

(1 Samuel) the Raiding of the Ark

by David Guzik

The Israelites' attempt to win the battle by bringing the Ark of the Covenant into the camp is a lesson in the dangers of manipulation and superstition, and the importance of humility and repentance.

Duration: 30:09

Scripture: 1 Samuel 3:1-3, 1 Samuel 4:3, 1 Samuel 4:10, Psalm 46:10, Matthew 6:33, Ephesians 6:10-11, Revelation 12:12

Topics: "Spiritual Transformation", "God's Sovereignty"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker emphasizes that God cannot be manipulated or controlled by human plans or programs. He uses the example of Israel's defeat by the Philistines to illustrate this point. Despite the excitement and rejoicing of the Israelites when the Ark of the Covenant was brought into their camp, nothing spiritually significant was happening. The speaker warns against relying on outward appearances and emphasizes the need for genuine spiritual transformation.

Transcript

We've been following in 1 Samuel the life of this remarkable young man named Samuel who was dedicated in a very unique and powerful way unto the Lord even before he was conceived and as a young child he was given unto the Lord and to the Lord's service and as he grew up in the temple precincts in the house of the Lord there, Samuel grew up and was more and more used of God and we saw at the end of chapter 3 last week how God was beginning to use Samuel as a prophet and raising him up. One of the reasons why God was raising Samuel up was because the spiritual leadership of Israel had become corrupt. The high priest Eli was a man who was admonished twice by God and didn't really listen and he refused to listen to the Lord and the Lord brought his correction and promised to judge the house of Eli, largely because of the wicked conduct of Eli's two sons, Hophni and Phinehas.

And so things were not going very well spiritually for the nation of Israel and in the midst of this darkness God was going to raise up a shining light this young man Samuel who was growing up as a prophet of the Lord. You see a reference to this in verse 1 of 1 Samuel 4 where it says, And the word of Samuel came to all Israel. He preached to, he ministered to the whole nation of Israel.

Continuing on in verse 1, Now Israel went out to battle against the Philistines and encamped beside Ebenezer and the Philistines encamped in Aphek. Now Israel was battling at this time with a neighbor nation known as the Philistines. The Philistines lived in the coastal areas of what's now the land of Israel.

They had their settlements, their cities there. And the Philistines proposed a sort of a unique challenge for the people of Israel for a lot of reasons. You know Israel was surrounded by many different nations, the Moabites, the Ammonites, the Edomites and the Philistines.

And these other nations such as the Moabites and the Ammonites and the Edomites, Israel could compete with them sort of on equal terms. They were sort of equivalent kind of nations. But the Philistines were a different sort of country altogether because the Philistines were a very seafaring people.

They had harbors and ports and ships and they traded with peoples all over the known world at that time, including people from the land of Greece. Now when you trade in that way, you import a lot of things as well. And a Philistine could sort of open up the mail order catalog of the ancient world and say, well I want to order from Greece these swords, these armor-plated breastplates, these helmets, these spears and we'll bring in this military equipment, this fighting technology and make use of it.

The point that I'm trying to make is that when the Israelites fought the Moabites or the Ammonites or the Edomites, they're pretty much fighting on equal ground. When the Israelites fought the Philistines, they were fighting a country with far superior military technology. I mean, if you're fighting a guy in hand-to-hand combat and you've got a stick and he's got a helmet, a breastplate and a sword, you're at a disadvantage.

And that's how it was when the Israelites would fight the Philistines. So it was a tough, tough thing that they faced in those days. So here they are battling back and forth and at this time the Philistines are really dominating the Israelites.

And so, verse 2, then the Philistines put themselves in battle array against Israel. And when they joined the battle, Israel was defeated by the Philistines who killed about 4,000 men of the army in the field. Friends, this is a military disaster.

You can't keep going out to battle and losing 4,000 men and have an army for very long. Now, that's just how many men were killed. Who knows? It could have been another 4,000 who were injured so badly in battle that they were incapacitated and couldn't fight anymore.

The bottom line is simply this. Israel is at a crisis point. They can't keep on losing battles like this.

If they do, pretty soon there's not going to be a nation of Israel. There's just going to be one big country of Philistine and not a nation of Israel at all. So, friends, this is a real crisis.

