

Part 26: Partial Rapture Theory

by John F. Walvoord

John F. Walvoord's sermon critiques the Partial Rapture Theory, emphasizing that salvation and resurrection are based on grace, not works.

Scripture: John 14:3, 1 Corinthians 15:51, Ephesians 4:30, 1 Thessalonians 1:9, 1 Thessalonians 2:19, 1 Thessalonians 4:14, 1 Thessalonians 4:16, 1 Thessalonians 5:4, Revelation 22:12

Topics: "Rapture Theology", "Salvation By Grace"

Description

John F. Walvoord discusses the theory of partial rapture, where a small group of pretribulationists believe only faithful church members will be raptured before or during the tribulation, based on works rather than grace. The historical background of this theory is traced back to Robert Govett in the 19th century. Walvoord presents general reasons for rejecting partial rapture, emphasizing salvation by grace, unity of the body of Christ, and the clear teaching in Scripture that all true believers will be translated at the appointed time.

Transcript

Definition of the Theory

It is generally held among pretribulationists that the entire church, composed of all believers in this age, will be translated and resurrected at the coming of Christ for them preceding the tribulation. There has arisen in the last century, however, a small group of pretribulationists who contend that only those who are faithful in the church will be raptured or translated and the rest will either be raptured sometime during the tribulation or at its end. As stated by one of its adherents: "The saints will be raptured in groups during the tribulation as they are prepared to go." [1] Ira E. David, "Translation: When Does It Occur?" *The Dawn*, November 15, 1935, p. 358. He states further: "The basis of translation must be grace or reward. ... We believe that frequent exhortations in the Scriptures to watch, to be faithful, to be ready for Christ's coming, to live Spirit-filled lives, all suggest that translation is a reward." [2] *Ibid.*, pp. 358-59. The theory includes the concept that only the faithful saints will be resurrected at the first resurrection.

Historical Background

The modern theory of partial rapture seems to have originated in the writings of Robert Govett who published a book setting forth the theory as early as 1853. [3] Cf. Robert Govett, *Entrance into the Kingdom*. In this work he expounds his view that participation in the kingdom is conditional and depends

upon worthy conduct. The most able exponent of the theory in the twentieth century is G. H. Lang.[4] Cf. G. H. Lang, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ; Firstborn Sons: Their Rights and Risks*. Others have made a significant contribution to the propagation of the theory. D. M. Panton, as editor of *The Dawn* (London), uses his publication to promote this teaching. Such writers as Ira E. David, Sarah Foulkes Moore, William Leask, and C. G. A. Gibson-Smith contribute to *The Dawn* articles in support of this theory. For the most part, however, the view is limited to a few adherents who are generally treated as heterodox by other pretribulationists.

General Reasons for Rejecting a Partial Rapture

It is commonly held by evangelical Christians that salvation is by grace rather than a reward for good works. The believer in Christ is justified by faith, and receives the many benefits of salvation quite apart from merit or worthiness on his part. This is normally carried over into the doctrine of translation and resurrection. Most pretribulationists as well as most posttribulationists consider the translation and resurrection of the saints on this basis. By contrast, the partial rapture teaching transfers both resurrection and translation from a work of grace to a work of reward for faithfulness. In so contending, they wrest principal Scriptures and misapply others. Opposition to the partial rapture point of view springs not only from particular texts but from the broad doctrine of the nature of salvation itself. It becomes therefore more than an argument about prophecy. It has its roots deep in the general theological perspective of the respective parties.

The opposition to the partial rapture view is also related to ecclesiology or the doctrine of the church. Most evangelicals distinguish the true church from the merely professing element. It is granted that outward conformity and organizational membership does not guarantee any blessing in the prophetic program. Pretribulationists as well as posttribulationists distinguish divine dealing with those genuinely saved and those who only profess salvation. Partial rapturists, however, are quite different in point of view from that commonly held. For them there are two classes of genuinely saved people--those worthy of translation, and those not worthy. They therefore divide the body of Christ into two groups on a works principle. By contrast, the Scriptures teach that the body of Christ, composed of all true believers, is a unit and is given promises as such. It is inconceivable if the church is formed by grace that it should be divided by works.

