

Psalm 23 - Finding Our Good Shepherd's Peace & Promises in the Midst of Darkness

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There are passages of Scripture that follow us all the days of our lives. These are the verses underlined, highlighted, barely legible for the years of sermons, Bible studies, and personal times of need. The yellowed leaves of a family Bible — a primitive record of lives lived, joys shared, sorrows borne — bear witness to successive generations that clung to the same “anchor” through many storms. These Bible verses are located on the earmarked pages of Bibles coming undone by use. As families gather around grandfather and draw closer to his white-whiskered face they love so dearly, an adult child leans in, straining to make out the beloved old man’s last words. He hears the verses his dad taught him; passages he is passing along to his children.

For the verses I speak of are the verses whispered as a prayer in death.

Psalm 23 is one of those. David, the shepherd, wrote this Psalm. The Bible gives us the pedigree of David: he was not your ordinary king. He began life as a shepherd, but that humble beginning prepared the greatest King of Israel to become the most unusual king who ever lived. For through the other challenges of his life, challenges that came from his sins as well as from others, we always return to the core identity of David as a shepherd. The psalm is a pleasant and fragrant vine that continues to grow in our lives. And we always come home to **Psalm 23**.

Let’s pause for a while now. Let’s come home to **Psalm 23**. It is familiar, but that is what home is. This famous psalm is God’s gift to the weary; God’s blessing to the bereaved, and the Lord’s invitation to come to Him again. Just as so many of us have experienced this psalm through our lives, we can experience Christ in this psalm again.

So let’s read the words, and received the wellness that comes from the cadence of glory that is written by God, through a shepherd.

“The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name’s sake. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever” (**Psalm 23**).

A Vocation of the Soul

The journey of discovering a vocation, listening for God’s call, is both mysterious and sometimes painful. I counsel graduate students through this often-tricky passage as part of my occupation. I know that to discover the vocation, the calling, of God on your life is one of the most exhilarating experiences in life.

For David, that vocation was one of a shepherd. Jessie’s youngest son may have been a lot of things in his life — brave soldier, courageous king, failed father, and sacred songwriter — but he was at heart and soul a shepherd. And thus the shepherd boy comforts his soul through his encounter with God in the fields. But he uses the most

touching metaphor he knows to describe God's shepherding of his soul. In the process, we are blessed to come to know God as a shepherd. God desires that you know Him as a shepherd.

God chose David to write this Psalm because God wanted to reveal Himself to His people as a shepherd, someone they could relate to. While shepherds are not an ordinary experience of our lives today, in truth, we know quite a lot about shepherds. Parents, teachers, coaches, and other people in our lives are often shepherds to us. They guide us. They keep us from harm. They are there in the green valleys and the treacherous ledges of life. Now, shepherding was not esteemed employment. For it was the least of all the vocations in many ways, but such a lowly occupation was the best metaphor for us.

The metaphor of "shepherd" evokes images or experiences of a tender, compassionate, ever-present, protective person who cares for others. This is how God wants you to understand your Creator. **Psalm 23** speaks of the Lord's nurturing relationship to His people. There is a lowly sweetness to it. A sweetness that is expressed, also, when Jesus says in **John 10** that "I am the good shepherd." He goes on to say that others are hirelings, who go about the notable work of shepherding, but who care nothing for the sheep. In truth, these are the ones that get fat off of the sheep. The shepherd, however, so loves the sheep that he gives his life for them. In this way, Jesus was speaking of Himself.

Now the New Testament word, "shepherd," is also the same word for "pastor," explains W.A. Detzler in "New Testament Words in Today's Language". Pastors are imitators of Christ and David. I tell our students that to pastor is to, as Paul tells Timothy, aspire to a noble occupation. However, it is a lowly occupation. It is the use of all gifts given to be used to feed a flock, and to rescue lambs and bring them into the one faithful flock. The work of a shepherd can be lonely. The days are long. The challenges many. Life can be hard. Dealing with sheep is a dirty business. There is nothing glamorous about being a shepherd. But as we see from **Psalm 23**; the role has its benefits.

