

WHY?

Seeing God in Our Pain



Bill Crowder



introduction

The Why Question

Seeing God in Our Pain

From childhood, we want things our way. "I don't want peas; I want ice cream!" "Why do I have to take a nap?" "Do I have to stay in the backyard?"

As we get older, we gain more freedom. Soon enough, most of us get to make all the choices we care to make. We're designed for freedom. All human beings crave it.

But we are also designed for responsibility—for ourselves and for each other. “No man is an island,” wrote poet John Donne. He was talking about how even a single death affects each one of us, but his observation applies to all of life. Each human choice has a ripple effect on the rest of humanity. We cannot avoid it.

God gave us the freedom to choose. When Adam and Eve exercised that freedom, their shortsighted choice introduced evil into the world. We still have that freedom, but we live with its consequences too. And it doesn't feel very free.

Why is there suffering? Should we blame God for it? What role does our God-given freedom to choose play in the evil we see every day? What does it mean to be truly free?

Our Daily Bread Ministries

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one

The Problem of Pain

The tranquil blue waters of the Indian Ocean off the western shore of Sri Lanka belied the devastation of just a few months earlier. In 2004 an earthquake in the Indian Ocean caused a tsunami that decimated the region. The losses were catastrophic. The impact of the ocean's surge bordered on incomprehensible: over 200,000 lives were lost in 14 different countries. But it was the tiny island of Sri Lanka that absorbed the brunt of nature's force. When the water finally receded, over

35,000 were dead, 21,000 more were injured, and half a million people had lost their homes and their lives were completely disrupted. The tsunami impacted Sri Lanka on a national, community, family, and personal level.

In May 2011, half a world away from Sri Lanka's catastrophe, an immense tornado swept through Joplin, Missouri. With winds reaching 250 miles per hour, the tornado cut a swath of destruction through the city that took the lives of 158 people, injuring another 1,150, and leaving behind \$2.8 billion in damages.

In between those events, a scene of personal suffering took place at the Grand Rapids, Michigan, airport. Across the tarmac a casket was being removed from a plane, and a grieving family was trying to make sense of it all. As we boarded the plane, the pilot came over the speakers and asked everyone on the right-hand side of the plane to lower their window shades. "One of our soldiers has just returned home and we would like to give his family some privacy."

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I care about—the unexpected death of a child or spouse; a child who has become a prodigal; the loss of marriages, jobs, homes, friendships—life seems punctuated by pain, loss, and grief.



The mosaic of life is pieced together from all kinds of events. At a distance, the whole image can appear beautiful. But the beauty of the whole is not always visible in each event. Some events add a splash of beauty and color. Other times darken the image. They are ugly and black. Those are times of suffering. Clouds of fear, pain, heartache, and loss often overshadow our happy moments of joy and celebration. Our pain is not limited to the moment of the events. The jagged edges of our pain scratch deep lines of fear and doubt into our minds.

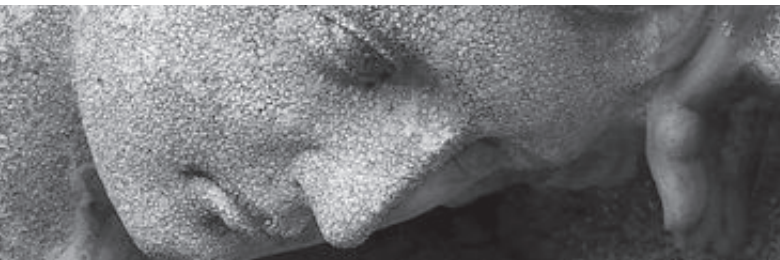
While our experiences are unique to us, they are not unusual to the human race. Pain and suffering are the common bonds that shackle us together. And though we know we are not alone, that knowledge offers no comfort. We wonder: *Why is there so much suffering and pain?*

In a world fractured by both natural and manmade disasters—human trafficking, addiction, disease, poverty, hunger, genocide, war, storms (literal and metaphorical)—fears and doubts seem as *natural* as the disasters that

give rise to them. And those fears and doubts are often directed at a God we expect to be good and powerful, yet who sometimes seems unwilling, or perhaps unable, to stop the heartaches and losses of a broken world.

