

The Legacy of Antioch

by John Piper

The sermon emphasizes the importance of crossing cultural barriers, following God's leading, and being filled with the Holy Spirit to fulfill the Great Commission.

Duration: 46:52

Scripture: Matthew 28:18-20, Acts 11:19-26, Acts 13:1-3, Acts 13:22-23, Acts 14:21-23, Acts 15:36-41, Acts 16:6-10

Topics: "Missions"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher discusses the challenges and fears that come with following God's plan. He emphasizes that despite our doubts and insecurities, God promises to be with us always. The preacher encourages the audience to be open to significant changes in their lives, especially if they feel restless or sense that there is more to their calling. He also highlights the importance of crossing cultural barriers to share the gospel with unreached peoples, emphasizing the difficulty of this work but also the need for someone to do it. The sermon concludes with a call for individuals to come forward and make a public commitment to follow God's leading in their lives.

Transcript

The following message is by Pastor John Piper. More information from *Desiring God* is available at www.desiringgod.org And if you will, please join us in reading this passage, Acts 11, verses 19 through 26. Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except Jews.

But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who on coming to Antioch spoke to the Hellenists also, preaching the Lord Jesus. And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number, who believed, turned to the Lord. The report of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch.

When he came and saw the grace of God, he was glad. And he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose, for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were added to the Lord.

So Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul. And when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. For a whole year they met with the church and taught a great many people.

And in Antioch, the disciples were first called Christians. Let's pray. With fear and trembling, Father, we ask that you would call this weekend hundreds of people, some young, some retired, some in the middle of their careers, that you would call hundreds of people to long-term cross-cultural missionary service.

We tremble because the places that are yet to be reached and the peoples that are yet to be penetrated don't want us to come. And they are dangerous places. And that is no reason not to go.

So God, I pray for miracles around the world for the spread of the gospel, that doors would be flung wide in places where we never dreamed they would, and that hundreds of our people would rise up and walk through those doors. I ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

So a review of the situation in the world today, in particular the meaning of the term Global South, which is in our missions-focused theme. Global South is a new term. It refers to the astonishing growth of the Christian church in Latin America, Africa, and Asia, while the former centers of Christian domination, Europe and America, are apparently weakening.

A few illustrations. At the beginning of the 20th century, about 71 percent of the professing Christians in the world lived in Europe. By the end of the 20th century, that number was 28 percent.

Forty-three percent of the Christians now lived in Latin America and Africa. In 1900, Africa had 10 million Christians, about 10 percent of the population. By 2000, that number was 360 million, about half of the population.

This is probably the largest shift in religious affiliation that has ever occurred in the history of the world in a continent. There are 17 million baptized members of the Anglican church in Nigeria, compared with 2.8 million in the United States. This past Sunday, more Anglicans attended church in each of Kenya, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda, than did Anglicans in Britain and Canada and Episcopalians in the United States combined.

The number of practicing Christians in China is approaching the number in the United States. Last Sunday, more Christian believers attended church in China than in all of so-called Christian Europe. Kenya has more people in Christian churches on Sunday than Canada.

More believers worship together in Nagaland than in Norway. More Christian workers from Brazil are active in cross-cultural ministry outside of their homelands than from Britain or Canada. In other words, the churches of the global south are increasingly sending churches.

Last Sunday, more Presbyterians were in church in Ghana than in Scotland. This past week in Great Britain, at least 15,000 Christian foreign missionaries were hard at work evangelizing the locals of Great Britain, most of them from Africa and Asia. In a word, as Mark Knoll says, and I got all of those facts from this book, so I just offered, I'm not a genius, I just copy things.

You can do what I did. This is in 2009, Mark Knoll, *The New Shape of World Christianity, How American Experience Reflects the Global Faith*. I haven't even read all of it.

I commend it to you. Mark Knoll says, in a word, the Christian church has experienced a larger geographical redistribution in the last 50 years than in any comparable period in history, with the exception of the very earliest church of history. Now, all of this is great cause for rejoicing for those of us who love the spread of Christ and don't need to be at the center of the glorious things he is doing.

