

Step 27 on Holy Solitude² of Body and Soul

by St. John Climacus

St. John Climacus emphasizes the profound significance of solitude for spiritual growth and the vigilance required to maintain it.

Scripture: Psalm 27:14, Proverbs 4:23, Romans 15:1, 1 Corinthians 10:13, Colossians 3:2, 1 Thessalonians 5:17, Hebrews 11:1, James 1:4, 1 Peter 5:8

Topics: "Spiritual Discipline", "Inner Sanctity"

Description

St. John Climacus preaches about the challenges and rewards of solitude, highlighting the struggles with unholy passions, the importance of self-awareness, and the constant battle against negative thoughts and distractions. He emphasizes the need for vigilance, patience, and unwavering faith in the face of temptations and despondency. Climacus discusses the different aspects of solitude, the dangers of self-will, and the virtues of obedience. He delves into the profound spiritual journey of those who seek true solitude, the discipline required, and the ultimate goal of unceasing worship and waiting upon God.

Transcript

1. We are like bought serfs under contract to unholy passions; we therefore know to some extent the whims, ways, will and wiles of the spirits that rule over our poor souls. But there are others who through the action of the Holy Spirit, and by reason of their liberation from the rule of those spirits, are fully alive to their tricks. The former, being in a painful state of sickness, can only guess about the relief which would come with good health; while the latter, being in a healthy condition, are able to form ideas and draw conclusions about the miseries attendant on sickness. That is why we, who are weak and infirm, hesitate to philosophize in our discourse about the haven of solitude, for we know that at the table of the good brotherhood there is always some cur watching to snatch from it a piece of bread, that is, a soul, and it then runs off with it in its mouth and devours it on the quiet. We do not want our discourse to give room to that dog, and an opportunity to those who are looking for opportunities, and for this reason we do not consider it permissible to talk about peace to the courageous warriors of our King who are struggling in the battle. We will simply remark that crowns of peace and calm are woven for those who do not flag in the fight. But we do not want to grieve anyone by speaking of other things without even mentioning this, and so we shall, if you wish, speak briefly about solitude, if only in order to explain what it is.

2. Solitude of the body is the knowledge and reduction to order of the habits and feelings. And solitude of soul is the knowledge of one's thoughts and an inviolable mind.

3. A friend of solitude is a courageous and unrelenting power of thought which keeps constant vigil at the doors of the heart and kills or repels the thoughts that come. He who is solitary in the depth of his heart will understand this last remark; but he who is still a child is unaware and ignorant of it.

4. A discerning solitary³ will have no need of words, because he expresses words by deeds.

5. The beginning of solitude is to throw off all noise as disturbing for the depth (of the soul). And the end of it is not to fear disturbances and to remain insusceptible to them. Though going out, yet without a word, he is kind and wholly a house of love. He is not easily moved to speech, nor is he moved to anger. The opposite of this is obvious.

6. A solitary is he who strives to confine his incorporeal being within his bodily house,⁴ paradoxical as this is.

7. The cat keeps hold of her mouse, and the thought of the solitary holds his spiritual mouse. Do not call this example rubbish; if you do, then you do not yet know what solitude means.

1 St. Matthew v, 8.

2 Gr. $\eta\sigma\upsilon\chi\iota\alpha$, i.e. 'quiet' or 'contemplation'; this has usually been translated as 'solitude'.

3 I.e. a hesychast, a contemplative, one who lives in solitude or holy quiet.

4 I.e. to shut up in his body, as in a house, all the powers of the soul: thought, imagination, desire, etc.

8. A monk living with another monk is not saved as a solitary monk would be. When a monk is alone he has need of great vigilance and of an unwandering mind. When not alone, the other often helps his brother; but an angel assists the solitary.

9. The celestial powers unite in worship with him whose soul is quiet, and dwell lovingly with him. And the opposite to this is obvious.

10. The depth of the dogmas is profound, and the mind of the solitary does not caper among them without risk.¹

11. It is not safe to swim in one's clothes, nor should a slave of passion touch theology.

12. The cell of the solitary is the confines of his body; he has within a shrine of knowledge.

13. He who is sick in soul from some passion and attempts solitude is like a man who has jumped from a ship into the sea and thinks that he will reach the shore safely on a plank.

