

# Spiritual Growth 6. Its Seasonableness

by A.W. Pink

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## Transcript

Spiritual Growth

6. Its Seasonableness

I

"To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven. . . . He hath made everything beautiful in his time" (Eccl. 3:1, 11). If the whole of these eleven verses be read consecutively it will be seen that they furnish a full outline of the many and different experiences of human life in this world, each aspect of man's varied career and his reactions thereto being stated. That which is emphasized in connection with all the mutations and vicissitudes of life is that they are all ordained and regulated by God, according to His unerring wisdom. Not only has He appointed a time to every purpose under heaven, but "everything is beautiful in his time." Nothing is too early, nothing too late. Everything is perfectly coordinated, and as we learn from the New Testament made to "work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose" (Rom. 8:28). There is a predestined time when each creature and each event shall come forth, how long it shall continue, and in what circumstances it shall be: all being determined by the Lord. This is true of the world as a whole, for God "worketh all things after the counsel of his own will" (Eph. 3:11). This earth has riot always existed. God was the One who decided when it should spring into being, and He created it by a mere fiat: "For he spake, and it was done; he commanded, and it stood fast" (Ps. 33:9). Nor will it last forever, for the hour is coming when its very elements "shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up" (2 Peter 3:10). How far distant, or how near, that solemn hour is, no creature has any means of knowing; yet the precise day for it is unchangeably fixed in the Divine decree. The same grand truth which pertains to the whole of creation applies with equal force to all the workings of Divine Providence. The beginning and the end, and the whole intervening career, of each person has been determined by his Maker. So too the rise, the progress, the height attained, and the entire history of each nation has been foreordained of God. "For of him, and through him, and to him are all things, to whom be glory forever. Amen" (Rom. 11:36). A nation is but the aggregate of individuals comprising it; and though its corporate life be much longer than of any one generation of its members, yet it is subject to the same Divine laws. Each kingdom, each empire, has its birth and development, its maturity and zenith, its decline and death. The Egyptian had.; so bad the Babylonian, Medo-Persian, Grecian, and Roman. What is stated in Ecclesiastes 3:1, 11 holds good of things in the spiritual realm, equally so with those in the material sphere, though we are more apt to forget this in connection with the former than with the latter. It is a fact that in the Christian life "To

everything there is a season and a time to every purpose under the heaven." How can it be otherwise seeing that the God of creation, the God of providence and the God of all grace is one. It is true there is much in the Divine operations both in Providence and in Grace which is profoundly mysterious, for "great things doeth he which we cannot comprehend" (Job 37:5). Yet not a little light is cast upon those higher mysteries if we seek to observe the ways and workings of God in Nature. How often the Lord Jesus made use of that principle, directing the attention of His hearers to the most familiar objects in the physical realm. Again and again we find the Divine Teacher using the things growing in the field to illustrate and adumbrate the things which are invisible and to inculcate lessons of spiritual value. "Consider the lilies." Not only look upon and admire them, but receive instruction therefrom. "Learn a parable of the fig tree" (Matthew 24:32). Yes, learn from it: ponder it, let it inform you about spiritual matters. When Christ insisted on the inseparable connection there is between character and conduct, He employed the similitude of a tree being known by its fruit. When He urged the necessity of new hearts for the reception of new covenant blessings, He spoke of new bottles for new wine, When He revealed the essential conditions of spiritual fruitfulness, He mentioned the vine and its branches. Yes, there is much in the material world from which we may learn valuable lessons on the spiritual life. Take the seasons which Cod has appointed for the year and how each brings forth accordingly. The coldness and barrenness of the winter gives place to the warmth and fertility of the spring, while the vegetables and fruit which sprout in the spring and grow through the summer are matured in the autumn. Each season has its own peculiar features and characteristic products. The same principle is seen operating in a human being. The life of man is divided into distinct seasons or stages: childhood, youth, maturity and old age; and each of those stages is marked by characteristic features: the innocence and shyness of (normal) children, the zeal and vigor of youth, the stability and endurance of maturity, the experience and wisdom of old age; and each of these distinctive features is "beautiful in its time." Not only has Cod appointed the particular seasons when each of His creatures shall come forth and flourish, but we are obliged to wait His set time for the same. If we sow seeds in the winter they will not germinate. Plants which sprout in the spring cannot be forced, but have to wait for the summer's sun. So it is in the human realm. "To everything there is a season and a time to every purpose under the heaven." We cannot put old heads on young shoulders, and such efforts will not only prove unsuccessful but issue in disastrous consequences. As everything is "beautiful in his time" they are incongruous and unseemly out of season. "When I was a child, I spake as a child I reasoned as a child, but when I became a man, I put away childish things" (1 Cor. 13:11). In the light of what has been said it is both interesting and instructive to ponder the ways of God with His people during the Old Testament and New Testament eras Much of that which obtained under the Mosaic dispensation was suited to that infantile period and was "beautiful in his time;" but now that "the fulness of time" has come such things would be quite out of place. During that kindergarten stage God instituted an elaborate ritual which appealed to the senses, and instructed by means of pictures and symbols. There was the colorful tabernacle, the priestly vestments, the burning of incense, the playing of instruments. They were all invested with a typical significance, but when the Substance appeared there was no further need of them: they had become obsolete, and to bring forward such things into Christian worship is an unseasonable lapsing back to the nursery stage. All that has been pointed out above is most pertinent to the spiritual growth of the individual Christian, and particularly to the several stages of his development or progress, and if duly attended to should preserve from many mistaken notions and erroneous conclusions. As the year is divided into different seasons so the Christian life has different stages, and as there are certain features which more or less characterize the year's seasons so there are certain experiences more or less peculiar to each stage in the Christian life; and as each of the year's seasons is marked by a decided change in what the garden and the orchard then bring forth, so there is a variation and alteration in the

