

Table of Contents:

Forward		3
Chapter 1	The gospel is for all people	4
Chapter 2	How the gospel is spread	6
Chapter 3	God prepared the way for the gospel	8
Chapter 4	The gospel changed the world	11
Chapter 5	The good news of the gospel	14
Chapter 6	Those who twist the truth	18
Chapter 7	The gospel changes lives	22
Chapter 8	Will all be saved?	26
Chapter 9	The Promise of the gospel	27

Forward

After Paul considered everything he had accomplished in his life, he said that it was all “a loss” when compared with the greatness of knowing Christ. The story of the gospel is the greatest story of all.

A person’s relationship with Christ is more important than anything else.

To know Christ should be our ultimate goal.

No amount of keeping the law, self-improvement, discipline, or religious effort can make us right with God. Righteousness comes only from God.

We are made righteous by trusting in Christ. He exchanges our sin and shortcomings for his complete righteousness.

Paul gave up everything—family, friendship, and freedom—in order to know Christ and his resurrection power.

We too have access to this knowledge and this power, but we may have to make sacrifices to enjoy it fully. Knowing Christ is more than worth the sacrifice.

We are united with Christ by trusting in him, we experience the power that raised him from the dead.

That same mighty power will help us live morally renewed and regenerated lives.

But before we can walk in newness of life, we must also die to sin. We can’t know the victory of the resurrection without personally applying the crucifixion.

Chapter 1

The Gospel is for all people.

And that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. Luke 24:47

Luke wrote to the Greek-speaking world. He wanted them to know that Christ's message of God's love and forgiveness should go to all the world. We must never ignore the worldwide scope of Christ's gospel. God wants the entire world to hear the Good News of salvation.

Crossing barriers of prejudice to share the gospel.

Soon a Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Please give me a drink." He was alone at the time because his disciples had gone into the village to buy some food.

The woman was surprised, for Jews refuse to have anything to do with Samaritans. She said to Jesus, "You are a Jew, and I am a Samaritan woman. Why are you asking me for a drink?"
John 4:7-9

This woman (1) was a Samaritan, a member of the hated mixed race, (2) was known to be living in sin, and (3) was in a public place. No respectable Jewish man would talk to a woman under such circumstances. But Jesus did.

The gospel is for every person, no matter what his or her race, social position, or past sins. We must be prepared to share this gospel at any time and in any place. Jesus crossed all barriers to share the gospel, and we who follow him must do no less. This is an example to show that the gospel was to go to the gentiles also.

Spreading the gospel doesn't always make life here easier.

"Please, sir," the woman said, "give me some of that water! Then I'll never be thirsty again, and I won't have to come here to haul water." John 4:15

The woman mistakenly believed that if she received the water Jesus offered, she would not have to return to the well each day. She was interested in Jesus' message because she thought it could make her life easier. But if that were always the case, people would accept Christ's message for the wrong reasons.

Christ did not come to take away challenges, but to change us on the inside and to empower us to deal with problems from God's perspective.

The woman did not immediately understand what Jesus was talking about. It takes time to accept something that changes the very foundations of your life.

Jesus allowed the woman time to ask questions and put pieces together for herself. Sharing the gospel will not always have immediate results. When you ask people to let Jesus change their lives, give them time to weigh the matter.

Chapter 2

How the gospel spread.

But when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, you will receive power and will tell people about me everywhere—in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." Acts 1:8

Power from the Holy Spirit is not limited to strength beyond the ordinary—that power also involves courage, boldness, confidence, insight, ability, and authority. The disciples would need all these gifts to fulfill their mission. If you believe in Jesus Christ, you can experience the power of the Holy Spirit in your life.

Jesus promised the disciples that they would receive power to witness after they received the Holy Spirit.

Notice the progression:

- (1) they would receive the Holy Spirit,
- (2) he would give them power, and
- (3) they would witness with extraordinary results.

Often we try to reverse the order and witness by our own power and authority. Witnessing is not showing what we can do for God. It is showing and telling what God has done for us.

Jesus had instructed his disciples to witness to people of all nations about him (Matthew 28:19-20).

But they were told to wait first for the Holy Spirit (Luke 24:49).

God has important work for you to do for him, but you must do it by the power of the Holy Spirit.

