

(John - Part 12): Nicodemus - the Singular Call of God Upon Him

by A.W. Tozer

A.W. Tozer's sermon on Nicodemus highlights the importance of spiritual sensitivity and the sufficiency of Jesus Christ for true fulfillment.

Duration: 43:11

Scripture: Isaiah 53:6, Matthew 6:33, Matthew 19:16-22, John 3:1-21, John 20:28, Acts 8:26-40, Acts 16:11-15

Topics: "Expositional"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher discusses the story of the rich young ruler who came to Jesus seeking eternal life. The young ruler had youth, wealth, morality, and a high position, which are often seen as desirable qualities. However, despite having all these things, he still felt a lack in his life. The preacher emphasizes the importance of recognizing the tug of the Holy Spirit and following it immediately. He also mentions other individuals who came to Jesus, highlighting the need for humility and obedience. Ultimately, the message is that only Jesus Christ is enough to fulfill our deepest desires and grant us eternal life.

Transcript

In the third chapter of John, just four lines, there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. The same came to Jesus by night. And since that is all I intend to talk about tonight, that's all I'm going to read.

I'm to speak tonight of the man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus. Out of the thousands of millions of people who have lived in the world, and out of the hundreds of thousands of Jews who've lived in the world, even hundreds of millions of them, and out of the tens of thousands of Pharisees, the Holy Spirit lets a pencil of light fall upon the head of one man, Nicodemus the Pharisee of Israel. And the Holy Spirit, who wrote the book, and who is rigidly economical in his use of words, nevertheless devotes twenty-one verses to this story of Nicodemus' visit to Jesus, what he said to Christ, and what Christ replied to him.

Now this, if nothing else, would lead us to believe that this is an important story. We're not done with it tonight. It is vastly important that God ever put it in the Scriptures at all, and therefore we want to approach it respectfully, reverently, and with an inquiring mind.

It says that this man Nicodemus was a Pharisee. I think the man Paul, later, best described the Pharisees in a phrase that is almost comical. He says, these people all know, if they would tell them, how I lived all my life in the most strictest sense of our religion.

The most strictest sect was the Pharisees, the most strictest of all. That double negative doesn't bother God at all, and I'm not going to let it bother me. It means that a Pharisee followed the strictest, straightest letter of Judaism.

In addition to being a Pharisee, a fundamentalist par excellence, he was also a ruler, that is, he was a member of the Sanhedrin. Now it's well known, but I'll throw it in for the sake of those who might not know, that the Sanhedrin was the supreme governing body in Israel. Not quite equivalent to our Supreme Court, but very much like it, because the Sanhedrin had some executive as well as judicial doings.

There were 70 of them, and they were composed of the high priest, who was the president, and all the ex-high priests that might be living, and the elders, and the legal assessors, and all these, says the books, all these were drawn from the privileged families, whatever that might mean. The point is that not every Tom, Dick, and Jerry got into the Sanhedrin. He had to be a VIP, which I understand in our day is a very important person.

And he had to be in order to get in. He had to be a high priest, or an ex-high priest, or an elder, or a scribe, or somebody at least from the privileged families. And these members could be either Pharisees or Sadducees, just as we can have on our Supreme Court in Washington men who are either Republicans or Democrats.

We can have in our Congress Republicans or Democrats, and the way we have it, they're usually fairly well balanced. Sometimes only one or two will turn the balance between one and the other. Pharisee and Sadducee, they're in Washington.

But we're getting a parallel there anyhow. Now, the Scripture says that Nicodemus came to Jesus. There were 70 of them, and Nicodemus came to Jesus out of 71 kings.

Why? He was separated from Christ by all the white gulf that separated all the other 69. High position, and Jesus was a common carpenter. Religious bigotry, and Jesus was anything but a straight-laced bigot.

His religious philosophy was as broad as all Palestine, and he could take in the Mediterranean too. And then pride of his high position, for remember, he belonged to the privileged family, and so did they all. And then remember the prejudice, the sharp prejudice, that an educated Jewish member of the Sanhedrin had against an uneducated fisherman, or an uneducated carpenter who lived among the fishermen, and who had in his little group some fishermen without any education.