14. For all who are struggling with their clay, solitude is suitable at the right time if only they have a director. For angelic strength is needed for the solitary life. I speak of those who lead a life of real solitude of body and soul.

15. The solitary who has become lazy will tell lies, urging people by hints to end his solitude for him. And having left his cell, he blames the devils. He has not discovered that he is his own devil.

16. I have seen solitaries who insatiably nourished their flaming desire for God, generating fire by fire, love by love, desire by desire.

17. The solitary is an earthly image of an angel who with the paper of love and letters of zeal has freed his prayer from sloth and negligence. The solitary is he who openly declares: O God, my heart is ready.² The solitary is he who says: I sleep, but my heart is awake.³

18. Shut the door of your cell to your body, the door of your tongue to speech, and the inner gate to evil spirits.

19. The patience of the sailor is tested in the midday heat or when he is becalmed; and the lack of necessities tries out the perseverance of the solitary. When the one gets discouraged he swims in the water, and when the other gets despondent he mixes with crowds.

20. Do not fear noisy trifles, for mourning⁴ does not know cowardice and is not scared by them.

21. Those whose mind has learned true prayer converse with the Lord face to face, as if speaking into the ear of the Emperor. Those who make vocal prayer fall down before Him as if in the presence of the whole senate. But those who live in the world petition the Emperor amidst the clamour of all the crowds. If you have learned the art of prayer scientifically, you cannot fail to know what I have said.

22. Take up your seat on a high place and watch, if only you know how, and then you will see in what manner, when, whence, how many and what kind of thieves come to enter and steal your clusters of grapes.

23. When the watchman grows weary he stands up and prays; and then he sits down again and courageously takes up his former task.

24. One who had learnt about this from experience wanted to tell others about it exactly and in detail, but he was afraid in case he should damp the enthusiasm of those already practising it, or frighten off with the noise of his words those who were making up their minds to embark upon it.

1 Variant reading: 'and the mind of the solitary jumps over them safely'. 2 Psalm lvi, 8.

3 Song of Songs v, 2.

4 Or, 'penitence'. Cf. St. Matthew v, 4.

25. He who goes into subtle and learned discussions on solitude stirs up demons against himself, for he has no one else to hold up their indecencies to contempt.

26. He who has attained to solitude has penetrated to the very depth of the mysteries, but he would never have descended into the deep unless he had first seen and heard the noise of the waves and the evil spirits, and perhaps even been splashed by these waves. The great Apostle Paul confirms what we have said. If he had not been caught up into Paradise, as into solitude, he could never have heard the unspeakable words.¹ The ear of the solitary will receive from God amazing words. That is why in the book of Job that all-wise man said: 'Will not my ear receive amazing things from Him?'²

27. The solitary is one who runs away from all company though without hatred, just as others run towards it though without enthusiasm. He wishes to go on receiving the divine sweetness.

28. Go and distribute immediately (because to sell would take a long time) all that thou hast, and give to the poor³ monks, so that in their prayers they may accompany you to solitude. And take up thy cross, and carry it with the help of obedience, and vigorously bear the burden of the loss of thy will, and for the future come and follow Me⁴ to union with most blessed solitude, and I will teach you the visible activity and life of the spiritual powers. They never weary of praising their Maker to all eternity, and he who ascends to the heaven of solitude never ceases to praise his Creator. Immaterial spirits will not think about the material, nor will those who have become immaterial in a material body think about food. The first will not be aware of food, and the second will need no promise of it. The former do not think about money and possessions, nor do the latter think about the malice of the evil spirits. Those in heaven above have no desire for the visible creation, and those here on earth below have no desire for things perceived by the senses. The former will never cease to advance in love, and the latter vie with them daily. Those are well aware of the wealth of their progress, and these are conscious of their love of the ascent. Those will not stop until they reach seraphic perfection, and these will not weary until they become angels. Blessed is he who hopes; thrice-blessed is he who has the promise; but he who has the reality is an angel.

