

Standing Strong in Tough Times: Paul's Letters to Timothy

By David Feddes

Paul's letters to Timothy emphasize standing strong in tough times. Paul knows that soon he's going to be gone, and times aren't going to get any easier for young Pastor Timothy. Paul says to Timothy, "Endure hardship with us like a good soldier of Christ Jesus. There will be terrible times in the last days... I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith" (2 Timothy 2:3; 3:1; 4:7).

Terrible times

As Paul writes these letters, especially his second letter, he knows that his execution is going to occur soon. He's going to be killed for the faith. And so Timothy needs encouragement to endure hardship. There are going to be terrible times.

But mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days. People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love [no natural family affection], unforgiving [impossible to make peace with], slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God—having a form of godliness but denying its power. Have nothing to do with them. (2 Tim 3:1-5)

Notice the phrase "the last days." The last days is not a guess about whether we might be living in the last few years or months before Jesus comes again. The last days were already occurring when Paul wrote to Timothy. The last days is the whole period between Jesus' first coming and second coming when the powers of the gospel will be advancing, but also resistance to the gospel and the behavior of those who reject the gospel will tend to get worse and worse. So, as we spread the gospel, we shouldn't plan on everybody becoming all sweetness and light. There are going to be terrible times in the last days, whether it's the time of Timothy or our own time.

And part of those terrible times in particular will be rotten religion. You notice the phrase "having the appearance or the form of godliness but denying its power" (2 Timothy 3:5). A bit later Paul says that there are people who are "always learning and never able to arrive at a knowledge of the truth" (2 Timothy 3:7). That sounds like a good deal of what goes on in some of our academic seminaries these days. Not all of them, thank God. There are some Bible-believing ones, but there are others that are always studying this, always studying that, always writing lengthy books about controversial new ideas, but never simply able to know and to state the truth of God.

"These men also oppose the truth, men corrupted in mind and disqualified regarding the faith" (2 Timothy 3:8). It's a remarkable and horrible thing that even today you could have people holding chairs of religion in prestigious universities who are completely unconverted, who do not know Christ as Savior, who do not even believe in the physical resurrection of Jesus Christ. And there are also those not just in academic institutions, but there are people who manage to get themselves a religious following, and they are able to corrupt other people. And so we need to realize during tough times there's also going to be rotten religion.

How do you stand strong in tough times? Well, first face the facts. Times will be evil, and people will be evil, but you must be different. There are a number of times in Paul's letters to Timothy when he describes how the world is going to behave in the last days, and then he says to Timothy, "But you." Sometimes the translation will say "You, however," or "As for you," or "But you." Paul says: Here's how things are going to be. Don't you go with that flow. You have got to be different. You've got to stand strong.

Standing strong

1. Figure on a fight
2. Endure for the elect
3. Stick to Scripture
4. Model your message
5. Teach more teachers
6. Look to the Lord
7. Focus on forever

What does standing strong involve? I'd like to highlight seven themes in Paul's letters to Timothy. I found these letters to Timothy very helpful in my beginning as a pastor. I still find them extremely helpful. But when you're starting out as a young pastor or you're just thinking of getting into pastoral ministry, what could benefit you more than hearing the mighty veteran apostle's advice for a younger pastor? Let's look in more detail at each of these themes from standing strong.

1. Figure on a fight

The apostle Paul says, "Endure hardship with us like a good soldier of Christ Jesus" (2 Timothy 2:3). You're a soldier of Jesus Christ. You going to be a soldier and think there's never going to be any combat? Endure hardship with us like a good soldier of Christ Jesus. There will be terrible times in the last days (2 Timothy 3:1). "Everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, while evil men and impostors will go from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived" (2 Timothy 3:12-13). That's the way it's going to be. Don't fall over in shock when it happens. Don't say, "Oh, I thought it was going to be easy." It's not. If you're going to stand for Christ, you've got a fight ahead of you.