We often like to get on with the job, even if it means running ahead of God. But waiting is sometimes part of God's plan.

Are you waiting and listening for God's complete instructions, or are you running ahead of his plans? We need God's timing and power to be truly effective.

This verse describes a series of ever-widening circles.

The gospel was to spread, geographically, from Jerusalem, into Judea and Samaria, and finally to the whole world.

It would begin with the devout Jews in Jerusalem and Samaria, spread to the mixed race in Samaria, and finally be offered to the Gentiles in the uttermost parts of the earth.

God's gospel has not reached its final destination if someone in your family, your workplace, your school, or your community hasn't heard about Jesus Christ.

Make sure that you are contributing in some way to the ever widening circle of God's loving message.

Chapter 3

God prepared the way for spreading of the gospel.

Here we are—Parthians, Medes, Elamites, people from Mesopotamia, Judea, Cappadocia, Pontus, the province of Asia,

Phrygia, Pamphylia, Egypt, and the areas of Libya toward Cyrene, visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism), Cretans, and Arabians. And we all hear these people speaking in our own languages about the wonderful things God has done!" Acts 2:9-11

Why are all these places mentioned? This is a list of many lands from which Jews came to the festivals in Jerusalem. These Jews were not living in Palestine because they had been dispersed throughout the world through captivities and persecutions.

Very likely, some of the Jews who responded to Peter's message returned to their homelands with God's Good News of salvation.

Thus God prepared the way for the spread of the gospel. As you read the book of Acts, you will see how the way was often prepared for Paul and other messengers by people who became believers at Pentecost.

The church at Rome was probably begun by such Jewish believers.

How you can be part of spreading the gospel.

God's message was preached in ever-widening circles. The number of believers greatly increased in Jerusalem, and many of the Jewish priests were converted, too. Acts 6:7

Jesus had told the apostles that they were to witness first in Jerusalem (Acts 1:8). In a short time, their message had infiltrated the entire city and all levels of society. Even some priests were

being converted, an obvious violation of the wishes of the council that would endanger their position.

The word of God spread like ripples on a pond where, from a single center, each wave touches the next, spreading wider and farther.

The gospel still spreads this way today. You don't have to change the world single-handedly—it is enough just to be part of the wave, touching those around you, who in turn will touch others until all have felt the movement. Don't ever feel that your part is insignificant or unimportant.

How persecution helped spread the gospel.

But the believers who had fled Jerusalem went everywhere preaching the Good News about Jesus. Acts 8:4

Persecution forced the Christians out of Jerusalem and into Judea and Samaria—thus fulfilling the second part of Jesus' command (see Acts 1:8). The persecution helped spread the gospel. God would bring great results from the believers' suffering.

Persecution forced the believers out of their homes in Jerusalem, and along with them went the gospel.

Sometimes we have to become uncomfortable before we'll move. We may not want to experience it, but discomfort may be the best thing for us because God may be working through our hurts.

When you are tempted to complain about uncomfortable or painful circumstances, stop and ask if God might be preparing you for a special task.

Why the gospel was to go first to Jews.

Then Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly and declared, "It was necessary that this Good News from God be given first to you Jews. But since you have rejected it and judged yourselves unworthy of eternal life—well, we will offer it to Gentiles.
Acts 13:46

Why was it necessary for the gospel to go first to the Jews?

God planned that through the Jewish nation *all* the world would come to know God (Genesis 12:3).

Paul, a Jew himself, loved his people (Romans 9:1-5) and wanted to give them every opportunity to join him in proclaiming God's salvation.

Unfortunately, many Jews did not recognize Jesus as Messiah, and they did not understand that God was offering salvation to anyone, Jew or Gentile, who comes to him through faith in Christ.

I am not ashamed of this Good News about Christ.

It is the power of God at work, saving everyone who believes—
Jews first and also Gentiles. Romans 1:16

How the gospel turns the world upside down.

Not finding them there, they dragged out Jason and some of the other believers instead and took them before the city council. "Paul and Silas have turned the rest of the world upside down, and now they are here disturbing our city," they shouted. Acts 17:6

We don't know much about Jason except that he evidently was the local host and sponsor of Paul and Silas; thus he took the heat for all the problems.