Indeed, **Psalm 23** is a shepherd's prayer to the Good Shepherd that brings blessings to all of God's shepherds and all of God's sheep. David wrote six verses that poetically describe the life of a lamb in the care of the shepherd. My call to you is to enter into a time of renewed relationship with the Good Shepherd as you hear the shepherd David describe His ministry to us.

Here we find not only six verses, but embedded with those divinely inspired lines, nine blessings that the Good Shepherd brings to us. Only a shepherd could describe another shepherd so well. I want to consider these many blessing in three main features of the way our Shepherd cares for our souls: **Presence, Protection, and Pathway.**

Psalm 23 Blessing #1 - There is a Blessing in our Shepherd's Presence

The very beginning of this Psalm brings great comfort to David, no doubt: It solidifies his identity: "The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want" (**Psalm 23:1**).

I would underscore the possessive of "shepherd." God is David's shepherd. David gave care to the sheep. He was a shepherd. But God was his shepherd. What a lovely assurance that we don't have to carry the world on our shoulders, but that we have a shepherd. Even more, what a blessing to know that our identity is connected to God as the one who cares for us. Thus, Peter, who was told to shepherd the flock of Jesus in **John 21**, may at length speak this relationship to suffering saints: "casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you" (**1 Peter 5:7**).

Our essential identity is a lamb shepherded by the Lord Jesus Christ. Our frequent location is in the wilderness.

I wonder how many of you are feeling alone in what has turned into a wilderness of life. I have counseled many. And I have also advised them to do what David the shepherd does here for himself: remember your identity. You are the object of love and care by the Lord Jesus. Speak peace to your soul, even as jackals and wolves of this world seek to destroy you: “The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.” I am saved. I am kept by His sovereign grace now and forever.

Another blessing of our Shepherd’s presence is security: “For you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me” (Psalm 23:4).

In his “Commentary on Psalms” John Calvin frames the question about this text: “What need would he have had of that consolation [of the “rod” and the “staff”], if he had not been disquieted and agitated with fear? It ought, therefore, to be kept in mind, that when David reflected on the adversities, which might befall him, he became victorious over fear and temptations, in no other way than by casting himself *on the protection of God.*”

Indeed, the passage is about the protection of God. It is about our security, both here in this world, and in eternity. One might ask what the difference between the rod and the staff is. In the life of the shepherd, a rod is used to beat the predators away. The staff is used to nudge the neck of the sheep, keeping them ever aware of the presence of the faithful Shepherd.

Our age is one in which security is a top concern. Ever since 9/11, we live in a perpetual state of anxiety over security. I will never forget a song at a gathering at the Capitol after those unforgettable events in New York City, the Pentagon, and the field in Pennsylvania. The song is called “The Prayer.” Here’s one of the lines. Maybe you’ll remember it:

“I pray you’ll be our eyes and watch us where we go. And help us to be wise, in times when we don’t know. Let this be our prayer, when we lose our way. Lead us to the place, guide us with your grace, to a place where we’ll be safe.”

“Lead us to the place, guide us with your grace. To a place where we’ll be safe.” Is that not the deepest existential cry of the human heart? As it was the cry of the shepherd boy David who grew to be a king under the attack of his sin and the sins of others; he knew where to go. He longed for the Lord’s presence. And his prayer was not the prayer of a deity who is unnamed. His prayer was to the Lord — the covenant name of the God who was there when he was a boy in the wilderness.

I pray that now you will know the presence of the Good Shepherd, the Lord Jesus Christ who said, “I will never leave you nor forsake you.” He also said that whoever comes into his possession will never pass away. Lead us to a place where we will be safe? Lord do it again now. May you know the presence and the power of the Good Shepherd in your life. Oh, that you can listen with the Spirit of God. Listen to the voice of Jesus speaking to the deepest part of your soul: His voice stilling the storms, His commands quieting the troublesome storm in your head. In your heart, let Jesus take your hand. Let Him lead you from the ruin and rubble of the pain of your past, the perplexities of the present, and into the faith of the future.