But do not draw the conclusion from those facts that the day of sending missionaries, Christian workers, from the West to the unreached peoples of the non-West is over. That would be a tragic misunderstanding. Partnership with the global South does not mean they do all the outreach and we just send money.

That to me would be like saying, you go ahead and shed your blood, we're not. We'll send money. We'll buy your coffins.

Many people have embraced the uninformed notion that it is always more efficient or more effective culturally to support ministries of the global South to do the work of missions for us instead of our sending missionaries because they're closer. That is uninformed and indeed misinformed to assume that local churches or nearby missionaries in the global South can reach the unreached peoples of the world better than Western missionaries can. Sometimes yes, sometimes no.

It is uninformed, first of all, because in pioneer frontier missionary situations, there are no local churches. None. That's what the definition of an unreached people group is.

There is no local evangelism going on to support. A language must be learned, a culture must be crossed, and sometimes the one that's 500 or 100 miles away is harder to cross than from 5,000 miles away because of ancient animosities. Don't assume.

Don't draw the conclusion that nearer is easier. It may not be. Sometimes yes, sometimes no.

Partnership is not a simple thing. It's a complex thing. The day of Western missions is not over and it will never be over till Jesus comes.

We will never pay others to do our bloodshedding, our dying to self, our doing the incarnational painful work of either crossing the street to Somalis or Native Americans or crossing the oceans to the unreached peoples of Azerbaijan. We're not going there. We're rich.

We send money. We don't get involved. We don't lay our lives down.

Today, you just go to joshuaproject.net for all the magnificent work these guys are doing. joshuaproject.net. 6,552 of the 16,309 ethno-linguistic people groups in the world are classified as unreached, and 1,540 of those peoples are called unengaged, meaning nothing's going on. You can't pay anybody to do that.

We own that. That's our job along with the job of tens of thousands of other Western churches and Global South sending churches. We're all in this together.

Open your Bibles, if you already shut them, please, to Acts chapter 11. Here's what I want to do by God's grace. I've been praying a lot about this, agonizing a lot about it, trembling a lot about it because I fully expect before I'm dead to do the funeral or the memorial service of dead missionaries.

And I'm asking for you to come tonight, today, North Campus, Saturday night, North Campus, Sunday morning, downtown Sunday morning. I'm talking to you, and I'm talking to us here. Tonight, I am seeking hundreds of people.

And the way we do this every year, we've done this for decades, is at the end, I'm going to ask some people to come, and I'll define very clearly because I want obedient people not to come. No guilt thing. But

there's a group I want to stand here at the end, and it will go something like this.

If you believe, and that's a proviso because you don't know for sure. If you believe that God is stirring in you to move you toward a serious pursuit. It's not a done deal.

A serious pursuit of cross-cultural, long-term missions. That's the group I'm going to ask to come. And by long-term, I simply mean longer than two years.

I'd pick a number. I don't want everybody to come. I want real, confident, powerful, happy, zealous, rope-holding, Barnabas team senders to stay in your seats.

But there's a few hundred across these campuses that I know God is moving that way. So that's who I'm after. And I'll just give you the heads up ahead of time so that on all the campuses you can be praying while I preach that God will make clear whether you should come and let me pray for you at the end.

So here's the way we're going to do it. This text, which was chosen months ago by Eric and me and a whole team of people working on what should we do this fall. This text, Acts 11, 19 to 26, is the story of how the gospel of Jesus came to the Gentiles across the barrier of the culture from Judaism to Gentiles in Antioch of Syria.

There are two Antiochs in the Bible. Antioch of Pisidia, that's in Turkey. Antioch of Syria, that's the one we're talking about here.

And my aim is to draw out of this text eight implications for you and me and state them and turn them into pleas and see which ones God, the Holy Spirit, in these rooms will cause to go home to you or not. There's eight of them. All of them might.

One of them might. I think they're all here. I hope to be faithful to the word of God.

I hope not to make anything up here to twist your arm. I just want to say things that are in this text that by God's mercy might be used to do a new thing in your life. Some of you have been considering missions for decades and tonight will be the decisive, yes, I'm gone.

