Dr. Leslie Allen, Lamentations, Session 12, Lamentations 5:1-7

This is Dr. Leslie Allen in his teaching on the book of Lamentations. This is session 12, Lamentations 5:1-7.

We come now to Lamentations chapter 5, and we will be studying just the first seven verses. If I forget to say it at the end, may I say now that next time, we will be looking at chapter 5, verses 8 through 16? Chapter 5 is what we've been waiting for, and in terms of grief, we come to a turning point.

Remember the turning point that I've been mentioning. The pain is felt as bad as ever, but a more positive future can be envisioned, and so there is a resolve in the direction of change and how that resolve is expressed here is in the fact that there is a turning to God in prayer and, of course, this is something that's been urged by the mentor, the need to pray and then Zion urging Zion as a role model for the congregation to pray and then the mentor as a male role model turning to prayer himself and recording those prayers at the beginning and end of chapter 3, and so we'd be moving along in this direction. We need to pray, and here we are.

Remember, O Lord, what has befallen us. Here we are at the point of prayer and so there's obviously a feeling that prayer is worth trying and we can come to the point of lifting our heads above this human situation, overwhelming as it is and actually turning to God to ask him to do something about it. We don't have an acrostic now.

We don't go through the Hebrew alphabet anymore, and all we do, we do have a sort of an echo of the acrostic in that there are 22 verses and so 22 lines make up this final poem and just an echo of the acrostic form but no actual acrostic, and there's no form-critical reason why we should have dropped the acrostic at this point. It does fit a prayer lament. Psalm 25 is a prayer lament in the Psalms, which is an acrostic, and so there's no reason from that point of view in terms of genre and the type of literature that we find here as to why there shouldn't be an acrostic.

Maybe it's just an indication of change, doing something different as a sign that we're starting over, and so just as there's only an echo of the acrostic now and no actual acrostic, so we lose to what goes with the funeral lament usually, that meter. Remember the meter? Three plus two, the limping meter. Three, and you hope for three accented syllables in the second half of the line, but no, a three plus two, and you feel that disappointment in a way.

It expresses grief in its own particular way in sound, but now it's a three plus three meter, which is a very regular poetic meter, but we haven't actually left behind the

funeral lament. We shall see that the funeral lament does very much feature in chapter five, and we haven't left the grief that underlies that funeral lament earlier on, but change is in the air, and the new meter celebrates that change, one might say, but as I say it is not closure in the psychological sense. It's a turning point, so there's still much pain there expressed in this chapter, but the pain is brought to God.

So, chapter five hovers between pain and suffering, hope and suffering, and in that hope, there's a willingness to pray for a better future than the congregation has been experiencing so far. We talked earlier about the different pathways or trajectories we find in the book of Lamentations, grief, guilt, and grievance, and they're still all present in chapter five, but they're now combined with a moving forward where this new poem is concerned. I divide chapter five into three parts and this governs our three successive videos here at the end.

One to seven and verses eight to sixteen, and then verses seventeen to twenty-two, and in this case, the poem is divided roughly into thirds. Now, why should I think of those sections? Well, I look at verse seven, our ancestors sinned, they are no more, and we bear their iniquities, and I look at verse sixteen, the crown is fallen from our head, woe to us for we have sinned, and in both cases, there's mention of sin, there's mention of guilt. Guilt comes in verse seven and verse sixteen, and I take this as a sort of refrain that plays an important part in the structure of the poem, and so I want to think in terms of verses one to seven, eight to sixteen, and then seventeen to twenty-two.

We characterize chapter five as a prayer lament, and that is true, but it's a strange prayer lament because it also incorporates another genre with it, our old friend, a funeral lament. In fact, this, of course, is rather strange because a funeral lament by its nature was secular originally. It was just humans talking about human circumstances that needed to be worked through, but staying at the human level and then over against that prayer, we think of essentially spiritual relating to God, and so contrast between those two approaches, these two genres which have run through the book so far. But here, they appear together in a way that's not surprising because both the funeral lament and the prayer lament are associated with disaster, and so they've got the same overall theme.

And then we saw very early on in our course that they're both associated with mourning rituals in the Old Testament. You find mourning rituals, especially in the funeral lament, but in the Psalms, too, you find references to mourning rituals of different kinds. And then, too, of course, in Lamentations 1:3, even when we were dealing with funeral laments, we were finding coming in, sneaking in as it were, a theological interpretation of the disaster, and we're getting near, we're getting near to the priority in the prayer lament.