Psalm 23 Blessing #2 - There is a Blessing in our Shepherd's Protection

David was often assaulted from both within and without. The lust of the flesh warred against his spirit. The pagan kings, and even Saul, the King of Israel, fought against him. His life was in constant threat. Even his son would rise against him. The boy who protected the flock in Jesse's fields also needed protection himself. Thus, David went to the Lord, his refuge. The Lord God provided David with three coverings.

The first was the blessing of courage: "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil" (**Psalm 23:4**).

For David to lead his sheep through the Judean hills from the place where they were to the place where he wanted them to be — of safety and green grass — he needed to lead the sheep through the valley. W. Phillip Keller, the author of "A Shepherd Looks at Psalm Twenty-Three," gives us insight when he writes "as with ordinary sheep management, so with God's people, one only gains higher ground by climbing up through the valleys. Every mountain has its valley. Its sides are scarred by deep ravines and gulches and draws. And the best route to the top is always along these valleys."

The problem with valleys is that there are hills. And there are predators in those hills. Stealthy creatures of incredible power and fantastic agility gaze patiently upon the peaceful valley. The great beasts' silence and stillness are deceptive. They seem to rest. But they are ever active. The predators calculate distance, velocity, angle, and, at length, consider the perfect vector that will result in a kill. Their restraint portends death. For at the predetermined point, the beasts will leap from their craggy perch.

The defenseless sheep recognize their certain death. But can they even visualize the once peaceful green valley becoming a blood-splattered scene of a massacre? The shepherd knows that there are ravaged remains of victims all along the valleys. There are no alternative routes through the wilderness. So when David prays that the Lord would lead him down these valleys, he admits in the sacred poetry, that the valleys are shaded by the ever-present prospect of death. It is here that David says I will fear no evil. He is saying, "I will walk with courage and God my protector. I will not fear. God is with me."

Jesus Christ told us that we should not fear the one who kills the body but the one who could kill the soul. And we hear God's charge to the new leader of Israel, Joshua. For we read: "Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened, and do not be dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go" (**Joshua 1:9**).

We hear the voice of Jesus in this passage. His voice is the same voice that spoke to St. Paul and called him to go and preach the gospel to Jerusalem even though he was being persecuted:

"The following night the Lord stood by him and said, 'Take courage, for as you have testified to the facts about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome'" (**Acts 23:11**).

And shall we not also be of good courage, with the spiritual sons and daughters of Joshua and St. Paul? Shall we not face the difficulties and trials of this life, where our valleys were covered with shadows of death?

I saw courage in the valley of the shadow of death just a few weeks ago. It was one o'clock in the morning when the telephone rang. Each of you who are parents knows the horror that can grip your heart by the phone ringing for one second which seems like an eternity. You stare at that phone and wonder what news is on the other end that will change your life forever? I picked up the phone, and it was my son on the other end.

“Dad, I am fine. I am okay. But, Dad, there has been a tragedy. A boy has been run over. It was an unavoidable accident, and no one can be blamed. Our friend is with the Lord now. The leaders want the parents to come and pick us up. I am fine. I will see you in a moment.”

When I arrived on the scene, it was in many ways like a battlefield trauma scene. One fifteen-year-old boy had been killed, but there were walking wounded all over the place. The early hours of the night, the storm, the presence of flashing lights, and the vision of excellent ministry now assaulted by the reality of a fallen world, all converged together to create an extraordinary scene. My son and others went group-to-group, providing prayer and courage. I was so proud of them. I was also proud of the pastoral staff of that church who immediately spoke the gospel of Jesus Christ, the reality of the resurrection, and the confident hope in Christ. Their words, their actions, and their presence broke into the valley of the shadow of death. In many ways, this is an imitation of Jesus.

May God give you courage in whatever you are facing today. He promises that he will. For if any man comes to him, our Lord Jesus will never turn away. He will receive you. He will give you comfort. And the sustenance of angels, which our Lord knew after his 40 days and 40 nights in the wilderness, will be yours.

The Shepherd provided David with the blessing of refuge. We read these words in verse five:
“You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies” (**Psalm 23:5**).

