

How Can a Holy God Have Pleasure in Sinners■

by John Piper

This sermon emphasizes the importance of surrendering to God and finding pleasure in Him. It discusses the impact of faith in Jesus, the concept of being pleasing to God through justification and sanctification, and the role of grace in empowering believers for good works. The message highlights that while believers may not be perfect, they can still be pleasing to God by embracing His grace and seeking to glorify Him.

Duration: 59:21

Scripture: 2 Thessalonians 1:11, Hebrews 13:20, Ephesians 1:6, Hebrews 11:6, Romans 5:9, Colossians 1:10, Philippians 4:18, Ephesians 5:10

Topics: "Surrender to God", "Embracing Grace"

Description

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Transcript

Lord, this is our collective confession from our hearts with as much authenticity as you have given to us. Jesus is our Lord. And we hear the words of the apostle ringing in our ears.

Nobody can say Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit. Therefore, miracles are happening all over this room. And if there is anyone, oh God, who cannot from the heart say, my Lord, my God, my Savior, my treasure, do that miracle now, I pray.

In Jesus' great name, we collectively say, amen. I want to begin with a story that I hope will encourage younger people among us, because I know there's so many. I hope this story puts a passion in you, it's not already there, to do something significant with your life and not to waste your life and to do it soon, because you may never be old.

The theme of this first Godward Life Conference is the pleasures of God. That's rooted first in the Bible, because the Bible says in so many places what pleases God. And secondly, it's rooted in the life of a pastor from Scotland who died in 1678.

His name was Henry Scougal. He died when he was young, 27. And I draw attention to his age because the impact of his life, even though it was so short, was massive.

Here I am, 2022, talking about him, and this conference exists because he existed. He wrote one thing. It wasn't even a book.

It was a letter, a hundred-page letter, which came to be called *The Life of God in the Soul of Man*, and he wrote it for a friend, and it begins, *My Dear Friend*. The friend began to circulate the 100-page letter, and then Gilbert Burnett, the bishop at the time, published it in the year that Henry Scougal died. That's over 300 years ago.

Now, here's the copy of this book. This is a beautiful little edition that I didn't even know existed from Crossway, and I'm going to give it away right now, and I need your help, okay? So, you stand up, and the first hand that he sees go up who meets these two qualifications is going to get the book, all right? This is just whoever sees it. I mean, there's no race here.

Number one, you have to be under—you have to be 18 or under. Now, there are 19 more copies of this at the book table, and Matt told me I could give this away, so bless him by buying all 19 of those copies. The second qualification is you promise by raising your hand you'll read it before the year's over.

Yeah, I agree. *The Life of God in the Soul of Man* at the bookstore, 19 more copies. Take them.

Scougal was not the only person who died young and made a huge impact. David Brainerd, the missionary to the American Indians, probably his journal has influenced modern missions more than any other, died at the age of 29 in 1747. Henry Martin, missionary to the Persians in India, whose memoirs keep influencing missions today, died at 31 in 1812.

Robert Murray McShane, whose Bible reading plan is used far and wide today, a Scottish pastor, died in 1843 at the age of 29. Jim Elliott, as you know, in 1956 was martyred by the Haurani Indians, and all five of those martyrs were under 33. Jim was 28.

To broaden the lens, Alexander the Great died at 33, Martin Luther King died at 39, Mozart died at 35, Emily Bronte died at 30, John Keats died at 26, and Frank died at 15. May God give you a passion for meaningful life before it's too late. Don't waste it on video games and all kinds of crazy insanity that your peers are doing.

It is so precious. Life is so precious. If you're old, like me, or somewhere in between 76 and 18 or 15 or whoever the youngest person is here, there's younger than that I know, Joy is here, then pray like I do.

God, make every remaining day count. Now, if you have 70 years in front of you, don't waste it. If you have 70 years behind you or 76, don't waste what's left.

It's very precious. We're going to be with Jesus just like that. Life is a vapor.