Why does suffering happen? Where is God when suffering happens? And can we trust His goodness even when we suffer? While we may not be able to uncover complete answers to these questions, some digging may reveal responses to what Philip Yancey says is "the question that won't go away." In our search we can unearth fresh reasons for turning to God, because as Sri Lankan Ajith Fernando says, He is the "God who groans with us." The Bible describes His love for us as trustworthy even when our circumstances seem unbearable.

The wisdom of the Bible can help us sift through important questions as we clear away the debris in our search to understand pain and suffering.



two

Why Do We Suffer?

If you've been up all night and cried till you have no more tears left in you—you will know that there comes in the end a sort of quietness. You feel as if nothing was ever going to happen again.

(C.S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*)

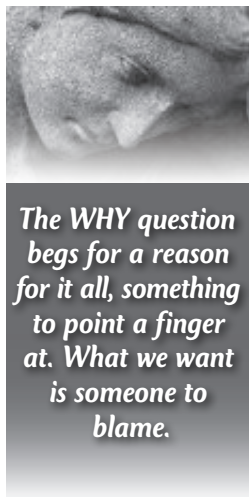
Philip Yancey writes, "Oh, how we long for an answer to that everlasting question ('Why?'). Sarajevo and other wars we can blame on human evil that has brought about incalculable sufferings.

Newtown, Boston, and similar tragedies we can blame on mental illness or radical ideology or bad gun laws or negligent parenting. Tsunamis and other natural disasters, absent anyone else to blame, we classify as 'acts of God.'"

The shadow of the question *why* has crept over us all. It is an important question. Even Jesus cried out, "My God, my God, *why* have you forsaken me?" (MATTHEW 27:46, EMPHASIS ADDED). The *why* question begs for a reason for it all, something to point a finger at. What we want is someone to blame.

Some blame God, suggesting that He is, at best, incapable of preventing our pain. At worst, He is disinterested. Others say that suffering is caused by the devil. Our pain is the result of his evil work. Still others say that there is no answer, nothing or no one to blame. The universe simply is the way it is, that the only place to look for answers is within ourselves.

The Bible, however, tells us a different story. According to Genesis, suffering is the potential (and obviously unwelcome) companion of something so natural and



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good that it's hard to imagine being without it—the ability to choose.

God's original creation. Genesis 1 describes the events of creation. God looked out over everything He had made and said it was "very good" (GENESIS 1:31). Our suffering was not a necessary part of the equation. The first man and woman enjoyed an existence filled with meaning, purpose, enjoyment, and, best of all, unhindered relationship with God and uninhibited relationship with one another. This condition, however, was not impervious. God not only gave Adam and Eve the gift of a paradise for a home, meaning for their lives, and access to Himself—He also gave them the opportunity to choose whether or not they wanted those things.



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The gift of choice. The events recorded in Genesis 3 have become known as, simply, "the fall." What is written there could never have happened if God created humanity to operate automatically, always humming along smoothly to the rhythm of His will, not able to

choose a different beat. Instead, the Creator allowed them to choose their own way: "The LORD God commanded the man, saying 'From any tree of the garden you may eat freely; but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you will surely die'" (GENESIS 2:16–17).

🔗 **The fall** refers to the choice Adam and Eve made to disobey God and to their subsequent fall from perfect relationship with Him.

It was not a complicated choice, but it wasn't exactly simple. The uncomplicated part was the choice whether or not to eat; but with this choice, the man and woman were also deciding whether life would be lived on their terms or on their Creator's terms. They chose their own way. When the choice was made (GENESIS 3:6–7), the curtain fell and the first couple entered into a new reality—a reality no longer shaped exclusively by the goodness of God. Life, for them and for everyone that followed them, would be shaped by the implications and consequences of their choice to go their own way, rejecting God's guidance.