Of course, Lamentations 5 goes further than that. Side by side, we have prayer and a funeral lament. Prayer is essentially addressed to God and has second-person references to God.

Where do we find that in this chapter? We find it in verse 1 and then we've got to wait a long time. We find it again in verses 19 through 22. So really the only prayer is in a sort of a frame, a framework, a frame for the whole chapter.

1 at the beginning, 19 to 22 more stated at the end. But those are really the only prayer elements addressed to God. In between, we have verses 2 through 18, and there are no second-person references to God now, only first plural ones referring to the congregation.

And so there they are. There's this wrapping around, and the prayer is wrapped around a funeral lament. And so that's something that doesn't occur in psalm laments, that we get this emphasis.

Now what we do have in a prayer lament is a description of crisis. And usually it's a small description of crisis, relatively speaking, in comparison with the overall size of the prayer lament. But here there's so much space given to talking about this human situation.

Verses 2 to 18, we've got 17 verses. Most of chapter 5 is made up of a funeral lament. But of course, it's not just a funeral lament, it's a funeral lament spoken to God, that it becomes baptized, one might say, form critically speaking, because the God who's addressed at the beginning, at the end, is still meant to be the hearer in verses 2 to 18, which are spoken in a human context and read in quite a secular way.

But here, the funeral lament is uniquely brought to God in chapter 5. So that's what's happening there, and it's rather strange. In fact, this means that Chapter 5 is the evidence of two missions that are accomplished for the mentor. We've been saying that all the way through, there's this emphasis on prayer.

You've got to pray about it. You must pray about it. This is addressed from various angles, and all sorts of reasons are given as to why the people need to pray.

We've seen before that Zion is a role model. Zion prays, and the congregation eventually needs to do that themselves, and they do here. And then, those testimonies of prayer at the beginning and end of chapter 3, there was that male role model, the mentor himself, who prayed, and the implication was, hint, hint, this is what you need to do as well.

And so, it's very necessary that call to prayer is at last being answered. But also, we've had an emphasis on the funeral lament, and the mentor recognizes that

psychologically, they've got to go through these grunge processes. And it's very long, and it's very involved.

Longer, perhaps, than the mentor thought. Perhaps the mentor thought in his planning that once he'd reached the end of the third poem, he could leap ahead to chapter 5. But when the liturgy came to be taking place, oh no, oh no. Or when perhaps he interviewed people, oh no, they needed more than that.

And so, chapter 4 was necessary, still carrying on with that funeral lament type of speaking. And so, it was very necessary. And one needs to do both in grieving.

As believers grieving, we, too, need to go through these grief processes, and we, too, eventually need to come to God and relate to God. Of course, in this situation, it was necessary because there was the guilt factor, and that relationship with God had been broken. So, they had to get back.

They had to get back with God, and they had to do that part in that reconciliation. But prayer is always necessary, and grief must always end up siding with God and relating to God once more. And so, this is what's happening there.

The relationship with God had been fundamentally compromised. You need to instigate this renewal. You need to initiate this renewal of that relationship from your side, and the congregation has got to accept that truth.

And so, we have in chapter 5, this remarkable hybrid in terms of genre. A prayer lament that's strictly only a prayer lament at the beginning and end, but incorporated in it, the prayer lament puts its arms around, as it were, that grieving and brings it all as a parcel to God wrapped around it. We need to say something about the historical setting.

When we were looking at chapters 1, 2, and 4, we knew where we were. We were back in the siege situation, and we were reliving those memories of what the people had gone through. And so often, grief is a matter of memory, remembering, remembering.

In fact, remembering the past is a way forward. It's a way of overcoming that terrible sting that agonizing pain, as one, rehearses it again and again. You dilute it in a sense, and you're able to absorb what happened and start to come through it.

So, grief is essentially related to past events. The events are in the past, but they stay alive in our minds. They've been breaking news for so long that we become obsessed with thinking about them. One grief specialist said it's difficult for somebody who grieves to realize that the clocks of other people register a different time.