Now, why did Nicodemus cross that gulf? What mysterious power laid hold on the man Nicodemus, and not on the other 69? And why he and not they, or why he and not somebody else? Is the answer simply that he was more sensitive to God's voice than the rest? Could I repeat again what I said only a few weeks ago about the prevenient grace of God, the mysterious secret working of God in the souls of men, turning them toward himself, influencing them toward himself, and magnetically attracting them toward himself? That's the prevenient work of God in the human breast, without which there never could be a conversion. And I wonder if this man Nicodemus was simply more sensitive to this operation of God than the other 69, because nobody in a thousand years of jumping up and down on the family Bible could ever make me

believe that God showed anything like partiality, that he picked out Nicodemus and let the other 69 go. Well, the heart of God that yearned over Nicodemus yearned over the other 69, too.

But only Nicodemus came. Why? I think that it was because he was more sensitive to God's voice. I'm talking to some people right now.

You've been reared in Christian homes. You've been brought up in this Sunday school. You cut your first baby tooth on the back of a hymnbook when your mother wasn't watching.

And still you are not right with God, or you make some kind of a halfway profession, but you'll never be much of a Christian if you're a Christian at all. And the reason is you lack sensitivity to the in-workings of God. Was it because this man was more receptive to spiritual impulses? Now, some people are more receptive than others to spiritual impulses.

Some people are simply extroverts, and you can't reach them. They're not sensitive to anything. They live more or less on the level of the stomach.

But this man, though he were a Pharisee, and though he was a member of the Sanhedrin, and though he had all the high pride of the rest, and position, and prejudice, and bigotry, and all that cursed the rest of them, too, there must have been a receptivity here to spiritual impulses. I want to keep that alive inside of my soul, brethren. I'd rather lose a leg and hobble along the rest of my life than to lose my spiritual sensitivity.

I want to keep it within me. And then he must have had a humility that the other ones didn't have. You know, some people are not ever going to get right with God, and the reason is they don't have humility.

They simply will not humble themselves. Some of us go to this church, and not much of any place else, and we shuttle in and out of here, and we forget that the Christian and missionary alliance church, this particular church, it pays its bills, and it's honored that way, and its people behave themselves fairly well, and not many go to jail from this church. But nevertheless, in spite of all that, we're considered to be just a little bit cross-eyed and just a little bit off-center.

We're eccentrics. It takes humility to cast in your lot with people who are possibly considered as it being necessary that they see a psychiatrist or that they do something to balance themselves. Now, Jesus had that kind of crowd all around him.

He himself was considered to be a man, a very strange kind of man, and the people that followed him were considered, of course, also to be very strange. Now, here was a member of the high court, and he had to have a lot of humility to humble himself and cast in his lot with the plain people. I got a bit of amusement out of a news report that came in over the wires here not so very long ago.

Now, one of the high officials in India was apologizing because he said the news had gone out all over the world that Christian missionaries were being hindered in India. Now, he said, I want you to know that that is not true. He said, we are not hindering the propagation of the Christian doctrines in India, and we understand that a few low-caste people have believed.

I could just hear the pride in that fellow's voice as this Brahmin spoke patronizingly and in condescension about those low-castes that he understood a few had believed in Jesus Christ, and he wasn't going to get in their way. Oh, the bigotry and the pride there. You don't have to go to Chicago's Gold Coast or to the

Midway.

You can go to India or Africa or anywhere, and you will find that there is human pride, and it feasts on almost anything that will make it fat. Now, he crossed over this gulf, and the scripture says that he came by night, evidently feeling his way. Because, you see, Nicodemus well knew what it would cost him.

He knew that to follow Christ would cost him something. I know my friend Randy Barthes too well to believe that he would ever go to Germany and tell the people there, just come, just come, just come as you are, just come and it will cost you nothing, the price has all been paid, just come. Brethren, there is always a price connected with salvation.

And our missionaries, I know too well to believe that they would ever go to any part of the world and simply say, you don't have to do a thing, there is a program on the air, and I get a magazine also, somebody sends it to me. Brother, if it's you, quit sending it, it doesn't mean a thing to me. They send it in a plain paper without a return address.

And this fellow has a philosophy of faith. He says everybody has faith, everybody has faith. Now that point number one, build on that.

Everybody has faith. Everybody in the wide world has faith. And all you have to do is turn your faith in the right direction toward Christ and it's all fixed up.

