

# Sailing to the Nations to Finish the Task

by John Piper

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*This sermon emphasizes the importance of having a holy ambition in life, whether as a sacrificial goer or sender for the completion of the Great Commission. It highlights the need to be driven by the Holy Spirit, to deny oneself for a greater purpose, and to meet the immeasurable needs of the world through gospel preaching. The sermon also clarifies the distinction between missionaries and pastors, urging individuals to discern their unique calling and pursue it with passion and dedication.*

**Duration:** 42:27

**Scripture:** Romans 15:20, 1 Peter 1:23, Romans 1:20, 1 Timothy 4:14, Psalms 96:3, Isaiah 52:15, John 3:16, Matthew 28:19, 1 Corinthians 9:22

**Topics:** "Holy Ambition", "Great Commission"

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## Description

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## Transcript

Let's pick up where we left off last night. So my heart's desire and prayer to God for you is that He would put your boat, the boat of your life, on a course toward the completion of the Great Commission, towards the remaining task of world evangelization, either as a sacrificial goer or a sacrificial sender. And I'm putting the word sacrificial on those words, not for any particular effect, but because of Jesus' statement, whoever would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross.

I think it belongs to the very essence of Christian life that we sacrifice, that we say no to numerous desires that we have for the sake of something greater. A life of sacrifice is not a life of unhappiness. We deny ourselves things that would diminish our delights in God through serving people.

And there are thousands of things that would diminish our delights in God, and they are all pleasurable. And we deny ourselves those for greater pleasure. So, number one, I'm eager that God would direct the boat of your life toward the remaining task of world evangelization, either as a sacrificial radical goer or a sacrificial radical sender, but not a coaster in this life, not a disobedient, indifferent person just going about your business with no care for the task of world evangelization.

That's number one goal. Number two is that I want to help you, and this is the focus this morning, to lift up a mast on your boat. This is a sailboat.

It's not a motorboat. The great tragedy is that people think the Christian life can be turned into a motorboat. It can't.

You can grow a church by putting an Evinrude on the back of your boat and making it happen, but it's not supernatural. It's not Christian. It's a sailboat, and the mast is to put these yards out here, drop the sails, be filled with the Spirit, and driven in His power across the sea of life for a good and holy purpose.

And so I'm trying to get you to have an ambition and a plan. You lift up this plan in your life. You stretch out your sails.

You catch the wind of the Holy Spirit by faith in God, and He moves you across the ocean of life towards some valuable purpose. We'll come back to that. And then I want there to be ballast in your boat.

That's number three. Because in so many conferences, get the sails up. The music is great.

The Spirit is blowing. He really is blowing. There's no ballast in the boat.

The crossed wind comes. Your sail is in the water, and you are disillusioned big time, maybe forever, about this thing called Christianity and world missions. And I still want that to happen.

You're young, most of you, and the storms have broken over a few of you. They will break over the rest of you. I just want your boat to float.

So that's the reason for last night's ballast. The ballast was two blocks. God is passionate for His fame among the nations.

God has an infinite regard for His glory. He is totally committed to the display of His greatness in this world. And at the center of that eternity to eternity, God glorifying purpose of God, there's the cross where God found a way to save sinners while magnifying His glory.

Sinners who have spent all their lives belittling the glory of God by preferring other things over His glory and thus treating His glory as worthless. And God has found a way not to damn people like that who deserve to be damned, but to bring them into His family all the while making it crystal clear I'm totally committed to the glory they've been trampling. And the answer of how He did it was that He put Jesus Christ forward as a propitiation to be received by faith and thus demonstrated in the perfect infinite payment of Jesus.

He hates the belittling of His glory that much. And you, who've spent your life doing it, get saved. That's the center of the ballast.

So that the implication for world missions is when you hear Jesus say, or God say in Psalm 96, Declare His glory among the nations. And you hear the New Testament say, Preach His gospel among the nations. Now you know, if you understood last night, now you know that's the same command.

Okay, let's go back to the mast. My goal in this message is to be used by God and if He would be pleased to help you get a more specific holy ambition for your life. The ballast in the bottom of the boat is a kind of ambition.

