

This Very Year You Are Going to Die!

by Samuel Davies

The sermon emphasizes the certainty of death and the importance of preparing for it by seeking salvation and living a life of obedience to God's will.

Scripture: Proverbs 27:1, Ecclesiastes 9:12, Jeremiah 28:16, Matthew 24:44, Luke 12:20, Acts 17:30, 2 Corinthians 6:2, Hebrews 9:27, James 4:14

Topics: "Mortality Awareness", "Eternal Judgment"

Description

Samuel Davies preaches a powerful sermon at Princeton College in 1761, warning the audience about the certainty and unpredictability of death. He emphasizes the need for serious reflection and preparation to meet the unknown occurrences of life, especially the inevitable event of death. Davies vividly describes the consequences of dying in sin, urging listeners to consider the possibility of their own mortality within the year and the eternal ramifications of being unprepared for death.

Transcript

This very year you are going to die!

by Samuel Davies

(This message was preached at Princeton College on January 1, 1761. The author died shortly after, on February 4--at the age of 37! Thus in a way--he preached his own funeral sermon!)

"Thus says the Lord--I am about to remove you from the face of the earth. This very year you are going to die!" Jeremiah 28:16

While we are entering upon the threshold of a new year, it may be proper for us to stand, and pause, and take a serious view of the occurrences that may happen to us this year--that we may be prepared to meet them. Future contingencies are indeed unknown to us; and this ignorance is as agreeable to our present state, and as conducive to our improvement and happiness--as our knowledge of the things which it concerns us to know. But though we cannot predict to ourselves the particular events that may befall us--yet the events of life in general, in a vague indeterminate view, are not so contingent and unknowable as to leave no room for rational suppositions, and probable expectations.

There are certain events which regularly happen to us every year, and therefore we may expect them this year.

There are others which sometimes occur in the compass of a year, and sometimes do not; such are many of the blessings and afflictions of life; of these we should be apprehensive, and prepare for them.

And there are events which we know are before us, and we are sure they will occur; but at what particular time they will happen, whether this year or next, whether this day or tomorrow--is to us an utter uncertainty.

Such is that most solemn event--the close of the present life, and our entrance into eternity. That we must die--is as certain as that we now live; but the hour or year when we die--is kindly and wisely concealed from us, that we may be always ready, and stand in the posture of constant vigilant expectation; that we may not be surprised. But certainly it befits us to reflect seriously upon the mere possibility of this event happening this year, and realize to ourselves those important consequences that result from this supposition. The mere possibility of this may justly affect us more than the certain expectation of any other futurity. And it is not only possible--but highly probable, death may meet some of us within the compass of this year! Yes, it is highly probable, that if some prophet, like Jeremiah, should open to us the book of the divine decrees, one or another of us would there see our sentence, and the time of its execution fixed! "Thus says the Lord--This very year you are going to die!"

There some of us would find it written, "This year you shall enjoy a series of prosperity--to try if the goodness of God will lead you to repentance." Others might read this melancholy line, "This year shall be to you a series of afflictions: this year you shall lose your dearest earthly support and comfort; this year you shall pine away with sickness, or agonize with torturing pain--to try if the kind severities of a father's rod will reduce you to your duty." Others, I hope, would read the gracious decree, "This year, your stubborn spirit, after long resistance, shall be sweetly constrained to bow to the despised gospel of Christ. This year shall you be born a child of God, and an heir of happiness, which the revolution of years shall never, never, terminate." Oh happy and glorious event! May we hope this mercy is reserved among the secrets of heaven, for any thoughtless impenitent sinner among us!

Others perhaps would read this tremendous doom, "This year my Spirit so long resisted, shall cease to strive with you; this year I will give you up to your own heart's lusts, and swear in my wrath that you shall not enter into my rest." Oh! dismal sentence! None can equal it in terror but one, and that is, "Depart from me, you who are cursed, into everlasting fire!" And the former is an infallible presage of the latter. Others (Oh! let our souls dwell upon the thought!) would probably find the doom of the false prophet Hananiah pronounced against them: "Thus says the Lord--I am about to remove you from the face of the earth. This very year you are going to die!"

This year you may die--for your life is the greatest uncertainty in the world. You have no assurance of another year, another day, or even another moment!