There is a mountain in Cape Town, South Africa called Table Mountain. It is one of the most beautiful sites that I have ever seen. There are “tables,” as it were, on the mountains; places where shepherds can pause for nourishment. These wilderness tables form a setting amongst the jagged rocks where a shepherd can feed his sheep. The savage predators may perch all around, but either they cannot harm the sheep or the shepherd guards the sheep and prepares a place for them to be nourished.

The enigmatic picture, however, is that the table place, the location of nourishment, the site of refreshment with food and drink, is a dangerous place. Thus, David gave refuge to the sheep. At the time of the writing of the 23rd Psalm, David, no doubt remembering how he prepared a table in the presence of his flock’s enemies, prayed to God that he, the good Shepherd, might now give him a place of refuge amidst his own enemies.

Some years ago, I had the opportunity to go with one of my parishioners, an oncologist, to visit his patients on a day when many were in his clinic to receive chemotherapy. As we toured the ward, patient by patient, the doctor would give me a briefing on each of them. Invariably, the rundown had as much to do with the virtue that he had found in his patient as with their cancer. We came to one lady, but before we approached her my friend told me that this woman has a very serious form of cancer. It is very aggressive. Yet each time I see her, and I pray with her, I leave feeling more encouraged. I have to admit the encouragement is not because of my prognosis. The encouragement comes from the presence of Jesus Christ in her life. Just wait and see.

As we approached the dear lady, a middle-aged woman with a quiet presence and a sincere smile, she reached out her hand to me, looking over to her doctor for the introduction. The doctor introduced me as his pastor. Before I could even say, “how do you do,” this dear woman began to speak. I will never forget her words: “Pastor, I have to tell you that the Lord has been with me all the way. I’ve come to know the love of the Lord Jesus Christ more in my cancer than at any other time in my life. I’ve also come to know the love of Jesus through this wonderful doctor. Isn’t he great? God has provided such a refuge for me in these days. I’m feeding on him more now than ever before; I wouldn’t trade my cancer for anything.”

Those are words that you don't expect — unless you have seen the power of the resurrected Christ at work in the lives of his saints. She was being fed by Jesus even though she was surrounded by savage enemies — pathologically multiplying cells that would not stop until they had devoured her. But they could not devour her soul. Her soul was growing. The food and drink were enriching it on Table Mountain.

Jesus said if you draw near to him, he will draw near to you. Amidst whatever trouble you're facing, he will make a Table Mountain for you — a place of nourishment, a place of refuge, and you will say with the psalmist: "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble" (**Psalm 46:1**).

God's protection over David provided him with the blessing of healing. We read in verse five: "You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows" (**Psalm 23:5**).

The Twenty-third Psalm is, I think, one of the most beautiful passages in all the Bible. It speaks of a shepherd ministering healing to sheep. David would have taken oil in his sojourning. Then, during the journey, while moving the flock of his father from one place to another, he would have ministered to each of them personally. Some would be in pain from hurting a leg in the journey. Others would suffer open wounds of parasites and disease, or injuries from another sheep. On the hard trip that lay behind them, with a road ahead of them, they needed their shepherd's touch. They needed the cup of *his* life to fill their own. So David, who gave of himself to his sheep, anointing them with oil, bringing them the healing that would overflow in such a way as they could finish their journey, now cries out to his good shepherd that he would do the same in his life.

What is so touching to me about this song, and this passage in verse five, is that Jesus himself is wounded when the Paschal lamb was wounded for our sake. The cup that Jesus drank from was the cup of suffering. Out of His pain came life for those who come to Him. We who are wounded along the path, need that cup of Christ.

There've been times in my life when I needed the touch of Jesus Christ more than at other times. These were not always times of loss, of illness, or trouble. Often they were periods when I recognized my need of the shepherd, after having tried to go it alone. I believe this is what confession is. I think this is what faith brings. It is the personal touch of the Good Shepherd on the sheep who recognize that they cannot make the journey, cannot make it all the way home, unless they receive the anointing and the fullness of the cup of life of Jesus.