Jason is just one of many "unsung heroes" who faithfully played their part to help spread the gospel. Because of Jason's courage, Paul and Silas were able to minister more effectively.

You may not receive much attention (in fact you may receive only grief) for your service for Christ. But God wants to use you. Lives will be changed because of your courage and faithfulness.

What a reputation these early Christians had! The power of the gospel revolutionized lives, broke down all social barriers, threw open prison doors, caused people to care deeply for one another, and stirred them to worship God.

Our world needs to be turned upside down, to be transformed.

The gospel is not in the business of merely improving programs and encouraging good conduct, but of dynamically transforming lives.

Take courage and ask God how you can help spread his Good News all over *your* world.

Why many will resist the gospel.

As he reasoned with them about righteousness and self-control and the judgment to come, Felix was terrified. "Go away for now," he replied. "When it is more convenient, I'll call for you again."

Acts 24:25

Paul's talk with Felix became so personal that Felix grew fearful. Felix, like Herod Antipas (Mark 6:17-18), had taken another man's wife.

Paul's words were interesting until they focused on "righteousness, self-control, and the judgment to come."

Many people will be glad to discuss the gospel with you as long as it doesn't touch their lives too personally.

When it does, some will resist or run. But this is what the gospel is all about—God's power to change lives.

The gospel is not effective until it moves from principles and doctrine into a life-changing dynamic. When someone resists or runs from your witness, you have undoubtedly succeeded in making the gospel personal.

Why many think the gospel is foolish.

God's way seems foolish to the Jews because they want a sign from heaven to prove it is true. And it is foolish to the Greeks because they believe only what agrees with their own wisdom.

So when we preach that Christ was crucified, the Jews are offended, and the Gentiles say it's all nonsense.

But to those called by God to salvation, both Jews and Gentiles, Christ is the mighty power of God and the wonderful wisdom of God. 1 Cor. 1:22-24

Many Jews considered the Good News of Jesus Christ to be foolish, because they thought the Messiah would be a conquering king accompanied by signs and miracles.

Jesus had not restored David's throne as they expected.

Besides, he was executed as a criminal, and how could a criminal be a savior?

Greeks, too, considered the gospel foolish: they did not believe in a bodily resurrection; they did not see in Jesus the powerful characteristics of their mythological gods; and they thought no reputable person would be crucified. To them, death was defeat, not victory.

Chapter 5

The Good News of Jesus Christ still sounds foolish to many.

Our society worships power, influence, and wealth. Jesus came as a humble, poor servant, and he offers his kingdom to those who have faith, not to those who do all kinds of good deeds to try to earn his gifts.

This looks foolish to the world, but Christ is our power, the only way we can be saved. Knowing Christ personally is the greatest wisdom anyone could have.

Don't distort the gospel to please audience.

We reject all shameful and underhanded methods. We do not try to trick anyone, and we do not distort the word of God. We tell the truth before God, and all who are honest know that. 2 Cor. 4:2

Preachers, teachers, and anyone else who talks about Jesus Christ must remember that they stand in God's presence—he hears every word. When you tell people about Christ, be careful not to distort the message to please your audience. Proclaim the truth of God's Word.

Content of the gospel is more important than presentation.

I may not be a trained speaker, but I know what I am talking about. I think you realize this by now, for we have proved it again and again. 2 Cor. 11:6

Paul, a brilliant thinker, was not a trained, spellbinding speaker. Although his ministry was effective (see Acts 17), he had not been

trained in the Greek schools of oratory and speechmaking, as many of the false teachers probably had been.

Paul believed in a simple presentation of the gospel (see 1 Cor. 1:17), and some people thought this showed simple-mindedness.

Thus Paul's speaking performance was often used against him by false teachers.

In all our teaching and preaching, content is far more important than the presentation.

A simple, clear presentation that helps listeners understand will be of great value.

Are you willing to sacrifice for the gospel?

They say they serve Christ? I know I sound like a madman, but I have served him far more! I have worked harder, been put in jail more often, been whipped times without number, and faced death again and again.

Five different times the Jews gave me thirty-nine lashes. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked. Once I spent a whole night and a day adrift at sea.

