The Thief on the Cross: Saved as by Fire

Today many deceive themselves into believing that a purely mental faith is enough for salvation: an intellectual acceptance of the truth, without the works of faith and without a transformed life. Many appeal to the saying that "our works are as filthy rags", but they tear it out of its context and so arrive at the wrong conclusion that no one can reach perfection, the stature of the fullness of Christ. In reality, this false interpretation ignores the very heart of God's plan: that man should be made like Christ.

The thief on the cross, who many believe entered the Kingdom of God simply because he wanted the Lord to remember him, is often used as an argument for passivity. But in fact he does not confirm this mistaken understanding. He dismantles it.

God's call to every person is a call to perfection: a deep inner work by which the heart is shaped, cleansed and made fit for His Kingdom. This work is not reserved for those who have decades ahead of them. It is meant for everyone, whatever their circumstances, just as it happened even with the thief on the cross. God does not call anyone merely to forgiveness, but also to transformation; not merely to salvation, but also to perfection. And the thief on the cross was no exception: he too had to go through the same process of being made perfect.

God does not have two Gospels, nor two ways into the Kingdom: one for those who have time and another for those who do not; one for the righteous and another for sinners; one for religious people and another for the unprepared. There is a single way, a single road and a single goal: the forming of a person until they reach the stature of the fullness of Christ.

That is why everyone who enters the Kingdom of God passes through the same process, whether they have a whole life ahead of them or only a few hours. God does not take spiritual shortcuts. He brings no one to the stature of Christ without putting them through this work: a breaking of the heart, a sincere repentance, a real submission to the Lord.

This is the only way anyone can grow into full spiritual maturity: not by their own merits, nor by dead works, but by the inward work of the Spirit, to which a person must respond with living faith, sincere desire and a heart open to transformation. No one is exempt from this divine work, because it is the very essence of salvation: the forming of a person in the image of Christ.

The thief on the cross was not spared the work of transformation. It took place in him too, even though it lasted only a few hours. In those brief moments his heart was pierced, his conscience was awakened, and his desire to be remembered by the Lord was not a passing thought but the expression of a living love, a clear sign that the Spirit had worked in the depths of his being. This shows that the same process of perfection can be genuine even when time seems too short, because God's power is not measured by a human clock.

To understand more clearly how God can work in so short a time, it helps to look at an illustration from today's world. If even in technology limits that once seemed fixed are being

broken at a surprisingly fast pace, how much more can the work of God, untouched by our weaknesses, accomplish in hours what man would think takes years. So technological progress should not be seen as an end in itself, but as a pale picture of how, when a higher power steps in, our ideas of "impossible" change radically.

The technological progress of recent centuries shows that things once thought impossible are now within reach. Around 1900 no one could have imagined a production rate of **1,500 cars a day**, yet today's reality overturns such assumptions. The fact that people can make complex objects in a few hours that once took weeks shows that human limits are largely relative, not absolute.

All the more, when we speak of God, who is untouched by constraint, lack or weakness, we cannot apply to Him the limits we associate with human beings. However sophisticated a modern factory may be, every work of man remains a pale shadow before **the limitless capacity of God**.

All the more, then, the idea that **God, the Source of power, wisdom and creation, could be constrained by time** or powerless to transform a heart has no foundation. The words of the Lord Jesus, *"The things which are impossible with men are possible with God"* (Luke 18:27), become the foundation for understanding that His work can unfold at a pace and with an intensity the human mind cannot anticipate.

If people can produce in a few hours things previous generations could not even imagine, it is reasonable to believe that God can work in a human heart in an infinitely deeper way, even within a very short span of time.

And yet, just as producing 1,500 cars in a day is impossible without the necessary framework (the workforce, the machinery, the technology, the supply chain for parts), so the spiritual work does not happen at random either. God Himself creates the framework, the time, the circumstances and the intensity needed for transformation to be possible.

What seems impossible to us is not impossible for Him, because **He prepares exactly the setting in which the heart can be touched by love, enlightened and transformed.** God does not only work in a person; He first creates the environment in which His work can take place, just as a modern factory creates the environment in which an astonishing rate of production becomes possible.