graces manifested and the fruits borne by the Christian during the several stages through which he passes; but "everything is beautiful in his time"—as it would be incongruous out of its season. Now though the earth's seasons are four in number, yet only three of them are concerned with fertility or production. The analogy pertains spiritually: in the Christian life there is a spring, a summer, and an autumn — the "winter" is when his body has been committed to the grave in sure and certain hope of resurrection, awaiting the eternal Spring. Thus we should expect to find that the more explicit teaching of the New Testament divides the spiritual life of the saint on earth into three stages; and such is indeed the case. In one of his parables of the kingdom of God, Christ used the similitude of a man casting seed into the ground (a figure of preaching the gospel), saying "The earth bringeth forth of herself: first the blade, then the ear, after that the full corn in the ear" (Mark 4:28): there are the three stages of growth. In like manner we find the apostle grading those to whom he wrote into three classes, namely, "fathers," "young men," and "little children" (1 John 2:13). Nothing which lives is brought to maturity immediately in this lower world: instead, everything advances by gradual growth and orderly progress. God indeed created Adam and Eve in their full perfection, but He does not regenerate us into our complete stature in Christ. All the parts and faculties of the new man come into being at the new birth, but time is needed for their development and manifestation. Moreover, as natural talents are not bestowed uniformly — to some being given five, to others two, and to yet others only one (Matthew 25:15), so God bestows a greater measure of grace to one of His people than to another. There is therefore a great difference among Christians: all are not of one stature, strength, and growth in godliness. Some are "sheep" and others but "lambs" (John 21:15, 16). Some are "strong others are "weak" (Rom. 15:1). Some are but "babes," and others are of "full age" (Heb. 5:13, 14). Nevertheless, each brings forth fruit "in his season" (Ps. 1:3). If more attention were paid to the principles which we have sought to enunciate and illustrate, some of us would be preserved from forming harsh judgments of our younger brethren and sisters and from criticizing them because they do not exercise those graces and bear those fruits which pertain more to the stage of Christian maturity. One would instantly perceive the folly of a fanner who complained because his field of grain bore no golden ears during the early months of spring: equally senseless and sinful is it to blame a babe in Christ because he has neither the mature judgment nor the patience of an experienced and long-tried believer. To that statement every spiritual reader will readily assent: yet we very much fear that some of these very persons are guilty of the same thing in another direction—self ward: reproaching themselves in later life because they lack the glow and ardor, the zeal and zest which formerly characterized them. Some older Christians look back and compare themselves with the days of their spiritual youth and then utter hard things against themselves, concluding that so far from having advanced, they have retrograded. In certain cases their lamentations are justifiable, as with Solomon. But in many instances they are not warrantable, being occasioned by a wrong standard of measurement and through failing to bear in mind the seasonableness or unseasonableness of certain fruits at particular times. They complain now because they lack the liveliness of earlier days, when they had warmer affections for Christ and His people, more joy in reading the Word and prayer, more zeal in seeking to promote the good of others, more fruit for their labors. They complain that though they now spend more time in using the means of grace, others who are but spiritual babes appear to derive far greater benefit though less diligent in duties than they are. In some cases where conversion has been more radical and clearly marked, growth is more easily perceived; but where conversion itself was a quiet and gradual experience, it is much more difficult to trace out the subsequent progress that is made. As the Christian obtains more light from God he becomes increasingly aware of his filth, and by apprehensions of his decrease he will increase in humility. As spiritual wisdom increases he measures himself by a higher standard, and thus becomes more conscious of hiscomings short thereof. Formerly he was more occupied with his outward walk, but now he is more diligent in