And others of you have not given it a thought. You're totally into your career, rightly so. And out of the blue is going to come something tonight that's going to loosen your roots in five years.

You're gone. That's going to happen. And we love to hear the stories.

I could tell you so many stories about what God has done in these pews in these weeks. So, Lord, do it. Implication number one, someone must cross the cultural barriers that separate unreached peoples from the gospel.

Somebody's got to do it. Some of you are being called to this. Look at verses 19 and 20.

I think this is the hardest work in the world. My job is not the hardest work. I think learning a language, crossing a culture, being incarnational, giving up the you that grew up to be a new you in a new place, in a new culture, that's the hardest thing in the world.

It's what Jesus did from heaven to earth. Now, read the verses with me. Now, those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch

speaking to no one except Jews.

This is what happened. The Jews were scattered. They spoke to Jews.

That was easy. Hard easy, you know, hard easy. Talking to anybody about Jesus is not easy, but there's hard easy and hard hard easy hard.

But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who on coming to Antioch spoke to the Hellenists also preaching the Lord Jesus. Now, Hellenists in this text has to mean Greek speaking Greeks, Greek speaking Gentiles. Otherwise, it wouldn't contrast with Jews.

Sometimes Hellenists means Greek speaking Jews, sometimes Hellenists means Greek speaking Greeks. And here, in order to contrast with Jews, at the end of that previous sentence, it needs to be Greeks and Gentiles. So somebody, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, isn't that interesting? They got scattered from Jerusalem.

They weren't even from Jerusalem. Maybe that's why it was a little easier for them. They never were at home.

Any of you feel not at home in America? Hope so. It's not your home. Our citizenship is in heaven.

So, the gospel had been spreading along monocultural lines, and praise God for that. Talk to the people you know. Praise God.

It's spreading along monocultural lines of Judaism, and then something happens in Antioch. Somebody broke through. They thought it through.

They thought it through. He's Lord of the universe. He's not just the Lord of the Jews.

So we're going outside the camp here, and my question is, is that you? I know it is for some of you, and I'm awakening it, I pray, in others of you. Is that you? Is that why you're on planet Earth? To do that kind of... I'm crossing. I'm crossing.

I'm dying to this, and I'm becoming that. I hope and pray, God is stirring in many of you, to do that crossing. There's no other way for the Great Commission to be done than for a group of people in the church to learn new languages, cross cultures, incarnate the gospel, plant the church.

There's no other way. Won't be done with Twitter. It will be done with flesh and blood, human beings, loving the way Jesus loved, laying down his life.

So consider giving your life to that. What an honor we have at Bethlehem. I mean, I can't look at these slides during Offertory.

I leaned over to Noel and said, that's our legacy. That's our 30-year legacy. We know those kids.

We dedicated some of them as babies. We did their marriages. We watched Ludine and Becky fall in love, and now their kids are in college.

It's a good way to spend your life. Pastoring is okay, but I'm not seeking pastors tonight. I'm seeking another kind of animal.

The implication number two, don't wait to be forced out by persecution. Verse 19a, first part of the verse, now those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled. Don't wait for that.

Here's what happened. The saints in Jerusalem, including the apostles, were going nowhere. I mean, I think last Sunday, last weekend, Timothy preached from Acts 1-8, after you receive power, you'll be my witnesses and you'll go to Judea and Samaria to the ends of the earth, and they didn't until God ripped them.

He killed Stephen, took him out to get him on the road, took him home. He looked into heaven, saw the Lord Jesus standing. Come on home, my most gifted deacon.

Come on home. That'll get them moving. And it did.

We owe our lives to the death of Stephen and the missionary movement that resulted from his death. But you don't have to wait for that to happen, so I'm suggesting that you not wait. He will do that.

He'll take somebody out, take me out tonight. That'd be cool. Whoa, we better go.

Wouldn't that be something? Number three, implication number three, the hand of the Lord will be with you when you follow him into mission. Verse 21, and the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number of who believed turned to the Lord. So I want to be as encouraging right now as I possibly can.