I want my life to count as a part of God's passion for His glory. So I want to have a passion for His glory. That's the big general ballast of your life.

Now I want to help refine it. So, some of you come here, you know the holy ambition of your life. You came to this conference to have your fire stoked.

Others of you, you want one, you want it to be God-glorifying, you don't have a clue yet what it is. And others of you, and I'm so glad you're here, are just drifting. You're just going from one video game to the next, or one class to the next, and you don't even think in terms of, I want an ambition for my life.

I want my life to have some coherent point. You haven't even gotten there yet, and I hope I can be of a help to you to just get you on board in the quest for such a holy ambition. So whether you're here already knowing it, getting your fire stoked, or whether you want it desperately, and you'd like some help right now for clarity, or whether you're just drifting and you need to be brought on board, I'm here for you.

And I'm inviting you now to go to Romans 15 if you have a Bible, because we're going to base the rest of our thoughts on this amazing passage where Paul talks about his ambition. And I hope God speaks to you very personally from this text. So Lord, do that even as I read the text.

Romans 15, we'll read verses 18-24. I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me to bring the Gentiles, the nations, to obedience by word and deed. By the power of signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God, so that from Jerusalem all the way around to Illyricum, that's northern Italy where Albania is today, so picture that extent.

I have fulfilled, in all that area, I have fulfilled the ministry of the Gospel of Christ and thus I make it my ambition. I've got that underlined now. I hope you underline it.

I make it my ambition to preach the Gospel not where Christ has already been named, lest I build on someone else's foundation. But as it is written, it quotes Isaiah 52, those who have never been told of Him will see Him. And those who have never heard will understand.

This is the reason why I have so often been hindered from coming to you, but now since I no longer have any room for work in these regions, and since I have longed for many years to come to you, you in Rome, I hope to see you in passing as I go to Spain and to be helped on my journey there by you. Romans is a mission support raising letter. It really is.

I want to be helped. I want you to support me as I go once I have enjoyed your company for a while. So, go back to verse 20.

Thus I make it my ambition to preach the Gospel not where Christ has already been named. Paul was controlled by a holy ambition. Controlled.

Why do I say controlled? Look at verse 22. This, this holy ambition, is the reason why I have so often been hindered in coming to you. Look at the end of verse 23.

I have longed for many years to come to you. Now, if you long for years to do something, and you don't do it, you're being controlled by something. Something else.

So you have that desire. I don't want to be there with you. For years I've wanted to be there with you.

And I haven't come. Why? Because I've got the ambition where I am. When I'm done with the ambition where I am, you're going to be a part of that ambition.

You see how it's controlling him? He had an ambition to preach the Gospel where Christ had not been named. He's doing it from Jerusalem to Albania and he's not done there yet. That's why he can't leave.

He's controlled by a holy ambition. When you're controlled by a holy ambition, there are a thousand things you cannot do. You dare not do.

Good things. Good, good things. My life has been one long life of selective neglect.

Because I have ambitions in my life about how I want it to count. Things I want to say. Things I want to do for a specific focus and a specific message, which means there are a thousand good things I don't do.

That's the way an ambition works. A holy ambition controls what you do and what you don't do. So he's controlled by a holy ambition and I want to just say to you it is a good thing to be controlled by a holy ambition.

You should want one. You should right now as I'm preaching be praying, Oh God, give me one. Make it clear.

I really want to live that way. I want to have a holy ambition. I don't want to be a drifter, a coaster, just getting up and doing stuff.

I want to have a point. I want it to go somewhere. I want my life to go somewhere like Paul's.

I want to be able to use the term I have an ambition. I'm controlled by an ambition. I'm not doing that because of the ambition.

I'm doing that because of the ambition that I have. It's a good thing. And you should want one.

I'm calling it a holy ambition because it's got holy ends of preaching the Gospel to people who don't know it and it's got holy origins. I'm going to show you in a minute that it's coming from God's Word. But I'm just asking right now do you have a holy ambition? And do you want one? And may God grant you one.

And please don't assume that I'm asking you to have Paul's holy ambition. Paul's holy ambition was to preach the Gospel where Christ has not been named. I am not trying to get all of you to do that.