The passages in Scripture [All quotations of Scripture, unless otherwise indicated, are from the American Standard Version (1901).] dealing with the translation and resurrection of the church do not teach a partial rapture. Those for whom Christ is coming according to John 14:3 are those who are identified as believing in John 14:1. Those translated and those resurrected at the last trump of 1 Corinthians 15:52 are described as "we all" in 1 Corinthians 15:51. According to 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18, those resurrected are described as "the dead in Christ" (v. 16) and the "we" who are caught up are identified as those who "believe that Jesus died and rose again" (v. 14). The explicit teaching of Scripture points to the conclusion that the translation includes all living saints and the resurrection includes all the "dead in Christ." Other Scriptures confirm that translation is not dependent on expectancy or watchfulness (1 Thess 1:9-10; 2:19 ; 5:4-11 ; Rev 22:12). Partial rapturists, however, contend for their point of view using various Scripture portions which are interpreted as sustaining their doctrine. These must be examined before the full character of their teaching becomes apparent.

Scriptural Basis for Partial Rapture Theory

Most of the Scriptural basis for the partial rapture theory is found by its adherents in exhortations to watch or look for the coming of the Lord coupled with the teaching that some who fail to watch will not be ready when He comes. Passages commonly used include Matthew 24:40-51; 25:13 ; Mark 13:33-37; Luke 20:34-36; 21:36 ; Philippians 3:10-12; 1 Thessalonians 5:6; 2 Timothy 4:8; Titus 2:13; Hebrews 9:24-28; Revelation 3:3, 12:1-6 . In citing these passages, little distinction is observed between references to Israel and references to the church, and passages referring to the second coming of Christ to establish the millennial kingdom are freely applied to the rapture or translation. In fact, many of the points of view of the partial rapture adherents are also held by posttribulationists. A study of these passages as interpreted by the partial rapturists will show the confusion of interpretation.

Matthew 24:40-51; Mark 13:33-37. The Matthew passage is essentially an exhortation to watch. The theme is stated, "Watch therefore: for ye know not on what day your Lord cometh" (v 42). A further command is given, "Therefore be ye also ready; for in an hour that ye think not the Son of man cometh" (v. 44). The one not watching is described as one to be cut asunder and given the portion of hypocrites (v. 51). This passage is properly interpreted as belonging to the second coming rather than to the church, though expositors in general are not always of one mind on this. The people in view are the Israelite nation. Of these, some are watching and are faithful, taking care of the household of God. They are contrasted to those who beat their fellow servants, and "eat and drink with the drunken" (v. 48). It is obvious that something more than mere carelessness is in view. The faithfulness of those watching is evidence of true faith in Christ, whereas the unfaithfulness of those who are drunken is indicative of failure to believe to the saving of the soul. While works are in view, they are indicative of vital faith or its lack. In any case, there is nothing whatever said about the rapture or translation of the faithful. It is doubtful if there is any specific reference at all to the rapture or translation in the entire context of Matthew 24--25 .

Partial rapturists usually seize upon Matthew 24:41 as substantiation of their position: "Then shall two men be in the field; one is taken, and one is left." It is argued that the one taken is the one translated. Robert Govett states that the Greek word for "take" (paralambano) means "to take as a companion"--"ordinarily the result of friendship." [5] Robert Govett, "One Taken and One Left," *The Dawn*, 12:11, February 15, 1936, p. 516. The article lists the author only by the initials "R. G." In this he finds a contrast to the Greek word for "took away" (eren), describing the judgment on unbelievers in Noah's day (Matt 24:39). He offers confirmation in that paralambano is used in John 14:3 of the rapture, "will receive you unto myself." The one left, according to Govett, is left to go through the tribulation.

A careful study of the usage here, however, however, does not sustain this exegesis. The context is Jewish, and does not refer to the church at all. The discussion is dealing with the end of the age, i.e., the entire interadvent age, not the church period as such. The terminus ad quem is the second coming, not the translation of the church. The Greek word paralambano is not specifically one describing a friendly relation. It is also used in John 19:17: "They took Jesus therefore: and he went out, bearing the cross for himself..." This act of taking Jesus was certainly not a friendly association and compares to a taking in wrath. The act of taking away in Matthew 24:41 is best interpreted as the same as in verse 39 . In both the one taken away is taken in judgment. This is precisely what is done at the second coming of Christ when those who remain enter the blessing of the millennium, and those taken away suffer judgment. The evidence, then, for a partial rapture in this passage is completely dissolved upon examination of the evidence. The parallel passage in Mark 13:33-37 has, if anything, less evidence than the Matthew account, and it is answered in the same way.