Some of you are sitting there and your imagination is running ahead, you're single woman, single guy, married couple, old, young, you're retired, and you're seeing yourself sitting on 747 in a seat by yourself or with one other person heading to who knows where and saying, what have I done? This was not the plan. This isn't going to work. I'm going to be so depressed when I get there.

And all kinds of thoughts come tumbling to your mind now as I'm preaching. And this is here for that reason, isn't it? Isn't this why this is in the Bible? The hand of the Lord was with them because when Jesus finished his work, he finished it and he gave the great commission. The last thing he said, Lo, I am with you always to the end of the age.

Why did he end like that? Because he knows we're all cowards. We're all frightened. We're all discouraged.

We're all easily depressed. Our emotions are all over the place. How are we going to make such a commitment? I can't carry it through.

I'm a basket case. And our only hope is when you wake up in the morning, I'm going to be there. When you go to bed at night, I'm going to be there.

When you talk to your first person, they roll their eyes, I'm going to be there. When they arrest you and question you, I'm going to be there. At the visa, I'll be there.

At the customs, I'm there. I'm always there. And I have all authority in heaven and on earth.

Go make disciples. So preach to yourself the promises of God. Number four.

Implication number four, be willing to serve a work that has already begun. Verses 22 and 23. The report of this, this meaning the pioneer breakthrough in Antioch, the report of what happened in Antioch came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem.

That's established church. And they sent Barnabas to Antioch. When he came and saw the grace of God, he was glad and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose.

Barnabas was not the first person on the ground in Antioch. He didn't start this work. He's building on another person's foundation.

Now Paul hated to do that. He did it sometimes, but he wanted to go to Spain because he didn't want to build on anybody else's foundation. Barnabas, Barnabas encourager, that's his name.

Son of encouragement. He's a builder. He's happy to go in where somebody else has got the glory for starting the whole thing.

I'm just going to go around to keep on, keep on, keep on. That's his job. So don't shrink back from that.

That's okay. That's beautiful. Some of you are called to that.

It's a noble work. Some of you, I would dare say hundreds of you, are in jobs right now that you know are going to change. You know you're not going to be doing this the rest of your life.

And as you look around, you say, well, good night. There are hundreds of thousands of churches in the United States. There's 1,200 evangelical churches in the Twin Cities, and a whole lot more besides that, and Christians all over the place.

And I could do the same job I'm doing in a place where there's almost no church at all. They'd pay me to go. Take me three years to learn the language, and then, in fact, I'd make a lot of money.

They don't, nobody wants to go there. And I could support two missionaries, and live high on the hog, and be a Christian in the hardest place in the world, working for blank. Some of you thinking that way.

I'm not, I don't want anybody to leave these rooms unshaken. Nobody's career is safe here. Number five, the main prerequisite for this work is not great gifts, but great grace.

Look at verse 23 and 24. When Barnabas came and saw the grace of God, he was glad, and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose, for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit, and of faith. And a great many people were added to the Lord.

Now, there's not a word here about how gifted he was. Maybe he was, maybe he wasn't. I suspect he wasn't, because when he went out with Paul on the missionary journey, his name was always first at the beginning, but there came a point where Paul's name always began to be put first.

Why do you think that was? Paul became the leader just like that. Paul's a madman. I mean, he's just, he's just driven.

He's going to get himself in jail in every city. He's going to get to Spain. He's going to die with a sword of Nero.

And Barnabas is just trying to keep everybody together. I was like, Paul, watch it. Don't say that.

This is poor Mark. He's not classy. He's just solid, just a rock, a good man, full of the Holy Spirit, full of faith.

Now, I don't mean that no qualifications exist for being a missionary. I just mean they're probably not as insurmountable as you think they are, and the real test for you is, can I trust Jesus enough to be filled with the Holy Spirit and then be good, be good, love people. Number six, when you sense God's leading, recruit others to go with you.

Let's demystify the call of God. Let's demystify it. Like, whoa, God's going to come in with a cloud.

Maybe, maybe he'll raise up somebody to go with me. Ask them. Persuade them.

Pay for them. Just jerk them around. Take somebody.