I have said passionate, sacrificial goers or passionate, sacrificial senders. It's the goers who are called to get to the unreached peoples where the name is not even known. I don't think every Christian should do that.

You know why I don't think you should? Because when Paul wrote this letter, he asked them to send him to Spain and not to go with him. And that's what you should say to churches. You shouldn't make them feel guilty that they're not going.

Come on! Go with me in your prayers. Go with me in your visits. Go with me in your passions.

Go with me in your sacrificial lifestyles that enable you to help me stay there. But just plow into your salt and light place where you are. So, when I say every one of you should have a holy ambition, I don't mean Paul's.

I mean yours! Yours! And it will be unique to you. Tailor made by the living God calls you into His family. A holy ambition tailor made for you.

Now here's the problem. One of them. Your generation.

I'm thinking of the younger people now among us. At the end of your teens, beginning of your twenties. Your generation has a huge obstacle to getting a holy ambition.

And the reason is because you're growing up so slow. Books are being written about you. Christian Smith is a professor at Notre Dame reviewed six of these books about your tribe.

Teenager and adolescent. Here's a quote now. Teenager and adolescence as representing a distinct stage in life were very much 20th century inventions.

So, the word teenager didn't exist before 100 years ago. And adolescence didn't exist. Those are real realities that didn't technically exist.

Nobody would have recognized them 200 years ago. Jonathan Edwards wouldn't know what you're talking about if you say, well, the young people in your church are in adolescence. They wouldn't have a clue what you meant.

They were created in the 20th century inventions brought into being by changes in mass education, child labor laws, urbanization, suburbanization, mass consumerism, the media. Similarly, a new distinct and important stage in life situated between the teenage years and full-fledged adulthood has emerged in our culture in recent decades. This is you.

Reshaping the meaning of self, youth, relationships, life commitments, as well as a variety of behaviors and dispositions among the young. What has emerged from this new situation has been variously labeled extended adolescence, youthhood, adultolescence, young adulthood, 20-somethings, and emergent adulthood. And then he says one of the ways of describing this group is the tendency to delay full-fledged adulthood.

So the characteristics of these 18- to 30-year-olds go like this. 1. Identity exploration. 2. Instability.

3. Focus on self. 4. Feeling in limbo, in transition, in between. 5. A sense of possibilities and opportunities and unparalleled hope.

These, of course, are also often accompanied by big doses of transience, confusion, anxiety, self-obsession, melodrama, conflict, disappointment. End of quote. So there's an obstacle for you.

You're part of a culture that is not growing up nearly as fast as 300 years ago. People married when they were 16. You shouldn't.

You're not ready at 17 to marry. They were. Because they became adults at about 12, 13.

There were rights, there was work, there was training, there was expectation. Everything about the culture made it work. Today, no way would that work.

Because it's all against you. Churches don't work that way. They keep you playing until you go to college.

They do. Youth ministries are built around playing. The whole thing, the culture, the media, the TV, the Internet, the churches, they're all designed to keep you from growing up.

So I'm aware of that, and I'm not making light of it. It's just a reality. I wish it weren't, but it is.

Little girls. Let's talk to the women for a minute. So most little girls play with dolls when they're little.

That's a good thing. I've got one little girl, four sons. I learned a little bit about girls in the last 17 years.

Raised four sons, and then along came Talitha. The day's going to come, you all know this, when she doesn't play with dolls anymore. She's now about 11, and she can work in the real nursery at church.

And she can hold real babies. And then she's about 14 and gets her first babysitting job, all by herself at somebody's house with a cell phone number from Mom. And she feels responsible.

This baby is totally helpless if I don't take care of her. And then the day comes when she's done with her schooling and perhaps now she's got a home ministry to AIDS babies or orphans. And she's grown up, and the weight of an Amy Carmichael is on her.

Women read *A Chance to Die* by Elizabeth Elliot about Amy. You see what I mean? It's a good thing to play with dolls, but not at 20. The mark of adulthood is that play is replaced with a sense of responsibility and ambition in this world for your life to count for real babies that are out there or a thousand other things.

I'm just using dolls and babies as an example. Boys. Talk about boys.