But remember how to fight well and to fight in the manner of our Lord Jesus Christ. The apostle says in 2 Timothy 2, "Those who oppose God's man he must gently instruct in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth, and that they will come to their senses and escape from the trap of the devil who has taken them captive to do his will" (2 Timothy 2:25-26). Remember what Paul said in his other letters. It's not just flesh and blood we're fighting. It's the principalities and powers. We're fighting against the evil one. We're fighting against the devil and his angels. And so, don't just take it out on those who are opposing the gospel. Some of them are captive to the devil. They're prisoners. They've been caught in a trap. Deal with them gently. Try to help them out of that trap. So part of the fight is helping enemy soldiers come over to your side and helping them to realize what a cruel master they've been serving, and then to deal with them and instruct them gently and show them a better way.

So figure on a fight. Be tough, be ready to face persecution, be ready to stand strong, but also don't forget to be gentle and help those who need to be set free.

2. Endure for the elect

There are many hard things that are going to happen, but you keep on going because you know that God has his chosen people, his elect, and he's going to use you to bring them salvation. He's going to use you to keep them in their salvation and to persevere in the faith till the very end. You know that your ministry is not going to fail because God has his elect.

Paul says, "I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they too may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus" (2 Timothy 2:10). If you read about Paul's ministry back in the book of Acts, he was facing some really challenging times in a lot of those places. When he was in Corinth, he may have been tempted to leave very quickly. But the Lord spoke to him in the night and said to him, "Paul, don't be discouraged. Keep on ministering here, for I have many people in this city" (Acts 18:9-10). That's what it means to endure for the elect. Paul knew that there were some of the elect there, and God told him, "Now you keep on going, keep on working here, because I've got people here that I'm going to be saving."

Second Timothy 2:17 and 19: "Their teaching," that is, the teaching of the phony teachers, "will spread like gangrene" (2 Timothy 2:17). So there is going to be success in evil, untrue, non-Christian religion. Nevertheless, "God's solid foundation stands firm, sealed with this inscription: 'The Lord knows those who are his'" (2 Timothy 2:19). Amid all the error, amid all the falling away, amid all the heartbreak of people who you thought were believers and then turned out not to be, amid all the hassles of dealing with persecutions and all the false teachings that keep on spreading, you might say, "Why does the Lord let a church like that grow when it's all false teaching?" But keep your head. The Lord knows those who are his. Endure for the sake of the elect. Stick with God's message. Do God's work, and you'll be helping to save God's chosen.

3. Stick to Scripture

To stand strong in tough times, stand firm on the foundation and stick to Scripture. "Devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching, and to teaching" (1 Timothy 4:13). That's what a man of God who is a minister of the gospel is called to do. You read those Scriptures publicly, and you let people know those are God's truth. Then you preach from those Scriptures. You teach their content. You stick to the Scriptures. Your people don't need to hear how smart you are and all the things you know. They need to hear the Word of God.

Paul says to Timothy, "From infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:15-17). Timothy's mother was a believer. His grandmother was a believer. And now, Timothy, from infancy you've known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. If you want to equip your people, teach them the Scriptures. If you want to teach them or rebuke them or straighten anything out or train them, you've got to do it from the Scriptures. And you

know from experience what Scripture has done for you, how it's made you wise for salvation and then matured you in your faith. Well, that's what it can do for other people too. So stick with the Scripture.

In the last section of the last letter that Paul would ever write, what does he say? "Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction. For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths. But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry" (2 Timothy 4:2-5).

There are going to be pastors and people from other religions, as well as phony Christian pastors, who will scratch itchy ears and tell people what they want to hear. That kind of stuff is going to happen. Don't envy them, and don't copy them. But you keep your head and preach that Word. There are only two times to preach the Word: when people like it and when they don't. In season and out of season. But whatever season it is, you stick to Scripture. You stand strong in tough times. And those slick salesmen who are giving people what they want to hear, let them do it. You have a different calling as a man of God.