We are still way back in the past, but other people's clocks move forward hour by hour, whereas we've stayed the same, and our clock has stopped, as it were. And so there it is. And so, for the congregation, the suffering continued, but they were obsessed with what had happened in the past.

But there was a change in chapter three, and when the mentor talked about suffering, he moved to the present, to the post-war situation, to enemy occupation. And we saw in two places in chapter three that that comes to the fore. And now, again, this is the historical setting.

The siege lies in the past, and as if the people are saying, we thought that bad enough, but our present suffering is carrying on. We're not just remembering past suffering. We're suffering afresh in our physical experience here in our occupied country in a post-war experience, and it's brought renewed suffering.

We saw that in chapter three, verses 34 to 36 and 51, and it was broached by the mentor, but now we come into the thick of it in chapter five, living in an occupied country. Judah was a virtual prison camp, and the enemy was everywhere and in tight control. And so, the text turns from the past, the past suffering, to the present, to present suffering.

Was it a compliment to the mentor that they could get beyond their past suffering and that they were not so affected by it now? Well, I'm not so sure because when you come to verse 18, you look into the past again, and in verse 18, what's the greatest worry that these people have? What got them down the most? Verse 18, because of Mount Zion, which lies desolate over it. So, they're thinking back, they're in that city, probably in the ruined courtyard of the old temple, but they're there, and they look around, and they think, Zion has fallen. Zion has fallen.

How can this be? And so, they're thinking back to that situation, not just their present situation of living in an occupied country, but what had preceded it, the fall and destruction of Jerusalem. So, it still plays a part in the congregation's thinking, and we're not surprised. Anyway, there was more to say, and it was their present objective experience that mainly came to the fore rather than their subjective experience of grief in terms of memory.

We need to think about prayer. Prayer, I think I may have mentioned before, prayer is persuasion. To be effective, very much in the Psalms, it's persuading God.

To be effective, prayer must make a good, reasonable case to God. The prayer laments in the Psalms always make a good case, and a keyword is a little conjunction for, which provides motivation. Answer our prayers, save us, because, for, and you give a reason.

And so, you build up a solid case before God as to why you should answer why God should answer that prayer. Chapter five is really a series of motivations for God to see, a series of reasons why they need his help. It's only with God's help that they could have a new beginning.

And I think, I think too of that, the model of Alcoholics Anonymous, that twelve-step program, it's a useful way of bringing that fact home to us, that turning to God, that higher power is so necessary to overcome the wretchedness in our human situation. Now, where Alcoholics Anonymous is concerned, there's very much a leaning on God or the higher power for help. But alcoholism is the burning issue.

That's the crisis. And the assurance is given that God is there to help the alcoholic through to recovery. And that's true here in chapter five.

It's true in the mentor's thinking that God is there to help. This is very true. But there's more to be said about the situation in Lamentations, especially in chapter five, but it's been hinted earlier, that the real burning issue is a spiritual one, is a theological one, that the relationship with God, that covenant relationship that marked out Israel from all other nations, it was really the burning issue.

And 586 spelled the disruption of that covenant relationship. And so, the climactic petition in the prayer is going to occur in verse 21. Restore us to yourself, O Lord.

Restore us to yourself. And this is a great issue that needs to be resolved. And this is the essence of the prayer, in fact.

But to persuade God, they bring to him their wretched case, and they bring a defense of their own situation to the judges, as to why they needed to be helped and brought back at the same time into that relationship with God. Alright, so we get a coalescing of the funeral lament and the prayer here, and it all plays this unifying role of presenting the case to God, persuading him to intervene on their behalf. And so now, we come to the individual details of the individual parts of these first seven verses.

You have in verse one this direct petition which sets the tone. There is a mood of prayer all the way through, everything is presented before God. And it starts with, remember, remember.

And this is an appeal to God to be mindful. And really, it's saying, don't ignore us, God. But there's an appeal for an active memory that gives priority to something that needs to be attended to.

And so please attend to this. It's really parallel to this look and see, which we also got in this first verse. Remember, O Lord, what has befallen us, look and see our disgrace.

Remember, it's very much a part of prayer laments, and we get in a number of times. One example is in Psalm 25, and it's in verse seven there, 25:7. Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions.

According to your steadfast love, remember me for your goodness sake, O Lord. That sounds very much like chapter three, doesn't it? Steadfast love and goodness. But remember me, there it is, this appeal to God to pay attention.