I'm one of those. So I remember this better. Boys like balls and trucks and guns or my Lucas McCain circle handle rifle.

Just better than any of those Matt Dillon pistols. I tried them both. I just killed so many bad guys.

I think that's a really good thing. I'm not against killing bad guys at all. I think kids that grow up playing cowboys and army and shooting their friends next door, falling dead, all in the name of justice and the American way.

But the day's going to come, guys, when you don't even do that anymore with a video. This is what guys are doing when they're 25 and 28. Rather, instead of a real gun, now they have the sword of the Holy Spirit.

And they're driving truckloads of mercy into hard places. And they're doing athletic ministries on the streets of Mumbai or Mexico City. Now it's become an ambition.

That's the difference between being a child and being an adult is that you get an ambition to take everything that you once played with and make it go somewhere for a high and holy purpose. So I'm simply saying when Paul says he had a holy ambition, that's a good thing. And I would like to encourage you to go ahead and grow up and just be countercultural enough to say, I don't need to be like that.

I don't need to wait until I'm 35 to get a job. I don't need to wait until I'm 35 to figure out what life is about. I can do this now.

I'm 19. I'm going to get an ambition for my life. It's going to help me not do things.

It's going to help me do things. And here's my next question. Where does that come from? More specifically, where do you get it? Let's go to verse 20 and 21 and notice the connection between the verses which I think is just stunningly helpful practically for your life.

Thus I make it my ambition, verse 20, thus I make it my ambition to preach the gospel not where Christ has already been named, lest I build on someone else's foundations. That's his ambition. Where did he get it? Where did that come from? But as it is written, and then he quotes the Bible, Isaiah 52, 15, those who have never been told of Him will see Him and those who have never heard will understand.

Now here's what's amazing. Jesus, the risen Christ, knocked Paul off his horse on the Damascus road and told him what he's going to do. Just told him.

I am sending you to the Gentiles to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in Me. You're probably not going to have an experience like that. Paul did.

He told him. You're mine. I chose you before you were born.

You're my apostle to the Gentiles. You're going to speak to people who've never heard of Me. Get moving.

You've got your ambition, your orders. You're on. And when he told you in verse 21 where his ambition came from, he never referred to that.

Why? Why didn't he say, thus I make it my ambition to preach the gospel where Christ has not been named because Jesus told me to. Instead of quoting the Bible. He goes to the Bible to warrant his mission.

I think he did it for you so I could preach the sermon. I really do. I mean, he didn't think of the sermon, but I think he was doing it for the Romans and for the succeeding generations.

We're not going to get a Damascus Road thing like that. But you can read Isaiah. Isn't that amazing? Here's the way it works.

Now let's testify for my own life. Here's the way it works. If you were to ask me right now, which you are, you should be, so what are you saying is the specific way I discern my holy ambition? My answer is immerse yourself in the Bible pleading with God to make some verse or some strategy or some trajectory or some truth so burn so continuously and so firmly and deeply and unshakably you know that's me.

I was lying in the hospital, the infirmary of Wheaton College, 1966 as a 20-year-old madly in love with Noel Henry and thinking I was going to be a doctor and needed to take organic chemistry to catch up with my pre-med stuff and John Harold Ockengay was preaching 200 yards to the west and I was listening to it on the WETN campus radio station and as he preached that happened to me. Everything changed. I don't even remember the text.

All I know is everything in me burned with Bible. And when that four-day series of messages was over I said to my girlfriend I know you were falling in love with a doctor but please I'm not going to be a doctor. I'm going to go to seminary because all I know is after that I love the Bible.

I've got to do Bible. I've got to be a Bible guy. That's all I know.

I don't know the details right now. I'm just going to be a Bible guy so I've got to go to school and learn the Bible and she said as she has a hundred times I'm falling in love with you that's your calling. So she went with me and she's been with me for 44 years actually 46 years I suppose.

Count that as the start. I want you to have a holy ambition. I want you to pursue it by reading your Bible and asking God to make something burn in your heart.

I think that's the way it comes. As you're reading the Bible you're pleading Oh God speak. God speak to me.

And he did a lot more calling and refining of that ambition as the months and years went by. It got clearer and clearer. I didn't enter the pastorate until I was 34.