Luke 21:36. This passage is cited by Lang as one of the conclusive proofs for the partial rapture theory.[6] G. H. Lang, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*, pp. 88-89. The exhortation it presents is another command to watch: "But watch ye at every season, making supplication, that ye may prevail to escape all these things that shall come to pass, and to stand before the Son of man." Appeal is made particularly to the King James Version which uses the expression, "that ye may be accounted worthy to escape all these things...." Lang summarizes his argument in these words: "This declares distinctly: (1) That escape is possible from all those things of which Christ had been speaking, that is, from the whole End Times. (2) That that day of testing will be universal, and inevitable by any then on earth, which involves the removal from the earth of any who are to escape it. (3) That those who are to escape will be taken to where He, the Son of Man, will then be, that is, at the throne of the Father in the heavens. They will stand before Him there. (4) That there is a fearful peril of disciples becoming worldly in heart and so being enmeshed in that last period. (5) That hence it is needful to watch, and to pray ceaselessly, that so we may prevail over all obstacles and dangers and thus escape that era." [7] Loc. cit.

All pretribulationists will agree that escape from the coming time of trial is provided for believers in Christ. All also agree that those who believe in Christ during the tribulation itself, while not kept out of the period, may have deliverance from it at the coming of the Lord to establish His kingdom. The point of dispute lies entirely in the conclusion that some true believers will be left to go through the tribulation while others are translated before it comes to pass.

While the exegesis of this passage is admittedly difficult, a careful study of the context provides a clue for its interpretation. The context has to do with signs preceding the second coming, obviously addressed to people who will be living on earth at that time. A possible interpretation based on the contrast of "ye" in verse 36 and "them" in verse 35 would be that the exhortation in question is addressed to the church in the days preceding the tribulation. However, the frequent interchange of the second and third persons in the entire passage does not provide much basis for this distinction (cf. second and third persons in vv. 27-28). The larger context deals with those living in the days of the signs and the exhortations largely concern them (cf. "look" in v. 28) rather than the church of the present age. The safest course would be to identify verse 36 as directed to those in the tribulation who anticipate the coming of the Lord to establish His kingdom. They indeed will "watch," for His coming is their only hope. They certainly will pray, for only by divine help will they survive the period. Note should be taken that this passage does not speak of deliverance from the period or the hour of trial (cf. Rev 3:10), but only of deliverance from "all these things that shall come to pass."

It should be observed that here, as in other passages often used by the partial rapturists, the rapture is not specifically mentioned, indeed is not indicated at all. Lang is inserting in the text what it does not say when he states that to stand before the Son of Man must necessarily mean in heaven. All men will stand before Christ on earth at the second coming (cf. Matt 25:32). To press the idea of escaping judgment as indicated in this passage to prove a partial rapture requires invention of the principal components of the doctrine. It is best to conclude that this passage does not teach a partial rapture because it does not refer to the rapture at all.

Matthew 25:1-13. The parable of the ten virgins is variously interpreted by pretribulationists, some taking it as referring to the tribulation saints[8] L. S. Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, V, 131ff. and others to the church.[9] H. A. Ironside, *Matthew*, p. 327. Partial rapturists, assuming that it refers to the church, find in the passage the concept of a selective translation--the foolish virgins being left behind because unprepared, the wise virgins being translated because ready. The answer given to the partial rapturists

depends upon the interpretation of the passage as a whole. If Chafer is correct that the passage deals with the end of the interadvent age, the tribulation, rather than the church, then the passage has no relation to the partial rapture doctrine. Much is in favor of Chafer's position. The church is ordinarily the bride, and in a figure of a wedding feast it would be incongruous to conceive of the church as represented by maidens attending the feast. The passage itself uses none of the characteristic terms relating to the church, such as bride, body, or the expression in Christ. There is no reference whatever to translation or resurrection. The bridegroom comes to the place where the virgins are waiting in an earthly scene and remains in that earthly scene as far as the figure is concerned. These and many other observations point to excluding this passage from consideration.