Make it happen. I mean, it is, it is amazing how many people in the history of the world have gone into one kind of ministry or another because somebody just took them and said, you're going with me tonight. I'm going to check this out.

I need to help. You're probably the one. Come on, let's go.

And God, God moves. There wouldn't have been a John Calvin without a William Farrell who told him, you're going to hell if you don't go to Geneva. Not always the best way to do it, but if you can't think of anything else to say, try that.

Barnabas needed a helper. So verse 24, so Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. I can imagine Saul saying, I don't do that.

It's not my job. I don't, I don't teach local churches. I go to Spain.

I do missions. But he came. Barnabas is a quiet, persuasive, encouraging fellow.

And so for a whole year, they worked together. So there's nothing in the text that says God said, Barnabas, go find Saul for he is waiting for you in Tarsus. He just went.

As far as we can tell, I need help. This is a big job. I know one of the best teachers on the planet, Saul.

I'm going to go ask him to come. Ask somebody to go with you. You might be surprised.

They're just waiting. God may be having them ready. Number seven, in all your evangelism and church planting, don't neglect to teach the converts and take them deep into the gospel and build them up so they are stable and strong.

Verse 23, it says that Barnabas exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose. Be steadfast, be rocks, be swayed. Then verse 26, Barnabas and Saul together focused on teaching.

Look at it. For a whole year, they met with the and taught a great many people. Taught, taught, taught.

That's what they did. They just gave themselves to teaching. I'm sure other things were going on in the church, but Barnabas and Saul, one year, teach, teach, teach, teach.

I read on the web this week, a little paragraph from Don Carson, who recounted a half hour visit that he had with an old, old woman who had been converted in the 1904-1905 Welsh revival. All over the world in the early 1900s, God was reviving. He was reviving in Korea, he was reviving here, he was reviving there, and they were all independent, so you knew it was of God.

So she was converted and she was telling him about how glorious the times were. And he said it was an inexpressibly glorious half hour. And then he commented, sadly, how little had been preserved.

Quote, almost nothing was done to capture or develop theological schools, multiply Bible teaching, or train a new generation of preachers. And so Don Carson, in an unusual moment, I think, of public, personal commitment, said this. Should the Lord, the title of this blog entry was What to Do If Revival Comes.

Now, revival is coming in lots of places in the world today. Not here yet, but in lots of places it is just sweeping. And what do you do? This is what he wrote.

Should the Lord, in his mercy, ever pour out large-scale revival on any part of the world where I have influence, I shall devote my energy to teaching the word, training a new generation of godly pastors, channeling all of this God-given fervor toward doctrinal maturity, multiplication of Christian leaders, evangelistic zeal, maturity in Christ, genuine Christian fellowship. In other words, he would do what Barnabas and Saul did here in this text. They saw a great ingathering and they taught and taught and taught.

They strengthened the believers. They sank the roots down deep so that they wouldn't be shaken loose quickly and that the next generation could be brought along to teach and care for the church. So, all over the world, you can read about it, read about it in Operation World, read about it on the internet.

All over the world, this is the heart cry of churches. We need trained, Bible-saturated, solid, strong leaders because we've been way more successful in evangelism in these places than we have in solidifying the results of the evangelism for centuries, which is why you can go to some third world countries today. We've been there 150 years and they're still leaning on us.

That's probably our problem. It's a strategic issue problem. What are we doing for 100 years? That's more complicated than that, I'm sure, but there's something to learn here and some of you are called to that.

Lastly, number eight, be open to a significant change in your life. Some of you know that God is making you restless where you are. You sense deeply that where you are right now is not where you're going to be in five years.

You just know it. Something's not, there's more and you know it. Others of you need to think seriously about possible changes in your life and whether this secure, established position you're in may not be a path to security or an exit ramp to retirement, but a runway for taking off into something new in missions.

Now here to get this point, I need to go to chapter 13. Would you go there? This would be the last text we look at. Acts chapter 13 verses 1 to 3, what happened to Saul, Paul, Saul and Barnabas who plugged in and became part of the church in Antioch, teaching, teaching, what happened to them? They didn't sign up for this.