Time, as we perceive it, does not limit spiritual work. God does not need decades to kindle faith in someone, to awaken the conscience or to bring about a genuine inner transformation when the heart truly opens.

In this light, **the thief on the cross becomes a fitting example of a perfection worked out intensely, rapidly and fully**, under the gaze and power of Christ.

The thief on the cross is not a marginal case. He is a revelation of how God works when time is compressed but grace increases. Scripture shows that the work of salvation and transformation

is not limited by duration, but by the readiness of the heart and the sovereignty of the Spirit. If suffering is the path to spiritual maturity, then for the thief the cross was the place where, in a few hours, experiences were concentrated that others live through over a whole lifetime: recognising sin, love, the fear of God, repentance, humility, faith, total surrender and perfection.

In the presence of Christ crucified, the supreme model of love, patience and obedience, the thief was exposed to a spiritual light that no one but the martyrs ever tastes. That extreme suffering, borne without resistance and with trust, became for him a rapid school of sanctification, a purifying fire that burned away the old nature and made room for the perfect work of grace.

God, who holds the keys of death and life, is not limited by hours, by weakness or by circumstances. He begins nothing that He does not bring to completion, for it is written in Philippians 1:6: "he which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ." If God has begun the work of salvation in a person, He has every resource at hand to complete it (power, grace and even time) because He is the One who gives life and He is the One who takes it.

To believe that God was constrained by time in the case of the thief on the cross, or that the few hours left forced Him to grant a "cheap salvation" without the work of transformation into the image of Christ, is to misunderstand Him and make Him powerless. Had more time been needed for the work of perfection, He would have given it; the fact that He did not give it proves that what had to be accomplished was accomplished in full. Nothing takes God by surprise, and nothing can hurry or slow His work.

The beauty of Christ's character (His uncommon gentleness, His dignified silence, the forgiveness He spoke in the very midst of mockery) was for the thief an overwhelming and irresistible reality. The moment he looked at Him, he did not see just a crucified man. He saw what only the Spirit can reveal: the moral beauty of the Son of God, the perfection of a love that gives itself to the very end. This beauty is Christ's universal call, the one He sends out to all people: "Be like Me… come to Me… follow Me."

Paradoxically, the thief, at the very edge of life, was one of those most responsive to this call. Christ drew him, not by threats or by fear, but by the unmatched charm of His character. And the thief responded.

He responded in a way that was pure, spontaneous and deep, as only a broken and enlightened heart can respond. In a few moments a love was born in him that human reason cannot explain: a love strong as death, a love that neither the terrible torments, nor the pain of his torn body, nor the nearness of the end could quench.

On the contrary, suffering made this love clearer and more genuine. As his life ebbed away, his love for Christ grew. As the world around him darkened, the light of Christ's beauty was kindled within him. Not even the approach of death could put out what had dawned in him: a deep loyalty to Christ, which his soul confessed with all the strength it had left.

So it is plain that what happened in the thief was not merely an intellectual conviction but a kindling of the heart. Christ drew him, and the love awakened by His beauty was stronger than the pains of the cross.

There is, then, no contradiction between Scripture's demand for a transformed character and the case of the thief. He did not enter the Kingdom as an unchanged man, but as a man who had gone through an unusually intense work, wrought by God in suffering, in the presence of the Son and under the enlightening of the Spirit. For him the cross was the place where his body died, but also the place where his character was transformed. Nothing defiled enters the Kingdom, and God, in His sovereignty, made that man go through the process of the perfecting of his character.

The extreme suffering he was going through was not merely the setting of his death, but the place of an accelerated transformation, where the intensity of pain met the intensity of discovering the beauty of Christ. Nailed to the wood of the cross, facing his own end, he was exposed to something few people have experienced: the suffering of Christ, endured in silence, without resistance and with dignity.

In those hours the thief was a direct witness to how Christ answered insults without answering back, how He bore pain without cursing, how He gave up His life without resisting. This presence, combined with his own suffering, became the catalyst of a deep inner change.

The process of transformation, which we perceive as unfolding over a longer time, seems here compressed into a dramatic span. Suffering sharpens inner perception, the conscience grows clearer, and eternal realities come directly into focus. In those hours the thief moves from rebellion to acknowledging the truth, from denial to recognition, from fear to faith, from contempt to love.

