

Justification by Faith

By David Feddes

Justification. Talking about such a big word, five syllables long, might sound like a formula for boredom, but justification is among the most important things you or I can possibly know. To show why this is so, let me first ask you a question and then tell you a story. Here is the question. How can you be right with God? If you had to go before God right now and he asked, “Why should I accept you and let you into heaven? What would you say?” That is a question of ultimate importance. How can you be right with God? That is the question.

Here is the story, the story of someone who wrestled with this very question. Martin was a brilliant young man. At age 21, he already had a master’s degree, and he was headed for a career in law. But Martin’s thoughts were on more than his career. He often thought of God and of heaven and hell. He wanted to be right with God and have a place in heaven, but he was not sure how. The thought of meeting God terrified him. Martin was part of a church, but his Roman Catholic church did not do much to erase his fears.

One time Martin was walking outdoors when a thunderstorm came along. The lightning flashed, the thunder rumbled, and the rain began to pour down. Suddenly a bolt of lightning struck so close to Martin that the impact knocked him down. He cried out, “St. Anne, help me. I will become a monk.” He was crying out to St. Anne, the mother of the Virgin Mary, to be his helper, and he promised that he would enter a monastery and become a monk. You see, Martin’s church taught that the saints could help a person gain favor with God, and the church also taught that if you joined a monastery and became a monk, you had a better chance of making it to heaven.

Unlike many who make promises in a panic and later forget them, Martin kept his promise. He gave up his career, and he entered a monastery to work on his salvation. There Martin devoted himself to prayer, singing, study, and meditation. He did so well that in less than two years his superior selected him to become a priest. But even this did not give Martin peace with God.

As he was saying his first mass, he had another crisis. During the mass, he found himself reciting the words, “We offer unto thee the living, the true, the eternal God.” And as Martin later told the story, at these words, “I was utterly stupefied and terrorstricken. I thought to myself, who am I that I should lift up my eyes or raise my hands to the divine majesty? The angels surround him. At his nod, the earth trembles, and shall I, a miserable little pygmy, say, ‘I want this. I ask for that,’ for I am dust and ashes and full of sin, and I am speaking to the living, eternal, and true God.” The young priest was shaken. It took every ounce of his power just to stay at the altar long enough to finish saying the mass.

After that, Martin Luther worked even harder to earn God’s approval. He prayed even more than the rules of the monastery required. He studied theology for long hours. He got his degree as a doctor of theology. He fasted, sometimes going three days in a row without eating a crumb. He went to confession constantly, in accordance with his church’s teaching that in order for your sins to be forgiven, you had to confess them to a priest and have the priest absolve you. But Martin Luther knew there had to be some sins he was overlooking if his salvation depended on his ability to recall every last sin and confess it to the priest. Then he was lost.

Martin kept searching for peace. It frightened him to think of God, so he thought of God's Son, Jesus. But he knew that Jesus would return to judge the world, and that frightened him all the more. He turned his prayers to Jesus' mother, Mary. He hoped that Mary might be tender and compassionate and put in a good word for him. It did not help. He chose 21 dead saints as his special patrons, three saints for each day of the week, and he prayed to them. That did not help. There he was, a priest, a theologian, a monk, completely devoted to the practice of religion, and yet, no matter what Martin Luther tried, it could not put him right with God.

Luther's liberation

Then came the discovery. Luther began to study the Bible book of Romans, and he kept coming across a phrase that puzzled him, the righteousness of God. He took the phrase to mean that God is righteous and acts righteously by punishing those who are wicked. That was a terrifying thought. Martin wrote, "My situation was that although an impeccable monk, I stood before God as a sinner, troubled in conscience, and I had no confidence that my merit could assuage him. Therefore, I did not love a just and angry God, but rather hated and murmured against him."

Night and day, says Luther, "I pondered until I saw the connection between the righteousness of God and that statement that 'the righteous shall live by his faith' (Romans 1:17; cf. Habakkuk 2:4). Then I grasped that the righteousness of God is the righteousness by which, through grace and sheer mercy, God justifies us through faith. I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise. The whole of Scripture took on a new meaning. This passage became to me a gate to heaven." God justifies us through faith.

Martin Luther had discovered how to be on good terms with God, not by good deeds or church rituals or prayers to saints, but by trusting in God's free gift of righteousness in Christ. Luther wrote, "If you have a true faith that Christ is your Savior, then at once you have a gracious God, for faith leads you in and opens up God's heart and will that you should see pure grace and overflowing love."

What Luther found in the book of Romans, the doctrine of justification by faith, transformed his life. It also transformed the life of the church. On October 31, 1517, Luther launched a public protest against church abuses and teachings that were clouding the Bible's message of justification by faith. His protest sparked the great movement known as the Protestant Reformation.