So what do you do in a time of crisis like this? Well, take a look at what the Israelite leaders did, beginning here at verse 3. And when the people had come into the camp, the elders of Israel said, Why has the Lord defeated us today before the Philistines? Let us bring the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord from Shiloh to us, that when it comes among us, it may save us from the hand of our enemies. So the people sent to Shiloh that they might bring from there the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord, who dwells between the Cherubim and the two sons of Eli, Hockney and Phinehas, were there with the Ark of the Covenant of God. I think this is very interesting because in one way, the elders of Israel do something very right here.

They lose a battle and they realize that the problem isn't just military. They say, There's another dimension to this problem. It's not just a matter of military.

They didn't say, Well, we need to bring more units in. We need to bring more reinforcements. We need to draft more people.

We need to do this. No, they realized that it wasn't primarily a military problem, that it was a spiritual problem, and something needed to be done so that they could have God fight with them, have God fight for them, as He had done so many previous times in the history of Israel. We need to get God on our side.

Now, that was right. But how they went about getting God on their side, that was very wrong. Friends, the Bible teaches us again and again, when you want God on your side, what should you do? You should humble yourself.

You should repent before Him. You should draw close to God. You should enthrone Him in your life.

You should put God first and everything else a distant second. You should come before God with the kind of mourning that repentance is marked by. And in the midst of all of that, God will turn His face towards you, and God will be on your side, so to speak.

Well, that's not what the leaders of the nation of Israel did. What did they do? They said, We need to get God on our side. Let's bring out the Ark of the Covenant.

Now, I have to say, as I stand before you here this morning, it's kind of an easy thing to talk about the Ark of the Covenant, because probably most all of you have seen that movie, Raiders of the Lost Ark. The depiction they have of the Ark of the Covenant in that movie is a pretty accurate depiction of what it looked like. It was a golden box with poles on either side of it, and it was never to be carried by holding the box.

You could only carry it by holding the poles that it was mounted on. And in this gold box contained many precious things. They had the tablets of the law that Moses brought down from Mount Sinai.

They had a jar filled with some of the manna that God had miraculously provided in the wilderness, and they had a few other things there in the Ark of the Covenant. One of the most remarkable things about the Ark of the Covenant was the lid, or the top to it. It was a golden lid, and on top of that lid were artistic designs of cherubim.

And this spoke to what the Ark of the Covenant represented. It represented a physical example of the throne of God on Earth. The Ark of the Covenant was a symbol of the active presence of God in the midst of Israel.

Now, the Ark of the Covenant wasn't in some museum. The Ark of the Covenant wasn't in the king's palace. The Ark of the Covenant was in the tabernacle, within the house of the Lord.

Now, in this house of the Lord, there was the outer courts, and you could go there if you had business to do at the tabernacle, at the house of the Lord. If you were a priest, you could go into the holy place when it was your appointed time to go in. But the room in which the Ark of the Covenant stood was called the Holy of Holies, and nobody ever went in there.

You had this marvelous representation of the throne of God, this golden box that was a symbol of God's presence among Israel, and it was in a room that was so holy that nobody could go in there. Well, nobody except one man, the high priest. And he could go into that room one time a year with sacrificial blood, which he would sprinkle upon the Ark of the Covenant to provide atonement for the sins of the nation of

Israel.

Do you know what a fearsome thing it was for him to go into that Holy of Holies room and to stand before that which represented the very throne of God in the midst of his people? It was such a fearsome thing that when the high priest went in there, he went in there with a robe that around the bottom of the robe, around the hem of it, had little bells. And around his foot, around his ankle, was tied a rope, and the rope extended outside of the room that he went into. Why the bells and the rope? So that if God should strike the high priest dead while he was in the Holy of Holies, they would know.

How would they know? Well, I guess they would hear a great crashing of little bells, and then it would be really quiet. And maybe they'd tug on the rope, and if they didn't get any tug, then the rope was there so they could pull the high priest out of the Holy of Holies without having to go in there. My friends, you see what an awesome thing the Ark of the Covenant was? It was not a thing to be trifled with.

It was a holy article of God. It was, again, the very representation of the presence of God in their midst. Now, the elders of Israel were right in seeing that they needed help from God to win the battle.

They were right in turning unto the Lord. But they really weren't turning unto the Lord, were they? They were turning unto the Ark. You see, instead of humbly repenting and seeking God, they turned to methods which God had not instructed them to use.