The result of choice. In *Mere Christianity*, C. S. Lewis described the implications of Adam and Eve's choice: "Out of that hopeless attempt has come nearly all that we call human history—money, poverty, ambition, war, prostitution, classes, empires, slavery—the long terrible

story of humanity trying to find something other than God which will make us happy." All generations have shuddered with the aftershocks of that choice. We not only shoulder the weight of the consequences resulting from Adam and Eve's choice, we also hunch under the burdens created by our own choices.

Despite the potentially disastrous effects of choosing—most obvious in the broken relationship between God and us—God still allows us to choose. Our choices have extraordinary impact. With the gift of choice came the reality that choosing produces effects. We cannot embrace the ability to choose and yet reject the fact that choosing has results. When we choose, something happens, and conversely, something else doesn't happen. Choices have consequences.

Referring to the story of Adam and Eve's choice, Philip Yancey tells his students, "You are free to reject God and the way this world runs. I, for one, respect a God who not only gives us the freedom to reject Him, but also includes the words of rejection in our scriptures." This



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rejection answers one *why* question but raises another:

Why is there suffering, brokenness, and struggle in our world? Because God allowed humanity to choose—and the world around us carries the weight of the choice and the subsequent choices that have been made.

But...

Why does that matter? Because our choices, like Adam and Eve's, do not occur in a vacuum. They have consequences.

What are those consequences like?



three

The Consequences of Choice

We were promised sufferings. They were part of the program [after Adam and Eve]. We were even told, “Blessed are they that mourn,” and I accept it. I’ve got nothing that I hadn’t bargained for. Of course it is different when the thing happens to oneself, not to others, and in reality, not imagination.

(C. S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*)

For every action, there is a reaction. Choices have results. Adam and Eve’s decision had consequences that ranged from personal to interpersonal and from immediate to eventual.

The immediate aftereffects of Adam and Eve's choice describe the stark reality of our world—a world suffering as the consequences of choice. As the story of Genesis moves away from the garden of Eden, a variety of consequences unspool. They include:

The immediate consequences. Adam and Eve were not only the first to introduce sin and suffering to the world, they were also the first to feel its consequences. Those consequences occurred in several critical areas of life.

First, suffering was introduced into the creation. Work would now be toil¹⁶ (GENESIS 3:17–19). The work that seems to have originally held pure satisfaction was now shrouded in disappointment and harsh labor. Rather than enjoying abundant fruit for his work, Adam had to battle the elements of creation that were now influenced by the curse. The toil of work hasn't faded in the generations since Adam; we still fight to see our labor accomplish what we intend.

↗ *The word translated **toil** in Genesis 3:17 of most English versions is the Hebrew word **itsabon**. The root of this word, **asab**, connotes sorrow and alludes to the act of grueling labor with difficult or disappointing results.*

Second, the relationship between the man and woman was affected. Their sense of innocence (GENESIS 2:25)

was replaced by shame and self-consciousness (GENESIS 3:10). In the new reality of life in a fallen world, their mutually beneficial work and cooperation would turn into domination and tension. For Eve, the joy of childbearing that was intended to fill the world with more who were in the image of God, would now be marked by pain and labor in childbirth (GENESIS 3:16).

Ultimately, however, the relationship most severely harmed by choice was humanity's relationship with God. Humanity's unhindered communion was now broken and lost. The choice of disobedience drove a wedge between the Creator and the people created in His image. The life the Creator had breathed into the man would eventually be extinguished, perhaps not immediately but inevitably (GENESIS 3:19), and not just in Adam and Eve but also in every human since.

The immediate and life-altering consequences of that first choice were reflected in the personal and private aspects of Adam and Eve's lives. The consequences,



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however, went beyond those immediately suffered by the man and the woman and extended to all who would come after them in the human race.



