

“Light of Life: Questions of Origins and Destinations”

John 8:12-30

January 19, 2020

Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service

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If you have been keeping track, you might note that last Lord’s Day morning we ended at John 7:52 ... and this morning we are starting with John 8:12 ... which means that we skipped 13 verses.

Where did they go?

Well, if you’d like to know, then join us tonight ... right here ... at 6 PM ... for the evening service.

This morning, we turn our attention to John chapter eight, verses twelve through thirty.

Jesus continues here to teach the crowds in the temple in Jerusalem, at the time of the Feast of Booths.

With that in mind, John chapter eight, verses twelve through thirty.

Please do listen carefully, for this is God’s word for us this morning.

^{8:12} Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.” ¹³ So the Pharisees said to him, “You are bearing witness about yourself; your testimony is not true.” ¹⁴ Jesus answered, “Even if I do bear witness about myself, my testimony is true, for I know where I came from and where I am going, but you do not know where I come from or where I am going. ¹⁵ You judge according to the flesh; I judge no one. ¹⁶ Yet even if I do judge, my judgment is true, for it is not I alone who judge, but I and the Father who sent me. ¹⁷ In your Law it is written that the testimony of two people is true. ¹⁸ I am the one who bears witness about myself, and the Father who sent me bears witness about me.” ¹⁹ They said to him therefore, “Where is your Father?” Jesus answered, “You know neither me nor my Father. If you knew me, you would know my Father also.” ²⁰ These words he spoke in the treasury, as he taught in the temple; but no one arrested him, because his hour had not yet come.

²¹ So he said to them again, “I am going away, and you will seek me, and you will die in your sin. Where I am going, you cannot come.” ²² So the Jews said, “Will he kill himself, since he says, ‘Where I am going, you cannot come’?” ²³ He said to them, “You are from below; I am from above. You are of this world; I am not of this world. ²⁴ I told you that you would die in your sins, for unless you believe that I am he you will die in your sins.” ²⁵ So they said to him, “Who are you?” Jesus said to them, “Just what I have been telling you from the beginning. ²⁶ I have much to say about you and much to judge, but he who sent me is true, and I declare to the world what I have heard from him.” ²⁷ They did not understand that he had been speaking to them about the Father. ²⁸ So Jesus said to them, “When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am he, and that I do nothing on my own authority, but speak just as the Father taught me. ²⁹ And he who sent me is with me. He has not left me alone, for I always do the things that are pleasing to him.” ³⁰ As he was saying these things, many believed in him.

This is the word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.)

“All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever.” [1 Peter 1:24-25]

Let’s pray ...

Lord, how can we keep our way pure?
By guarding it according to your Word.
Help us now to seek you with our whole hearts.
Keep us from wandering from your commandments.
Let us store up your word in our hearts,
so that we might not turn from you.
We ask this in Jesus’s name. Amen.
[Based on Psalm 119:9-11]

Our text this morning can seem like a lot of back-and-forth that is kind of all over the place. At first glance, there doesn’t seem to be a central theme or point really.

But if we look closer, a theme does emerge. And the best way to look closer will be for us to ask a series of questions – three questions, actually ... though some of them are two-part questions.

First: Where are *we* from and where are *we* going?
Second: Where is *Jesus* from and where is *he* going?
And Third: What is Jesus doing here?

Where are we from and where are we going?
Where is Jesus from and where is he going?
What is Jesus doing here?

Let’s dive in.

First: Where are we from and where are we going?

Maybe we start with the first part: Where does Jesus tell us we are *from* in this passage?

And the answer comes back that Jesus tells us that we are from this dark world.

We are from this dark world.

And that answer sort of has two parts as well – two claims built into it: The first is that this world is dark. The second is that we are *from* this world with its darkness.

So the first claim is that this world is dark. We see Jesus make that claim in verse twelve.

Jesus says “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”

Jesus, who will later tell us that he is in the world but not from the world, tells us here that he is the light of the world ... and that if we do not follow him – if we do not stay close to him, then in this world we will find ourselves in darkness.