And then you set out all the reasons as to why he put, should put, give his attention to you. And it's mentioned in very general terms in the first half of the line what has befallen us. But then, look and see our disgrace.

Look and see, of course, they'd be listening to the mentor, and they'd be listening to Zion, because that was the form of petition that they brought in their prayers. And so, look and see, look and do something about it. And this is what they prayed.

But it's interesting that they sum up what's wrong in terms of disgrace. Disgrace. And disgrace is not immediate, objective suffering, physical suffering.

It's subjective suffering. It's psychological suffering. Remember we spoke earlier about secondary suffering in grieving, and humiliation, and loss of face.

And this can be as badass or even worse than the objective situation. And so, it's a matter of feelings, psychological feelings that are brought before God. Oh, we feel so wretched, God.

We feel so worthless. Look and see our disgrace. And they want that mending of the human psyche.

They want to be healed in their minds and hearts once more. That's the main reason behind all their physical problems. So, this functions as a motivation.

They present themselves as wretched and needy people before God in the hope that he'll be genuinely sorry for the congregation as victims who are suffering emotionally as well as outwardly. And so, this is a persuasive backup for the imperatives, this word, disgrace. And so, here we are.

We come to this first section, verses 1 to 7, and looking at trajectories, at pathways, grief, grievance, and guilt. Well, we're going to come to guilt in verse 7, the climax of this first section. Our ancestors sinned, they are no more, and we bear their iniquities.

And so, there's mention of guilt there that we shall have to look at in some detail. And then, there's going to be mention of grief, examples of the loss of normal life, the sort of life they enjoyed before the invasion. It was a thing of the past.

Grief, we remember, is essentially linked with losses, things that have been lost, and a whole series have been lost. And there's going through a catalogue of these losses in verses 2 through 6. Grievance, these expressions of grief and losses, also function as a grievance. Grievance is about enemy occupation, because it's enemy occupation that is brought about those losses.

And it looms very large. Grief and grievance are very much companions, or twins, side by side, as we look at this first section. Now, we come to our reasons and different motivations, even though we don't get a for or because.

We come to verse 2, and our inheritance has been turned over to strangers, our homes to aliens. Inheritance is a very loaded term, and it's meant to be. It's reversed to the land, and you cannot study Old Testament theology without examining the theology of the land.

Here, it's presented as a strong territorial tradition, but it's got a theological basis. Humanly speaking, the land was meant to stay in the family for generations, handed down from father to son, to grandson, and so on. But everybody knew it was basically given by God to the tribes, who divided among the clans, who divided among the families, and that was what was meant to be.

But what does verse 2 say? Our inheritance has been turned over to strangers, our homes to aliens. There's a key passage when we think of inheritance and inheritance lost, and I think of 1 Kings and chapter 21. It's the story of Elijah's encounter with King Ahab in the Northern Kingdom.

Next door to the palace, Ahab looked out of his window and saw a beautiful vineyard next door, and he got to covet that vineyard. He said, oh, that would make a fine garden for me. I wish I had it.

I wish I had it. But no, it doesn't belong to me. I can't have it.

And so, we read in 1 Kings 21, Naboth the had a vineyard in Jezreel, beside the palace of King Ahab of Syria. Ahab said to Naboth, give me your vineyard so that I may have it for a vegetable garden because it's near my house. I will give you a better vineyard for it, or if it seems good to you, I will give you its value and money.

But Naboth said to Ahab, the Lord forbid that I should give you my ancestral inheritance. Ahab went home resentful and sullen because of what Naboth, the

Jezreelite, had said to him. For he had said, I will not give you my ancestral inheritance.

He lay down on his bed, turned away his face, and would not eat. And there he is, sulking. It's all right.

The queen came to see him. What's wrong, my dear? What's wrong? And he tells her what's wrong. Oh, don't worry, my dear.

I'll arrange for you to get it. And it was plain. The answer was plain to Jezebel.

She was the daughter of the king of Tyre. And the king of Tyre was an autocrat. Anything that the king wanted, he could have.

And it was like father, like daughter. And so I'll arrange it. And so she arranged for false accusations of cursing God and the king, Naboth was stoned to death.

There it is. And so, you can have it now. It's yours for the taking, my dear.