This is not the same as receiving Christ as Savior. It is not the same as being born again. It is that experience that Martyn Lloyd-Jones spoke of when he talked about the depression in his own life. He spoke of the book by Richard Sibbes, the old 17th-century Puritan, who wrote a series of sermons that was entitled *The Bruised Reed*. The title comes from a place in Scripture, when Isaiah told the wayfaring children of Israel that God would not abandon them even in their rebellious, sinful ways. He would bring healing and restoration and hope. And so Isaiah wrote these words which Richard Sibbes preached from and which brought Martyn Lloyd Jones right out of the midst of the darkness that came into his life:

"A bruised reed he will not break, and a faintly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice" (**Isaiah 42:3**).

Maybe now, in your life, it's time to go back to the shepherd amid your journey and received his touch. You need his healing. You need his fresh anointing. You need the fullness of his life. We've been a long way, and there is yet the further road ahead. He stands before you and says, "I am the way, the truth, and the life." And the reality of those words means as much now as when you first heard them and first believed. They are now words of protection from the good Shepherd that will lead you all the way home. What a blessing. What a promise. What a Savior.

Psalm 23 Blessing #3 - There is a Blessing in our Shepherd's Pathway

This Psalm is going somewhere. **Psalm 23** is not about lingering in a quiet pasture; it is about a journey of sheep with a shepherd on a pilgrimage. The fields, the valleys, the rod, and the staff, were all means to an end. The sheep were headed from a place of famine to an area with plenty. Without their shepherd, however, they would not know which way to go. The flock would be lost and alone, subject to the attacks from without and the disease from within. The elements and enemies would destroy them. So, David, having lived out this role in his own life as a boy, now turns to his shepherd, Almighty God, and encourages himself in the role of God the shepherd to the believer. David needs to recalibrate his way home.

Without God, we would wander. Even with God, we are prone to wander, as the old American hymn "Come Thou Fount" says:

"O to grace how great a debtor, Daily I'm constrained to be. Let Thy goodness, like a fetter, Bind my wandering heart to Thee. Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it, Prone to leave the God I love; Here's my heart, O take and seal it, Seal it for Thy courts above."

You can get weary along the way. The context of this psalm was surely the weariness of David. So David says that the Lord makes him lie down in green pastures. Sheep have to be made to lie down and to rest.

Recently I preached a sermon that I called resting in God before running in ministry. I used a phrase from **Psalm 37** to bring that message: "Be still before the LORD and wait patiently for him; fret not yourself over the one who prospers in his way, over the man who carries out evil devices!" (**Psalm 37:7**).

There are four words that I would use to describe the blessings of our Shepherd's pathway that leads to a particular place.

The first word to describe the pathway to the blessings of Psalm twenty-three is rest: "The Lord is my Shepherd. I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures" (**Psalm 23:1-2**).

Part of God's guidance is giving us the freedom to rest. Jesus himself modeled this for us when he stole away from the healing ministry at Capernaum to go to his father in prayer early in the morning. We also remember how he stole away from the crowd and went up on the mountain to pray. You will remember that he told his disciples to come away for a while. I once had a dear lady in my church write me a little note included in the offering plate. It was delivered to me on Monday. It read, "Pastor, you need to 'come apart' for a while, or you will come apart altogether!" She observed me and knew that I needed rest.

This psalm teaches us that God is the shepherd who provides a pathway for us to follow. Along that pathway, he guides us into green pastures where we can be renewed. He leads us beside still waters — not running water, which frightened the timid sheep — but the quiet place where our thirst is quenched by the calm, peaceful presence of the shepherd. No movement. No noise. Only the heartbeat of the shepherd guiding us along the path.

The second word is restoration: "He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake" (**Psalm 23:3**).

David could not be restored in his life unless he was restored in the righteousness of God himself and for the sake of his very name. Such renewal speaks to the saving work of God in our lives. We are not restored by mere meditation, or even by sitting under a sermon, or by going to the communion table. These are means of grace,

but the grace is from Christ himself. The grace flows through these means to strengthen our souls. We need his righteousness not only for salvation but for growth in grace, growth in the heart and mind. We need to be strengthened for the journey. We need to be restored from the wounds of this world. And to receive that is to receive the righteousness of Christ by faith.