Wake up and stop wasting your life if you happen to be wasting it. One of the reasons for creating this fall conference called *Godward Life* as an intergenerational conference is because we wanted to take some of the passions that we have in this school here and share them with those who might go to school here and with those who wish they could because they're 70 and they don't think they can. I mean, I watch these teachers teach here and what they teach and I want to go to every class.

And one of those passions is life is precious. Now, back to Henry Schugel for a minute to show how he shaped this conference. In that 100 page letter, I think that little book is 170 pages because it's so tiny, there was one sentence that when I read it in 1987 created a book and a lot of other things.

Here's the sentence. The worth and excellency of a soul is to be measured by the object of its love. You can see into the excellence of a soul by what the soul loves.

And by loves, he didn't mean mercy kind of love of the unlovely. That's a beautiful kind of love. That's not what he meant.

He meant the kind of love that delights, the kind of love that finds pleasure in something. Here's the way he says it. Quote, the most ravishing pleasures, the most solid and substantial delights that human nature is capable of are those which arise from the endearment of a well-placed and successful affection.

Now that's what he's talking about when he says the worth and excellency of a soul is to be measured by the object of its well-placed affection. Where are you placing your affection? What do you put your affection on? That's the excellency of your soul, he says. Now, he's talking in that sentence about a human soul.

When I read it, I stopped and I thought, that's true of God. That's true of God. We can see into the worth and excellency of God himself if he would reveal to us the object of his well-placed affection.

What does God delight in? What does he find pleasure in? What are his solid, substantial delights and pleasures? So this first conference theme, the pleasures of God, is rooted in one of the passions of this school and desiring God, namely, we want to know God. We want to know God. You can't trust God.

You can't enjoy God. You can't honor God if you don't know God. If you have a figment of your imagination that you call God, you can't.

Everything follows from knowing him. Bonaventure was asked one time in the Middle Ages, why don't people love God? And his answer was, they don't know him. We want to know God here.

I want to know God. I want to know him better at 77 than 76. What else was there a year before? Except making him known, perhaps.

God help us. So, the worth and excellency of God can be known, measured by the object of his well-placed affections. So now we have a fresh pathway into the knowledge of God.

What makes him glad? Read your Bible. That's what I did. When I got that in 1987, I said, read the Bible, looking for what makes God glad.

And if Schugel is right, and I think he is, I would have a fresh new window into his excellency, and his worth, and his beauty, and his greatness, which proved to be so. My assignment among the plenaries that you'll be hearing, my assignment is, I think President Rigney told me to do this, my assignment is, my goodness, like, throw me in the briar patch, right? You don't even know what that—my assignment is to talk to you about, help you think about God's pleasures in human responses, the responses of sinners to God. Does God take pleasure in his people? The only kind of people he has are sinners.

There are no other kind on the earth. Does God take pleasure in his people? And the biblical answer is yes. Isaiah 62, 4, you shall no more be called forsaken, you shall be called, my delight is in her, and your

land will be called married, for the Lord delights in you.

As the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you. Zephaniah 3, 17, the Lord your God will rejoice over you with gladness, he will quiet you with his love, he will exalt over you with loud singing. Colossians 1, 9, Paul says, we pray, asking that you might walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work, increasing in the knowledge of God.

Second Corinthians 5, 9, so whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him. Philippians 4, 18, I am well supplied, having received from Epaphroditus the gifts that you sent, a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God. Hebrews 3, 16, do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.

So the answer is yes, God can and does take pleasure in his people, in who they are, what they do. Here's the way C.S. Lewis put it. I forgot to ask Matt Lund if he has copies of *The Weight of Glory*.

If he does, buy those out. So this is a quote from *The Weight of Glory* by Lewis, another massively influential book here. To please God, to be a real ingredient in the divine happiness, to be loved by God, not merely pitied, but delighted in, as an artist delights in his work, or a father in a son, seems impossible.

A weight, a burden of glory, which our thoughts can hardly sustain, but so it is, an ingredient in the divine pleasure. You sinner. So my question is, and please put on your thinking cap, this is a school-sponsored conference.

I'm going to expect a lot of you in the next 20 minutes or so. How can this be? How can this be? You are of purer eyes than to see evil. You cannot look at wrong, Habakkuk chapter 1, but all human beings are sinners, evil, born corrupt, selfish.