When light from above, sincere love and pain meet, time no longer carries the same weight. In such moments, what we would think possible only over a whole lifetime becomes possible in a few hours.

The scene of the crucifixion is not only a moment of ultimate pain but also one of supreme revelation. There, between heaven and earth, in the tension between despair and grace, is a man who until then had lived in darkness, the thief on the cross, and who in the last hours of his life meets the shining light of Christ. This encounter does not leave him unchanged. As with Saul of Tarsus on the Damascus road, or the jailer at Philippi at midnight, the effect of the light was total and immediate. When God's light is kindled in a human heart, change no longer depends on years, but on the truth that has pierced the person's being.

Extreme suffering, rather than being merely the backdrop to his death, proves to be the place of accelerated maturing, **a fiery furnace** in which the word of Scripture is fulfilled concerning God's work in those who seek Him in their hour of crisis.

The Bible describes suffering as an essential process in forming character. The Lord Jesus Himself went through this schooling: "it became him, for whom are all things, and by whom are

all things… to make the captain of their salvation perfect through sufferings" (Hebrews 2:10). We are also told that "yet learned he obedience by the things which he suffered" (Hebrews 5:8).

This is not about moral imperfection in Christ, but about being made perfect through full identification with human suffering. This is the framework in which His enigmatic saying must be understood: "every one shall be salted with fire" (Mark 9:49), the fire of trial serving to cleanse and consecrate.

For the thief this "fire" did not last a few minutes, but hard and relentless hours. If a few minutes of pain can make us cry out and reach for medicine, what does it mean to hang on a cross for six to nine hours, in a mixture of thirst, bleeding, burning, cramps and slow suffocation? In that place of agony Scripture shows us an inner process taking place: one of the thieves mocks, but the other stops him with the words: "Dost not thou fear God?" (Luke 23:40).

This question brings to light a holy fear, the beginning of wisdom (Proverbs 1:7), and opens the way to confession: "we receive the due reward of our deeds" (Luke 23:41). It is a renouncing of self-justification, a sign of a conscience awakened in the midst of pain. Then comes his confession about Christ: "this man hath done nothing amiss" (Luke 23:41). And finally rises the simple yet profound prayer: "Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom" (Luke 23:42).

Christ answers not with judgment but with a promise: "To day shalt thou be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:43). This "today" shows the intensity of the divine work, not the shortness of human time. The process is not measured in years, but in the depth of the encounter with Christ.

It is worth noting that today many stop at the supposedly free offer of the Lord Jesus and completely neglect the work of perfection that God began in this man. The Lord Jesus' promise does not suspend the work of perfection; it confirms it. It does not replace the forming of character; it inaugurates it in concentrated form. "Today" is not a cheap shortcut but an intensifying of grace that kindles love and begins the work of transformation.

This work has an essential backdrop: suffering. Scripture says that "the trying of your faith worketh patience", and "let patience have her perfect work" (James 1:3–4). The apostle Paul adds: "knowing that tribulation worketh patience; and patience, experience; and experience, hope" (Romans 5:3–4). And Peter speaks of a faith "tried with fire" (1 Peter 1:7).

In the same vein, Scripture also makes this promise: "But the God of all grace, who hath called us unto his eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after that ye have suffered a while, make you perfect, stablish, strengthen, settle you." *(1 Peter 5:10)*

The thief passes through this fire, not over a long life, but with a rarely seen intensity, under the eyes of the One crucified beside him. And here we see the fulfilment of the promise: in a little while God perfects him, establishes him and makes him unshakeable before the attacks of the evil one. What would seem impossible to people in so short a time, God works fully in those hours: a burning faith, a cleansed heart and a steadfastness that can no longer be shaken.

The suffering of the Lord Jesus becomes the supreme model: "even hereunto were ye called: because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow his steps" (1 Peter 2:21). "Who, when he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered, he threatened not" (1 Peter 2:23). The thief, in his own way, imitates this non-resistance: he does not answer the mockery, he does not defend himself, he does not strike back with words, but accepts the truth and looks to Christ.