They believed that the presence of the Ark would make God work for them. We'll put God in a corner. Yeah, you know, if the Ark is out there, God's not going to let the Ark get lost.

I mean, God's too proud. God's got His reputation to protect. God's not going to lose a battle when His Ark is out there.

Yeah, now God will fight for us. They thought that they could manipulate God, that they could twist God's arm and make Him work for them by following some kind of secret formula. You know, what they were really doing was tempting God.

They thought that they could maneuver God into a position where He had to do what they wanted Him to do. And I can just see the elders of Israel gathered around the table. There they are at the war council.

Well, what should we do? Well, I think we should bring more troops. Well, I think we should try to get more swords. Well, I think we need more archers.

Well, I think... And then somebody says, I know what we'll do. Let's bring the Ark of the covenant of God into the camp of the Lord, and it'll lead us into battle. And there's no way we can lose then, because then God will fight for us.

And all the elders around the council think, yes, yes, what a great suggestion. Yes, we can't lose now. And they probably felt great about it.

Yes, this is a winning proposition. We're going forth now. But friends, their belief was really only a vain superstition.

To them, that Ark of the covenant, instead of being the holy presence of the throne of God in their midst, it may as well have been a giant rabbit's foot for all they cared. It was a lucky charm. It was a superstitious emblem.

Notice their words in verse 3. Look at it here in the second part of verse 3. It says, Let us bring the Ark of the covenant of the Lord from Shiloh to us, that when it comes among us, it may save us from the hand of our enemies. Do you see their hearts revealed in their words? What are they looking to for salvation? The Ark itself. Friends, they're trusting in the Ark of the covenant of God instead of trusting in the God of the Ark of the covenant.

You might say, well, it's a small distinction. It's not a small distinction. It's a huge distinction.

If they really wanted God on their side, they should have repented and got on their face before God. But instead, they've got a program. They've got a plan.

They've got a human scheme. And they're trusting in that. And they're saying, that's going to win the day for us.

You know, instead of being concerned with having the Ark there, they should have been more concerned about the two men carrying the Ark. Did you see verse 4? Who's carrying the Ark? These two men that God is going to judge. Hobney and Phineas.

They're the ones entrusted with the care of the Ark. You can just see Eli saying to these boys before they left. Well, they're not boys.

They're men. But they were his boys. They were his sons.

They're saying, now, boys, listen. You take care of the Ark. You make sure nothing bad happens to it.

This is a very precious thing. It's a very serious thing. You be careful.

And Eli, just trembling, is saying, oh, I hope the Ark comes back. Because he just didn't go out and carry the Ark around. I mean, it stayed there in the Holy of Holies.

But they covered it. And they took it out to battle. Now, take a look at what happens here in verse 5. And when the Ark of the covenant of the Lord came into the camp, all Israel shouted so loudly that the earth shook.

Isn't that marvelous? Boy, they're excited, aren't they? They're all pumped up. You can just see them there in the camp of Israel. You know, they spent days just burying the dead.

It takes a long time to bury 4,000 men, doesn't it? They've cared for the wounded. They're all depressed. They're all discouraged.

The Philistines are going to defeat us again. Well, I don't know what we're going to do. It's a terrible situation.

There's the whole army of Israel camped out. And they're all depressed. But then one guy says, look, up there on the hill, what's that? And they see priests of the Lord clothed in their distinctive white garments with the white turbans.

And they see this procession of priests coming along the road. And they're carrying something. Now, none of these men had ever seen the Ark of the Covenant in their lives because it was safely set away in the Holy of Holies.

But they had heard about it. And they saw a box being carried between two priests on these poles. And they said, something's going on there.

There's something remarkable. It's the Ark of the Covenant of God. We heard that our generals were going to bring it for us.

And as they see it, they get excited. And as it comes into the camp, a shout goes up. And it's a shout so loud that the very ground shakes.

Looking from the outside, you might think, yeah, these guys are going to win. Oh, yeah. What a victory.

Surely God is on their side. You know, when you have God's people that excited about anything, surely the Lord is doing a great work there. Friends, I'm here to tell you that the Lord wasn't doing anything there.