Both Jews and Greeks are under sin, as is written. None is righteous. No, not one.

Now, we know that whatever the law says, it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world accountable to God. For by the works of the law, nobody will be justified in God's sight, since through the law comes the knowledge of sin. So by virtue of our sinful nature, we're born this way.

We are not pleasing to God. We are children, not of God, but of wrath. Listen to these heavy words from Ephesians 2.2. You were following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience, among whom we all once walked in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath like the rest of mankind.

You've never met anybody who's not a child of wrath by nature. The wrath of God is not his pleasure. It is his displeasure, his intense displeasure, and he's on everyone.

We're not children of God by nature. We're children of wrath by nature. Jesus put it like this, whoever does not obey the Son of God shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him.

See what that word remains means? If there's no escape, if there's no rescue, you just stay where you are. Wrath. You don't get into wrath.

You're in wrath. You're under wrath. You're born worthy of wrath.

There is an escape. Without it, we remain, Jesus said, forever. So how can it be? How can it be that there would be a people in whom God could delight, a people in whom he would feel pleasure rather than the displeasure of wrath? How can that be? And if there were a way that it could be, that God could actually be pleased with sinners, since there aren't any other kind of people, how could he be holy? How could he be unsullied, righteous, pure? It's one thing to be merciful to sinners.

It's quite another thing to delight in the ungodly and be holy. That's a problem. Christianity exists.

The church exists. Bethlehem College and Seminary exists because God answered this problem with Christ. I'll read you the most perhaps beautiful statement of the remedy and escape and solution to this problem.

This is Romans 5, 6, 9 to 9. While we were still weak, at the right time, Christ died for the ungodly. One will scarcely die for a righteous person. Perhaps for a good person one might dare to die, but God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.

Therefore, having been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from wrath. There's a way out. That's the most important news in the world.

No exception. No political position comes ten thousands close, right? Get your priorities right. You want to get excited about something? That's it.

You want to talk to the world about something? That's it. There's a way out from under the wrath of God for all the cultures of the world, because everybody is a child of wrath in all the cultures of the world, and we have the news. Oh my, what a glorious gospel.

That's the greatest event in the history of the world, the death of Jesus and his confirming resurrection. Having been justified by his blood, much more shall we therefore be saved by him from wrath. God saved us from God.

The devil is quite inconsequential in this affair. God's love in Christ saved us from God's wrath. He did not spare his own son, but gave him up for us all.

Romans 8.32. Well, who then, among all of us sinners, who then is not under the wrath of God? Answer. All who are justified, declared right, pure, holy, perfect, declared that way. All the justified.

Having been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from wrath. Who escapes wrath? The justified. Romans 5.9. Who are the justified? Are you one? Here's who they are.

Romans 8.30. Those whom he predestined, he called. Those whom he called, he justified. Those whom he justified, he glorified.

So all the predestined, all those who were predestined to be God's loved, delighted in, enjoyed children, he called. And all the called, he justified. But we know from Romans 5.1 that we are justified only by faith, and that's not listed in Romans 8.30. So you have to go back and pick it up from chapter five, and then read it like this.

Those whom he predestined, he also called. And those whom he called, all of them he brought to faith. He came—they came to faith.

That's what the call does. Lazarus, come forth! Hey, dead live! That's the call of God. If you are a believer, that miracle happened to you.

You may have never been taught, that's how you got saved. That's how you got saved. God, through the gospel, called you, created life, faith happened, union with Christ, justified.

It is as sure, Paul writes, as though it had already happened in glory. So the foundational key to how sinners please God and how an actual—they become an actual ingredient in the divine happiness is justification in Christ by faith. Now, how can that be? How does that work? Justification includes two things.

In union with Jesus, talks about being in Christ, that little phrase used so many dozens of times by Paul, in Christ. By faith, we have union with Christ, and in that union with Christ, we have complete forgiveness for all sins, past, present, and future. And second, we have Christ's righteousness counted as ours.