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Suffering because of the choices

of others. In one way, all of us bear the consequences of Adam and Eve's choices. In a clearly different way, however, as we move forward to the first children, we also see that all of us make choices—and those choices often hurt others just as harshly as they hurt us. In the story of Cain and Abel (GENESIS 4:1–12), we find the first brothers—brothers whose conflict and rivalry ended in murder. ▶

▶ *When Cain's jealousy of Abel reached its breaking point, God reminded Cain of his ability to choose. "Sin is crouching at the door; and its desire is for you, but you must master it" (GENESIS 4:7).*

The first homicide was tragic in itself, but it also demonstrates the kind of suffering that our choices can inflict on others, especially when our choices are driven by selfish ambition. Often, the wrong that others perpetrate spills over into the lives of the innocent. In holocausts and genocides, countless lives are offered

as sacrifices to the gods of self and selfishness. In the pursuit of power, wealth, or both, the cost in human life and suffering is the highest price of the choices of hearts twisted in brokenness.

Suffering because of living in a broken world. As humanity spread throughout the world God had made, betrayals, violence, abuse, war, and so much more spread with it, their choices revealing how far from Eden and God humanity had strayed. This became painfully clear in Genesis 6:5–7, as the brokenness of a fallen race so greatly grieved the heart of God that He sent a flood to destroy the earth. From there, He would start over.

The cataclysmic event of the flood, however, also reflects the impact that human choice had on creation. The flood revealed the growing influence of sin; it also showed that creation itself would bear the consequences of the choices humanity makes. The apostle Paul affirms this in his letter to the Roman church, where we read, "For we know that the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now" (ROMANS 8:22).

Creation's groaning started when thorns and thistles began showing up in Adam's attempts to grow food. The earth bore the natural brunt of a supernatural flood. It still groans and will continue to groan until it is renewed

and once again functions as it was meant to (ISAIAH 65:17; 66:22; 2 PETER 3:13; REVELATION 21:1; SEE ALSO ROMANS 8:18–30). As Ajith Fernando says, with the fall, “the universe lost its equilibrium.” As creation groans, we groan with it.

Suffering postponed for a time. Not all consequences are immediate. Sometimes we cannot see how our choices will affect those around us or ourselves. When Joseph’s brothers sold him into slavery (SEE GENESIS 37), he was not the only one who suffered. Jacob lost a treasured son, and he would experience the anguish of seeing his own past sins repeated by his sons.

While Joseph’s brothers may have seemed to escape any consequences of their choice, they were simply postponed. During Joseph’s years in Egypt—years that got worse before getting better[↗]—the brothers shouldered the weight of guilt[↗] from their selfish actions against Joseph and their father.

↗ As if **Joseph’s slavery** was not bad enough, during his time in Egypt he was also falsely accused of attempted rape and spent years in prison where he was forgotten by someone he had helped.

↗ **Guilt** is an emotional consequence of choice. When we make bad or poor choices that cause others or ourselves to suffer, we experience this type of consequence.

One of the consistent elements of the Bible’s story is that, though consequences for choices are inevitable, they are not always immediate. In Psalm 73, Asaph

lamented the fact that self-centered, destructive people prospered. He wondered if they would ever be held accountable for their deeds, words, and attitudes toward God and people. It was only in God's presence that he gained new understanding. He began to see that God's timeline doesn't always match our own. Asaph's confusion dominated his thinking "Until I came into the sanctuary of God; then I perceived their end. Surely You set them in slippery places; You cast them down to destruction" (PSALM 73:17–18).



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Though the wrongdoers may have felt invincible, Asaph began to see the end. An old farmer's proverb says that, unlike the harvest, God does not settle all of His accounts in October. While any consequences for the choices that create suffering in the world may appear unnecessarily delayed, the Judge of all the earth will do what is right. In God's timing, a day will come when justice will roll like mighty waters—even though that day may not be today.