Now, of course, you don't say to someone "stay close to me, I've got a flashlight" if you're walking on the beach at noon on a sunny day. You say it if you are walking at night and there are no other lights around ... you say it in a cave or in a tunnel – you say it if you are in a dark place. When Jesus says in verse twelve that you should stick with him if you want light in this world, he is making a claim that this is a dark world that we live in.

And by dark, in this particular passage, Jesus especially means that it is a place where people cannot see clearly – where people lack perception, or understanding – understanding of reality, of the world around them, and of how to navigate it.

And on some level, the Jews Jesus spoke to in Jerusalem in the first century would have agreed with him. They knew that the world around them was a mess. The Roman Empire that dominated the world they lived in worshiped a set of ridiculous false gods. The nations around them lived violent and immoral lives. They affirmed foolish claims about spiritual reality and about how human beings should live – and as a result they made their lives and the lives of others brutal. When the first century Jews looked at the culture around them, they saw darkness, just like Jesus did.

And we are mostly the same ... aren't we? We look at the world ... we look at many in our culture ... and we see foolishness and ignorance, and mental and spiritual darkness.

David Brooks sums up most of our outlooks pretty well – he writes: "Most people see themselves living on an island of intelligence in a sea of idiocy. They feel their own lives are going pretty well, even if society as a whole is going down the toilet. [...] Their own values are fine, even if civilization itself is on the verge of collapse. We all live in Lake Wobegon because we are all above average. We are all okay; it's the vast ocean of morons who are [messing] things up." [Brooks, 74]

The world is a dark place – it lacks understanding.

We tend to agree. The first century Jews listening to Jesus would tend to agree.

But then Jesus says something that they ... and we ... might struggle a bit more to agree with.

As Brooks puts it: "Most people see themselves living on an island of intelligence in a sea of idiocy."

And Jesus essentially says that they ... and to some extent that we ... are half right.

We *do* live in a sea of idiocy in this dark world ... but we are not on an island. We are part of that sea to some extent.

Jesus tells the crowd listening to him that *they* are part of the world that is in darkness.

Take a look at verse twenty-three. Jesus says: “You are from below; I am from above. You are of this world; I am not of this world.” Jesus says that the crowd is not only *from* this world ... but that they are *of* it. They not only came from it ... but they still fit in in it. They are part of it. They are in darkness. They too lack understanding.

And as if to prove his point, that lack of understanding plays out in our text. The crowd is constantly confused. They repeatedly, again and again, display their lack of understanding.

In verse thirteen they say that Jesus is bearing witness about himself and so his testimony is not true. But the point is a bit odd. One may need a second witness to *prove* their testimony, though lacking one doesn't necessarily prove that the initial testimony is false. Moreover, Jesus already addressed this exact point with the Pharisees in Jerusalem who were trying to kill him back in chapter five. Now the group there was not identical to the group here – but there would also appear to be some continuity among the leaders present. But they have not learned from his past explanation. They still lack understanding.

It comes up again in verse nineteen. Jesus has been talking about his Heavenly Father, but in this verse, when they ask where his Father is, it becomes clear that the Pharisees don't understand who he's actually talking about.

Then we see it again in verse twenty-two. Jesus is speaking of returning to his Father, and while the Jewish leaders understand part of it, they jump to a conclusion that he is talking about suicide.

By verse twenty-five, after Jesus has spoken not just here, but in the verses before, about who he is, the crowd is still confused, and their question is simply “Who are you?”

Jesus answers by going back to talking about his relationship to the Heavenly Father, but in verse twenty-seven we are told that the crowd didn't understand this either.

Again and again, we see that the Pharisees, the Jewish leaders, the crowd as a whole – those Jesus is interacting with, lack understanding. They are in darkness.

And Jesus says as much in verse fifteen. He says to them “*You* judge according to the flesh.” He means, in a sense, that they evaluate things according to the ways of this world. They are in darkness. They lack understanding.

Jesus tells the crowd he is interacting with that this world is in darkness. And that they are not only *from* this dark world, but they are *of* it – they too are in darkness. They too lack understanding.

Jesus says it is true of them ... and by implication, to some extent, he says it is true of us as well. Jesus tells us that we are from this dark world ... and that to some extent we are like it ... we are comfortable in it.