The word is imputation or reckoned—choose your word, whichever you like—counted as ours, imputed to us, reckoned to be ours. Those two things, forgiveness and imputation, reckoning, counting, make up what justification is. I'll read you the key text for both of those.

This is Romans 4-5. To the one who does not work but believes, in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness. Just as David also speaks a blessing of the one to whom God counts righteousness apart from works, and then he quotes Psalm 32, blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven and whose sins are covered.

Blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin. So in Christ, in union with Christ, by believing, by faith, the sins of all who believe are nailed to the cross. So it says in Colossians 2-14, the record of debts that stood against us are nailed to the cross.

Now bear them no more. 1 Peter 2-24, he himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, hence forgiveness. God didn't just wave a wand and forgive.

He paid his son's blood and forgave. The other aspect is imputation. He counted us righteous in union with Christ.

Listen to Philippians 3. I count all things—this is Paul talking now—I count all things as rubbish in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him. There's the union idea, all right? You with me? Union with Christ. Be found in him, not having righteousness of my own, but that which comes—not having a righteousness of my own that comes from law or law-keeping, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God.

That depends on faith. Or as Romans 5-19 says, comparing Adam's disobedience with Christ's obedience. As by one man's disobedience, Adam, the many were appointed sinners, so by one man's obedience the many will be appointed righteous.

Or here's the way it's put in 2 Corinthians 5-21. For our sake, God made Christ to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him—there it is again, union—in him we might become the righteousness of God. In sum, then, God's love rescues us from God's wrath by giving his only Son as a substitute.

By Christ's perfect obedience unto death, he bore our sin and provided perfect forgiveness, perfect righteousness, which is imputed to us, and he covered all of our sin. Christ alone, his blood and righteousness, as the song says, Christ alone is the ground, foundation, basis of our justification. We don't add anything to justifying righteousness.

Nothing. Not one of our deeds, good deeds, not one of our thoughts, not one of our feelings add anything to the righteousness that God takes into account as the basis of our justification. It is all Christ's.

God is 100% for us forever because of justification. Our forgiveness and our imputed righteousness, to use the words of Paul in Romans 3-24, are by his grace as a gift to be received by faith. That's a direct quote from Romans 3-24-25.

Faith is not part of justifying righteousness. Faith receives forgiveness. Faith receives righteousness because faith receives Christ.

Faith welcomes Christ. Faith embraces Christ as a supremely treasured Savior and Lord. So, does God look upon us with delight and pleasure? Are justified sinners in this life, this still sinning life, are justified sinners in this life pleasing even before that final sin obliterating glorification? And the answer is yes, because God said when Christ was baptized and at the transfiguration, this, this is my loved Son in whom, with whom I am well pleased.

I have much pleasure in my Son, Jesus Christ. Therefore, since we are united with Christ and counted as righteous with his righteousness, we are God's treasured, loved, delighted in children. But you say, I hope, I still sin.

I still sin, Pastor John. Is he not displeased with my sin? Yes, he is. But that does not cancel out his delight in you as you are in Christ.

Consider these words. This is a quote from Proverbs 3, 11, and 12, which is quoted in Hebrews 12, 5, and 6. Listen to this. My son, do not despise the Lord's discipline or be weary of his reproof.

For God reproves him whom he loves as the Father, the Son in whom he delights. In every spanking from heaven, and oh, he spans his children. Yes, he does.

Just read Hebrews 12. In the very act of disciplining his son for displeasing behavior, he has never lost the delight he has in his Son. So, when you experience suffering, which you all do and will, when you experience suffering as a child of God, remember two things about God's treatment of you in that moment or that season.

One, remember this. My Father disapproves of the remaining corruption in me. This is not saying that every suffering correlates with a specific disobedience.

That's not what I'm saying. I'm saying there is always remaining corruption in this life, in your heart. There is corruption remaining in me, Father, and it is loving me.

It is loving me to refine my faith and refine my holiness through discipline. That's the first thing to remember. You are loving me by refining my faith through fire and refining my holiness through trial.