I have traveled many weary miles. I have faced danger from flooded rivers and from robbers. I have faced danger from my own people, the Jews, as well as from the Gentiles.

I have faced danger in the cities, in the deserts, and on the stormy seas. And I have faced danger from men who claim to be Christians but are not.

I have lived with weariness and pain and sleepless nights. Often I have been hungry and thirsty and have gone without food
Often I have shivered with cold, without enough clothing to keep me warm.

Then, besides all this, I have the daily burden of how the churches are getting along. Who is weak without my feeling that weakness? Who is led astray, and I do not burn with anger? 2 Cor. 11:23-29

Paul presented his credentials to counteract the charges that the false teachers were making against him.

He felt foolish boasting like this, but his list of credentials would silence any doubts about his authority.

Paul wanted to keep the Corinthians from slipping under the spell of the false teachers and turning away from the gospel.

Paul also gave a list of his credentials in his letter to the Philippians (see Phil. 3:4-8).

Paul was angry that the false teachers had impressed and deceived the Corinthians (2 Cor. 11:13-15).

Therefore, he had to reestablish his credibility and authority by listing the trials he had endured in his service for Christ.

Some of these trials are recorded in the book of Acts (Acts 14:19; Acts 16:22-24).

Because Paul wrote this letter during his third missionary journey (Acts 18:23-21:17), his trials weren't over.

He would experience yet further difficulties and humiliations for the cause of Christ (see Acts 21:30-33; Acts 22:24-30).

Paul was sacrificing his life for the gospel, something the false teachers would never do.

The trials and hurts we experience for Christ's sake build our character, demonstrate our faith, and prepare us for further service to the Lord.

Sea travel was not as safe as it is today. Paul had been shipwrecked three times, and he would face another accident on his voyage to Rome (see Acts 27).

By this time, Paul had probably made at least eight or nine voyages.

Not only did Paul face beatings and dangers, he also carried the daily concern for the young churches, worrying that they were staying true to the gospel and free from false teachings and inner strife.

Paul was concerned for individuals in the churches he served. If God has placed you in a position of leadership and authority, treat people with Paul's kind of empathy and concern.

Chapter 6

Detecting those who twist truth of the gospel.

That pretends to be the Good News but is not the Good News at all.

You are being fooled by those who twist and change the truth concerning Christ. Galatians 1:7

There is only one way given to us by God to be forgiven of sin—through believing in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.

No other person, method, or ritual can give eternal life. Attempting to be open-minded and tolerant, some people assert that all religions are equally valid paths to God.

In a free society, people have the right to their religious opinions, but this doesn't guarantee that their ideas are right. God does not accept man-made religion as a substitute for faith in Jesus Christ. He has provided just one way—Jesus Christ (John 14:6).

Those who had confused the Galatian believers and perverted the gospel were zealous Jewish Christians who believed that the Old Testament practices such as circumcision and dietary restrictions were required of all believers.

Because these teachers wanted to turn the Gentile Christians into Jews, they were called *Judaizers*.

Some time after the letter to the Galatians was sent, Paul met with the apostles in Jerusalem to discuss this matter further (see Acts 15).

Most of the Galatian Christians were Greeks who were unfamiliar with Jewish laws and customs. The Judaizers were an extreme faction of Jewish Christians.

Both groups believed in Christ, but their life-styles differed considerably.

We do not know why the Judaizers may have traveled no small distance to teach their mistaken notions to the new Gentile converts.

They may have been motivated by

- (1) A sincere wish to integrate Judaism with the new Christian faith,
- (2) A sincere love for their Jewish heritage, or
- (3) A jealous desire to destroy Paul's authority.

Whether or not these Judaizers were sincere, their teaching threatened these new churches and had to be countered.

When Paul called their teaching a perversion of the gospel, he was not rejecting everything Jewish.

He himself was a Jew who worshiped in the temple and attended the religious festivals.

But he was concerned that *nothing* get in the way of the simple truth of his message—that salvation, for Jews and Gentiles alike, is through faith in Jesus Christ alone.

A twisting of the truth is more difficult to spot than an outright lie.

The Judaizers were twisting the truth about Christ. They claimed to follow him, but they denied that Jesus' work on the cross was sufficient for salvation.

There will always be people who pervert the Good News.