However, even if the virgins represent the church in the present age, where is the proof that this is the true church, the company of those who are saved? As commonly interpreted by such writers as H. A. Ironside,[10] Loc. cit. the virgins represent the professing church. True believers are identified as having oil in their lamps, typical of the Holy Spirit. Mere professors have the appearance but no oil, that is, are not genuinely regenerated and indwelt by the Spirit. If watchfulness is necessary for worthiness, as partial rapturists characteristically argue, then none of the ten virgins qualify for "they all slumbered and slept." The command to "watch" in verse 13 has, then, the specific meaning of being prepared with oil--being genuinely regenerated and indwelt by the Spirit rather than having unusual spirituality. The clear teaching is that "watching" is not enough. This passage would serve to refute the partial rapturists instead of sustaining their viewpoint. Only by the power and presence of the Holy Spirit can one be qualified for entrance into the wedding feast, but all the wise virgins enter the feast.

Luke 20:34-36. This passage is used by the partial rapturists mostly because of the expression "they that are accounted worthy to attain that world [age]...are sons of God, being sons of the resurrection" (Luke 20:35-36). The context indicates that the passage deals with the question of the state of those raised from the dead. Those who are counted worthy of the resurrection of the righteous at the beginning of the millennial age indicated in the passage are evidently the saved who have died and are at that time raised from the dead. Not only is the idea of partial rapture foreign to the passage, but the passage does not deal with the subject of rapture at all. If the rapture takes place before the tribulation, this scene is related to the posttribulation resurrection. According to Daniel 12:1-2, at that time--the end of the tribulation--"every one that shall be found written in the book" will be delivered, whether living or dead. There is no partial rapture here nor is the resurrection of the righteous divided on the principle of being worthy. This passage can therefore be excluded from the argument entirely.

Philippians 3:10-12. In this passage Paul speaks of his surpassing desire to know Christ, "if by any means I may attain unto the resurrection from the dead" (v. 11). It is the contention of partial rapturists that Paul had in mind the necessity of faithfulness in the hope of meriting resurrection at the time of the first resurrection, i.e., before the millennium, instead of waiting until later. Govett translates Philippians 3:10-11 as follows: "That I may know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being conformed to his death, if by any means I might attain to the select resurrection from among the dead." [11] R. Govett, Entrance into the Kingdom. I, 31.

It is commonly accepted by pretribulationists that the resurrection to which Paul referred was indeed a "select resurrection," but Govett's translation is interpretation rather than a literal translation. A literal translation would be "to attain to the resurrection the one out of the dead." It is clear that the passage refers to a resurrection which includes only the righteous dead, though this is usually denied by amillenarians. The resurrection in view is undoubtedly the resurrection of the "dead in Christ" (1 Thess

4:16). Paul's ambition was not, however that he might die and then, perchance, be accounted worthy of resurrection at that time. His hope was that he might attain to it in the sense of being still alive when the event took place, which would mean that he would be translated rather than resurrected. Paul had no doubt that he would be included in the event. Later he wrote Timothy, "I am not ashamed; for I know him whom I have believed, and I am persuaded that he is able to guard that which I have committed unto him against that day" (2 Tim 1:12).

The resurrection of which Paul speaks is not of reward as Govett argues. Govett writes: "It is evident at a glance, that the resurrection which the apostle so earnestly sought, was not the general resurrection. The wicked shall partake of that, whether they desire it or not. Paul then could not express any doubts of his attaining to that, or speak of it as an object of hope. It remains then, that it be a peculiar resurrection: the resurrection of reward, obtained by the just, while the wicked remain in their graves." [12] Ibid, I, 34.

In refutation of this error, 1 Thessalonians 4:16 is plain: the resurrection will include all the dead in Christ, all who by grace through faith have trusted Christ and have even now been given this new position in Christ in place of their old estate in Adam. There is no justification for building upon Paul's hope a resurrection of reward to be attained only by a small portion of the church of Christ born of the Spirit and washed in the blood of the Lamb. Resurrection is a part of the gift of God, never a reward for human works; however, it may justify faithfulness and even martyrdom on the part of the believer. Paul's point of view is that if the resurrection is sure, what does it matter if the road before him is one of suffering and even death. The means, however difficult, are justified by the end.