This delay is God's divine prerogative, but it may be an expression of His grace. Peter reminds us that God's

patience is intended to allow people to repent and return to Him (2 PETER 3:9). But this delay also brings frustration and doubt. We wonder, "Does He even care at all?" and may even question His very existence.



four

Where Is God?

My argument against God was that the universe seemed so cruel and unjust. But how had I got this idea of just and unjust? A man does not call a line crooked unless he has some idea of a straight line. What was I comparing this universe with when I called it unjust?

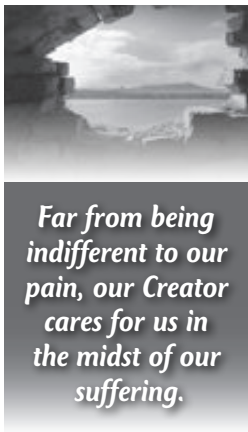
(C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*)

Barbara Brown Taylor wrote, "Pain makes theologians of us all. . . . Pain is one of the fastest routes to a no-frills encounter with the Holy." Sufferers ask more questions about the nature and character of God than any other persons at any

other time—questions that should be asked.

So, where is God in all of this? Any attempt to understand God must include a theology of suffering—understanding God in the midst of suffering, not apart from it.

Adam and Eve's choice has given us a world where suffering is the norm, not the exception. Far from being indifferent to our pain, our Creator cares for us in the midst of our suffering. He even chose to suffer Himself. And because He knows what it is like to suffer, we can trust Him in the middle of our suffering.



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The promise of God's own suffering. In the pages of the Bible, the stories of human suffering rival our own newspaper headlines, suffering on a scale that is difficult to understand. Yet, in the midst of these sobering tales of pain and heartache, there is a promise—a promise that God will respond to suffering. The cost to turn that suffering into something good and beautiful could never be paid by any of us. We disqualified ourselves with our choice to turn away from God.

The prophet Isaiah spoke of a Rescuer, a Deliverer who would come. And when He came, He would ultimately rescue us from the suffering of a broken world. He would provide that rescue in an unexpected way, by experiencing suffering with us. Isaiah 53 tells the tale of our suffering Rescuer and what He endured:

He was despised and forsaken of men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; and like one from whom men hide their face He was despised, and we did not esteem Him. Surely our griefs He Himself bore, and our sorrows He carried; yet we ourselves esteemed him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. But He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the chastening for our well-being fell upon Him, and by His scourging we are healed. All of us like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; but the LORD has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him. He was oppressed and He was afflicted, yet He did not open His mouth; like a lamb that is led to slaughter, and like a sheep that is silent before its shearers, so He did not open His mouth (ISAIAH 53:3–7).

Notice the intensity of the words Isaiah used to describe the suffering: Despised, rejected, suffering, pain, punished, stricken, afflicted, pierced, crushed, wounds, oppressed, afflicted, slaughter.

These are harsh words—words that every sufferer understands. But they are words that specifically describe the suffering Jesus endured on the cross. Through His life, and especially in His death, Jesus understands and identifies with our suffering. As theologian John Stott wrote: “I could never myself believe in God, if it were not for the cross. The only God I believe in is the one Nietzsche ridiculed as ‘God on the Cross.’ In a world of real pain, how could one worship a God who was immune to it?”

Far from being immune to suffering, Jesus embraced it. He endured pain so that He might effectively care for us when we suffer. On the cross, Jesus shouldered the burden of all the consequences that flowed from the choice in that ancient garden—both in terms of the suffering we experience and the judgment with which we were condemned. 🏹

🏹 *Part of the death that came as a consequence of that choice by Adam and Eve was final and eternal **separation from God**, the punishment for disobedience. Jesus’ death on the cross satisfied the requirements of that punishment.*

Jesus did not come to study and analyze our brokenness. He came to take it all on Himself. He came to be with us and to suffer for us. In His suffering, our suffering is redeemed—both in the pain of the moment and in the eternity to come.