You are loving me. And the second thing to say is, my Father is doing this discipline on the unshakable, unchangeable basis that I am totally forgiven for all my sins, for all my displeasing behavior. I am totally

righteous in Jesus Christ, totally pleasing to my Father in union with Christ.

Now, that may appear to you — well, it certainly would appear to you as a paradox, to put it mildly — that God would discipline those whom he regards in Christ as perfect. But listen to Hebrews 10, 14, don't you love the Bible? What would I be doing right now? What an idiot! Jabbering away like I have any opinions at all that matter about anything. If what I say is not here, forget it.

So here's a great text for the paradox. This is Hebrews 10, 14. By a single offering, Christ has perfected for all time — who? Those who are being sanctified.

That's strange. That's really strange. Our perfection in one sense is finished, it's over.

By a single offering, he has perfected us for all time. God sees you in Christ as perfected, forgiven, justified, right with him. But in another sense, it says, we're not sinlessly perfect in this world, in our behavior, in our attitudes, in our feelings, in our thinking.

He has perfected those who are being, little by little, made holy. We know this all too well. In our earthly, daily lives, we are embattled, we are imperfect, now, I circled this in oranges, big orange circle here.

The essence of Christian ethics that sets Christianity apart from all religions and all philosophies, the essence of Christian ethics is that we pursue our daily earthly holiness precisely because we are holy. You know any other religion that teaches that? We pursue — and I hope you do, it's an evidence that you're born of God — we pursue earthly, daily righteousness on the basis of already being righteous. That's why Paul says, 1 Corinthians 5, 7, cleanse out the old leaven as you really are unleavened.

Oh, what a great gospel. What a great way to live. We seek to please God daily because we are already perfectly pleasing to God.

I said we seek to. Can we succeed? This is my last effort to make sense out of the Bible on this issue. Can you succeed in your behavior, in your thinking, in your feeling, please God? So, I ask my Father in heaven, Father, with profound thankfulness in my heart for what Christ did for me in dying for me, in bringing me to faith, in forgiving all my sins, in counting his righteousness as mine, so that I am in Christ perfectly pleasing to you.

With profound thankfulness to that, I'm asking this, Father, can I in my daily life on this earth please you by the way I think, by the way I feel, by the way I act? Can my thinking and my feeling and my acting become an ingredient in your pleasure? Father, I'm not asking you to replace Christ's obedience with my obedience as the basis of my justification. God forbid. Everything would be undone.

I'm not asking that my imperfect growth in holiness replace Christ's perfect holiness as the basis of your being 100 percent for me. I don't want to switch that around. That's the basis of everything.

It's my only hope. I'm taking my stand there, and I'm asking, can you find pleasure in my imperfect efforts to think and feel and act in holiness? God's answer to this question is yes, and this is probably the one that is most troubling to us, and we wonder, can this really be? A few texts. Colossians, Paul says to them, chapter one, verse 10, may you walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work.

Colossians or Philippians 4.18, the gifts you sent are a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God. To the Corinthians in chapter 5, verse 9, whether at home or away, we make it our aim to please him. Ephesians chapter 5, verse 10, try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord.

It is possible for imperfect justified sinners to please God, to be an ingredient in the divine pleasure, not only, now hear this carefully, not only by union with Christ in justification, but also by depending on Christ in sanctification, transformation. Not only it is possible to please the Lord, not only because we stand perfected in his righteousness, but also because he empowers us for our righteousness. Don't shrink from that, you'll fly away from the Bible if you do.

Now, why is that the case? How can that be? How can an all-holy, perfect God be pleased with my imperfect thoughts, my imperfect feelings, my imperfect actions as a Christian? The most important two verses in the Bible, I think, in answering that question are 2 Thessalonians chapter 1, verses 11 and 12. I'm going to read it to you, and as I read it, I'm going to hold up my fingers for six pieces of the answer. We always pray for you that our God may make you worthy of his calling, which I'm interpreting to be pleasing behavior, make you worthy of his calling and thus please him, and may fulfill every resolve for good in every work of faith by his power so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you and you in him according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.