We tend to doubt this. We tend, like David Brooks says, to see ourselves as islands of understanding in a sea of idiocy. But Jesus here challenges that perception – that assumption.

And if we do a little thinking ... we should begin to appreciate that Jesus is right.

And this would be true regardless of how you think of yourself in relation to the world around us – regardless of what cultural tribe you identify with. Either way, to some extent, you share the darkness – the lack of understanding – that our world has. Either way, some thought should lead us to realize that we, and the subsection of our culture that we identify with, are not as enlightened as we tend to think.

There are a couple ways that some have pointed this out.

One is to stop and consider how you think of people's views and assumptions about the world a few generations ago – maybe 70 years into the past. Consider how they viewed things – what assumptions they made about the world and about other people. Consider the areas where you think they were mistaken. Even if there were many things you might agree with them on, I'm betting that as you think about that society as a whole you would also say that there were areas in which they were mistaken – even gravely mistaken – areas you see now that they lacked understanding in. Consider the views they had, that everyone today thinks of as primitive. Or the assumptions that they made, that now make you cringe. Think of all the ways that you can see that that generation 70 years ago lacked understanding.

And now realize that that generation probably viewed the generation 70 years before them the same way that you view the generation 70 years before you. And with that in mind, realize that the generation 70 years *after you* will in all likelihood view *you* as ignorant, primitive, lacking understanding, and making cringe-worthy assumptions about people and the world. You may not *think* you lack understanding – you may not *think* you are in darkness ... but a later generation almost certainly will.

That said ... you don't even have to go out 70 years to see that truth. Think of yourself ten years ago. And think of all the things about yourself 10 years ago that make you cringe – that make you feel shame ... or embarrassed. Think of all the ways you can now see that back then you naively bought into the foolishness of those around you and of the world you lived in ten years ago. Consider that ... and then realize that ten years *from now* you will probably see many of the embarrassing ways you have bought into the foolishness of the world *today*.

You may not be able to see the ways that you lack understanding just as the world around you does – the ways that you share in the darkness of the world around you ... but reflection should lead you to admit that you almost certainly do share the world's foolishness right now – to some extent at least. [Timothy Keller, Various Sermons]

And while it may be true to different extents, it is still true of both Christians and non-Christians.

If you are not a Christian – if you have not believed Jesus's claim that he is the light of the world – if you have not responded to his call in this text to follow him, then Jesus says that this is *especially* true of you. This world is a dark world *because* it has rebelled against God. That is the root problem. And so long as you continue to rebel against God yourself (and refusing to believe and obey the words of Jesus, God's Son, would be a central form of that rebellion) so long as you continue to rebel against God, you share in the world's darkness – you share in its blindness

and lack of understanding – in a deep way. You really are *of* this world to your core, because you share in a defining trait of the world: its rejection of the true God.

But if you are a Christian, you need to recognize that to some extent you too are more *of* this dark world than you should be.

You still share some level of its unbelief. You still share some level of its lack of understanding. You need to battle that – you need to work against that and grow away from it – but to begin that work and that battle, you need to first acknowledge the problem.

Jesus says in verse twenty-three that we are *from* below ... that we are *from* this world ... and while those who follow him are no longer to be *of* this world ... the family resemblance to this world sometimes takes a while to fade.

It reminds me of talking about families-of-origin in premarital counseling. Because often one of the initial sources of conflict for newlyweds are all the assumptions they have, that they bring from the family they grew up in – their family-of-origin. But they're usually assumptions that they don't think they have. It could be over something like roles. So maybe in the new husband's family-of-origin his mom always handled the family's finances ... but in the new wife's family-of-origin her dad always handled the finances ... and it's not an assumption they even thought they were each making, they just took their family as "normal" and figured that's how things are done ... until they get married and then they are both quickly annoyed that the other person isn't managing the finances.

Or maybe in one person's family love is expressed through words and in the other's it is expressed through gifts ... and they never thought of it that way, they always just assumed it, but as their marriage gets going, soon the new husband and the new wife both feel that the other person hasn't expressed much love for them *and* they are simultaneously baffled that their new spouse feels unloved despite all they have tried to do to express their love.

We could go on and on. The point is that a new family has to, in many ways, form a new family culture. It may overlap with the culture of their families-of-origin, but it will in many ways be unique.