The care of the cross. God the Son came to engage suffering by walking in the dust and dirt of this world, to confront it with His power and miracles, and then to take it upon Himself as He died on the cross for our sin and its consequences. Through His suffering, Jesus demonstrated His ability and willingness to care for His own when they suffer.

In ancient Israel, the role of the priest was to represent people before God. By becoming "Immanuel" ("GOD WITH US" MATTHEW 1:23), Jesus lived among hurting people, worked with those in the middle of pain and suffering, and even experienced suffering on our behalf. The writer of the book of Hebrews highlights a wonderful comfort from Jesus' suffering: "For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin" (HEBREWS 4:15).

We can rest assured that He understands when we hurt and how we hurt because He has hurt like us. He experienced trials and testings, and, on the cross, a suffering beyond imagination.■ As our High Priest, Jesus represents us before God the Father with full understanding of our fears and pains. And the Father to whom Jesus represents us has the deepest love and concern for our comfort: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God

of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction"

(2 CORINTHIANS 1:3–4).

↗ The **agony** Jesus experienced was of a similar kind as ours, separation from God the Father. However, Jesus' suffering went much deeper than ours. When Jesus took our sins on Himself, God the Father could no longer bear to look at Him, and the perfect union they shared was broken, all because of God's love for us and desire to bring us back to Himself.

It is to the God who entered into our suffering through Jesus that we cry out in our pain and loss. It is to the God whose mercies are new every morning that we plead for mercy (LAMENTATIONS 3:22–23). It is because of Christ's cross and His resurrection that we can cast our cares on Him, knowing that He cares for us.

As Pastor Robert Gelinas put it in his book *The Mercy Prayer*, it is to this God that we ask:

For those who sin and those who suffer.

For those who suffer because of sin.

For those who sin to alleviate their suffering.

Lord, have mercy on us.



five

The End of Suffering

Pain insists upon being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our consciences, but shouts in our pains. It is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world.

(C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*)

While suffering is unfortunately the common denominator of life in this present world, pain and suffering will have no place in the world to come. This is, in part, what was accomplished with Jesus's death on the cross. The

cross gives us a hope that helps us endure, by grace, when the long shadow of suffering passes over us. It is the cross that promises a time when wrongs are made right and suffering is brought to an end.

The apostle John, nearing the end of his life and exiled for his faith in Christ, glimpsed what the fulfillment of this promise looked like. He described his vision in vivid terms:

And I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them, and He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be *any* death; there will no longer be *any* mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away."

And He who sits on the throne said, "Behold, I am making all things new." And He said, "Write, for these words are faithful and true." Then He said to me, "It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. I will give to the one who thirsts from the spring of the water of life without cost. He who overcomes will inherit these things, and I will be his God and he will be My son (REVELATION 21:3-7).

Where is God when we suffer? Right beside us. He allowed His Son to experience the same things we

experience. He provided the cross, which pays for our suffering and offers restored relationship with Him. And He is the God who promises that, in the life to come, all those things will be no more.

With the words of Revelation 21, the Bible's story comes full circle. From paradise, through paradise lost, to paradise regained. Having begun with an unrestricted perfect relationship between the first man and woman, we find that we end with eternal relationships that will be perfect in every way.

This is the end of the problem of the world's pain. We need never fear that God is disinterested in our pains, struggles, or heartaches—He is right there in the suffering with us:



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Right beside us.***

Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? Just as it is written, "FOR YOUR SAKE WE ARE BEING PUT TO DEATH ALL DAY LONG; WE WERE CONSIDERED AS SHEEP TO BE SLAUGHTERED." But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities,

nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord (ROMANS 8:35–39).

God's love for us is most evident by His presence with us when we suffer, not when suffering is absent. In His presence we can find peace. 🌿



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