Different aspects of solitude and how to distinguish them

29. In all the sciences, as everyone knows, there are differences of opinion and aim. For everything is not perfect in all, either from want of industry or from lack of strength. Therefore some enter this harbour,⁵ or rather this sea, or perhaps this abyss, because they lack control of their tongue or because of a past habit of the body; others because they are without control of their temper and the poor wretches cannot overcome this in crowded society; others because out of conceit they have judged it better to sail at their own discretion than under direction; others because amidst material things they cannot abstain from such; some with the intention of cultivating zeal by solitude; others to torment themselves secretly for their faults; and some in order to acquire glory for themselves from it; others again (if only the Son of Man when He comes may find such on earth) are wedded to holy solitude out of a delightful thirst for the love and sweetness of God, but they do not achieve this union before they have divorced all despondency; because fellowship with despondency would seem like adultery to anyone who is united with God.

30. As far as my meagre knowledge permits (for I am like an unskilled architect) I have constructed a ladder of ascent. Let each look to see on which step he is standing: Is it self-will, or human glory, or weakness of tongue, or hot temper, or too great attachment? Is it to atone for faults, or to grow more

1 2 Corinthians xii, 4. 2 Job iv, 12-18.

3 St. Matthew xix, 21. 4 Matthew xvi, 24.

5 I.e. of solitude or contemplation.

zealous, or to add fire to fire? The last shall be first, and the first last. The first seven are the activities of this world's week, some acceptable, and some unacceptable. But the eighth clearly bears the seal of the world to come.

31. Watch, solitary monk, be vigilant at the times when wild beasts prowl; otherwise you will not be able to adapt your snares to them. If despondency which you have divorced has completely left you, then the task will be superfluous. But if she still puts herself forward, then I do not know how you can live in solitude.

32. Why did the holy fathers of Tabennisi never have so many lights¹ as those of the Scete? Understand this who can. I cannot speak, or rather, I do not wish to.²

33. Some diminish the passions, others sing psalms and spend most of their time in prayer, while some apply themselves to contemplation, and live their life in profound contemplation. Let the question be investigated after the manner of the ladder. He who is able to receive this, let him receive it in the Lord.³

34. There are idle souls living in monasteries, and by indulging in what nourishes their idleness they come to complete ruin. But there are also souls who through living with others strip themselves of their idleness. And the same thing often occurs not only with the careless, but with the zealous too.

35. We can apply this same rule to solitude. For it is true that many whom the solitary life has received as experienced it has rejected for wilfulness, convicting them of desire to please themselves; while others who have come to this way of life have been more zealous and fervent through fear and anxiety about the condemnation that they will have to bear.

36. He who is still troubled by bad temper and conceit, by hypocrisy and remembrance of wrongs, should never dare to set foot in the solitary way, lest he gain distraction and nothing else. But if anyone is clear of these, he will know what is best--and yet I think, perhaps not even he.

37. Here are the signs, courses and proofs of those who are practising solitude in the right way: an unruffled mind, sanctified thought, rapture towards the Lord, recollection of eternal torments, the urgency of death, constant hunger for prayer, unsleeping vigilance, wasting away of lust, ignorance of attachment, death to the world, loss of gluttony, a sure understanding of divine things, a well of discernment, a truce accompanied by tears, loss of talkativeness, and many such things which the common run of men are wont to find quite alien to them.

38. And here are the signs of those who are practising solitude in the wrong way: dearth of (spiritual) wealth, increase of anger, a hoard of resentment, diminution of love, growth of vanity; and I will be silent about all the rest which follow.⁴

39. But our chapter has now reached the point at which we must consider the case of those living in obedience; all the more so because this chapter is especially meant for them.

40. The signs of those who are lawfully, unadulterously and sincerely wedded to this orderly and fair obedience, both in reality and according to the teaching of the inspired Fathers, are these--and everyday (if only we have consecrated a day to the Lord)⁵ they reach forward and obtain increase and progress so that they become perfect in due time: an increase of elementary humility, a lessening of bad

1 Cf. 'he was a burning and shining light' (St. John v, 35).

2 The great work of quiet or contemplation is a means or cause of greater progress than the active life of a community. Pachomius's foundation at Tabennisi was famed for its cenobitic character, whereas the desert of Scete was a centre for solitaries in the fourth century and later.

3 St. Matthew xix, 12. In the spiritual life we must begin with the humbler virtues and climb by them to the heights, just as a ladder is used to elevate one from a lower to a higher state.