That's 14 years later. I was weaving along as the ambition was getting clearer and narrower I was following it. It was broad, Bible and then it became Bethlehem Baptist Church.

There is an immeasurable need that every ambition should care about. I don't think any I mean the word ambition I know is a dangerous word. It's usually associated with vanity and ego and I'm pleading that it can be holy.

That's why I'm putting the word holy on the front of it. Every holy ambition is an expression of love for people. What was the need that Paul was trying to meet as he preached the gospel where Christ had not been named? Here's the theological problem.

Paul, do you think people are responsible to believe in a name they've never heard? And I think he would have said no. So at the judgment day they won't be condemned for not believing in Jesus if they've never heard of Him. That's right.

Well, then why are you telling them because then if they reject what you say they're going to go to hell and you said that they're not responsible to believe in Jesus if they've never heard of Jesus. And his answer would have been I'll read it to you. This is Romans 1. The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness, all of it, and unrighteousness of men who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.

For what can be known about God is plain to them. So everybody knows God. They don't know Jesus.

They know God. For His invisible attributes, this is Romans 1.20, His invisible attributes, namely His eternal power and divine nature have been clearly perceived in the things that He has made since creation of the world, so they are without excuse. That's why I'm going.

They'll have no excuse at the judgment day. They will all perish. Why? Because, he keeps going, for although they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks to Him.

They became futile in their thinking. Their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of God for mortal images.

They suppressed the truth. That's why everybody is under the wrath of God because the truth they know they suppress. There is one escape.

They must be born again. How are people born again? We are born again through the living and abiding Word. That is the Gospel which we preach.

1 Peter 1.23-25 Faith comes by hearing. And hearing by the Word of Christ. And nobody is saved without calling upon the name of the Lord.

And how shall they call on whom they haven't believed? And how shall they believe unless they have a preacher? And how shall they preach unless they be sent? Faith comes through preaching. That's why I'm going, he says. So, my point generally is every holy ambition is trying to meet an immeasurable need.

There's a thousand of them. I'm not trying to make anybody a copy of anybody else. There's a thousand ways to meet immeasurable needs.

Paul was going to do it by preaching where nobody had preached before. Let me draw this to a close by pointing out one more thing in the text. Verse 19.

Second half of the verse. From Jerusalem all the way around to Illyricum to Albania, northern Italy, I have fulfilled the ministry of the Gospel of Christ. What in the world did that mean? In fact, he said in verse 23, I no longer have any room for work in these regions.

That's crazy! Because he said to Timothy in 1 Timothy, Do the work of an evangelist. Now, where is Timothy located? Ephesus. Ephesus is smack dab in the middle from Jerusalem to Illyricum.

Again, there's Ephesus. Asia Minor. Turkey.

And he says to him, Do the work of an evangelist. Why? You said the ministry of the Gospel is fulfilled and completed from Jerusalem to Illyricum. And Paul looked at him and said, That's my job that's finished, not yours.

What did he mean by that? He meant pastors and missionaries aren't the same. Pastors are responsible to mobilize their churches to do the evangelism of their districts and their regions and their cities. Missionaries are not! Missionaries plant churches where they don't exist and raise up pastors to do that.

A missionary is a real reality. I don't like it when pastors say we're all missionaries. That's not true! It ruins people's understanding of this radical, unique thing that some of you came to this conference to get called to do.

Namely, be a cross-cultural, frontier, pioneer, church-planting missionary among the unreached peoples of the world. So, when Paul said, I have fulfilled the ministry of the Gospel from Jerusalem to Illyricum, he meant missionary work here is over. Tens of thousands of people need to be converted in Turkey! Then and now! And Paul's finished! Some of you are called to do that.

Not all of you. It's a pretty unusual group, really. It's a pretty unusual group.

But in this group that came to a missions conference, something's rumbling in your hearts. And I'm just trying to clarify who you are. Some of you.

You are the Paul-type missionary. Timothy is another type of minister. I am not a missionary.

I have labored over this for years. Every time our missionaries' conference rolls around, should I be in Minneapolis? There's 1,200 evangelical churches in Minneapolis. I'm one of them in Mumbai.