Now his basic premise is as false as the devil, because Paul says, not all men have faith. Faith is not a plant that grows by the way that everybody has. Faith is a rare plant that grows in a penitent soul only.

And so the basic teaching that everybody has faith, and all you have to do is use the faith you have, is simply humanism in the guise of Christianity. For the faith everybody has is a humanistic faith and it is not the faith that saves. And it is not that faith which is a gift of God to a broken heart.

This man had a faith that cost him something, and he was feeling his way. They say that the man, now this has a question mark after it, but some scholars believe that this Nicodemus was Nicodemus Ben-Gurion. And Nicodemus Ben-Gurion was a brother to Flavius Josephus, who was of course, as you know, one of the great Jewish historians of the time, perhaps the most famous of all the Jewish historians.

And this Nicodemus was one of the three richest men in all of Jerusalem. And yet, history tells us that later on, the daughter of Nicodemus, one of the three richest men in Jerusalem, and brother to Flavius Josephus, possibly, was found picking up corn off of the street where the horses had thrown it out of their feedbags as they traveled down the street, and picking it up and roasting it in order to get something to eat. Why? Because when Nicodemus finally threw in his lot with Jesus Christ, they took everything he had, confiscated his property, and turned him out as if he were the scum of the earth, and his daughter had to pick up corn from the street to get anything for her stomach.

That's why he came by night. There's been a tremendous lot of wind wasted on this man, and a great deal of abuse hurled upon him, abuse that he never deserved at all, because he came to Jesus by night. He came feeling his way.

He came inquiring. He came asking questions. He wasn't sure.

He only knew that he was spiritually sensitive, and he wanted help. And he also knew the reputation this man had, and he knew what would happen to him and his family, and his position, and his money, and his reputation if he were to cast any lot with this man. Now, his coming then suggests only one thing.

His coming suggests that the soul of man is too nobly conceived and too high born and too mighty a universe in itself ever to be satisfied with anything less than Jesus Christ. His coming suggests that only Jesus Christ is enough. And I can stand without any embarrassment and say to you that you will find either now or later in your life or at death or in the world to come that only Jesus Christ is enough.

Out of all the rulers, one ruler came. Out of all the Jews, this Jew came. And I want to point out that those who came to Jesus Christ, our Lord, came of the various levels of life, and their reason for coming was always about the same.

Let me mention some others that came to Jesus. Here was the rich young ruler that everybody knows about. Now here this rich young ruler was an example of a model man because he had four things or three things anyway that everybody might want to emulate.

He had wealth and morality and position. And I can hear a mother when her little boy got out of line holding up this rich young ruler that lived around the corner and say, Now why don't you try to be like that man? Now there is a successful Jew. There is a moral man.

Nobody's ever found him doing anything wrong. There is a man of high position which he earned by virtue of study and hard work. There is a wealthy man and his wealth has come also from shrewdness and hard bargaining.

And here is a young man. If you want to be like anybody, choose this young fellow as your example. I can just hear the mothers in Israel in that day holding up this young fellow.

And yet one word tells the secret of his great disappointment. For notice he had the four things that everybody wants. He had youth.

Everybody wants youth. And mourn when they begin to lose it. Everybody wants wealth, although almost everybody modestly says they only just want enough to get along with.

And everybody wants morality. Nobody wants really to be bad. Everybody wants morality, or at least admires it.

And everybody liked to have a high position. Now this young fellow had the four things that are supposed to be desirable, which if you attain to or obtain, will give you peace of mind. And yet this young ruler came to Jesus and the language of his question tipped his off, as they say, gave away what was the matter with the young man.

He said, What shall I do that I may inherit eternal life? There was the answer. That's what brought the young man. Youth.

He looked forward to the time when youth would be no more, and withered and palsied and shaken with age, he would brush back his few remaining gray hairs and lie down stiffly on the bed from which he should never rise again. He had to have something with eternity in it. And he knew also that his wealth could not help him then, and his morality could not help him then, and he knew that his position would

have to be given up and his place filled by another.

So he came saying, What shall I do for eternity? What shall I do that I might have that eternal life, that eternal quality, which I don't now have? Oh, my friends, the world is filled with liars. And David didn't need to apologize when he said every man is a liar, because until we're really converted to Christ and the holiness of Christ enters our heart, we are part and parcel of a mighty deception. And that deception is that you can have peace of mind and be relatively happy and get along fine and make a big success of your human life if you have wealth and morality and a high position.