4. Model your message

You have a call not just to preach but to live. Not just to talk the talk but to walk the walk. Model your message. "Command and teach these things. Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity. Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers" (1 Timothy 4:11-12, 16).

You see, watch yourself as well as the teaching. You've got to watch that teaching. Teaching is so important, that you rightly handle the Word of truth and that you communicate God's Word to others. But don't just watch your teaching. Watch your life. Set an example. People need to hear the Word from you. They also need to see the Word in you. They need to see the life of Christ in you in order to believe the message of Christ from you. So to stand strong in tough times, model the message that you preach.

5. Train more teachers

Don't do it all by yourself. Train more teachers. First Timothy 3 is all about that. The whole chapter says to appoint elders and deacons whose faith, whose character, whose families are worthy of being reproduced. And the apostle gives Timothy things to look for. Here's what you look for. You want their faith and their teaching to be accurate. You want their personal character to be exemplary. You want them to model what their message is. And you want their families to be a display of how you'd like other families to turn out. So pick people whose faith and character and families are worthy of being reproduced. And then train them.

Paul says, "The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching" (1 Timothy 5:17). Give recognition to great leadership and encourage more great leadership by the way that you honor those who have done well.

Train more teachers. "What you heard from me, keep as the pattern of sound teaching, with faith and love in Christ Jesus. Guard the good deposit that was entrusted to you—guard it with the help of the Holy Spirit who lives in us" (2 Timothy 1:13-14).

Another way of saying that is, don't drop the baton. In a relay race when you're running and you have to pass the baton on to someone else, you get disqualified from the race and you automatically lose if you drop the baton. If there is a pattern of sound teaching, a good deposit of truth that's been given to you, then you guard it with the help of the Holy Spirit, and you keep it and you hold tight to it and then you hand it to another so that they too can hold on to that truth. That's what training teachers is all about—raising up more people for this generation, but also handing on the baton to a following generation of believers who will carry on after you're gone. That's what the apostle was doing with Timothy. He was training another teacher, handing on a good deposit to him.

Paul says, "You then, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others" (2 Timothy 2:1-2). That's something that I love doing at Christian Leaders Institute, entrusting to faithful men who will also be qualified to teach others, to have this precious truth, and then have more people learn this precious truth thoroughly, and they in turn to teach others so that they can spread that message from person to person as well as from generation to generation.

Train more teachers in tough times. You know that evil's going to be here in another generation if the Lord doesn't return first. But if evil's going to be here in another generation, make sure there are faithful men here in the next generation who are qualified to teach others and hand on that good deposit.

6. Look to the Lord

In a sense, this is most important of all. Always keep your eyes on Jesus. Always keep your eyes on God Almighty and his power. Always live in the strength of the Holy Spirit.

Paul says, "Timothy, my son, I give you this instruction in keeping with the prophecies once made about you, so that by following them you may fight the good fight, holding on to faith and a good conscience" (1 Timothy 1:18-19). If you're going to fight the good fight and stand strong in tough times, then remember what God said about you. You were called by God. And in Timothy's case, there were prophecies made about him of what God was going to do. And Paul says, "Never forget that. Never forget who God said you are and what God said you will do. God has appointed you an ambassador. Keep your eyes on God and on what he's making of you."

"For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands. For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline" (2 Timothy 1:6-7). Timothy received this prophecy about himself. He received the gift of the Holy Spirit. And now he must continually fan that flame into life again and remember what God has made him to be. God did not make us to be a bunch of chickens and cowards. He did not give a spirit of being timid, but a spirit of power, of boldness, a spirit of love, a spirit of self-control, a spirit of not being blown this way and that, but of staying steady and self-disciplined as we focus on God.

Certain kinds of statements are made again and again throughout Paul's letters to Timothy where he reminds Timothy that this is not just a matter of Paul writing to Timothy, but solemn words communicated in the presence of the living God. "I charge you, in the sight of God and Christ Jesus and the elect angels, to keep these instructions without partiality, and to do nothing out of favoritism" (1 Timothy 5:21). It's not just one guy talking to another. The Almighty God, the Lord Jesus Christ, the splendid angels and archangels are watching what's going on, and they're with you in this. So keep that in mind as you hear these instructions.

"Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my gospel" (2 Timothy 2:8). Just remember Jesus. Look to him. Remember him constantly. "In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge: Preach the Word" (2 Timothy 4:1-2). Earlier I emphasized preaching the Word and sticking with Scripture. But Paul didn't just say preach the Word in season and out of season. He says, in the presence of God and Christ Jesus who's going to judge, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, preach the Word. That's what encourages you to preach the Word. You're preaching God's own Word, the Word of the living God.

Again, in the sight of God and of Christ Jesus. Paul says that again and again. "In the sight of God, who gives life to everything, and of Christ Jesus, who while testifying before Pontius Pilate made the good confession, I charge you to keep this command without spot or blame until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ, which God will bring about in his own time—God, the blessed and only Ruler, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone is immortal and who lives in unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see. To him be honor and might forever. Amen" (1 Timothy 6:13-16).

When you're living in tough times, you may think, "Oh, this is so hard," and you just see trouble and difficulty all around and are tempted to think that's all there is. No! Jesus Christ stood alone before Pontius Pilate and made the confession (1 Timothy 6:13). Jesus Christ is coming again in power at the time God has appointed. Remember God: God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit, God the ruler, the almighty, who swallows up everything by his majesty and power. Focus on him, and then the things you go through during these tough times don't seem so intimidating.

It's an echo of what the prophet Elisha experienced when his town was once surrounded and his servant was panicking. Elisha did for his servant what Paul is doing for Timothy here. Elisha said to his servant, "Those who are with us are more than those who are with them." And then he prayed, "Lord, open his eyes." And the Lord opened his eyes, and the servant saw chariots and

horses of fire surrounding Elisha on every side (2 Kings 6:16-17). We look around and we'll see enemies in the last days. But open your eyes, and you see God, the blessed and only ruler. In one sense, we can't see him, but in another sense, we can see his glory because he opens the eyes of our heart to his glory and power in Christ. And that's how you stand strong: again and again—in the sight of God and of Jesus Christ, in the sight of God and of Jesus Christ. You're doing everything with God and Jesus looking on at what you're doing and also with you looking to him. Look to the Lord and focus on forever.

7. Focus on forever

This is the final thing that I want to highlight from Paul's letters to Timothy. Focus on forever. "Christ Jesus has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel. And of this gospel I was appointed a herald and an apostle and a teacher. That is why I am suffering as I am. Yet I am not ashamed, because I know whom I have believed, and am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him for that day" (2 Timothy 1:10-12). Jesus destroyed death. Paul is sitting there in a prison cell awaiting death, and he says that Jesus has destroyed death, and I know that he's guarding that deposit of eternal life for me.

Paul also gives a warning: "If we endure, we will also reign with him. If we disown him, he will also disown us; if we are faithless, he will remain faithful, for he cannot disown himself" (2 Timothy 2:12-13). And so we need to endure, because it means we'll reign—forever reign with him. If we reject him and fall away from the faith, we will be forever disowned in hell. A focus on forever helps us to keep standing strong in tough times.

Paul reflects on his own situation: "For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time has come for my departure. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing" (2 Timothy 4:6-8).

Oh, that is my desire—to be able to say at the end of my days and at the end of my ministry, I fought the good fight. I finished the race. I kept the faith. I finished well. Is that your desire—that you keep going all the way and finish well? Far too many have found their ministry collapsing in one way or another. They weren't ready for the tough times, or they weren't ready to resist the temptation to give itching ears what they wanted to hear. But Paul can say on the eve of his death, I am finishing well, and Jesus is waiting for me with tremendous rewards. And not just me, but all who long for his appearing. Do you long for his appearing? If you long for his appearing and you count on his appearing, that's what keeps you going through tough times. You focus on forever.