Nothing was happening spiritually. This was carnality. You know, if you were to walk by there at this time, you would have thought, man, the Lord is on their side.

Look how excited they are. You might have thought, wow, this is a great church service. Look how excited they are.

Look at all the rejoicing. But friends, for all of the appearances, it was really nothing. All of the noise, all of the excitement meant nothing because it wasn't grounded in God's truth.

Oh, I can see the Israelites there thinking of themselves so much better than the Philistines. Oh, those pagan Philistines. Look at them.

Worshipping their pagan gods. Their gods are nothing. Well, the Israelites were serving the true God, but they were serving the true God in a pagan way, thinking they could manipulate him.

Thinking that he was on par with the pagan gods of the Philistines. No, they should have humbled themselves, but instead of doing that, they had a scheme, they had a plan of their own devising. Friends, doesn't this show us something? That you can have a lot of excitement, but nothing really of the spirit of God going on.

Oh, so much excitement, so much shouting. But friends, nothing was happening in that camp by the spirit of God. Let me read you something from Charles Spurgeon.

He says, Now, beloved, when you are worshipping God, shout if you are filled with a holy gladness. If the shout comes from your heart, I would not ask you to restrain it. God forbid that we should judge any man's worship.

But do not be so foolish as to suppose that because there is a loud noise, that there is also true faith. Faith is a still water, it flows deep. True faith in God may express itself with leaping and with shouting, and it is a happy thing when it does.

But it can also sit still before the Lord, and that perhaps is a happier thing still. Sometimes we see somebody over here and they're all excited, and they're walking and leaping and praising. Oh, they're just shouting, and it's a hallelujah this and amen that.

You think, wow, they really love the Lord. Wow, they've got a close walk with Him. And some quieter brother or sister is just humbly sitting there and their hands folded and their head bowed in reverent adoration before the Lord.

Well, you know, gee, they're kind of boring, I guess. You know, maybe there's not much there of the spirit of God. Friends, you can't judge that by outward appearances, can you? It's possible that the walker and the leaper and the jumper is all carnal in the flesh.

It's possible that the quiet person over on the other side is just quiet before the Lord has something deep and profound going on in their hearts by the spirit of God. All that shouting, all that excitement in the camp of the Israelites, and it meant nothing. Well, look what was happening in the camp of the Philistines, verse 6. Now, when the Philistines heard the noise of the shout, they said, what is the sound of this great shout in the camp of the Hebrews mean? Then they understood that the ark of the Lord had come into the camp.

So the Philistines were afraid, for they said, God has come into the camp. And they said, woe to us, for such a thing has never happened before. Woe to us.

Who will deliver us from the hand of these mighty gods? These are the gods who struck the Egyptians with all the plagues in the wilderness. Now, let me say something good on behalf of the Philistines, and then let me correct them on a point. I want to compliment the Philistines on their knowledge of the Bible.

You know, they knew the ark of the covenant represented the presence of the Lord. They knew it meant something unusual, that the ark of the covenant was brought into the camp of the Lord. They knew that the Lord had smote the people of Egypt with plagues.

They got a little bit confused. They said they did it in the wilderness. Well, actually, it was before Israel came to the wilderness, but close enough.

I just want to ask you, did you know this much about the ark of the covenant of the Lord and the plagues of Egypt? Could it be said that the Philistines knew more about the Bible than you did? I mean, let's compliment the Philistines where they deserve a little bit of recognition. But on the other hand, I think the Philistines fall very, very short here in an important area. Do you see something remarkable here? They recognize that the God of Israel is greater than their gods.

Otherwise, why would they be afraid? So what if the God of Israel has come into the camp of the Israelites? Our gods are better than theirs. Don't worry about it. They don't say that, do they? When they believe that the God of Israel has come into the camp of Israel, they're afraid and they recognize the greatness of the God of Israel.

Yet what do they fail to do? They won't submit to the God of Israel. We know you're great. We know you're mighty.

We know you're sovereign. We know you're greater than any of our gods. Yet we will not bow our knee before you.

We're going to stick with our own gods. Friends, the Philistines knew the right facts about God, but they wouldn't submit their hearts to him. Could be some people like that in the room this morning.

I know I'm like that sometimes. I know the facts. I know the truth about God.

It's not that I don't need to know something intellectually. It's a heart submission issue. And that's what the Lord wants to deal with us on.