4 That is, 'I will be silent about bodily falls and mental derangements.' 5 The words in brackets are missing in some Greek texts.

temper (for how can it not decrease as the gall is exhausted?), dissipation of darkness, access of love, estrangement from passions, deliverance from hatred, diminution of lust through continual scrutiny, ignorance of despondency, increase of zeal, compassionate love, banishment of pride. This is the achievement which all should seek, but few attain. A well without water does not deserve the name. And what follows, he who is capable of thought already knows.¹

41. A young wife who has not been faithful to her marriage bed has defiled her body; and a soul who has not been faithful to his vow has defiled his spirit. Reproach, hatred, thrashings and, most wretched of all, separation will befall the first. The other will have to face: pollution, forgetfulness of death, insatiability of stomach, lack of control of the eyes, working for vainglory, pining for sleep, hardening of the heart, deadness and insensibility, rank growth of wrong thoughts and an inclination to allow them, captivity of the heart, disturbance of spirit, disobedience, contradiction, attachment, unbelief, scepticism, talkativeness and, worst of all, free familiarity; and still more wretched, a heart without compunction which in the negligent is followed by indifference, the mother of devils and falls.

42. Out of the eight evil spirits, five² assail those practising solitude, and three³ those living in obedience.

43. He who is practising solitude and fighting despondency often suffers great harm, for he wastes time which should be given to prayer and contemplation in tricks and wrestlings to battle against it.

44. Once, having become slack, I was sitting in my cell and thinking of leaving it. But some people came to me and began to praise me not a little for my solitary life, and at once the thought of slackness gave place to the thought of vainglory. And I was amazed at how this three-horned demon opposes all the other spirits.

45. Observe every hour the slaps and flicks, the inclinations and changes of your companion (i.e. the spirit of despondency) and see how and where they are directed. He who has obtained calmness through the Holy Spirit is familiar with this spectacle.

46. The preliminary task of solitude is the disengagement from all affairs, whether laudable or not; for he who allows even laudable ones will certainly fall into those which are not. The second task of solitude is earnest prayer. And the third is inviolable activity of the heart.⁴ It is physically impossible for one who does not know the alphabet to study books. It is still more impossible for one who has not attained to the first to pass in the right way to the last two tasks.

47. Engaged in the middle task, I was among the middle orders; and an angel enlightened me, thirsting as I was. And again I was among them, and when I asked: 'What was the Lord before He took visible form?' the angel could not tell me, for he was not allowed. So I asked him: 'In what state is He now?' He replied: 'In the state proper to Him, but not in this (our state).' I asked: 'What is the meaning of the standing and sitting on the right hand of the Father?' He said: 'It is impossible to grasp these mysteries by hearing with the human ear.' I implored him on the spot to lead me where my longings drew me,⁵ and he said: 'The hour has not yet come, because the fire of incorruption does not yet burn sufficiently within you.' Whether I was then with this earth, I know not; or out of it--I am quite unable to say.⁶

48. It is difficult to overcome the midday nap, especially in the summer time; then, and perhaps only then, is manual work permissible.

49. In my experience the demon of despondency prepares and clears the way for the demon of lust, so that by violently weakening the body and plunging it in sleep the latter may produce pollutions in

1 That is, anyone lacking the signs or proofs just mentioned cannot be called obedient. 2 I.e. pride, vainglory, sloth, despondency, and covetousness (cf. Step 26: 2).

3 I.e. gluttony, anger, lust.

4 That is, none of the activity is stolen or diverted to lower ends.

5 I.e. to the vision of God. 6 2 Corinthians xii, 2 ff.

those practising solitude by means of a lifelike dream. If you resist these demons vigorously, then they will certainly launch a violent attack upon you in order to make you stop your labours on the ground that you are doing yourself no good. But nothing can prove the defeat of the demons so clearly as the violence with which they attack us.

50. When you come out of solitude, guard what you have gathered. When the cage is opened, the birds fly out. And then we shall find no further profit in solitude.

51. A small hair disturbs the eye, and a small care ruins solitude; because solitude is the banishment of thoughts and ideas, and the rejection of even laudable cares.

52. He who has really attained to solitude does not give a thought to his flesh; for He who has promised¹ will not prove false.

53. He who wishes to present his mind pure to God, and is agitated by cares, is like a man who has tied his legs tight together and then expects to walk briskly.

54. Those who are thoroughly versed in secular philosophy are indeed rare; but I affirm that those who have a divine knowledge of the philosophy of true solitude are still more rare.