It doesn't get any more amazing than those two sentences when it comes to how we please God as sinners. So I'm going to walk through it, okay? All six of those, here we go, just restate them so that you can hear them, and now read the verse again. This is 2 Thessalonians chapter 1, verses 11 and 12.

One, at the bottom, the root of our action, our work, our behavior is the grace of God, absolutely unearned, absolutely undeserved. Second, that grace is manifest in God's power in us for good works. Third, we experience this power, we experience this power by faith.

We look away from ourselves, we admit we can do nothing, we look to grace, we embrace grace, we trust grace, our treasured hope for holiness is grace. Four, in that faith, we do good works. We do righteousness, we do mercy, we do love, we do justice.

Paul calls these works works of faith. Elsewhere, obedience of faith. Five, Jesus gets the glory for those works of faith, because his grace is at the bottom, and his power is enabling those works.

He is the decisive cause, and the giver gets the glory. Six, in this way, we walk worthy of our calling and please the Lord. So, read it again, see if you think I'm handling this text correctly.

Verse 11, we always pray for you that our God may make you worthy of his calling, which would be pleasing in his sight, and may fulfill every resolve for good in every work of faith by his power, so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified, not you, him, not you, him, not you, him, and you in him, according to the grace at the bottom, without which nothing happens, of our God and Lord Jesus. In short, we're almost done. In short, God is pleased with our works of faith, because they are his works of power, or you could say his works of grace experience this power for holiness.

The giver gets the glory. Or to say it another way, God is pleased with our works done in dependence on his grace, because his grace then gets the glory. That's the reason he created the world, for the praise of the glory of his grace, Ephesians 1.6. Here's the way the writer to the Hebrews makes the same point.

It's chapter 13, verse 20. Now, may the God of peace equip you to receive this as a kind of benediction. May the God of peace equip you with everything good, that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight.

So he's working in us what is pleasing in his sight through Jesus Christ. Now, here are the six points. Actually, there's only five, which is an interesting point.

Number one, at the bottom, through Jesus Christ and his sovereign grace. Two, he works in us his power. Three, we do his will by that power.

Four, Jesus gets the glory. Five, this is pleasing to God. What's missing? Faith.

The connection between God's power moving in us by grace and our doing what is pleasing to him, the link there is faith. It's not mentioned. Is that a problem in Hebrews? It is not a problem in Hebrews, because he's already made it absolutely crystal clear in chapter 11 what he thinks about the relationship between faith and pleasing God.

Without faith, it is impossible to please God. Oh, praise God for the Bible. So, summing up now, I think this is my last page.

This is the last page. The same faith that unites us to the pardon of Christ for justification, that same faith unites us to the power of Christ for sanctification. The same faith that makes us perfectly pleasing to God by imputation of his righteousness makes us progressively pleasing to God by our righteousness.

I'm going to read that sentence again, because I've never said it that way before, and I like it. I hope you like it. The same faith that makes us perfectly pleasing to God by the imputation of his righteousness makes us progressively pleasing to God by our righteousness.

So, you will not be perfect in this life. You will not. But you can be pleasing to God in this life.

You can. You can. Some of you grew up in homes where you could not please your father.

You couldn't. It always felt, he's always angry at me. He's never pleased with anything I do.

And for you to hear this message with openness and honesty and happiness is hard. I hope God gives you grace to hear it. You will never be free of sin in this world.

You will in the next. But you can be pleasing to God in this life. Perfectly pleasing because of justification.

Progressively pleasing because of transformation. You can become, beyond all imagination, an ingredient in the divine pleasure, both by imputation and by transformation. The glory of God in Jesus Christ, overflowing in grace, is God's supreme delight.

The glory of God, overflowing in grace, is God's delight. When we embrace the grace of God in Christ as our only hope for imputation and transformation, he's pleased with that magnifying of his glory and grace. Or, as we like to say here at Bethlehem College and Seminary, we are his pleasure when he is our treasure.

Let's pray. Father, would you take this weighty and sometimes complex meditation on pleasing you and make it real in the experience of the young and the old in this room, I pray. In Jesus' name, amen.

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