Those are all with fairly innocuous differences I've mentioned. But that's not always the case.

Sometimes one new spouse is from a family with serious problems – with sin, or brokenness, or abuse that defines their family-of-origin. The challenge for them is to discard those sinful or broken aspects of their family-of-origin and to align themselves with a new culture in the new family they are making. But that can be hard ... and that can take time.

And there's something like that for Christians and our relationship to this world. We are *from* this dark world that is in rebellion against God. Whether we came to know Jesus in our adulthood or in our infancy, we were born into a world that is in rebellion against God and therefore a world that is in darkness.

We have, since then, been adopted into the family of God – we have striven to walk in the light of Christ – but the old family patterns still reside in us to some extent. We can still resemble our

spiritual family-of-origin ... and we can do it more than we realize, and in ways we don't even notice.

We see this when we study church history. Even the great saints of centuries past, for as much as they stood out from their age, still in many ways resembled their age – they still bore a resemblance to that age's sins and misunderstandings.

And of course we are the same.

We may have left the world in many real ways when we were adopted into the family of God, the Church of Christ ... but even as we left the world, *we in some ways brought the world with us*. Like the young man or young woman who leaves a dysfunctional family to marry and create a new family, the patterns of our spiritual family-of-origin have formed deeper tracks in our heart than we realize at first ... and that comes out when we try to live a new life in a new spiritual family.

The world we all come from is a dark world, lacking understanding, and in rebellion against God.

And to the extent that we resemble that world, we too share in its darkness. And the truth is that we share much more with this world than we tend to think. The truth is that we feel much more at home in this world than we tend to admit – even to ourselves.

The first half of the question was: Where are we from?

We are from this dark world.

Which leads to the second half of the question: Where are we going?

Left to ourselves, we are going, in this world, to a dark end.

Left to ourselves – left to live according to this dark world – we are going towards a dark end.

We see that in verse twenty-one. Jesus says to the people: "I am going away, and you will seek me, and you will die in your sin."

Now – Jesus is not saying there that they will seek him, but he will hide from them. Rather, he's saying that they will refuse him, and that eventually he will leave them. And they will continue to seek the Messiah, since they have rejected him as the Messiah ... and then, left to their own devices, they will die in their sin. [Carson, 341] The natural result of the world's darkness is a dark end. The world embraces rebellion against God, it embraces darkness, and the natural consequence is an *eternity* of darkness. Jesus repeats the point in verse twenty-four: left to themselves, without intervention, he says, "I told you that you would die in your sins."

Jesus is reminding us that the part of us that shares the darkness of the world ... its pull, its desire, is to keep us there, in the darkness, forever. *Because part of us loves the darkness*. Part of us *doesn't want* to understand the world the way God would have us understand it. We *want* to think of it *our way*. We *want* to see it according to *our* desires. We *want* the darkness that lets us

imagine the world however *we* want it to be, rather than the light which confronts us with reality *as it actually is*. Maybe that desire for the darkness dominates us. Maybe it is just a rebellious tug in a corner of our hearts. But either way, we all experience that pull.

Jesus reminds us that that pull, if it has its way, would lead us to live in that darkness forever. The result it leads us to is that we die in our sin – we are separated from God, we are separated from his goodness, we are separated from his truth, we are separated from his light. We die in our sin.

Our first question is: Where are we from and where are we going?

The answer is: We are from this dark world, and left to ourselves, we are going to a dark end.

That is the first question.

The second question our text raises is: Where is *Jesus* from and where is *he* going?

Where is Jesus from, and where is he going?

And the answer Jesus gives is that he is from the Father above, and he is returning to the Father above.

We see the first part of that in a number of verses. Jesus tells them first that he is from the Father, who is above.

In verse fourteen he tells them “I know where I came from and where I am going.” And then, in verse sixteen we learn that the most important part of *where* he came from is *whom* he came from. Jesus tells us that he was sent by God the Father, and he repeats that same claim in verse eighteen. And again in verse twenty-six.

Then, elaborating a bit further in verse twenty-three he says, “You are from below; I am from above. You are of this world; I am not of this world.”