Why? Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq. Chad. Why aren't I there? Now, I'm 67.

I'm not going to be a pastor anymore. Maybe I should be there. I do wrestle with those things.

What should I do with the next chapter of my life? You don't want to waste it. Don't play golf in Arizona. Uh-oh.

If you catch me doing that, don't read another book I ever wrote. It's just all undermined totally. If Piper's going to get on a glide path towards Jesus, that's crazy.

So, immeasurable needs are being met, and the strategy is some of you are called to be Paul-type missionaries. Let me close like this. I'm going to read you an email, and I'll be done.

This comes from a 30-something now, because he's been there so long, in China, Tibet. He wrote this three years ago. He wrote it because I had raised the issue about young people feeling like Western missionaries are not needed in a place like China, for example.

It's hard to get in, because there's 60 million Chinese Christians now that can surely do the job. And here's his response to that, and I give it to you as a clarification of the fact that you, and I know that not all of you are American, but most of you are white, Western, middle class Americans, and there's a place for you. And that's the point of this.

I'll read it, and then we'll pray. After spending the first three years as a Christian in the States, involved in tons of personal evangelism, I have now spent nearly seven, now it will be ten, years living in some of the most gospel-deprived regions in the world. I am very frustrated by the amount of gospel preaching that takes place in the West compared to the complete ignorance of the gospel that exists all around me over here.

Let me explain myself a little better. Although it seems that the laborers are so few, even in America, it is impossible to even compare the amount of gospel knowledge available to the average American with the utter lack of gospel found in certain areas around the world. I happen to live in one of those places.

In brief, within a few hundred miles of where I am sitting right now, there are millions of Tibetan Buddhists and Chinese Muslims scattered through tens of thousands of towns and villages. The vast majority of these people have never heard anything true about Christianity, and with the exception of just a handful, the villages have never in the history of mankind been graced by the presence of a minister of the gospel. The lack of the gospel in this place is overwhelming, and I truly believe that God will call more people out into these far-flung corners of the world if only they have a chance to hear about the need and are shown how they can do something about it.

I simply want to encourage the Western Church to wake up and realize that dozens of regions around the world are still completely devoid of the gospel, and most of these places are difficult places for even native missionaries, so-called, to work. It is going to take people like you, he's writing to Western young people, and me, Western cross-cultural missionaries, to be sent, to go, to learn these languages and share the gospel with these people. For instance, the large number of Christians in China are primarily located in the eastern half of the country, and their culture is radically different from that of the Tibetans and the Chinese Muslims.

Much of the time, Western missionaries do a better job of reaching out to these minorities than do the Chinese, especially with the racism that exists in China and the recent wars that the minorities have often fought against the ruling Chinese. I hope I have explained my burden clearly enough. Please, let me know

if anybody has any thoughts, comments, questions.

For God's glory, we want to see more laborers raised up to reach these millions with the gospel. His website is [www.china.myadventures.org](http://www.china.myadventures.org) and he means it that he'd like to hear from you. [www.china.myadventures.org](http://www.china.myadventures.org) I won't give you his name.

So I close. My prayer as I finish my part in this and hand you over now to the seminars and to Russ, that you will have your boat, the boat of your life on a course towards helping with the cause of global evangelization as a radical sacrificial goer or a sacrificial sender. To that end, I pray that the mast of your holy ambition will be lifted high and you'll drop your sails of faith and you'll catch the wind of the Holy Spirit and he will drive you freely, no motor on the back, trying to make it happen when it can't happen, but being driven by the Holy Spirit.

And I pray that there will be weighty ballast of gospel truth in your boat so that when the cross winds come, your boat will not sink and you'll make it to the end. Let's pray. So God, please, do the miracle work of saving.

Do the miracle work of purifying. Do the miracle work of calling and clarifying the holy ambition for these young people. I ask for the glory and the fame of your great name among all the peoples of the world.

And everybody said, Amen.

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Video: [https://sermonindex2.b-cdn.net/rs\\_mGMVgPEM.mp4](https://sermonindex2.b-cdn.net/rs_mGMVgPEM.mp4)

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