This year you may die--because thousands have died since the last new year's day; and this year will be of the same kind with the last--a time to die for many mortals. The causes of death, both in the human constitution and in the world without, will exist and operate in this year as well as in the last.

This year you may die--for thousands of others will die: it is certain they will--and why may not you? What peculiar security have you to confide in?

This year you may die--though you are young; for the regions of the dead have been crowded with people of your age; and no age is the least security against the stroke of death.

This year you may die--though you are now in health and vigor, and your constitution seems to promise a long life; for thousands of such will be hurried into the eternal world this year, as they have been in years past. The principles of death may be even now working within you, notwithstanding the seeming firmness of your constitution; and you may be a pale, cold, lifeless corpse, sooner than the invalid whose life is apparently near its close!

This year you may die--though you are full of business, though you have projected many schemes, which it may be the work of years to execute, and which afford you many bright and flattering prospects. Death will not consult your leisure, nor be put off until another year--that you may accomplish your designs. Thousands have died before you, and will die this year amidst their golden prospects, and while spinning out their eternal schemes. And what has happened to them--may happen to you.

This year you may die--though you have not yet finished your education, nor fixed your place in life--but are preparing to appear in the world, and perhaps elated with the prospect of the figure you will make in it. Many such abortive students are now in the dust. Many who had passed through a laborious course of preparation for public life, and had inspired their friends, as well as themselves, with high hopes--have been snatched away as they were just stepping upon the stage! And this may be your doom also!

This year you may die--though you are not prepared for it. When death shows you his warrant under the great seal of heaven, it will be no excuse to plead, "But I am not ready!" Though the consequence of your dying unprepared will be your everlasting ruin--yet that dreadful consideration will have no weight to delay the execution!

This year you may die--though you deliberately delay your preparation, and put it off to some future time. You may fix upon the next year, or the decline of life--as the season for religion; but that time may never be at your disposal. Others may live to see it--but you may be engulfed in the boundless ocean of eternity before it arrives, and your time for preparation may be over forever!

This year you may die--though you are unwilling to admit the thought. Death does not slacken his pace towards you, because you hate him, and are afraid of his approach. Your not realizing your latter end as near--does not remove it to a greater distance. Think of it or not--you must die! Your lack of thought can be no defense; and you know not how soon you may feel--what you cannot bear to think of!

This year you may die--though you may strongly hope the contrary, and flatter yourself with the expectation of a length of years. You will not perhaps admit the thought of a short abortive life; but notwithstanding this--you may be a lifeless corpse before this year finishes its revolution!

Thus it appears very possible, that one or other of us may die this year. Nay, it is very probable, as well as possible, if we consider that it is a very uncommon, and almost unprecedented thing, that not one should die in a whole year, out of such a large assembly as this. Several have died the year past, who made a part of our assembly last new year's day. Therefore, let each of us (for we know not on whom the lot may fall,) realize this possibility, this alarming probability, "This year I may die!"

And what if YOU should die? Surely you may be startled at this question; for oh! the surprising change! Oh! the important consequences!

If you should die this year--then all your doubts, all the anxieties of blended hopes and fears about your state and character, will terminate forever in full conviction. If you are impenitent sinners, all the artifices of

self-flattery will be able to make you hope better things no longer; but the dreadful discovery will flash upon you with resistless blaze! You will see, you will feel yourselves such. If you lie under the condemnation of the divine law, you will no longer be able to flatter yourselves with better hopes: the execution of the penalty will sadly convince you of the tremendous truth. To dispute it would be to dispute the deepest heart-felt sensations of the most exquisite misery.

But, on the other hand, if your fears and doubts are the honest anxieties of a sincere, self-diffident heart, ever jealous of itself, and afraid of every mistake in a matter of such vast importance, you will meet with the welcome demonstration of your sincerity, and of your being unquestionably the favorites of heaven. Sensation will afford you conviction; and you will believe--what you see. In short, the possibility that this year maybe your last, may be joyful tidings to you. If you die this year, this year you shall be in heaven, imparadised in the bosom of God! And is it possible that your salvation is so near! Transporting thought!

It would be easy to enumerate several happy consequences of death with regard to those who have spent their life in preparation for it; and the nearness of death, instead of striking them with terror, may heighten the transport of expectation. It would afford me no small pleasure to trace those blessed consequences, and it would be an act of kindness and compassion to the heirs of heaven, many of whom go on mourning and trembling even towards the regions of happiness, as though they were going to the place of execution, and anticipate but very little of those infinite pleasures which are so near at hand.