55. He who has not yet known God is unfit for solitude and exposes himself to many dangers. Solitude chokes the inexperienced; not having tasted the sweetness of God, they waste time in being taken captive, robbed, made despondent and subjected to distractions.

56. He who has experienced the good which comes from prayer will shun crowds like a wild ass; for what, if not prayer, makes him like a wild ass and free from all contact with people?

57. He who is gripped by passions and lives in the desert allows his mind to listen to their chatter. So the holy elder, I mean George Arsilaites, who is not entirely unknown to your reverence,² once told me and taught me. He once directed my worthless soul and, guiding me towards solitude, he said: 'I have noticed that in the morning it is usually the demons of vainglory and concupiscence who make assaults upon us; at midday the demons of despondency, repining and anger; and in the evening, those dung loving tyrants of the wretched stomach!

58. It is better to live (as a cenobite) in poverty and obedience than to be a solitary who has no control of his mind.

59. He who has entered into solitude in the right way and does not see its daily reward is either practising it in the wrong way or else is being robbed of this by his self-esteem.

60. Solitude is unceasing worship and waiting upon God.

61. Let the remembrance of Jesus³ be present with each breath, and then you will know the value of solitude.

62. For the monk under obedience self-will is the fall, but for the solitary it is a breach in prayer.

63. If you rejoice in having visitors to your cell, know that you are not taking a holiday from despondency alone, but from God.

64. The model for your prayer should be the widow who was wronged by her adversary,⁴ and for your solitude--the great and angelic solitary Arsenius. Remember in your solitude the life of this great hermit, and see how often he sent away those who came to him, so as not to lose the better part.⁵

1 Hebrews x, 32. Cf. St. Matthew vi, 25-34.

2 I.e. John, Abbot of Raithu.

3 This patristic expression denotes the Prayer of Jesus and not the simple remembrance of the Name of Jesus. 4 St. Luke xviii, i--8.

5 I.e. Mary's part (cf. St. Luke x, 42).

65. My experience is that the demons often persuade foolish gadabouts to visit those living in solitude in the right way so as to use even such as those to throw some hindrance in the way of these active men. Look out for such people, and do not be afraid of offending these idle bodies by your devout behaviour; because, as a result of this offence, they will perhaps stop gadding about. But see that you do not mistakenly offend a soul who in his thirst has come to draw water from you. In all things you need the light (of discretion).

66. The life of those practising solitude, and especially those who are quite alone, should be guided by conscience and common sense. He who runs his race in the right way, and performs all his undertakings, utterances, thoughts, each step, every intention and every movement according to the Lord, works for the Lord's sake with spiritual fervour as though in the Lord's presence. If he is robbed, he is not yet living by the rules of virtue.

67. I will expound, says someone, my proposition and my will on the harp,¹ according to my still imperfect judgment. As for me, I shall offer my will to God in prayer, and from Him I shall receive assurance.

68. Faith is the wing of prayer; without it, my prayer will return again to my bosom. Faith is the unshaken firmness of the soul, unmoved by any adversity. A believer is not one who thinks that God can do everything, but one who believes that he will obtain all things. Faith paves the way for what seems impossible; and the thief proved this for himself.² The mother of faith is hardship and an honest heart; the latter makes faith constant, and the former builds it up. Faith is the mother of the solitary; for if he does not

believe, how can he practise solitude?

69. He who is chained up in prison fears the judge who sentences him, but the hermit in his cell brings forth fear of the Lord; and the tribunal is not so terrifying to the former as the throne of the Judge is to the latter. You need great fear for solitude, excellent man, because nothing else is so effective in dispelling despondency. The convict is continually looking to see when the judge will come to the prison; and the true worker wonders when the angel of death will come. A burden of sorrow oppresses the former, but the latter has a fountain of tears.

70. Bring out the staff of patience, and the dogs will soon stop their insolence. Patience is a labour that does not crush the soul and never wavers under interruptions, laudable or the reverse. The patient man is a faultless worker, who turns his faults into victories. Patience is the limitation of suffering that is accepted day by day. Patience lays aside all excuses and all attention to herself. The worker³ needs patience more than his food because the one brings him a crown, while the other may bring ruin. The patient man has died long before he is placed in the tomb, having made his cell his tomb. Hope engenders patience and so does mourning; but he who has neither is a slave to despondency.