Either they do not understand what the Bible teaches, or they are uncomfortable with the truth as it stands. How can we tell when people are twisting the truth? Before accepting the teachings of any group, find out what the group teaches about Jesus Christ.

If their teaching does not match the truth in God's Word, then it is perverted.

The universal scope of the gospel

He wants everyone to be saved and to understand the truth.

1 Timothy. 2:4

Although God is all-powerful and He is all-knowing, he has chosen to let us help him change the world through our prayers.

How this works is a mystery to us because of our limited understanding, but it is a reality. Paul urges us to pray for each other and for our leaders in government.

Our earnest prayers will have powerful results (James 5:16).

Paul's command to pray for kings was remarkable considering that Nero, a notoriously cruel ruler, was emperor at this time (A.D. 54-68).

When Paul wrote this letter, persecution was a growing threat to believers.

Later, when Nero needed a scapegoat for the great fire that destroyed much of Rome in A.D. 64, he blamed the Roman Christians so as to take the focus off himself.

Then persecution erupted throughout the Roman Empire. Not only were Christians denied certain privileges in society. Some were even publicly butchered, burned, or fed to animals.

When our lives are going along peacefully and quietly, it is difficult to remember to pray for those in authority, because we often take good government for granted.

It's easier to remember to pray when we experience problems. But we should pray for those in authority around the world so that their societies will be conducive to the spread of the gospel.

Both Peter and Paul said that God wants all to be saved (see 2 Peter 3:9). This does not mean that all *will* be saved, because the Bible makes it clear that many reject Christ (Matthew 25:31-46; John 12:44-50; Hebrews 10:26-29).

The gospel message has a universal scope; it is not directed only to people of one race, one sex, or one national background.

God loves the whole world and sent his Son to save sinners. Never assume that anyone is outside God's mercy or beyond the reach of his offer of salvation.

Chapter 7

The gospel changes lives.

For when we brought you the Good News, it was not only with words but also with power, for the Holy Spirit gave you full assurance that what we said was true.

And you know that the way we lived among you was further proof of the truth of our message. 1 Thessalonians 1:5

The keys to surviving persecution and trials are perseverance and faith. When we are faced with crushing troubles, we can have faith that God is using our trials for our good and for his glory.

Knowing that God is fair and just will give us patience in our suffering because we know that he has not forgotten us. In God's perfect timing, he will relieve our suffering and punish those who persecute us. We must trust God's timing.

Paul had been persecuted during his first visit to Thessalonica (Acts 17:5-9).

No doubt those who had responded to his message and had become Christians were continuing to be persecuted by both Jews and Gentiles. In Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians, he said that Christ's return would bring deliverance from persecution and judgment on the persecutors.

But this caused the people to expect Christ's return right away to rescue and vindicate them. So Paul had to point out that while waiting for God's kingdom, believers could and should learn perseverance and faith from their suffering.

As we live for Christ, we will experience troubles because we are trying to be God's people in a perverse world. Some people say that troubles are the result of sin or lack of faith, but Paul teaches that they may be a part of God's plan for believers.

Our problems can help us look upward and forward, instead of inward (Mark 13:35-36; Phil. 3:13-14); they can build strong character (Romans 5:3-4);

They can provide us with opportunities to comfort others who also are struggling (2 Cor. 1:3-5)

Your troubles may be an indication that you are taking a stand for Christ.

There are two dimensions of the relief mentioned by Paul.

We can gain relief in knowing that our sufferings are strengthening us, making us ready for Christ's kingdom.

We can also gain relief in the fact that one day everyone will stand before God; at that time, wrongs will be righted, judgment will be pronounced, and evil will be terminated.

We must keep the gospel alive for the next generation.

May the Lord be with your spirit, Grace be with you all. 2 Tim.4:22

Running away is sometimes considered cowardly. But wise people realize that removing themselves physically from temptation often can be the most courageous action to take.

Timothy, a young man, was warned to flee anything that produced evil thoughts.

If you have a recurring temptation that is difficult to resist,
Remove yourself physically from any situation that stimulates your
desire to sin.

Knowing when to run is as important in spiritual battle as knowing
when and how to fight. (See also 1 Tim. 6:11.)

The gospel changes social structures.