So the Philistines are afraid. I want you to see here in verse 9, they also show a lot of courage. It says, Be strong and conduct yourselves like men, you Philistines, that you do not become servants of the Hebrews as they have been to you.

Conduct yourselves like men and fight. Well, the Philistines feel like they're backed into a corner and like a dog that's cornered. They're going to fight all the more.

And they muster up that courage that comes from desperation and they're ready to fight. They're ready to do the best they can. Might I say another complimentary word on behalf of the Philistines here? They're going to do something incredible here through courage and persistence.

And friends, I need to let you know that even in the midst of a desperate, desperate battle, God can do something great when we show courage and persistence. And I think a lot of Christians need to hear the same words that the Philistines said. They need to show that same kind of willingness to fight and to battle forth.

Don't be discouraged. Battle forth and do the best you can. Many battles are fought through courage and persistence even when they're not fighting for the right thing.

Oh, listen, I'll give the devil credit for this. He's persistent. He's a hard worker.

And I think many times the devil carries the day just because he's a hard worker and persistent, not because he's in the right. Certainly not. Anyway, now let's see how the battle turns out here beginning at verse 10.

So the Philistines fought and Israel was defeated and every man fled to his tent. There was a very great slaughter and there fell of Israel 30,000 foot soldiers. Also the Ark of God was captured and the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, died.

Friends, I think we see it go from bad to worse to worser to worst. Look, it starts off bad. Look at verse 10.

The Philistines fought and Israel was defeated. That's bad enough, isn't it? Friends, it would have been a defeat if they would have fought to a draw. The Ark of the Covenant is there.

Not only should you win, you should win big over your enemies. Not only did they not win big, not only did they not fight to a draw, not only were they defeated, they were defeated badly. Yes, it was a defeat.

And I think you can say that they lost because the Philistines were fighting extra hard, right? They fought with the courage of underdogs. And don't you think the Israelites were overconfident going into the battle? They probably thought, Well, we just go up to those Philistines and say, Boo! And they'll run from us because we've got the Ark of the Covenant on our side. You know, friends, I think sometimes we as Christians fall under the same delusion.

Sometimes we as Christians believe that if God is on our side, it's going to be easy. And sometimes we judge whether or not God is on our side by whether it's easy or hard. You know, if it's hard, God isn't with me.

If it's easy, well, then it must be of the Lord. Well, let me tell you something. Sometimes when you're right smack in the middle of God's will, it's going to be very hard.

And sometimes when everything's easy, you're doing exactly what the devil wants you to do. Don't judge whether or not it's the will of God by whether or not it's hard or easy. And I think, thirdly, the real reason for the defeat was that, well, bottom line, God just did not feel obligated to bless the Israelites even though they had the Ark of the Covenant there.

Oh, they thought, Well, surely God isn't going to let the Ark of the Covenant get conquered. No way! God will fight now. We've got God in a corner.

Oh, yeah, He'll do what we want Him to do. God said, I guess I won't. You're not going to manipulate me, the Lord was saying.

Look, you may be very good at manipulating people. You may use guilt or pressure or intimidation or fear or whatever you use. You may be very good at getting people to do what you want them to do, but you will never manipulate God.

It will not happen. God's not some kind of genie in a bottle that you can summon at your will and have Him do your bidding. You can't have your plan and your program.

Well, then, God bless it, you know, and know that it'll work because, my friends, God will not be manipulated that way. He's a sovereign Lord who sits in heaven, and I'm sure Israel thought that everything was lost when the Ark was captured, and God said, Well, I'll take care of myself very well, thank you. It was bad.

Israel was defeated. But it went from bad to worse. Did you see later on in verse 10 how many soldiers were killed? 30,000.

First battle, the battle that got them all panicked, 4,000 were killed. Now 30,000 are killed. More than seven times as many people die.

Oh, my friends, it's horrible. It's horrible. God was very powerfully showing, You're not going to manipulate me.

You're not going to trust in some big rabbit's foot and think that it's really trusting in me. No, not at all. I'm not going to allow that to happen.

By the way, just as a side issue, and I sort of bring this up just again on the side, in the late 1970s, a five-line inscription was found on the sign of a grain silo in Israel, and they discovered that it was written by the Philistines, and it was a Philistine account of this very battle, even mentioning the name of Hophni in the description. It's the earliest biblical event that we have a secular record of ever in the Bible. And it just goes to show you over and over again how the Bible proves archaeology is true, and it works that way.