As we consider the phrase “his namesake,” this leads us to a **third word that describes the**

blessings of the pathway of the shepherd: covenant. “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life” (**Psalm 23:6**).

I use the word covenant to describe this blessing. The word mercy that is used here is the English translation of the Hebrew “*hesed*”. “*Hesed*” speaks of the covenant love of the covenant name of God. There is a scarlet thread running through all of Scripture that is the truth as Augustine put it, “what God hath required, God hath provided.” To get to where we want to be, to get to the place of refuge and safety, to get to the holy destination where we were meant to arrive, is to trust in the covenant God whose goodness and mercy flows from his triune presence into our lives “all the days of my life.”

There were many years which I sought to follow God, but had missed his goodness in his mercy — his covenant love. I was trying to follow God in my strength, not for his namesake. I was trying to live the Christian life out of the overflow of whatever inward faith I could conjure up. Instead of trusting in his mercy, I was trusting in my labors; at length, I was defeated by myself. When I came to see that I died to self, I could live for God through Jesus Christ. God’s covenant love would give a life that I could not live, and sacrificial death that should have been mine. As a result of this act of grace in God sending his only begotten son, I could not only be saved but I could follow all the days of my life.

This is a good time for every one of us to renew our hearts and lives in the covenant of grace. Without such a renewal, we are prone to stray, we are inclined to lose our way, and we are likely to revert to the default setting of our lives — labor without ceasing, striving that produces burnout. Throughout all the days of your life, his goodness and mercy will follow you as you follow your good shepherd by faith.

The fourth word is home: “and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever” (**Psalm 23:6**).

W. Phillip Keller wrote very touchingly and convincingly of this final part of the Psalm. For him, verse six is the climax and essential message of the Psalm: “My personal conviction is that this is the most significant sentiment that David had in his heart as he ended this hymn of praise to divine diligence. Not only do we get the idea of an ever-present Shepherd on the scene, but also the concept that the sheep wants to be in full view of his owner at all times.

The destination for David was not merely a temple. The goal for David was home with God. That is my destination and yours. The house of the Lord is not only a place where we worship but is the everlasting new heaven and the new earth where we are going. The hours of worship in the sanctuary, the sweet times of family worship in our homes, in the familiar settings, small groups, and Sunday schools, are hints of heaven, little pieces of bread on the forest floor, to find our way. Signs of heaven appear all through the days of our lives. These little reminders are gifts of God to each of us. For we were created for *home*.

C.S. Lewis used to say that as he stepped outside of his Oxford home early in the morning and saw geese flying across an autumn English sky, he was reminded that we too were going somewhere. He said that it seemed to

be an echo in his heart of Eden. He was saying what I think we experience in so many ways, and in so many times in our lives: a beckoning by the Spirit, by the Good Shepherd, to come home.

Thus the Psalmist who has led the lambs of the flock through the dark, dangerous fields, and over rugged mountains, lifted his head unto the Good Shepherd to lead him home. So must you look up and see your rest in the LORD of this Psalm, Jesus Christ. In the Good Shepherd, every sorrow is sanctified; every circumstance is under the sovereign saving work of Jesus and will be used to get you home. Thinking of these things, I once wrote a song about this theme. I call it **"Your Sovereign Grace."**

When the wind and waves of life
Drove my soul to find relief
I was guided by the storm
To find Jesus underneath.
When the storms of life betray
All the promises You've made
I will cling to Calvary's place
I will trust Your Sovereign Grace.
Though Your presence with me goes
I seem to still be tossed and turned
By an unseen enemy
And I know I need to learn.
And when life is finally o'er
And I stand before You, Lord
I'll see the storms that stirred despair
Were the winds that blew me there.
When the storms of life betray
All the promises You've made
Let me cling to Calvary's place
Let me trust Your Sovereign Grace.

David trusted in the Lord's sovereign grace. And through repentance and faith in Jesus Christ, you too can know the power of the promises, the security of the Savior, and the blessings of being a well-beloved lamb in the fold of the Good Shepherd. And you will learn as I have that to be in His fold is to be home at last.

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