So that's the end of the problem. Oh, no, it isn't. Along comes Elijah, speaking in God's name.

And he utters a terrible oracle of judgment from God against him. He says you will lose your own land. No, I'm jumping ahead to another text here.

Because in Micah, chapter two, we have a similar situation of land being lost. And there were these rich people who were coveting fields and seizing them and oppressing householders and house and people in their inheritance. God says through the prophet Micah, you're going to lose that in your own land because you dared to take away other people's land.

And so, this is obviously a very deep grievance. And it's a human grievance, but it's got theological overtones. Our inheritance has been turned over.

Houses and land have been requisitioned to be used by foreign troops. Then, in verse three, we become orphans and fatherless. Our mothers are like widows.

And we've got a simile, and we've got a metaphor, and we've got a simile. It's rather like the use of widow that we have in chapter one. It's sociological.

The thought is of the low social status of people who are widows and orphans. And so, we're like that. We've lost our standing.

We're not independent citizens anymore. We are very much subject to these people who are occupying the land. We're socially vulnerable.

We've lost our social standing because we're under enemy occupation. And then, in verse four, we must pay for the water we drink, and the wood we get must be bought. This was a new situation, obviously, because there was a heavy tax imposed by the occupiers for water and wood that one needed for fires to cook with.

And there was no free access as used to be the case. The assets of the land were no longer freely available to the people. So, this is a land-linked complaint once more.

And because it's land-linked, there's that theological presupposition there that God himself must be affected by the situation. And I think of over against a verse like this, I think of verses in Deuteronomy chapter eight and verses seven to ten in chapter eight of Deuteronomy. The Lord, your God, is bringing you into a good land, a land with flowing streams, with springs and underground waters, welling up in valleys and hills, a land of wheat and barley, vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey, a land where you may eat bread without scarcity, where you will lack nothing, a land whose stones are iron and from whose hills you may mine copper.

And it goes on to speak of the good land that God has given you. But now it wasn't their land to deal with as they always had up to now. Now, it was up to the occupiers to dictate the conditions under which they could enjoy the assets of this land and here, water and wood.

So, there are theological ramifications in both verse two and verse four and good reasons why God should take seriously what's happened to them because, in a way, it's happened to him as well, and God is affected by this change in the situation and so these are ways of persuading God to take their side. Verse five, with a yoke on our necks we are hard-driven, we're weary, we're given no rest. In the New RSV there's an addition of one word in the Hebrew which is rendered with a yoke, with a yoke on our necks and that is reflected in one ancient version and the advantage is that it makes sense of on our necks, with a yoke on our necks.

The NIV doesn't add that word, and instead, it's got a paraphrase of sorts, those who pursue us are at our heels. They're close to us. They're pursuing. They're so close to us, they're at our heels. And so at our necks is sort of paraphrased as at our heels, and that makes some sense. Really, I think this is talking about forced labor whether you look at the NIV or the NRSV. This talk of being pursued, I think the New RSV is right in thinking of an extended meaning, we are hard-driven, we are hard-driven by our taskmasters who work us hard. They're breathing down our necks, they're so close to us, they're breathing down our necks. Essentially, it's dealing with the forced labor that the occupied people are set to.

In line with that, we are weary, we're given no rest. Traditionally, Judean Israelites worked a six-day week, but now evidently seven days, come on, back to work. There's work to be done, and they weren't allowed to rest. And so, seven days they were working, working, working, we are weary. We're given no rest, and there we are.

That's a little hint at a theological issue: a six-day usual labor on the seventh day, which is usually rest on the Sabbath. And so, this is an affront to God, one might say, so once again, a persuasive issue even where God was concerned. But then, too, we come to these final verses, which I think go closely together: we have made a pact with Egypt and Assyria to get enough bread, our ancestors sinned, they are no more, and we bear their iniquities.

I think, here again, we get a question of tenses, English tenses, and here in verse 6, we have made a pact of a perfect, I think really it's looking to the past, a past situation. The NIV brings that out, we submitted to Egypt and Assyria to get enough bread. Our ancestors sinned and are no more, and we bear their punishment. What it's saying is the root set in, in a previous generation, and when it talks of ancestors, it's not talking about many, many centuries ago or even necessarily many, many decades ago. It's a fairly recent past, Hebrew just uses the word fathers which has got a range of meaning according to the context, forefathers.