Verse 1, Acts 13, now there were in Antioch, in the church in Antioch, prophets and teachers, Barnabas, Simeon, who's called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Menaeon, member of the house of the court of Herod, the

tetrarch, and Saul. While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them. And then after fasting and praying, they laid hands on them and sent them off.

So much for a nice, secure, stable, established teaching ministry in Antioch. Barnabas and Saul are now thrust into global missions. They will blaze a trail into an uncharted territory.

We know it is Turkey first and Greece. This is not why they had come to Antioch. This is not why they had come to Antioch.

This is not why you came here tonight to have me do this to you. This is not why most of you are at Bethlehem. But God may have plans for you that you never dreamed of.

So this last point is simply whether you are rock solid 15 years into what you are perfectly made for, or whether you are totally restless, be open. Just ask him. Got anything new for me? Ask him.

The legacy of Antioch is that a mission church became a sending church through partnership, through partnership of Barnabas and Saul, who in the end were sent out by the church to which they were sent. That's the way it works. Isn't that strange? So you think you're sent to Bethlehem for something, and lo and behold, God's going to make Bethlehem a launching pad for something else.

Once upon a time, Bethlehem was a young, newly founded Swedish Antioch 138 years ago. Came out from First Baptist, crossed town over there because they were Swedes and they wanted their own language. So they came over here.

Building's gone now where they first were 138 years ago. Now Bethlehem is a 138-year-old, passionate, sending, strengthening Jerusalem. Oh, how many Antiochs there are in the world yet to be created, yet to be strengthened by partnership, perhaps in the global south, and we partner with them, with our Barnabases and our Sauls and our unnamed men and women of Cyprus and Cyrene who cross a cultural chasm to reach the lost.

So my closing question is, and then I'm going to pray and invite some of you to come, will you in one group rededicate yourselves as more passionately than you've ever been to hold the ropes and pay the way? We have dozens more missionaries at Bethlehem who want to go than our thousands of people are ready to pay for, which is a great concern to me. It's a great concern. There are probably 2,000 people who sit in these pews who don't give anything to this church in all three campuses.

They just sit here. They just come through. And I just want to say for those who are here and here, here, and those who are not here, here, think hard about this.

Pray hard about this. We are a massively happy, joyful, significant sending agency. A million and a half dollars supports those people you saw during the offertory, and it's not enough for another 40, 15 waiting to go and what will happen here this weekend and then be ready.

And we can change that. We can. We are the wealthiest people in the world, and we think times are hard.

The other group, here's the group, and then I'll pray, and then I'll let you come. So now all three campuses are listening. Do you believe, believe, not sure, but you sense that God is stirring in you to lead you to seriously pursue.

You may not go, but you're going to pursue the possibility of cross-cultural, long-term, meaning longer than two years, ministry. That's the group. And here's why I want you to come.

I have three reasons, maybe four. One, I'm going to pray over you as a group. Number two, I want you to make a public statement to yourself, to God, and to these people that that's what God is doing.

I'm going to see God's work. Number three, I want to give you a card. There's going to be some folks here who pass out cards, and the cards are simply, what do you do next? If you're going to be sent out by Bethlehem someday, what do you do? What do you do next? And the last thing is, I think it probably might be used by God to solidify you in this sense, if you let me pray for you publicly like this.

And this could be nine-year-olds or 90-year-olds, okay. Let me pray, and then I'll invite you to come. We're going to play any music, and nobody's going to close their eyes.

We're just going to make this as hard as possible, okay. Let's pray. Father in heaven, I pray that you would confirm at the North Campus tonight, and at the North Campus Sunday morning, and at the downtown campus Sunday morning, and here tonight, I pray that you would confirm your stirrings.

The leading of God is a mysterious thing, isn't it, Lord? How do you do this? How do you get people to do this? Only you know, and then we know. So I pray that you'd confirm it so that mighty and wonderful things would be happening on these campuses, I pray in Jesus' name. 1-888-346-4700 Our mailing address is Desiring God 2601 East Franklin Avenue, Minneapolis, Minnesota 55406.

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