Jesus is from above. But the most important part of that is who was above with him. He comes from God the Father. He was sent here by God the Father, who dwells *above* this world.

And as we say that, we need to be clear about what we mean by “above.” As one commentator helpfully puts it: “Jesus cuts through [the crowd’s] misguided speculation by declaring that he and they emerge from two entirely antithetical realms. He is *from above*, *i.e. not of this world*, but from heaven, sent by his Father. They are *from below*, which does not mean ‘from hell’ or ‘from the underworld’ or the like, but *of this world*, this fallen moral order in conscious rebellion against its creator [...]. The contrast is not between a spiritual world and a material world (John is not a Neoplatonist), but between the realm of God himself and the realm of his fallen and rebellious creation, the ‘world’ which hates Jesus because he testifies that ‘what it does is evil.’” [Carson, 342]

Jesus is from the realm of God himself, because Jesus *is* God himself – he *is* God the Son, and he has been sent by God the Father, and is working in the world by the power of God the Holy Spirit.

Jesus is also, therefore, from a realm of light. If this dark world lacks understanding and a clear vision of what is true, then Jesus, as God the Son comes from a realm of light where truth is seen and where all is understood.

Jesus, as he stresses throughout this passage, knows himself and he knows us.

This is what sets Jesus apart, of course.

If you're not a Christian, then you need to appreciate that. Jesus doesn't claim to be just another enlightened teacher of morality or spirituality. He claims to be the Son of God who has existed from all eternity and who came to earth in his incarnation – in his birth and earthly life.

If you are a Christian, you need to consider whether you really appreciate and acknowledge that Jesus is as far above this world as he is – that your ideas don't get to rival his because he is not just an exceptional human being, but is our Maker, come down to us from above.

Jesus comes from the Father of lights above.

And he will also return to his Father above.

We see that in verses fourteen and twenty-one.

Jesus speaks in parallel of where he is from and where he is going. As he came from the Father, so he will return to the Father above.

So ... where does that leave things?

Our first question was: Where are we from and where are we going? And the answer is: We are from this dark world, and left to ourselves, we are going to a dark end.

Our second question is: Where is Jesus from and where is he going? And the answer he gives is that he is from the Father above, and he is returning to the Father above.

And those two questions lead us to our final question: What is Jesus doing here?

What is Jesus doing here?

And by that, I mean both what was he doing in his incarnation on this earth – as in: Why was he dwelling in this world? – and I also mean what activity was he performing both then and now: What is he *doing* here?

And I think our text points us to three answers: Jesus came to light, to lead, and to lift.

To light, to lead, and to lift.

Let's go through those quickly.

First, Jesus came to light. He says that in verse twelve: "I am the light of the world." he says. "Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

And light, as we see consistently throughout this passage, gives knowledge. It reveals truth. Light, when used on a journey, gives knowledge of the land you are in, and the path you are on. And it becomes clear throughout this text that the light Jesus brings gives true knowledge of this world, and where we are headed in it.

In verses sixteen through eighteen Jesus makes it clear that the knowledge he offers us comes from the realm of God – it comes from both God the Father, and Jesus, God the Son. Jesus, in a sense, brings with him the light from heaven and offers it to us.

And what is the content received by that light? What is the knowledge offered?

It is to see things as they are. It is to show us the truth about God and the truth about us and our world.

So, in verse fourteen we see that the light that Jesus brings is a witness – it is a testimony – and it includes a testimony to who *he* is.

But then along with that, it is also a testimony as to the state of our world. Jesus says it is a judgment of this world. He mentions that he judges along with the Father in verse sixteen. This helps clarify verse fifteen and shows that what Jesus means there is not that he does not judge at all, but that he does not judge as the world judges. [Carson, 339]

And Jesus makes this point further in verse twenty-six where he says that he has much to say and much to judge.

Jesus came first to light – to shine as the light in this world. He came to show us who he is. He came to show us who the Father is. He came to show us the true state of this world. He came to show us much of what we have talked about so far this morning – that he is from the Father above, and that our world is broken and in darkness. First, Jesus came to light.

Second, he came to lead.

And we see that in verse twelve. Because he said, "I am the light of the world Whoever *follows* me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

Following Jesus is key. Which means Jesus leads us.