It's thinking back to earlier times in Judah's political experiences when there was famine, in Israel and Judah. They were always experiencing famine, it just happened and you needed to import food from abroad.

And so, right, economic treaties then with foreign powers, and this will solve the situation. You may remember in the book of Genesis that Genesis chapter 12, Abraham experienced a famine while he was in the promised land and he migrated to Egypt for a while until the season was over and until it was the rainy season again.

Then you remember in Genesis 42 that Jacob's family visited Egypt in order to bring back food, and so there was this dependence at times but it had become rather sinister because it was an opportunity for, in Judah's case, in recent history, for foreign camels to get their head into Judah's tent. And so, there's very much a feeling that the former generations had done wrong and the rot had set in in that former experience.

And so, gradually, foreign powers have gained more and more control over Judah. First, it was Judah and Assyria, and so Assyria was replaced by Babylonia, and now they were suffering, part of the empire rebelling against Babylon, and now Jerusalem's destroyed, and everything's come to an end, but that starting point, that sinister starting point, was that those economic alliances. Very often in the Old

Testament we find reference in these same sort of periods of political alliances. But it's very feasible that there would have also been economic alliances and treaties.

And so, it's summed up in verse 7, our ancestors sinned, they're no more, they've died, those former generations that entered into those pacts, economic pacts, with foreign powers, and we bear their iniquities, see what it's grown to, this whole situation and it's developed in this terrible way. See where it's got us now. It eventually led to subjection to a foreign power, Assyria's successor to Babylon, so the nation's past sins caught up with the present generation. In verse 6, it says we made a pact in the form of our ancestors, and there's mention of generational solidarity; we as a nation were involved in that situation, though more strictly generationally, it was our ancestors, our forefathers, who were involved, and they said they're no more and we bear their iniquities.

Now, when you read commentaries on Lamentations, quite a number of commentators make quite a bit about verse 7. What they want to do is to contrast it with verse 16, we have sinned in verse 16 but our ancestors sinned up in verse 7 and they want to see confusion here, they want to see two quite different points of view that don't agree with each other.

There's a text which seems to agree with them, and those commentators who take that line they appeal to Ezekiel 18 and verse 2. There Ezekiel is involved with the Judean exiles in Babylon who were very resentful over their exile and saying it's not our fault, it's the previous generations. It's their fault, it's not our fault. What did they say, they had a proverb, a way of summing it up, “the parents have eaten sour grapes and the children's teeth are set on edge.” It's not fair, that's the point of view.

And so, they're saying it's not us, it's the previous generations, the parents have eaten sour grapes and the children's teeth are set on edge. We might change the metaphor and say the parents got drunk, and we the children are suffering the hangover. That's just not fair and so that this very picturesque proverb could underlie, does it underlie verse 7, we bear their iniquities, they died, they got off scot-free and we bear their iniquities and that's not fair.

It's not us who were sinning. Ah, but 16 says, but we sinned, well that's different, that's different, and there's confusion here. There are two different points of view, two different theological points of view here at this point. Well no, not really, because there are a number of passages in the Old Testament which wants to put together as two links in a chain, both sets of circumstances and I'll refer you to one of those passages.

Psalm 79 and verses 8 and 9, do not remember against us the iniquities of our ancestors, let your compassion come speedily to meet us for we are brought very low, sounds like verse 7 of Lamentations is fine.

But how does it go on? Help us, oh God, of our salvation for the glory of your name, deliver us and forgive our sins for your name's sake.

So, it's not saying it was only the ancestors, it was only the forefathers who were sinners. It's bracketed together, these two things are bracketed together, and they both represent a terrible confession of guilt past and present.

There's the interesting fact in verse 6, we were involved in generational solidarity, we made a pact with Egypt and Assyria, we submitted to Egypt and Assyria to get enough bread, and that historically was what our forefathers did.

But it was us. We were involved in that generational solidarity that landed over to us, and so there it is. I don't think we should differentiate in any confusing way between verses 7 and 16. But we've come to the end of the first section of chapter 5, and it's been dealing with grief, it's been dealing with grievance, and in that last verse, really the last two verses 6 and 7, it's been dealing with guilt.

Next time we should be moving over to verses 8 through 16.

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