seeking to discipline his heart. In earlier years there may have been more fervor in his prayers; but now his petitions should be more spiritual. As the Christian grows spiritually his desires enlarge and because his attainments do not keep pace he is apt to err in his judgment of himself: "there is that maketh poor, yet hath great riches!" (Prov. 13:7) Young Christians are generally more enthusiastic and active, yet their zeal is not always according to knowledge, and at times it is unseasonable through neglecting temporal affairs for spiritual. A young Christian is ready to respond to almost any plausible appeal for money, but a mature one is more cautious before he acts lest he should be supporting enemies of the Truth. The older Christian may not perform some duties with the same zest as formerly, yet with more conscience: quality rather than quantity is what now most concerns him. As we grow older, greater and more difficulties are encountered, and the overcoming of them evidences that we have a larger measure of grace. Particular graces may not be as conspicuous as previously, and yet the exercise of new ones be more evident (2 Peter 1:5-7). Measure not your growth by any one part of your life, nor by any single aspect of it, but by your Christian career as a whole. It is by no means a simple matter to accurately classify believers as to which particular grade or class they belong to in the school of Christ, either concerning ourselves or others, for spiritual growth is rarely uniform—though it ought to be so. Some Christians are weak and strong at one and the same time, yet in different respects, as both experience and observation show. Some have better heads than hearts, while others have sounder hearts than heads. Some are weak in knowledge, ignorant and unsettled in the Faith, who nevertheless put to shame their better-instructed brethren by their love and zeal, and by their walk and fruitfulness. Others have a good understanding of the Truth but are veritable babes when it comes to putting it into practice. Solomon was endued with great wisdom, but ruined his testimony through yielding to fleshly lusts. "A Christian should labor for a good heart well-headed, and a head well-hearted" (Thos. Manton). Again; it needs to be borne in mind that there are great differences in the same Christian at sundry times, yea within a single season, so that the three stages of spiritual growth may coincide in a single saint. The maturest "father" in some respects may be as weak as a new born "babe" in other regards, and tempted as violently as the "young men. The case of the godliest man is not always uniform. One day he may be rapt into the holy mount to behold Christ in His glory; and the same evening he may be tossed with winds and waves, and in his feelings be like a ship on the point of sinking. Now he may, like Paul, be caught up into Paradise and favored with revelations which he cannot express to others, and anon be afflicted with a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet him. Calms and storms, peace and troubles, combats and conquests, weakness and strength, alternate in the lives of God's people; yet in each they may bring forth fruit which is "beautiful in his time." All that has been dwelt upon above may appear to some of our readers as being so elementary and obvious that there was really no need to point out the same. Though that be the case, there are others who at least require to be reminded there. It is not so much our knowledge but the use we make of it that counts the most; and often our worst failures issue not from ignorance but from acting contrary to the light we have. A due recognition of the seasonableness or unseasonableness of particular spiritual fruits in the Christian life will preserve from many wrong conclusions. On the one hand it should keep him from expecting to find in a spiritual babe those fruits and developed graces which pertain to a state of maturity, and on the other hand he who regards himself as a "father" in Christ must vindicate that estimation by bringing forth far more than do young Christians. II