The partial rapture view of this passage brings out in bold relief that their position not only involves a partial rapture but a partial resurrection of believers. While believers may not be raised at the same time, the principle of the stages of resurrection--some at the translation of the church, some after the tribulation--is based upon the sovereign program of God for the church and for the Old Testament saints, not upon a works principle or evaluation of faithfulness among the saints. Rewards there shall be, but resurrection is promised all believers.

1 Thessalonians 5:6. This passage is another exhortation to watch: "So then let us not sleep, as do the rest, but let us watch and be sober." The contrast here again is not between some believers who watch and other believers who do not. Rather, believers are exhorted to do that which is in keeping with their expectation--watch for the coming of the Lord. Those who sleep are obviously the unsaved as described in 1 Thessalonians 5:7: "For they that sleep sleep in the night; and they that are drunken are drunken in the night." By contrast, those who "are of the day," i.e., those who are true believers, should have lives in keeping with their faith. This passage does not teach any more than the others considered that there will be a partial rapture of some believers. The distinction is between those saved and those unsaved.

2 Timothy 4:8. This verse is a glorious affirmation of Paul's hope of reward: "Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give to me at that day; and not to me only, but also to all them that have loved his appearing." This passage clearly prophesies reward for Paul and others who "love his appearing." This revelation says nothing of a partial rapture as a part of that reward. It is rather that all believers in Christ are raptured, and then apportioned rewards according to their works.

Titus 2:13. The hope of the believer is expressed graphically in this familiar verse : "Looking for that blessed hope and appearing of the glory of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ." This attitude of

expectation is normal for true Christians, but is not here or elsewhere made a condition for being raptured. Only by reading into the passage a preconceived doctrine can the partial rapture be found here.

Hebrews 9:24-28. The entrance of Christ into heaven and his return when he "shall appear a second time, apart from sin, to them that wait for him, unto salvation" (v. 28) is the theme of this portion of Scripture. Partial rapturists seize upon the phrase, "to them that wait for him," as indicating that only such believers as are actively waiting for Christ will be raptured. The obvious answer is that those who are here described are Christians pictured in characteristic attitude of waiting or anticipating the completion of the salvation of which they now have the first fruits. All Christians worthy of the name anticipate the future completion of God's program of salvation for them. The phrase upon which partial rapturists put so much emphasis is more of an aside than the main revelation of the passage. The main point is that Christ is going to return and complete at his second coming the salvation which He provided in His death at His first coming. The figure is that of the priest who, having sacrificed, goes into the holy of holies and then appears the second time to those on whose behalf He has been ministering. In the sense used in this passage all true Christians are waiting for Christ in His second coming.

Revelation 3:3. This passage, addressed to the church at Sardis, is another command to watch: "Remember therefore how thou has received and didst hear; and keep it and repent. If therefore thou shalt not watch, I will come as a thief, and thou shalt not know what hour I will come upon thee." This passage is addressed to a local church at Sardis in which, no doubt, there were both true Christians and merely professing ones. The church had at one time a live testimony but had slipped from this (vv. 1-2). The challenge now is to correct this fundamental spiritual fault lest Christ come in judgment when they are not ready for Him. The judgment which will fall upon the church at Sardis will obviously deal with those who are unsaved. Those who do not heed the message of Christ and ignore the warning are by so much demonstrating their fundamental lack of faith and salvation.

Revelation 3:10. This favorite text of partial rapturists is a promise to the church at Philadelphia: "Because thou didst keep the word of my patience, I also will keep thee from the hour of trial, that hour which is to come upon the whole world, to try them that dwell upon the earth." D. M. Panton declares in connection with his support of the partial rapture theory based upon this text: "He bases it solely on the 'kept' word. He flings open the door to rapture into heaven.... Second Advent truth, on which our Lord bases the Angel's escape, is far from being 'kept' by all the children of God...the Lord thus bases rapture foursquare on fidelity, not conversion." [13] D. M. Panton, "An Open Door," *The Dawn*, 26:11, November 1948, p. 327.