But I intend to devote the present hour chiefly to the service of a part, perhaps the greater part of my hearers, who are in a more dangerous and alarming situation, I mean such who may die this year--and yet are not prepared; such who are as near to hell as they are to death, and consequently stand in need of the most powerful and immediate applications, lest they be undone forever beyond recovery.

To you, therefore, my dear brethren, my fellow mortals, my fellow candidates for eternity, whose everlasting state hangs in a dread suspense, who have a secret conviction that you are not qualified for admission into the kingdom of heaven, and who cannot promise yourselves that you shall not sink into the infernal pit of hell this year--but upon this supposition, which is the most precarious and doubtful in the world, namely, that you shall live out another year. To you I would address myself with affectionate tenderness, and yet with plainness and pungency. And I beg your most solemn attention to an affair of infinite consequence, to which you may not have another year to attend.

This year you may die! And should you die in your sins this year--you will be forever cut off from all the pleasures of life! Then farewell, an everlasting farewell to all the mirth and gaiety, to all the tempting amusements and vain delights of earth! Farewell to all the pleasures you derive from the senses, and all the gratification of appetite. This year the sun may lose his luster as to you; and all the lovely prospects of nature may become a dismal blank. To you music may lose all her charms, and die away into everlasting silence; and all the gratifications of the palate may become insipid. When you lie in the cold grave, you will be as dead to all such sensations--as the clay that covers you! Then farewell to all the pompous but empty pleasures of riches and honors. The pleasures both of enjoyment and expectation from this quarter will fail forever. But this is not all.

If you should die in your sins this year--then you will have no pleasures, no enjoyments to substitute for those which you will lose. Your capacity and eager thirst for happiness will continue, nay, will grow more strong in your immortal state. And yet you will have no good--real, or imaginary--to satisfy it; and consequently the capacity of happiness will become a capacity of misery; and the privation of pleasure will

be positive pain. Can imagination think of anything more wretched than a creature formed for the enjoyment of the infinite good, pining away forever with hungry, raging desires, without the least degree of gratification! banished at once from the supreme good, and from all the created enjoyments that were accustomed to be poorly substituted in its stead! Yet this may be your case in the short compass of the following year! Oh! what a terrible change! What a prodigious fall!

If you should die in your sins this year--then all your hopes and prospects of a long life, will perish abortive. Several of you now are in a state of education, preparing to enter upon the stage of the world; and you are perhaps often pleasing yourselves with mirthful and magnificent dreams about the figure you will make upon it. You may be planning many schemes to be accomplished in the several periods of a long life: and are perhaps already anticipating in idea the pleasure, the profit, or the honor you expect to derive from their execution. In these fond hopes--your affectionate parents, friends, and teachers concur with generous pleasure.

But, alas! in the swift revolution of this beginning year, all these optimistic expectations and pleasing prospects may vanish into smoke! Youth is the season of promise, full of fair blossoms; but these fair blossoms may wither, and never produce the expected fruits of maturity. It may perhaps be the design of God, that after all the flattering hopes and projects, and after all the pains and expense of a fine education, that you shall never appear upon the public stage; or that you shall vanish away like a phantom, as soon as you make your appearance! Certainly then you should extend your prospects beyond the limits of mortality; extend them into that world, where you will live to execute them, without the risk of a disappointment. Otherwise,

If you should die in your sins this year--then you will not only be cut off from all the flattering prospects of this life--but from all hope entirely, and forever! You will be fixed in an unchangeable state of misery; a state that will admit of no expectation but that of uniform, or rather ever-growing misery; a state that excludes all hopes of making any accomplishment, except as the monuments of the vindictive justice of God, and the deadly effects of sin! How affecting is the idea of a promising youth cut off from the land of the living--useless and hopeless in both worlds! fallen from the summit of hope--into the gulf of everlasting despair! Yet this may be your doom, my dear youth, your doom this very year--if you should die in your sins!