The leading principle which we sought to enunciate and illustrate, namely, fruit suitable to the season, receives exemplification in that statement, "A word spoken in due season, how good is it!" (Prov. 15:23): a word of sympathy to one in trouble, of encouragement to the despondent, of warning to the careless. Hence we find the minister of Christ exhorted, "Preach the word: be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and doctrine" (2 Tim. 4:2)—by the "in season, out of season"

we understand, at stated times and as opportunity occurs. The same principle was exemplified by the Baptist when he said, "Bring forth therefore fruits meet for repentance" (Matthew 3:8)—praising God for His mercies at that time would have been unseasonable, rather was godly sorrow for the abuse of them called for. "There is a time to weep, and a time to laugh." (Eccl. 3:4) Fruitfulness is an essential quality of a godly person, but his fruit should be seasonable. A time of suffering calls for self-examination, confession, and the exercise of patience. A season of testing and trial requires the exercise of faith and courage. When blest with revivings and spiritual prosperity, holy joy and praise are becoming. It is written "Therefore will the Lord wait that he may be gracious . . . blessed are all they that wait for him" (Isa. 30:18)—wait for the time He has appointed for the development and manifestation of particular graces. Unseasonable graces are like untimely figs, which are never full flavored. Most of us are too impatient. "No chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous . . . nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby" (Heb. 12:11)—exercised in conscience as to what has given occasion for the chastisement, exercising faith for the fulfilling of this promise, and patience while awaiting the same. As we turn now to look at the characteristics which mark the three stages of the Christian life, it must be borne in mind: (1) we are not to understand that what is predicated of the "fathers" in nowise pertains to the "babes," but rather that the particular grace ascribed abounds in the former more eminently. (2) That what is said of each of the three may, in different respects, belong to a single Christian so that "young men" who are "strong" may in another way, be as weak as the "babes." (3) We must not lose sight of God's liberty in apportioning His grace as and when He pleases: He works not uniformly, and causes some of His people to make much more rapid progress than others during the earlier years of their Christian lives, while others who seem slow at the start overtake and pass them at a later stage. "I write unto you little children (teknia) because your sins are forgiven you for His name's sake." (1 John 2:12) "I write unto you fathers, because ye have known him that is from the beginning. I write unto you young men, because ye have overcome the wicked one. I write unto you little children (paidia) because ye have known the Father" (1 John 2:13). This is the classical passage on the present aspect of our theme, though its force is somewhat obscured through the translators making no distinction between the two different Greek words they have rendered "little children." 1 John 2:12 pertains to the whole of the "called" family of God irrespective of growth or attainment, for every believer has had his sins forgiven him for Christ's sake. The word used there for "little children" is a term of endearment, and was employed by Christ in John 13:33 when addressing the apostles, and occurs again in this epistle in 2:28; 3:7 etc. Only in 1 John 2:13 are believers graded into three distinct classes according to the degrees of their spiritual progress: "fathers," "young men," and "little children"—or preferably "babes," to mark the distinction from the word used in verse 12. That is the order of dignity and responsibility: had it been the order of grace, it had been "babes, young men and fathers." As some one has said "If Christ were to enter a Christian gathering for the purpose of showing forth His favor, He would commence with the youngest and feeblest one present; but if to judge the works of His servants, He would begin with the maturest saint." For example, Christ appeared many times after His resurrection: He ended by manifesting Himself to the apostle Paul, but with whom did He begin?—with Mary Magdalene out of whom He had cast seven demons! The same principle is illustrated in the parable of the "pence" (grace)—beginning with the eleventh-hour laborer; but reversed in the parable of the "talents," where responsibility as in view. As we are writing on the subject of spiritual progress, or as most writers designate it "growth in grace," we propose to inverse the order of 1 John 2:13 and consider first the spiritual babes. If any one should consider we are taking an unwarrantable liberty with the Word in so doing, we would appeal to Mark 4:28, where our Lord spoke of "first the blade, then the ear, after that the full corn in the ear." And now as we seek to grapple more closely with our present task we have to acknowledge we experience considerable