Perhaps you could think of it this way: Onesimus ran away for a
little while so you could have him back forever.

He is no longer just a slave; he is a beloved brother, especially to
me. Now he will mean much more to you, both as a slave and as a
brother in the Lord. Philemon 1:15-16

Onesimus means “useful.” Paul used a play-on-words, saying that
Onesimus had not been much use to Philemon in the past, but had
become very useful to both Philemon and Paul.

Although Paul wanted to keep Onesimus with him, he was sending
Onesimus back, requesting that Philemon accept him not only as a
forgiven runaway servant, but also as a brother in Christ.

Slavery was widespread throughout the Roman empire. In these
early days, Christians did not have the political power to change
the slavery system.

Paul didn’t condemn or condone slavery, but he worked to
transform relationships.

The gospel begins to change social structures by changing the
people within those structures.

What a difference Onesimus's status as a Christian made in his relationship to Philemon.

He was no longer merely a slave, but he was also a brother. That meant that both Onesimus and Philemon were members of God's family—equals in Christ.

A Christian's status as a member of God's family transcends all other distinctions among believers.

Do you look down on any fellow Christians?

Remember, they are your equals before Christ (Galatians 3:28). How you treat your brothers and sisters in Christ's family reflects your true Christian commitment.

Chapter 8

Will those who never hear the gospel be saved?

So, you see, it is impossible to please God without faith. Anyone who wants to come to him must believe that there is a God and that he rewards those who sincerely seek him. Hebrews 11:6

Believing that God exists is only the beginning; even the demons believe that much (James 2:19-20).

God will not settle for mere acknowledgment of his existence. He wants a personal, dynamic relationship with you that will transform your life.

Those who seek God will find that they are rewarded with his intimate presence.

Sometimes we wonder about the fate of those who haven't heard of Christ and have not even had a Bible to read.

God assures us that all who honestly seek him—who act in faith on the knowledge of God that they possess—will be rewarded.

When you tell others the gospel, encourage them to be honest and diligent in their search for truth.

Those who hear the gospel are responsible for what they have heard.

Chapter 9

The Promises of the Gospel

Therefore, since we have been made right in God's sight by faith, we have peace with God because of what Jesus Christ our Lord has done for us.

Because of our faith, Christ has brought us into this place of highest privilege where we now stand, and we confidently and joyfully look forward to sharing God's glory. Romans 5:1-2

We now have peace *with God*, which may differ from peaceful feelings such as calmness and tranquility.

Peace with God means that we have been reconciled with him. There is no more hostility between us, no sin blocking our relationship with him.

Peace with God is possible only because Jesus paid the price for our sins through his death on the cross.

problems. Instead, we will learn to depend on the power available to us from Christ, who lives in us by the Holy Spirit.

Paul states that, as believers, we now stand in a place of highest privilege (“this grace in which we now stand”). Not only has God declared us not guilty; he has drawn us close to himself. Instead of being enemies, we have become his friends—in fact, his own children (John 15:15; Galatians 4:5).

Yet it was our weaknesses he carried; it was our sorrows that weighed him down. And we thought his troubles were a punishment from God for his own sins!

But he was wounded and crushed for our sins. He was beaten that we might have peace. He was whipped, and we were healed!

All of us have strayed away like sheep. We have left God's paths to follow our own. Yet the Lord laid on him the guilt and sins of us all. Isaiah 53:4-6

How could an Old Testament person understand the idea of Christ dying for our sins (our transgressions and iniquities)—actually bearing the punishment that we deserved?

The sacrifices suggested this idea, but it is one thing to kill a lamb, and something quite different to think of God's chosen servant as that Lamb.

But God was pulling aside the curtain of time to let the people of Isaiah's day look ahead to the suffering of the future Messiah and the resulting forgiveness made available to all mankind.

Isaiah speaks of Israel straying from God and compares them to wandering sheep. Yet God would send the Messiah to bring them back into the fold. We have the hindsight to see and know the identity of the promised Messiah who has come and died for our sins.

But if we can see all that Jesus did and still reject him, our sin is much greater than that of the ancient Israelites who could not see what we have seen.

Have you given your life to Jesus Christ, the "good shepherd" (John 10:11-16), or are you still like a wandering sheep?

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