71. Christ's warrior should know what foes to parry from a distance, and which to fight at close quarters. Sometimes the combat has earned a crown; sometimes refusal has made men reprobate. It is not feasible to lay down precepts in such matters, for we have not all got the same character or dispositions.

72. There is one spirit on which you should keep a vigilant eye; he is the one who assails you unceasingly during your standing, walking, sitting, movement, rising, prayer and sleep.

1 Psalm xlviii, 4.

2 Cf. St. Luke xxiii, 42-3.

3 I.e. the contemplative or practiser of solitude.

73. Not all loaves of the heavenly wheat of this spiritual food have the same appearance. Some people in the field of solitude ever cultivate within them this thought: I see the Lord before me continually;¹ but others: In your patience you will win your souls;² some: Watch and pray;³ others: Prepare thy works for thy death;⁴ some: I was humbled and he saved me;⁵ some: The sufferings of the present time are not worthy to be compared with the future glory;⁶ and others always have in mind the words: Lest he snatch you away and there be none to deliver you.⁷ For all run, but one receives the prize⁸ without effort.

74. He who makes progress works not only when awake but when asleep as well. So even in sleep some snub the demons who approach them and admonish dissolute women in the matter of chastity. But do not expect visits and do not prepare for them beforehand, because the state of solitude is perfectly simple and free.

75. No one intending to build a tower and cell of solitude will approach this work without first sitting down and counting the cost, and he will feel his way by prayer, considering whether he has within him the necessary means for completing it, so that he should not lay the foundation and then become a laughing-stock to his enemies and an obstacle to other workers.⁹

76. Examine the sweetness you feel in your soul, lest it be compounded craftily by cruel physicians, or rather treacherous ones.

77. Devote the greater part of the night to prayer and only what is left to recital of the psalter. And during the day again prepare yourself according to your strength.

78. Reading¹⁰ enlightens the mind considerably, and helps it concentrate. For those are the Holy Spirit's words and they attune those who attend to them. Let what you read lead you to action, for you are a doer.¹¹ Putting these words into practice makes further reading superfluous. Seek to be enlightened by the words of salvation¹² through your labours, and not merely from books. Until you receive spiritual power do not study works of an allegorical nature because they are dark words, and they darken the weak.¹³

79. Often one cup of wine is sufficient to reveal its flavour, and one word of the solitary makes known to those who can taste it his whole inner state and activity.

80. Have the eye of your soul fixed firm against conceit or self-opinion, for nothing is so banefully destructive.

81. When you leave your cell be sparing with your tongue, because it can scatter in a moment the fruits of many labours.

82. Try to unlearn officiousness and curiosity; for they can spoil solitude as nothing else can.

1 Psalm xv, 8.

2 St. Luke xxi, 19.

3 St. Matthew xxvi, 43.

4 Proverbs xxiv, 27.

5 Psalm cxiv, 5.

6 Romans viii, 18.

7 Psalm xlix, 22.

8 1 Corinthians ix, 24.

9 St. Luke xiv, 28-30.

10 I.e. Holy Scripture.

11 James i, 22.

12 Lit. 'by the words of health'.

13 Anagogical writings appear to mean one thing, but in reality mean something quite different. Being words of

darkness, or at any rate puzzling and unclear, they may injure those who cannot go beyond the letter and proceed in the Spirit, being taken at their face value, as the Song of Songs and such like.

83. Offer to those who visit you what is necessary both for the body and for the spirit. If they are wiser than we are, let us show our philosophy by silence. And if they are brethren following the same way of life, let us open the door of speech to them in due measure. Yet it is better to regard all as superior to us.¹

84. I wanted to forbid to those who were still children all bodily work at the time of the church services,² but he who carried sand all night in his cloak restrained me.³

85. What is said in the dogma of the holy, uncreated and adorable Trinity contrasts with the doctrine of the providential Incarnation of One of the Persons of this all-hymned Trinity--for what is plural in the Trinity is single in Him; and what there is single, here is plural.⁴ And in the same way some habits of life are suitable for solitude and others for obedience (in a community).

86. The divine Apostle says: Who has known the mind of the Lord?⁵ And I will say: Who has known the mind of the man who is a solitary in body and spirit?

87. The power of a king consists in his wealth and the number of his subjects; the power of a solitary in abundance of prayer.

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