difficulty in attempting to set forth with any measure of definiteness what it is which specially marks the spiritual "babe" in contrast from the "young men" and "fathers," or if others prefer, that which distinguishes the "blade," from the "ear" and "the full corn in the ear." But if we cannot satisfy our readers, we trust that we may be kept from confusing any of them. In view of the vastly superior conditions which obtained in the days of the apostles—illustrated by such passages as Acts 2:44, 45; 11:19-21; 1 Corinthians 12:8-11—it is not to be supposed that many of the features which marked that glorious period will be reproduced in a "day of small things" (Zech. 4:10) such as that in which we are now living. The line of demarcation between the church and the world was much more plainly drawn then than it is now; the contrast between lifeless and living professors more easily perceived, and so on. Therefore it is reasonable to conclude that the distinct stages of the Christian life and the different forms which believers occupied in the school of Christ, were then more plainly marked; and though the difference be one of degree rather than of kind, yet that very difference renders it the more difficult for us to describe or identify the several grades. In his most excellent "Letters on Religious Subjects" John Newton has three pieces entitled "Grace in the Blade," "Grace in the Ear" "Grace in the Full Corn." He began his second piece by saying "The manner of the Lord's work in the hearts of His people is not easily traced, though the fact is certain and the evidence demonstrable from Scripture. In attempting to explain we can only speak in general, and are at a loss to form such a description as shall take in the immense variety of cases which occur in the experience of believers." It is just because so many preachers have failed to take into their account that "immense variety of cases," and instead, have pictured the experience of conversion as though it were cast in a uniform mold, that numbers of their hearers and readers have been much stumbled, fearing they were never truly converted because their experience differed widely from that described by the preacher. George Whitefield stated, "I have heard of a person who was in a company with fourteen ministers of the Gospel, some of whom were eminent servants of Christ, and yet not one of them could tell the time when God first manifested Himself to their soul." Then he went on to say to his hearers and readers, "We do not love the pope, because we love to be popes ourselves, and set up our own experience as a standard to others. Those that had such a conversion as the Philippian jailor or the Jews on the day of Pentecost may say, You are not Christians at all because you had not the like terrible experience. You may as well say to your neighbor, You have not had a child, for you were not in labor all night. The question is, whether a real child is born: not how long was the preceding pain, but whether it was productive of the new birth and whether Christ has been formed in your hearts!" Some are likely to object to what is said above and say, Though the circumstantial of conversion may vary in different cases, yet the essentials are the same in all: the law must do its work before the soul is prepared for the gospel, the heart must be made sensible for its sickness before it will betake itself unto the great Physician. Even though that should be the experience of many of the saints, yet the Holy Spirit is by no means tied down to that order of things, nor do the Scriptures warrant any such restricted view. Take the cases of Peter and Andrew, his brother, and the two sons of Zebedee (Matthew 4:18-22), and there is nothing in the sacred narrative to show that they went through a season of conviction of sin before they followed Christ! Nor was there in the case of Matthew (9:9). Zaceheus was apparently attracted by mere curiosity to obtain a sight of the Lord Jesus, and a work of grace was wrought in his heart immediately, and he "received him joyfully!" (Luke 19:6) Let us not be misunderstood at this point. We are neither casting any reflection upon those ministers who preach the law by which a knowledge of sin is obtained (Rom. 3:20), nor disparaging the importance and necessity of conviction of sin. Rather are we insisting that God is perfectly free to work as He pleases, and that I have no Scriptural reason to doubt the reality of my conversion simply because my heart was then melted by a sense of God's wondrous love, rather than awed by a discovery of His holiness or terrified by a realization of His wrath; and that I have no warrant to call into question the genuineness of another's