If you should die in your sins this year--then all the ease and pleasure you now derive from thoughtlessness, self-flattery, and suppressing the testimony of your consciences, will forever be at an end! You will then be obliged to view yourselves in a just light, and to know the very worst of your condition. The secret plaudits of self-flattery will be forever silenced, and conscience will recover itself from that state of insensibility into which you have cast it by repeated hardenings, and, as exasperated by your ill-treatment, it will become your everlasting tormentor! It will do nothing but accuse and upbraid you forever; you will never more be able to entertain so much as one favorable thought of yourselves!

And what a wretched state will this be! for a man to be self-condemned! to disapprove of his whole past conduct! to be pleased with nothing in himself--but heartily, though with horror, to concur in the condemning sentence of the Supreme Judge--to esteem himself a fool, a sinner, a base, sordid wretch; an enemy to himself, and the whole universe; a self-destroyer, an outcast from all happiness, and from the society of all happy beings; a vile, odious, useless, miserable, despairing creature forever! O miserable situation! Does it not alarm you to think you may be so near to it?

If you should die in your sins this year--then you will be deprived forever of all the means of salvation. All these are confined to the present life, and have no place in the world of eternal punishment. There the thunders of the divine law roar; but the gentle voice of the gospel never sounds. There the LION of the tribe of Judah tears the prey; but never exhibits himself as a LAMB that was slain, an atonement for sin, and the Savior of the guilty. There conscience exerts its power, not to excite the medicinal anguish of kindly repentance--but the hopeless horrors of everlasting despair! There Jehovah works--but not to enable the sinner to work out his own salvation--but to touch all the springs of painful sensation, and open all the sources of misery in the criminal. There mercy no more distributes her bounties--but justice reigns in her dreadful rigors! There the sanctifying Spirit no more communicates his purifying, all-healing influences--but sin, the great Apollyon, diffuses its deadly poison!

In a word, when you leave this earthly state of trial, all the discipline of the present state, all your advantages for salvation, all the means of grace, and all the encouragements of hope--will be forever removed out of your reach; and consequently all possibility of your salvation will cease forever; for when the necessary means are taken away--the end becomes utterly impossible.

Therefore, if you should die this year--then all your hopes of heaven will vanish forever!

No more happiness for you! You have received your portion in this life--a few years of fleeting, sordid, unsatisfactory happiness! And an entire eternity of misery; permanent, exquisite, consummate misery--follows!

No more honor for you--but shame and everlasting contempt!

No more amusements for you--but only the blackness of darkness forever! Only intense poring upon your hopeless wretchedness! Only tormenting recollections of your past folly and madness of voluntarily rushing into the infernal pit!

No agreeable companions!

No sympathizing friends!

No relaxation!

No pleasing hobbies!

No encouraging prospects!

No comforting hopes!

No token of love!

No gift of grace from the Father of mercy!

No hope in the future!

No relief from the past!

No refuge, no escape--into the gulf of annihilation!

ABOVE you--an angry omnipotent God--and a lost heaven!

BEHIND you--a misspent life, and opportunities of salvation irrecoverably lost!

WITHIN you--a guilty, remorseful conscience--an implacable self-tormentor!

AROUND you--malignant, enraged fiends, mutual tormentors!

BEFORE you--an eternity of hopeless misery, extending infinitely!

Oh tremendous doom!

Who can bear the thought?

And is it possible that this doom should be so near to any of US? Where is the unhappy creature, that we may all drop our tears over him? Where is he? Rather, where is he not? An impenitent sinner is almost everywhere to be found; and that is the wretched creature who stands every moment upon the slippery brink of this horrible precipice! And this year, nay, this hour, for what mortals or angels know, he may be thrown down, engulfed and lost forever!

And is this a safe situation for you, thoughtless, foolhardy mortals!

Does it befit you in such a situation--to be cheerful, merry, and mirthful?

Does it befit you in such a situation--to be busy, restless, and laborious in the pursuits of this transitory life?

Does it befit you in such a situation--to dread nothing but the disasters and calamities of the present state?

Does it befit you in such a situation--to spin out your eternal schemes of grandeur, riches, or pleasures--in hopes to accomplish them within the narrow, uncertain limits of time allotted you?

Alas! before another year has run its hasty round, the world and all that it contains, all its pursuits and enjoyments, all its cares and sorrows--may be as insignificant to you as the grandeur of Caesar, or the riches of the world before the flood.

