no more destroy the veracity of God than intercepting clouds remove the mountains they hide from view.

3. This fact, however, does not exempt the Jew from judgment (vv. 5-8)

**“But if our unrighteousness commend the righteousness of God, what shall we say? Is God unrighteous who taketh vengeance [visiteth with wrath]?”** In other words, if sin be a foil for grace, how can God justly punish for sin? If my unbelief does not affect God's faithfulness, how can I be condemned?

The answer to such questions is that we can be condemned for rejecting God's faithfulness, for making it null and void in our lives, for hindering its entrance into the lives of others. **“God is light, and in him is no darkness at all”** (I John 1:5).

Men may be unfaithful to God, they may deny His goodness and reject His promises, but all this does not affect the nature of God. Is the sunlight to blame, if a man, refusing to have anything to do with it, insists upon living in a dark, damp cellar, and thereby brings upon himself a deadly disease? By rejecting what God has prepared and designed to bring eternal life, even our redemption effected on Calvary's cross, we subject ourselves to eternal condemnation—God is not to blame.

**“God forbid: for then how shall God judge the world?”** God could not judge the world, if He were unjust. As judge of all, He must be just to all; whatever philosophies or speculations run counter to this principle must be wrong.

**“And not rather (as we are slanderously reported, and as some affirm that we say), Let us do evil that good may comet whose damnation [condemnation] is just.”** The apostle here anticipates the Antinomian error which receives further treatment subsequently in this Epistle and in the pastoral Epistles written several years later.

### **E. THE WHOLE WORLD, JEW AND GENTILE, GUILTY BEFORE GOD (3:9-20)**

1. Jew and Gentile alike under sin (v. 9)

**“What then? are we better than they? No, in no wise: for we have before proved both Jews and Gentiles, that they are all under sin . . .”** Jews and Gentiles are alike under sin. True, the Jews may boast of superiority in point of possession of the law; but, as Paul has already demonstrated, they are judged by their doing and not by their possessing the law. And the Jew, no less than the Greek, is under the bondage of the law and in subjection to sin because of his failure to live up to the moral requirements of the law in which he takes such pride. Possession is not attainment.

## 2. Universal sinfulness proved from the Old Testament (vv. 10-18)

Jews and Christians in Paul's day had what were known as *Testimonia*, collections of quotations from the Old Testament strung together for various purposes as proof texts. The passage in verses 10-18 may be a ready-made selection, or it may be a series of Old Testament quotations which he put together himself. At any rate, the effect of this assemblage of proof texts is as if Paul had said, "I can express my opinion in inspired words; therefore it must carry the weight of the truth of God." (This, however, is not to deny that the Pauline Epistles are every whit as much inspired of God as the Old Testament Scriptures.)

## 3. The whole world answerable to God (v. 19)

**"Now we know that what things soever the law saith, it saith to them that are under the law; that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God."** The whole world is answerable to God. Man has sinned against God and owes Him satisfaction. It is not the offending sinner, but the offended God to whom belongs the prerogative of stating the terms of reconciliation. We are judged not according to what we think God thinks of sin, but by what God says He thinks of it.

## 4. By the law comes knowledge of sin (v. 20)

**"Therefore by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight: for by the law is the knowledge of sin."** With this verse it will be helpful to correlate Galatians 3:19-22 where the apostle shows that the law was in no sense an abrogation of the promise given to Abraham four hundred and thirty years earlier.

The promise and the law are not in conflict because they have different functions. Sin necessitated the law; grace precipitated the cross. Men had to be brought under conviction of sin before they could become recipients of salvation by grace. The law was a plowing for the seed, the gospel was a sowing of the seed. The law revealed the need of deliverance, while the cross produced the way of deliverance. The law showed sinners what they lacked in themselves; the cross showed what God had for them in Christ. The law was a tutor or pedagogue to bring them to Christ (Galatians 3:24).

**". . . for by the law is the knowledge of sin."** It is to be carefully noted that the law brings knowledge of sin but not freedom from sin nor power for holiness. The law is an X-ray that reveals his sin to the sinner, but is impotent to remove it. It condemns for sin; it cannot redeem from sin. It shows man his utter helplessness and hopelessness apart from God's redeeming grace.

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