Through this process, the crucifixion becomes not merely the end of a life but the entrance into a concentrated school of perfection, where outward pain sets off an inward awakening. In a few hours, but hours in which the intensity of suffering and love for Christ amplify each other, the biblical dynamic of transformation comes together: faith, confession, love, self-denial, the fear of God, trust and longsuffering.

In the end, the thief is not a strange exception but a symbol of God's power to work intensely and deeply where the heart opens and suffering becomes the soil in which grace sprouts. If "the author and finisher of our faith" (Hebrews 12:2) was made perfect through suffering, then the fire of the cross can become, even in the hour of death, the place where a person's life is changed irreversibly.

In this place of agony the thief chooses not to repay evil with evil, but to rebuke injustice, acknowledge his guilt and look upon Christ with love from all his heart. Here the word is fulfilled: "he that shall endure unto the end, the same shall be saved." In him we hear the echo of 1 Peter 2, where disciples are called not to return insult for insult, not to answer suffering with violence, but to imitate the silence and non-resistance of Christ.

This theme of deep transformation in a short time is not limited to the episode of the thief. The early Church is full of such examples: people who died for their faith before they had the chance of a long life of gradual maturing.

Down the centuries, many who chose Christ as their Bridegroom had short lives marked by persecution and martyrdom. The history of the Anabaptists records tens of thousands of believers who, after their conversion, were captured, tortured and killed within a short time. For many of them the "new life" was measured not in years but in days. And yet they did not turn back, they did not deny the faith and they did not repay evil with evil. They stood firm even under torture, demonstrating the love that had been set ablaze in them, a love strong as death, which "many waters cannot quench" (Song of Solomon 8:6–7).

The young woman in the Song of Solomon, though "the watchmen that went about the city" found her, struck her and wounded her (5:7), still did not give up seeking her beloved. In the same way the true Church does not stop loving the Bridegroom, even when she is wounded, despised and persecuted. Wounds do not quench love; they prove it and set it aflame.

The painful contrast is that today many who call themselves "born again" cannot show such love for the Lord Jesus, the love without which no one can become worthy to be His bride. They confess with their lips, but their hearts do not burn; they declare faith, but do not live in wonder

at His beauty; they enjoy the offer of salvation, but neglect the call to love and to sacrificial loyalty. And without this love there is no maturing, no transformation, no preparation for the Marriage of the Lamb.

In the mirror of biblical history, the exodus from Egypt offers a telling parallel: the journey to the promised land could have taken a few days, but the people turned it into a forty-year trek.

In this sense, the thief on the cross can be seen as representing a rare kind of person, like Joshua and Caleb, or Paul: people who, when they met God's call, responded immediately, firmly and with a pure heart.

Had Joshua and Caleb not had to travel with a hard-hearted people, they would have entered Canaan not after forty years but after only a few days, as long as the physical journey from Egypt to Canaan takes, a journey similar to the one Joseph's brothers made when they went down to Egypt for grain: roughly ten to fourteen days. Just as Joshua and Caleb were ready to enter the land at once, so the thief was ready, in the very hour of his suffering, to enter the Kingdom.

His prompt response to God's voice and to the beauty of Christ's character brought about the divine work. Just as the hearts of Joshua and Caleb did not need decades to be transformed, neither did the thief need a whole lifetime, because his heart responded fully at the very moment he met Christ.

Perhaps this perspective invites us to turn our usual way of seeing things upside down: if some reach maturity in a short time, why do others need years? Perhaps the length of time is not an expression of God's plan, but sometimes a reflection of inner resistance, of unwillingness, of the slow pace of the human heart.

So in the light of these examples, we can understand that God's work in the heart is not determined by the length of time, but by the intensity of the encounter with Him and by a person's readiness. Extreme suffering, the presence of Christ and openness to the truth can compress into a short span a spiritual work that would otherwise stretch over years.

Conclusion

In the end, the thief's story is not the exception that allows a relaxed attitude towards the demands of holiness God makes of every person. It is proof that God can accomplish, in His own way and in His own time, everything necessary for a person to be worthy of His Kingdom.

The thief does not become a model of spiritual carelessness, nor an argument for a cheap salvation reduced to a shallow line of reasoning: "just believe and you are saved (as by fire); the rest does not matter." On the contrary, he is one of the strongest proofs that grace, when it truly touches the heart, does not leave it as it found it.