If you die this year, then . . .

earthly riches or poverty,

liberty or slavery,

honor or disgrace,

joy or sorrow,

sickness or health--

will be as little your concern--as the dust that shall cover your coffin!

Does it not rather befit you to turn your thoughts to another inquiry, "Is it possible for me to escape this impending danger? Where, how, whence may I obtain deliverance?" If you are not desirous seriously to attend to this inquiry--then it will be to no purpose for me to solve it; to you it will appear as a solemn trifle, or an impertinent fantasy. But if you will lay it to heart; if you will, as it were, give me your word that you will

pay a proper regard to it, I shall enter upon the SOLUTION with the utmost alacrity!

I assure you, then, in the first place--that your case is not yet desperate, unless you choose to make it so; that is, unless you choose to persist in carelessness and impenitence, as you have hitherto done. If you now begin to think seriously upon your condition, to break off from your sins, and attend in good earnest upon the means appointed for your salvation--then there is hope concerning you! Yes, miserable sinners! there is hope that this year, which now finds you in so deplorable a state--will introduce you into another state, under the blessing of God--safe from all danger, and entitled to everlasting happiness!

I presume you all know well, the external means you should use for your salvation, that I need not particularly direct you to them. You all know that prayer; reading and hearing the Word of God; meditation upon divine things, sincere conference with such as have been taught by experience to direct you in this difficult work; you all know, I say, that these are the means instituted for your conversion; and if you had right views of things and a just temper towards them--you would hardly need instruction or the least persuasion to make use of them! But to give you such views, and inspire you with such a temper, this is the difficulty. Oh! that I knew how to undertake it with success! I can only give you such directions as appear to me proper and beneficial; but it is the almighty power of God alone, that can give them force and efficacy.

You must learn to think, to think seriously and solemnly upon your danger, and the necessity of a speedy escape. You must retire from the crowd, from talk, business, and amusement, and converse with yourselves alone in pensive solitude. You must learn to think seriously upon the most melancholy and alarming subjects: your present guilt and depravity, and your dreadful doom so near at hand, if you continue in your present condition.

The mind, fond of ease, and impatient of such mortifying and painful thoughts, will recoil, and fly off, and seek for refuge in every trifle! But you must arrest and confine it to these disagreeable subjects; you must force upon it this necessary discomfort--just as you may sometimes take bitter medicines, when your health requires it. There is not any moroseness in this advice; no ill-natured design upon your pleasure and happiness. On the other hand, it is intended to procure you more pleasure and happiness than you can possibly obtain any other way! It is intended to prevent many sorrowful days and years, nay, a complete eternity of misery!

The alternative proposed to you, is not . . .

whether you shall feel the bitter anguish of repentance--or not;

whether you shall be pensive and serious--or not;

whether you shall think upon gloomy and alarming subjects--or not.

This is not at all the state of the case--for . . .

you must feel the sorrows of repentance;

you must be thoughtful and pensive;

you must confine your minds to subjects of terror!

You MUST, whether you will or not! It is utterly unavoidable!

But the only alternative proposed to your choice is--whether you will voluntarily submit to the kindly, hopeful, medicinal, preventive sorrows of repentance in this earthly state of trial, which will issue in everlasting joy! Or whether you will be forced to submit to the despairing pangs, and useless, destructive horrors of 'too late a repentance' in the eternal world; which will only torment you--but not save you; which will be your punishment--and not a means of your salvation, or a preparative for happiness!

Your only choice is--whether you will now contemplate your present miserable circumstances, while hope irradiates even the darkest gloom of discouragement, and the gospel opens such bright and inviting prospects beyond those melancholy views which now first present themselves to your thoughts; or whether you will choose to pine away a doleful eternity in sullen, intense, hopeless porings upon your remediless misery, in remorseful reviews of your past folly, and shocking surveys of endless ages of woe before you!

This is the true state of your case! And can you be at a loss what choice to make! Does not the voice of reason, the voice of conscience, of self-interest and self-love, as well as the voice of God--direct you to choose a few serious, solemn, sorrowful, penitent hours now--rather than to forever regret your choice; and to purchase a few hours of presumptuous ease at the expense of a wretched, despairing eternity? Oh choose life, that you may live! While you indulge a trifling levity of mind, and a roving dissipation of thought--there is no hope you will ever seriously attend to your most important interest, or use the means of grace in earnest. Hence it is that I have made it so much my endeavor today to make you serious and thoughtful.