But it's all false, as the rich young ruler shows us, because there's one word missing from it all, and that is eternal. If it could be said of him he had eternal youth, if it could be said of him that his wealth was eternal wealth, if it could be said of him that his position was everlasting, then we might say that wealth and youth and morality and position might be enough for a man. But the word eternal is not there.

You have to read it in. The man knew that God had set eternity in his heart. That man knew that his soul was too nobly conceived and too highly born, and too much of a universe within itself ever to be satisfied with anything that didn't have eternity in the middle of it.

Let's look at another character that came, and that was the Ethiopian chancellor found in the eighth chapter of Acts. Now he had something else. He had authority, prestige, and religion.

Read that story sometime and think about what I have said. He had authority, for he was a man of great authority under Queen Candacy, who was queen of Ethiopia, and of course he had the prestige that went with it. And then in addition to that he was a Jewish proselyte.

He was as black as could be for he was an Ethiopian. He wasn't a Jew, but he had joined the Jewish religion and no doubt had undergone the rites that had made him a Jew. And there was some feast or other going on up in Jerusalem, so he went up there to pray, being a chancellor of the Exchequer and a big shot in Ethiopia, of course he could get permission from Queen Candacy.

And she said, why certainly go. So he went and took in the religious festival in Jerusalem among the Jews. And they admired him and admitted him in and took him in among them as a proselyte Jew.

And still, not all of his newfound religion and not all of the swinging of the censors in Jerusalem and not all of the chanting of the priests and not all of the beauty of the form of their religion could make his heart sing. He couldn't rejoice. His heart was too discriminating, that man.

But when he had met Jesus through faith and the man Philip had preached Jesus unto him, then he immediately, says the scripture, went on his way rejoicing. Now what was it that gave rejoicing to the heart of the Ethiopian chancellor, the eunuch who served under Queen Candacy, and he couldn't get it any place else? It was nothing else than that he found the one of whom Moses and the prophets did write. The Ethiopian eunuch also confirms this, that the Nicodemus suggests, only Jesus is enough.

Religion won't do. It's amazing how many things religious people want to do to you. Thank God, I've never had the two things done to me yet.

One, I was baptized and the other, I had men lay their hands on my empty head and ordain me. And that's the only two things they've ever done to me. But you know, it's astonishing how many things they can do to you in churches.

They can start when you're eight days old with circumcision and end up with last rites when you're 108 years old. And all the time they'll be shooting something into you or rubbing something on you or putting something around your neck or making you eat something or lay off of eating it or something else. Manipulate you and maul you and Swedish massage your soul all the time.

And when it's all done, you're just what you were. You're just a massaged sinner. That's all.

When you're finished, you're simply a sinner that didn't eat fish. And if you ate fish, then you're a sinner that did eat fish. And if you made the long journey to the temple, then you're a sinner that went to the temple.

And if you didn't, then you're a sinner that didn't go to the temple. And if you attended the church, then you're a sinner that went to the church. And if your name is on the rulebook, then you're a sinner whose name is on the rulebook.

And if it isn't, then you're a sinner whose name isn't on the rulebook. Measure it any direction and approach it from anywhere, and we're sinners still after religion has done all it can do to us. It can put us on the roll and educate us and train us and teach us and instruct us and discipline us.

And when it's all over, there is still something that says, eternity is in my heart and I don't find anything to satisfy. So you'll be searching and searching forever until you find Christ, for only Christ is enough. Then I think, and I'll bring this to a hurried close, don't get too optimistic, though, for it may be some little time, but I won't take as long as you do.

This woman, Lydia, I'm interested in Lydia. Now, Lydia was a career woman, and she was born out of due time. We have our business women now, business women this and that.

Scripture made women to have homes and bear children and keep their husbands happy. But we have now career women and business women. And I suppose it's all right, and God knows I can't do anything about it.

They just look at me and shrug, push past me and take my seat in the bus. So I can't do anything about it. But I can only say that the business women, they told us back there a few years back that poor women had been trodden down, they said.