That is why it must be said with all seriousness that the work God did in the thief was not set off by religious mechanisms, but by the love that was born in him the moment he saw the beauty of

Christ. Only love awakened by the moral beauty of the Son brings about God's deep work in a person.

Without this love (strong, real, irresistible, "strong as death", a love that not even torment can quench) there is no genuine transformation. And we must not fool ourselves that if this love has not been born in us during our lifetime, God will produce it automatically in the last hour, as He did with the thief. Grace does not work mechanically; it responds to a heart that sees the beauty of Christ and is moved by it.

Those who came out of Egypt are a sad example of how time, used without faith and without love, can work against a person: they responded with grumbling from the very start, and in the end they did not enter the Promised Land. Their period of grace and testing was about two years, followed by thirty-eight years of wandering, as judgment, not as maturing. Time in itself does not sanctify; only love that answers Christ's call opens the heart to God's perfecting work.

The thief was not spared transformation; the transformation was simply concentrated, intensified and accelerated by suffering, by the nearness of death and above all by the moral beauty of Christ. Grace did not cancel his need for change; it produced the change. Grace did not allow him indifference; it awakened his repentance. Grace did not allow him licence; it broke his attachment to sin. Nothing that happened to the thief encourages a life lived to please the flesh, because nothing that happened to him was cheap: he went through the fire of the utmost suffering, the light of Christ's presence and the deep piercing of the Spirit.

The truth is that his story does not minimise the call to holiness; it maximises it. His story does not say, "Live as you please and repent at the end." It says, "When His beauty truly touches you, not even the agonies of death can quench your love for Christ."

So the thief's salvation does not justify shallowness; it exposes false repentance and inert faith. The grace that saved him is the same grace that normally transforms some of us through years of walking with God, but which can work in a few hours all that we have failed to achieve in a whole lifetime. The God who perfects through a whole lifetime can also perfect through a few hours, when grace and suffering meet in the shadow of Christ's love. But this work does not happen without the love that is kindled in a person at the sight of the Son's beauty, a love nothing can quench.

The example of the thief on the cross, of the martyrs of the early Church and of the Anabaptists shows that spiritual transformation can happen at an accelerated pace under conditions of extreme suffering. God is not limited by time, and the way He works remains within the realm of His power. Suffering, faith and inner readiness can create a setting in which His work is intense and deep, even if a life is short.

In this light, a person's transformation is not measured only in years, but in the intensity of the encounter with God and in the heart's response to His call.

The foundation is "like Christ", and every person's work will be tried by fire: there is no cheap salvation

In our times many, out of negligence or convenience, have built themselves a "cheap salvation" by leaning selectively on two passages: 1 Corinthians 3 (about each person's work being tried by fire and being saved "as by fire") and the episode of the thief on the cross. From these texts people have wrongly drawn the idea that entry into the Kingdom of God can be gained without discipleship, without sanctification, without the transformation of character, as though salvation were a certificate without **inner change**, without any real change of our corrupt nature.

Such **interpretations** tear the texts from their context. In 1 Corinthians 3 Paul does not legitimise an untransformed life. He warns that the work of building the Church will be tested by fire, and whatever is "wood, hay, stubble" will burn, bringing loss of reward, even though the person, standing on the foundation which is Christ, will be "saved; yet so as by fire".

And the thief is not a model of Christian life for living without the fruit of the Spirit and without obedience.

This confusion, which flirts with a "security" devoid of holiness and of likeness to Christ, leads many to deceive themselves and others, reducing the Gospel to a legal pardon without the renewal of our nature, without being "changed… from glory to glory". Scripture, however, is clear: the foundation must be Christ, and there is no such thing as salvation without transformation.

So we must avoid a double confusion: on one side, the work of the Spirit in a person for salvation (without which no one enters the Kingdom), and on the other, each person's work in building the Church (which can bring reward or the loss of it). We must also rightly understand the Lord's statement, "every one shall be salted with fire", for no one reaches glory without discipleship, refining and obedience.