This passage brings out clearly that the partial rapture theory depends upon a works principle--the rapture not a fruit of salvation but a reward for good works. As in other passages, the problem is whether this is the fundamental teaching of Scripture. Salvation is often traced to faith alone--as in Romans 4, and in other passages the evidence of salvation, good works, is pointed to as necessary to salvation (James 2:21-26). The promise of Revelation 3:10 falls into the same category as James 2. The evidence of faith, keeping the Word of God, is the ground for the promise. Here as elsewhere, however, the distinction is not between believers with works and believers without works. The main thought of the passage is that those without works are not true believers. To accept the principle of translation on the basis of works upsets the whole doctrine of justification and absence of all condemnation for the believer. Further, it vitiates all the promises given to the church as a whole relative to both resurrection and translation. The prominence of works as evidence of faith can never be proof of the negation of faith as the sole ground of the grace of God.

The works principle immediately breaks down when the question is asked: How much works? Evidently no Christian lives perfectly and the Philadelphian Church is no exception. To make the one doctrine of the Lord's return one and the same as to "keep the word of my patience," is entirely unjustified. Many commentators identify the phrase, "word of my patience," as being simply a reference to the steadfastness of the Philadelphians under trial.[14] Cf. F. W. Grant, Revelation of Jesus Christ, p. 206.

James Moffatt writes: "The precise sense therefore is not 'my word about patience' (i.e., my counsel of patience as the supreme virtue of these latter days, so Weiss, Bousset, etc.), but 'the word, or the preaching, of that patience which refers to me' (i.e., the patient endurance with which, amid present trials, Christ is to be served; so Alford, Spitta, Holtzm.). See Ps xxxviii (xxxix).... The second reason for praising the Philadelphian Christians is their loyal patience under persecution, as well as the loyal confession of Christ (ver. 8) which had possibly brought on that persecution." [15] James Moffatt, The Expositor's Greek Testament, V, 367-68. whatever for dragging in the church as individuals composed largely of Gentiles in racial origin.

It is true that the church is positionally in Christ and some pretribulationists have argued that the church in Christ is also caught up and that the rapture is prefigured in Revelation 12:5. Ironside says, "The man-child symbolizes both Head and body--the complete Christ." [17] H. A. Ironside. Lectures on the Revelation, p. 212. Even if this teaching be allowed, it is clear that all, not part, of the man child is caught up. The "rest of the seed" are neither Christ nor the church, but the physical seed of Israel unsaved at the time of the rapture and thereby thrust into the tribulation period of which this passage speaks. The context gives no ground whatever for the conclusion that the man child represents the spiritual element of the church raptured while the unspiritual element is left behind.

Conclusion

Opposition to the partial rapture view in addition to refutation of their interpretation of key Scriptures is based upon three broad principles: First, the partial rapture view is based upon a works principle in opposition to Scriptural teaching on grace. The translation and resurrection of the church is a part of its salvation provided by grace and is a reward only in the sense that it is a fruit of faith in Christ. To accept a works principle for this important aspect of salvation is to undermine the whole concept of justification by faith through grace, the presence of the Holy Spirit as the seal of God "unto the day of redemption" (Eph 4:30), and the entire tremendous undertaking of God on behalf of those who trust Him. The issue of reward is properly settled at the judgment seat of Christ, not before in a partial translation resulting in the infliction of the tribulation on other believers.

Second, the partial rapture view divides the body of Christ. While the Scriptures portray difference in God's dealing with saints of the Old Testament as compared with saints of the present age, and also a difference between the church and tribulation saints, there is no Scriptural justification for dividing the divine unity of the body of Christ joined in organic union with Christ and all fellow believers. A division such as partial rapturists teach is unthinkable in view of the doctrine of the one body.

The third objection to the partial rapturist position is the fact that they ignore plain teaching concerning the translation of all true believers when the event takes place. Attention was called earlier to the "we all" of 1 Corinthians 15:51 and the expression "the dead in Christ" in 1 Thessalonians 4:16. The identity of those translated is described as those who "believe that Jesus died and rose again" (1 Thess 4:14). Confirming Scriptures are found elsewhere as well (1 Thess 1:9-10; 2:19; 5:4-11; Rev 22:12). The partial rapture

view has been embraced by only a small fragment of evangelical Christians and has not been recognized by any evangelical Protestant group. It is an interpretation limited to a few and cannot be regarded as within the bounds of normal Biblical premillennialism.

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