They said, we've trampled the poor ladies under our feet and their faces show the marks of hobnails for we men trampled them down into the ground. And so they passed an amendment, what was it, the 17th Amendment? And it emancipated the ladies and set them free. And now they can go vote and not know what they're voting for, just like the men.

And we set the women free to be just as bad as the men and just as miserable. We've set the women free to curse and swear and tell dirty stories and smoke filthy cigarettes and run around and come in when they please. We've set women free to make nasty political speeches and vote blind.

They say they're free, but they're not free. They're simply free to be bad and miserable. Of course, they're free to be good, too, if they come to God in Christ.

But the so-called freedom of the modern career woman needs to be reexamined in the light of history and in the light of the female heart. But anyway, apart from that, Lydia came. Now, Lydia had what every

woman is supposed to have when she's perfectly satisfied to have.

She's free now. No more of this being an appendage to a man. No more of this simply being a helpmeet strung on as an afterthought.

She now takes her place along with bearded men. All right, Lydia, you were born out of due time. You were a seller of purple.

And she traveled. She lived in one town, and Paul found her in another. And she was converted, and she came to Jesus, too.

Now, I wonder why. Ladies, really now, if you were to tell me the truth about this and not put on that front and just break right down, is your newfound freedom enough? Is your freedom to yawn and stretch and be a man, if you want to, is it enough? No, you know it isn't. Lydia found it wasn't.

And every woman, when she finally wakes up, she'll find she isn't. It isn't. Only Jesus Christ is enough.

Now, Lydia found that out. And she came and gave her heart to Jesus Christ, and she was so delighted with what she found that she said to Paul, she had a big house, and she said, Paul, if you think I'm really a convert now. She was used to the Jewish way of looking at women, and they didn't count women, they only counted men, you know.

They belonged to the patriarchal way of looking at things, but she'd broken over the fence. She was one filly that had jumped over the corral. And she should have been the happiest Jewess in all Asia Minor, but in place of that she came humbly to Paul and said, would you tell me about this one? And he told her, and she said, now if you think I'm a believer, come to my house and make it your headquarters.

There was Lydia, and I think of another man as the last, and that is Nathaniel, the plain man. Now, I've searched about this fellow Nathaniel, and I don't know who he is. There's not much said about him, and the only thing I know about him is that he was a fellow full of prejudice, like any man on the street.

He thought nobody could come out of Nazareth, and yet he was a man completely simple. Now, psychology tells us that if we be simple and sincere and put away strain and pretense and just relax and cast out fear, we will be real persons. Have any of you read widely enough in liberal religious literature to catch on to that real person? Harry Amerson Fosdick wrote a book called How to Be a Real Person.

And being a real person is to be a great big glory Adam of a man or Eve of a woman and be all you are, not have any little corners that aren't developed, not have any inhibitions, but get out in the moonlight and bathe the moon and show that you're a man, stand up on your hind legs and beat your hairy chest and tell the world, today I am a man. Well, that's what they tell us, just be a man, be a plain man, be a real person, simple and sincere and honest and direct and fearless. And the high priest of that kind of goo was none other than Walt Whitman, the dirty, unkempt, smelly poet of the eastern seaboard.

And in his Leaves of Grass, which is the Bible of a great many fellows now, in his Leaves of Grass, he celebrates himself, he says, and writes long poems addressed to himself. If this wasn't a church, I'd just bellow and show you how it sounds. But he was a man, if you please, and a he-man, if you please, a Tarzan of America.

Well, Nathaniel was a simpler man, but he was what the psychologists say we ought to be, unafraid, simple, direct, not covering anything, uninhibited, humble, plain. And yet the sun wouldn't come out for Nathaniel. He lived under a shadow and just couldn't get the sun to come out.

And then somebody came and said, Come and see what we've seen and find what we've found. And they came and found Jesus. And then the sun came out and a new life dawned.

And Nathaniel became, according to the scholars, Bartholomew. And he became a follower of Jesus and lives today in the memories of thousands. But it started when he cried, My Lord and my God.

And when he turned from his simplicity and his relaxed position. I got another book last week, Tell Me to Relax. And I get letters telling me, Now, Brother told you, you must relax.

If I was as relaxed as all of my friends want me to be, you'd have to sop me up with a sponge. But you know, you couldn't get a hold of me. I'd just be too slippery.

But they say, Relax and you'll be all right. Brethren, Nathaniel was a relaxed man. But the sun wouldn't come out and the joy wouldn't come.