And he leads us on a path. He leads us to the Father. He leads us, ultimately, out of the unbelieving world and to our heavenly Father above.

We see that in verse twenty-four, as Jesus tells us that unless we believe him – unless we follow him – then we will die here in our sins. By saying that, by that “unless” in verse twenty-four, we know that Jesus intends something different for us if we would follow him.

And we get that something else in verse nineteen. Jesus says, “If you knew me, you would know my Father also.” Here we see where Jesus is leading us. Jesus is leading us to the Father.

And at this point we should appreciate how Jesus’s work to light and to lead us go together. Jesus is the light of the world. But to benefit from that light, you need to be close to him. And he, he has told us, is going back to his Father. He is on the move. And so *we* must be as well. If we are to stay with him and stay with the light, we must be traveling with him towards the Father.

Or, looked at from the other end: If we are to follow Jesus – if we are to travel with him wherever he goes – then we need the light that he offers us, so we can see.

Jesus lights the way, and Jesus leads us – and he leads us *from* this world of darkness and sin, and *towards* the Father of light above.

But he doesn’t just lead us to the Father. He also lifts us up to the Father.

Jesus lights, he leads, and he lifts.

By saying, in verse twenty-four that we *need not* die in our sins – we *need not* meet the dark end this world leads to on its own – Jesus is saying that though we are *from* below, we need not stay below. “Below” need not be our final destination. Our final destination can instead be “above” – above with Jesus, above with our Heavenly Father.

And it is as Jesus is speaking about this that he suddenly starts to talk about the cross.

In verse twenty-eight Jesus says, “When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am he.”

When Jesus speaks of being “lifted up” here, he is speaking of the cross. The people of Jerusalem will lift him up ... and when he is lifted up by them, he will be nailed to a cross.

Jesus will be lifted up by the world, on the cross, so that he might lift his people up to the Father who is in heaven. Jesus is lifted up in judgment so that we might be lifted up in redemption. The world lifts Jesus up to death that Jesus might lift his people up to life. Jesus is lifted up to pay for the sins of those below, so that we might be lifted up to receive the joy of those above.

Jesus does lead us. And he does light the way. But as we see by his light and as we follow on his way, it is his lifting work, through the cross, and not our own effort, that brings us, ultimately, to the Father.

In this complicated back-and-forth, in a range of ways, Jesus tells us first that we are from this dark world, and left in it and to ourselves, we are headed for a dark end.

He tells us that he is from above, sent by the Father of lights, and he is returning to the Father above.

And he tells us that he came to bring us his light, to lead us on his way, and finally, to lift us up through his cross, to the Father above.

All that remains for us, is to run to Jesus and to stay close to him. That is the central call of our text – because none of this text does us any good *unless* we come to Christ and cling to him.

The fact that Jesus is the light will do you no good if you keep your distance. You might be able to see him a bit – like a distant star. But his light will do you no good from there. It will not illuminate your surroundings or your path. You need to be closer to him for that. You need to draw close to Jesus that you might see by his light.

His leading might be to the Father, but that will do you no good unless you are following close behind him. Keeping a distance and tracing him on the horizon as he makes his way to the Father will not help you. You need to follow him. You need to draw close so that you can follow him on the way. That is what a disciple is – she is a follower. If you want to escape the darkness of this world, you need to follow Jesus close behind. You need to be a disciple and not just a spectator.

And finally, the cross of Christ will do you no good if you are not close by Jesus, in order to be lifted up to the Father by him. The cross cannot be for you an interesting idea. It cannot be a nice symbol. It cannot be one doctrine among many. The cross of Christ must be the only means by which you know you can get back to God. You must run to the cross of Jesus, lifted up before you, that Christ might lift you up, into the realm of light above, to truly know God the Father.

Jesus came to be the light. He came to lead. He came to lift helpless sinners to their loving heavenly Father, so that they would not live for eternity in the darkness.

Jesus came close to you, to do all that for you. Come close then to him, that you might see, that you might follow, and that you might live in joy rather than die in your sin.

For that is the offer of the gospel.

Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

Carson, D.A. *The Gospel According to John*. PNTC. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991.

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