Ah! my friends! while we laugh--all things are serious round about us. God is serious, who exercises patience towards us! Christ is serious, who shed his blood for us! The Holy Spirit is serious, who strives against the obstinacy of our hearts! The holy Scriptures bring to our ears the most serious things in the world! The whole creation is serious in serving God and us! All who are in heaven and hell are serious! How then can we be mirthful?

I beg you, my dear friends, yield an immediate compliance. Do not delay this great affair for another year--you are not sure that you shall live another year! You may perhaps have time enough to work out your salvation--if you immediately begin to improve it: but, if you loiter--you may perish for lack of time! All the riches of the world will not be able then to redeem one of those precious hours you now squander away!

Let me now make you one of the most reasonable, beneficial, and advantageous proposals that heaven itself can make to you; and that is--that you endeavor to enter upon this new year as new creatures. Let the old man with his affections and lusts die with the old year. "Do not live the rest of his earthly life for evil human desires, but rather for the will of God. For you have spent enough time in the past doing what pagans choose to do--living in debauchery, lust, drunkenness, orgies, carousing and detestable idolatry!" How shocking the thought that your old guilt should follow you into the new year, and haunt you in future times! Oh! begin this year as you would wish to end your life! Begin it so as to give hopes that your future time will be so spent as to render death harmless, and even welcome to you.

Let the possibility suggested in my text, have due weight with you: "Thus says the Lord--I am about to remove you from the face of the earth! This very year you are going to die!"

But perhaps some of you may be inverting this consideration, and whispering to yourselves, "This year I may not die!" and therefore there is no immediate necessity of preparation for death. But what if you

should not die this year, if you still delay the great work for which your time is given you? Alas! if you persist in this--one would think it can give you but little pleasure whether you die this year or not? What end will your life answer--but to add to your guilt, and increase your punishment? What safety can another year afford you--when you must die at last? What valuable end do you intend to answer in future life? Do you purpose to spend this year--as you have your past years?

What! in offending your God!

What! in abusing his mercies!

What! in neglecting the precious seasons of grace!

What! in hardening yourselves more and more in impenitence!

What! in adding sin to sin, and treasuring up wrath against the day of wrath!

Is it worth your while to live for such horrid, preposterous purposes as these? Can you wish for another year with these views? Could you venture to pray for it? Come, put on the hardiness of an infernal fiend, that you may be able to support yourselves, under the horror of the sound: "O supreme Excellence! Author of my being, and all my powers! Father of all my mercies! O righteous Judge of the world! I have spent ten, twenty, or thirty years in displeasing you and ruining myself; but I am not yet satisfied with the pleasures of such a conduct. Grant me, I pray you, another year to spend in the same evil manner. Grant me more mercies to abuse. Grant me more time to misspend. Grant me more means of grace to neglect and profane."

Could you now fall on your knees, and present such petitions to Almighty God? Surely you could not! Surely your body would shudder; nay, would not the heavens gather blackness, and the earth tremble at the sound! But have your temper and practice no language? Language expresses the thoughts and intentions of the mind; and are not the habitual temper and practice--a more certain discovery of the thoughts and intentions, than mere words? words, which may be spoken without a thought, or in a passion, and which may soon be heartily retracted? But the temper and practice--is a steady and sure rule of judging, and decisive of a man's predominant character.

Therefore, while your temper and practice are agreeable to such a prayer: that is, while you are disposed to spend your time that God gives you in sin and impenitence; you are perpetually insulting almighty God with such petitions, and that too in a manner much more expressive and strong, than if you should utter them in words! And can you quietly bear the thought of this horrid blasphemy, which you are constantly breathing out against the God of heaven? Can you wish and pray for another year for this horrid purpose?

What though you should not die this year? Will this exempt you from death forever, or from the punishment of misspent life? Alas! no! This will only render you a greater criminal, and a more miserable wretch in eternity! One more year of sinning--will make a dreadful addition to your account.

Therefore conclude, every one for himself, "It is of little importance to me whether I die this year, or not. But the only important point is, that I make a good use of my future time, whether it be longer or shorter." This, my brethren, is the only way to secure a happy new year--a year of time, that will lead the way to a holy and happy eternity!

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