Why? Because man sinned and broke his fellowship with God, lost the gold from his spirit and wandered away like a sheep from the fold, like a son from the household, pulled himself free like a limb from a tree to wither on the ground. And we simply don't have in us what we need. The way of man is not in himself, says the Holy Ghost.

Only Jesus Christ is enough. And all of these men sinned. Now there were many rulers in Israel.

Why do we find only Nicodemus and the rich young ruler came? There were many women, no doubt, who were sellers of purple and career women even in that day. Why did only Lydia attach herself to Paul? There were many plain men who walked the streets of Jerusalem and other towns in the Holy Land. Why was it Nathaniel, whose name is put here, was it, I repeat, some secret working of God in the human breast? Oh, friends, I believe in that secret working.

I believe in the secret working of God in the human breast. If I might be allowed a minute of testimony. There is something in the line from which I come that is not religious.

Moral, on a certain level, but not religious. Cold, earthy, profane. It runs down both lines, my father and my mother.

Moral, high standards, but completely without a thought of God. God might as well not exist, profane, secular, without a spark of desire after God. Will you tell me why at seventeen I, surrounded by unbelief, one hundred percent, should find my way to my mother's attic, kneel on my knees, and give my heart to Jesus Christ and be converted without anybody's help, without a human being, without anybody with a marked New Testament showing me how easy it is, and without any friends to place an arm over my shoulder and pray beside me? That conversion was as real as any man's conversion has ever been.

You tell me why? I don't know why. My little mother, cold as stone. My high-strung English father, utterly without regard to God.

And none of the members of my family or the in-laws cared for God. I found Christ, Jesus my Lord. Why? There is such a thing as the secret working of God in the human breast.

There is such a thing as the prevenient workings of the Holy Ghost within the human personality. Oh, man, if you feel the tug of God in your breast, what a happy man you could be. What, what, what riches are yours if you could be given Fort Knox and the government would supply the trucks to haul all the buried gold to your door? You couldn't be as rich as you are if you feel the inner tug of God in your bosom and hear the secret whisper that not very many men hear to be on God's prospect list, to be on God's active list, that God is working in whose breast God is working is a marvelous thing.

And if you've got a trace of it left in you in God's name, get up tonight and do something about it. If you feel a pull in your bosom this night, do something about it. Remember, a thousand men may work where you work.

Only you will feel that tug. God will have yearned over them all, but they won't listen, they won't hear, and they kill it within them. If it's still alive in you, thank God and follow the light.

Chicagoans are around us by the thousands and even millions, but how few are they who feel the pull and hear the voice and realize that God is there. You don't have to have a course in theology or know a thousand things about the Bible. You only have to know that you're a sinner and Christ is a Savior.

Put those two things together and you have met God's condition. You're a sinner and he's a Savior. I say, the secret working of God.

Remember one thing. It's possible to feel that secret working and ruin the whole business. Look at the rich young ruler.

He came, he felt it, pulled by his longing for eternity. Young, yes, but not eternally young. Rich, yes, but not eternally rich.

Moral, yes, but how could he be sure that his immorality was eternal morality? High position, yes, but not eternal high position. His soul said, Oh God, why did you put eternity in my heart and then give me time? I must have eternity. He went looking for a man that could teach him how his eternity might be safe.

He found that man in Christ Jesus the Lord. Jesus stopped and turned from everybody else and talked to this shining-eyed inquirer. But the last Jesus saw of him was when he was looking sadly at the back of his neck as he walked away.

It isn't enough to be a recipient of the yearnings of God. It isn't enough to feel the tug of the spirit. It isn't enough to feel a longing for heaven and God.

It isn't enough. The rich young ruler proved that. He had all that, but he went away.

He loved the world. If you feel that tug within you tonight, cherish it, and then follow it. Follow it immediately.

Come every soul by sin oppressed. There is mercy with the Lord. Come every soul by sin oppressed.

The Lord will give you rest and give you peace. I want tonight to put out this invitation. If the Holy Spirit has spoken to your heart, come.

Come any way you can come. The Nicodemus came by night. Someone else came another way.

But they came. Come, will you? Remember, only Jesus Christ is enough. Have the sensitivity to hear it.
Have the humility to obey it.

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