conversion merely because it was not cast in a certain mold. The all-important thing is whether the subsequent walk evidences that I have passed from death unto life. In Zechariah 12:10 "mourning" follows and not precedes a saving looking upon Christ! There are some who taste the bitterness of sin more sharply after conversion than they did before. Now as the Holy Spirit is pleased to use different means in connection with the converting of souls, so also there is real variety in the experiences of those newly brought to a saving knowledge of the Truth. On the other hand, as there are certain essentials found in every genuine conversion—the turning from sin, self, the world unto God in Christ, receiving Him as our personal Lord and Saviour and then following him in the path of obedience—so there are certain characteristics in babes in Christ which distinguish them from the "young men" and "fathers." And the very name by which they are designated more or less defines those characteristics. As infants or little children they are largely creatures of impulse, swayed by their emotions more than regulated by judgment. Feelings play a large part in their lives. They are very impressionable, easily influenced, and largely unsuspecting, believing readily whatever is told them by those who have their confidence. "I write unto you little children, because ye have known the Father" (1 John 2:13). That is the distinguishing mark which none other than the Holy Spirit has given of the spiritual infant. It is a statement which needs to be particularly taken to heart and pondered by some of our readers for it plainly signifies that unless we "know the Father" we are not entitled to regard ourselves as being His children. In the natural life the very first thing which babes and young children discover is an acknowledgement—in their infantile way—of their parents, aiming to call them by their names ("papa" and "mamma") in distinguishing them from others. And thus it is also spiritually: the distinguishing act of babes in Christ is to acknowledge God to be their Father, and this they do by expressing, in their way, their attachment to Him, their delight in Him, and their dependence on Him, lisping out His name in their praises and petitions before the throne of grace. What we have just pointed out is agreeable to such passages as these: "thou shalt call me, my Father and shalt not turn away from me. (Jer. 3:19) "I am a Father to [the spiritual] Israel, and Ephraim is my first born . . . Ephraim, my dear son, a pleasant child . . . I will surely have mercy upon him, saith the Lord." (Jer. 31:9, 20) In the first formal instruction which the Lord Jesus gave to His young disciples, He bade them "After this manner pray ye: our Father which art in heaven." (Matthew 6:9) How can we approach Him with any confidence or freedom unless we view Him in this blessed relation? If we have been reconciled to Him by Jesus Christ then God is our Father, and "because ye are sons, God hath sent forth the spirit of His Son into your hearts, crying, Father! Father!" (Gal. 4:6); and that spirit causes its possessor to come in a holy familiarity and childlike manner to God, and evidences itself in a desire to honor and please Him. Not only would it be misleading to our minds for the young convert (even though old in years) to be likened unto a "little child" (Matthew 18:2, 3) unless there was a real resemblance, and thus a propriety in employing this figure, but it would also be a strange departure from one of the well-established "ways" of God, namely, His having so wrought in the first creation as to strikingly foreshadow His works in the new creation, the natural having been made to adumbrate the spiritual. We see that principle and fact illustrated in every direction. As in the natural so in the spiritual: there is a begetting (James 1:19), a conception or Christ being formed in the soul (Gal. 4:19), a birth (1 Peter 1:23), and that birth evidenced by a "cry" (Rom. 8:15), and the newborn babe desiring "the sincere milk of the Word" (1 Peter 2:2); so there are many features in common between the natural and the spiritual infant. Little children are far more regulated by their affections than by their understanding, and the young Christian is much taken with the love of God, the grace of the Lord Jesus, and the comforts of the Holy Spirit. he delights greatly in his own experience, and to hear the experience of others. As the natural child is timorous and easily scared, so the young Christian is quickly alarmed, as was evidenced by the fearing disciples on the storm-swept sea, to whom the Saviour said "O ye of little faith." As the digestive system of a youngster is feeble, so the babe in Christ

needs to be fed on "milk" rather than "strong meat." "I have yet many things to say unto you, but ye cannot bear them now" (John 16:12). Owing to an undeveloped understanding, babes in Christ are not "established" in the Faith: "be no more children—tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine" (Eph. 4:14). "A young convert is much taken with his own importunity in prayer, with his own enlargements and affections (they being very warm and lively), with the multitude of means and the much time he spends in the use of and observance of them; whereas a believer of longer standing and greater measure of spiritual growth values those discoveries which the Holy Spirit gives him in prayer and inward converse with the Lord, of the Father's free love, and the Son's personal, particular, and prevalent intercession on his behalf: and he is more taken with those, than with his own fervor and supplications . The 'babes' in Christ are particularly affected with a sense and enjoyment of pardoning mercy and calling God 'Father.' Hence, the blessings of pardon of sin, peace with God, the spirit of adoption, and an advancement in and an increased spiritual perception of these precious realities, must be a growth in grace such as is quite suited to their spiritual stature and circumstances" (S. E. Pierce).

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