All right, it went from bad to worse. Look at verse 11. It goes to worse.

I know it's not good English, but it gets the point across. Israel was defeated. They lost 30,000 men.

What could be worse? The Ark of God was captured. Oh, my friends, the Ark of God. The Ark of God was captured.

The very thing that they thought would win the battle for them was taken away. You know what the problem was? They had made an idol of the Ark. And God is not kind to our idols.

You make an idol of something, and God has a way of taking it away. And that's exactly what they did. This is how often God breaks us of our idolatry.

It's by taking the idol away. You know, we can make good things idols. Was there anything wrong with the Ark of the Covenant of God? No.

Friends, God commanded them to make the Ark. It was important to Israel. He told them to put the tablets of the law, jar of manna.

He told them to put things in the Ark. It was good. It was important.

It was essential to their worship. My friends, yet even a good thing like the Ark can be made into an idol, and God will not tolerate our idols. So the Ark of God was captured.

Can I tell you something, though? Even though the Ark of God was captured, the God of the Ark was still sitting up on His throne in heaven. There was no problem with the God of the Ark, and you're going to see in the next couple of weeks just how God displayed His glory through all of this. God showed that He was greater than the Ark.

Well, could it get worse? Yes. From bad to worse to worser to worst. Look at the end of verse 11.

And the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas died. Oh, they heard it from their dad. They heard him say, Hey, listen, here's the problem.

You know, you've got to watch out for this Ark. Be careful with what you do. But friends, they died as well, these two wicked priests who were supposed to supervise the Ark.

They were killed in the battle. Way back in 1 Samuel 2, God had promised that judgment would come upon those two sons in one day, and now it's been fulfilled. Now, I know it would be easy for us to leave this this morning thinking, I know what the problem was.

They took the Ark of the Lord into battle, and you should never do that. You know, the funny thing is, though, when you start looking through the history of Israel, you find that they took the Ark of God into battle on other occasions and were blessed. The battle of Jericho, the Ark went before them as they marched around the city of Jericho seven times.

When Moses told the people of Israel to go and battle against the Midianites, the Ark of God led the way. Later on, in the days of Saul, they took the Ark of God into battle, and God blessed it each one of those times. You see, my friends, it's not a matter of you should never take the Ark of God into battle.

No, it's a matter of you shouldn't do it unless the Lord tells you to. You see, there's some things we can do in our lives that really come off as schemes, as plans, as programs, as attempts to twist God's arm. Let me explain it to you this way.

Would there be anything wrong with fasting and praying for five days? No. Not if it's led by the Lord. But what if you say, you know, we really want God to do this.

I really want a new car. So, okay, I really need this new car, so I'm going to fast and pray for five days. That God would give me the new car.

And you fast and pray for five days, and the new car doesn't come forth. Is there anything wrong with fasting and praying? No. It's just you didn't do it at the direction of the Lord.

You did it as a plan, as a program, as a scheme for your own self. So one person can do something, and another person can do the same thing. One of them's led by God.

One of them's led by the flesh. One of them has a human plan, a human scheme, a human program that they just hope God blesses along the way. The other one is really led by the Lord.

And God will bless one, and God will not bless the other. See, my friends, that's what God's leading us to do, is to live in this kind of constant trust and dependence on Him, to not focus on the ark of God, but on the God of the ark. It's a tall order, isn't it? We'd better pray and ask the Holy Spirit to work that in us.

Let's pray. Lord God, we come before you this morning humbly, and we ask that you'd forgive us for any focus that we've had as individuals or as a church on plans and programs and schemes. Lord, how we long to be led by your Spirit.

How we long, Lord, to just not do things in our life, and then somewhere along the way hope that you bless it, but rather, Lord, just to truly be led by the Spirit of God in everything that we do. Lord, won't you move in our lives to give us that kind of passion for your will? We don't want to make something good and idle. We don't want to worship, Lord, the ark of God.

We want to worship the God of the ark. So, Lord, cleanse us, purify us, draw us into a humble repentance, and lead us along your way, Lord. We pray this in Jesus' name.

Amen.

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