The apostle Paul declares powerfully that the foundation of the Christian life is one alone: "other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ." The foundation is compulsory, not optional, and every genuine spiritual life begins with real union with Christ, not with morality, tradition or mere good intentions. Forgiveness, justification and reconciliation with God are rooted solely in this foundation God has laid through His Son. Absolutely everything that follows in a believer's life, both personal transformation by the Spirit and the work of building the Church, depends on this foundation.

In 1 Corinthians 3 Paul is not speaking about the fruit of the Spirit in the sense of Galatians 5:22–23, but about a distinct reality: the work of building the Church in which everyone is called to take part. The emphasis here is not on the inner transformation needed to reach the stature of Christ, but on the quality of the work believers bring to the Body of Christ. Paul compares servants of God to workmen building on the foundation of Christ with different materials: gold, silver, precious stones, or wood, hay, stubble. This image shows clearly that not all works are equal in God's eyes; some are solid, pure and lasting, while others are shallow, cheap and lacking substance.

Paul adds that "every man's work shall be made manifest: for the day shall declare it", because it is "revealed by fire; and the fire shall try every man's work of what sort it is." Here we find one of Scripture's most solemn warnings: every person's work will be tested. If the work survives the fire, the builder will receive a reward.

If the work is burned up, he will lose his reward, yet he himself will be saved, but "as by fire". This expression, saved, yet as by fire, does not describe a "cheap salvation". It describes a salvation in which the person stood on the right foundation, Christ, but their work in building the Church, their personal contribution to the Body of Christ, had no lasting value.

This case resembles the thief on the cross, who was saved but had no time to build in the Church; he was truly saved "as by fire". This example cannot be turned into a rule for those who live a whole life and are called to take part in building up the Body of Christ. The thief was saved in his last moments through faith and genuine transformation, and his salvation does not cancel the need for discipleship and transformation. That is why we must not confuse the Spirit's work in a person for salvation and transformation with each person's work in building the Church. The two are different planes.

The Spirit's work in a person is absolutely necessary for entering the Kingdom. Without the new birth, without sanctification, without the transformation of character, a person cannot be compatible with God. "Holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord," says Hebrews 12:14. "Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God," says the Lord Jesus in John 3:5.

The transformation of the inner self into the image of Christ is not an option but a necessary process: "whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son." The fruit of the Spirit (love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance) is not a list of moral perfections, but the character of Christ grown to maturity in a person, indispensable for eternal life. This is the work of the Spirit in a person without which no one can enter the Kingdom.

The work of building the Church described in 1 Corinthians 3, by contrast, concerns something else: the quality of each believer's service. Here Paul is not referring to the fruit of the Spirit in the inner self, but to the way each person contributes to the growth of the Body. If this work is "gold, silver, precious stones", that is, sound, pure, centred on Christ and built with truth and love, it will remain.

If it is "wood, hay, stubble", that is, shallow, merely human and without substance, it will be burned up. The person is fit to dwell in eternity through the transformation produced by the Spirit, yet the service they built on earth may have no eternal value.

That is why the Lord Jesus says, "every one shall be salted with fire." The fire of testing is inevitable, both for character and for work. But it is important not to confuse these two areas. The work of building can be burned up and the person still be saved, but the Spirit's work in the heart for transformation and holiness is compulsory; without it no one can see God. Personal

salvation does not mean forgiveness without transformation. "Cheap salvation", meaning forgiveness without a changed life, is a contradiction of the Gospel of Christ.

So the two realities stand out clearly: each person's work in the Church may be rewarded or burned up, but personal salvation requires the foundation, Christ, and the indispensable work of the Spirit, which transforms a person until they are compatible with the Kingdom. Forgiveness opens the door, but it is a transformed character that allows entry into God's presence. In this way Scripture shows that there is no cheap salvation, no fruitless life, no forgiveness without transformation, for God's ultimate purpose is a family of mature sons, like Christ, able to dwell in His light for ever.

Therefore, to build cheap "salvations" out of **1 Corinthians 3 and the case of the thief** is to mutilate the witness of the Bible and to reject God's very purpose: not merely forgiveness, but the forming of the image of the Son; not merely escape from punishment, but fitness for His presence. Only in this way, with the foundation laid in Christ, with a life "salted with fire" and with one's work tested at God's judgment, does the Christian stop deceiving himself and others, and enter into the true calling: to become like Him.

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