So those are some of the great themes in Paul's letters to Timothy. Figure on a fight. Endure for the elect. Stick to Scripture. Model your message. Teach more teachers. Look to the Lord. And focus on forever.

Delivered from the lion's mouth

Shortly after the apostle Paul wrote this, he was beheaded in Rome. That's according to the church historian Eusebius. As a Roman citizen, he could not be crucified or tortured. So he was killed with the sword. But he left behind his great missionary legacy. He left behind the great letters of the New Testament, including these wonderful letters to Timothy of how to stand strong in tough times.

Here are some of Paul's final words that he ever wrote before his head was severed from his body and his soul was taken to glory. He says, "At my first defense, no one came to my support, but everyone deserted me. May it not be held against them. But the Lord stood at my side and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. And I was delivered from the lion's mouth. The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom. To him be glory for ever and ever. Amen" (2 Timothy 4:16-18).

How was Paul delivered from the lion's mouth? He was about to be killed. He was delivered from the lion's mouth because he stood strong to the end. Satan wanted him to deny his faith, to depart from the Lord, to compromise his witness. The Lord rescued him, enabled him to stand firm in the face of certain death. He's delivered from the lion's mouth and headed safely for God's heavenly kingdom.

Dear friend, I pray that that's true of you too, that you will take to heart these letters of the apostle to Timothy and to all of us younger leaders in the faith, looking to God, listening to the voice of this senior apostle telling us, "I have fought the good fight. Now you endure hardship like a good soldier of Jesus Christ."

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Endure hardship

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But mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days. People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love [no natural family affection], unforgiving [impossible to make peace with], slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God—having a form of godliness but denying its power. Have nothing to do with them. (2 Tim 3:1-5)

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... having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power... always learning and never able to arrive at a knowledge of the truth... these men also oppose the truth, men corrupted in mind and disqualified regarding the faith. (2 Timothy 3:5-8)

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- Times will be evil and people will be evil, but you must be different.
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1. Figure on a fight

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Those who oppose him he must gently instruct, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth, and that they will come to their senses and escape from the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will. (2 Tim 2:25-26).

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I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they too may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus. (2 Timothy 2:10).

Their teaching will spread like gangrene... Nevertheless, God's solid foundation stands firm, sealed with this inscription: "The Lord knows those who are his." (2 Timothy 2:17, 19)

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Devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching. (1 Timothy 4:13)

From infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. (2 Timothy 3:15-17)

Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction. For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths. But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry. (2 Timothy 4:2-6)

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Command and teach these things. Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity. Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers. (1 Timothy 4:11-12,16)

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Appoint elders and deacons whose faith, character, and families are worthy of being reproduced. (1 Timothy 3)

Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor. (1 Timothy 5:17)

What you heard from me, keep as the pattern of sound teaching, with faith and love in Christ Jesus. Guard the good deposit that was entrusted to you—guard it with the help of the Holy Spirit who lives in us. (2 Tim 1:13-14)

You then, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will also be qualified to teach others. (2 Tim 2:1-2)

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I give you this instruction in keeping with the prophecies once made about you, so that by following them you may fight the good fight, holding on to faith and a good conscience. (1 Timothy 1:18-19)

I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands. For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline. (2 Timothy 1:6-7)

I charge you, in the sight of God and Christ Jesus and the elect angels, to keep these instructions. (1 Tim 5:21)

Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David. (2 Tim 2:8).

In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge: Preach the Word (2 Tim 3:1-2)

In the sight of God, who gives life to everything, and of Christ Jesus, who while testifying before Pontius Pilate made the good confession, I charge you to keep this command without spot or blame until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ, which God will bring about in his own time—God, the blessed and only Ruler, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone is immortal and who lives in unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see. To him be honor and might forever. Amen. (1 Timothy 6:12-16)

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If we endure, we will also reign with him. If we disown him, he will also disown us. (2 Timothy 2:13).

For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time has come for my departure. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing. (2 Tim 4:6-8)

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