I mention all this not as a history lesson, but because each of us needs to face the questions Luther faced. We need to discover the answer Martin Luther discovered in the Bible, and we need to proclaim the gospel of justification by faith. If God asks you, "Why should I let you into heaven?" and you say, "I am basically a good person," or "I have gone through the right rituals," or "I have tried my best," you will be lost forever. Your best is not good enough. In order to be right with a perfectly righteous God, you need nothing less than perfect righteousness, and you are not perfect. You are a sinner.

God justifies the ungodly

In order to be right with God, you need to give up on your own qualifications and accept the perfect righteousness of Christ as a gift that God freely credits to those who believe, who trust in Jesus. The Bible makes this absolutely clear in Romans 4:4–5. “⁴Now to the one who works, his wages are not credited as a gift, but as an obligation. ⁵However, to the one who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness” (Romans 4:4–5, NIV 1984).

That may be the clearest statement in the whole Bible about justification by faith. To the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, the wicked, his faith is counted as righteousness. God justifies. That word means God gives a right standing, a status of being accepted by God and right with him, and it is done by believing, not by our achieving. It is believing in Jesus. It is faith, not works, that is the key to justification, to being right with God.

If you are counting on your own goodness to get you into heaven, I guarantee you on the authority of God’s Word that you will never get there. In order to be justified, given a right standing by God, you must give up on what you have done and trust in what Jesus Christ has done. Instead of working to earn God’s favor, trust a God who justifies the ungodly, and God will credit your faith as righteousness.

This gospel of unearned credit, of justification by faith, is not a new message. It was not new when Martin Luther came upon it almost 500 years ago. Luther found it in the book of Romans, written by the apostle Paul 1,500 years before Luther, 2,000 years before us. And it was not even new in the book of Romans. This is how God has always dealt with his people, including those who lived thousands of years before Jesus came. Even before the New Testament book of Romans was written, even in Old Testament times, righteousness was a matter of unearned credit of faith and not of works.

Paul made this discovery in his own life when he tried to earn salvation by works. Paul’s religious fanaticism turned him into a hater of Jesus and a killer of Christians. But then Jesus appeared to him, and Paul put his faith in Jesus and was made right with God through faith. After thinking things through and taking another hard look at the Old Testament Scriptures, Paul found that justification by faith had been God’s way of salvation all along, even in Old Testament times.

Abraham and David

In Romans 4, Paul shows this by looking back at two of the leading figures in Old Testament history: Abraham, the father of God’s people, who lived 2,000 years before Jesus, and David, the great king, who lived 1,000 years before Jesus. First, Abraham. Paul says, “What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, discovered in this matter? If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about, but not before God. What does the Scripture say? ‘Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness’” (Romans 4:1–3, NIV 1984).

Did God declare Abraham righteous because Abraham earned it? No. God made promises to Abraham. Abraham believed those promises of God, and it was credited to him as righteousness. Paul then brings out the full significance of this. He says, “Now when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but as an obligation. ⁵However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness” (Romans 4:4–5, NIV 1984).

A wage is very different from a gift. When you punch the time clock every morning and put in a hard day’s work for your boss, do you consider your paycheck a gift? When your boss pays you after hours and hours of effort and labor, do you say, “Well, thanks boss for this generous gift”? Of course not. It is not a gift. You earned it. You worked hard for it. You deserve it. Your boss is not handing you a gift when you have worked hard for him. He owes you that money. Now, to the one who works, says Paul, his wages are not counted as a gift, but as his due.

However, that is not how salvation works. The Bible does not say Abraham worked hard and God gave him credit for the righteousness he had earned. No, it says Abraham believed God and it was counted to him, imputed to him, reckoned to him as righteousness. Faith was counted by God as righteousness, and God gave a right standing to Abraham. Apart from any achievements on Abraham’s part, his faith was credited to him as righteousness. He was credited with something he had not earned. It was a gift. Abraham’s faith is proof, says Paul, that to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness.

You might wonder, how can Abraham be an example of God justifying the wicked, the ungodly? Was Abraham not a great and godly man? Keep in mind that before God called him, Abraham was an idol worshipper. Even after he came to know God, Abraham was a sinful man in need of ongoing forgiveness. The Bible tells what happened while Abraham and his wife Sarah were staying for a time in Egypt. Sarah was beautiful, and Abraham was afraid that the king of Egypt might want her and might have him killed in order to get her. Abraham was willing to lie and pretend that Sarah was not his wife. He was so concerned for his own skin that he was willing to let another man sleep with her. God kept it from happening, but it certainly was not because Abraham was noble or courageous.

If once was not bad enough, Abraham did the same thing again later on. This time, during a stay in Palestine, he again pretended that Sarah and he were not married because he was afraid of the Philistine king. Again, Abraham was willing to let his wife become part of the king’s harem, and it was only God’s intervention that kept it from happening. It was this Abraham, Abraham the former idol worshipper, Abraham the cowardly liar who was willing to let another man have his wife, who believed God and was credited with righteousness. According to Romans 4, Abraham is proof that to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness.

Abraham is not the only one. “To the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly” applies not only to Abraham, but also to David. Paul goes on to say, “David says the same thing when he speaks of the blessedness of the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works: ‘Blessed are they whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered.

Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will never count against him” (Romans 4:6–8; Psalm 32:1–2, NIV 1984).

If a right standing with God depended on a perfect record, David did not have a chance. David committed adultery with Bathsheba. He slept with another man’s wife. Then David had her husband Uriah killed. David took no action when his daughter Tamar was raped by his son Amnon. Yet although David was sinful, he admitted his sinfulness and trusted in a God who credits righteousness apart from works.

Both Abraham and David discovered the same thing. Righteousness is a matter of unearned credit. The great father of the Hebrew people and the greatest king in the history of the Hebrew people both discovered this. Already in the Old Testament, God’s people were justified through faith and not works. They found that the Lord did not count their sins against them, but instead credited to them a righteousness they had not earned.

Justified through faith in Jesus Christ

How could God do this? How could God be a just judge and still leave the sins of people like Abraham and David and countless others unpunished? Because God had already determined to send his Son to pay the just penalty for their sins. Paul explained this earlier in Romans chapter 3. Paul wrote, “²³For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. ²⁵God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished, ²⁶he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus” (Romans 3:23–26, NIV 1984).

Jesus is the propitiation who absorbs God’s wrath against sin and makes God favorable toward his people. God is just in punishing sin, and at the same time he can declare sinners to be right with him. Instead of condemning Old Testament believers for their sins, God kept adding their sins to Christ’s account until the day when Jesus would pay the price on the cross. God was crediting to those Old Testament believers the righteousness that Jesus would someday earn for them.

God’s way of salvation has been the same throughout history. For Abraham, 2,000 years before Christ, and for King David, 1,000 years before Jesus came, it was a matter of faith and unearned credit based on the future work of Christ. For Paul, writing not long after Jesus’ death and resurrection, and for us 2,000 years later, it is a matter of faith and unearned credit based on the completed work of Christ. No matter who you are, no matter where you live, no matter when in history you live, the answer to the question, “How can I be right with God?” is always the same.

If you could go to heaven and ask the people there how God accepted them, you would hear the same refrain over and over. If you asked Abraham, “How did you get here?” he would tell you, “I was an idol worshipper, a liar, and a coward, but I trusted a God who justifies the ungodly, and he credited me with a righteousness I did not earn.” If you asked David, “How did you get here?” he would say, “I was an adulterer, a murderer, and a failure as a father, but I trusted a God

who justifies the ungodly, and he credited me with a righteousness I did not earn.” If you asked Mary Magdalene, “How did you get here?” she would say, “I was an immoral, demon-possessed woman, but I trusted a God who justifies the ungodly, and he credited me with a righteousness I did not earn.” If you asked Paul, “How did you get here?” he would say, “I was the chief of sinners, a proud blasphemer, a killer of Christians, but through Jesus Christ I trusted a God who justifies the ungodly, and he credited me with a righteousness I did not earn.”

So how can you be right with God? The same way as every other person whom God accepts, by admitting your own sin and putting your faith in the perfect obedience and sacrifice of Jesus Christ. What happens is this. God takes your sins and transfers them to Christ’s account. The price of those sins is fully paid through the infinite suffering and death of Jesus on the cross. God then takes the perfect obedience and holiness of Christ and credits that to your account so that you are counted as having the perfect righteousness required to enter heaven. Christ got what you earned so that you can get what Christ earned. That is the miracle of divine bookkeeping.

Paul wrote much about justification by faith in his letter to the Galatians as well as in his letter to the Romans. He wrote, “¹⁶We know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no one will be justified. . . . ²¹I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing” (Galatians 2:16, 21, NIV 1984). Again he wrote, “¹¹Clearly no one is justified before God by the law, because, ‘The righteous will live by faith’” (Galatians 3:11, NIV 1984). That quotation, “The righteous will live by faith,” comes from the Old Testament prophet Habakkuk (Habakkuk 2:4).

Conversion = repentance + faith
My whole person receiving the whole Christ

	Repentance	Faith
Mind	Admit that sin is wrong.	Believe that the gospel is true.
Heart	Feel sorry and hate sin.	Treasure God and His promises.
Will	Choose to fight sin and strive to change.	Choose to trust Jesus as Savior. Commit to serve him as Lord.

We are justified by faith and not by our ability to keep God’s law. In understanding what it means to be justified by faith, it helps to say a little more about what faith is. Faith and repentance are part of the same act of conversion. Faith and repentance are two sides of the same coin, in which my whole person receives the whole Christ. Faith is not merely believing an idea. It is a whole person embracing and receiving the whole Christ. Repentance is the negative aspect of that, and faith is the positive aspect of my whole person receiving the whole Christ. Repentance and faith are something we do with our mind, with our heart, and with our will.

In repentance, your mind admits that sin is wrong. Intellectually, you believe that sin is wrong and that you are a sinner. In faith, your mind believes that the gospel of Jesus Christ, crucified and risen for your salvation, is true. Your mind believes the gospel facts. Your heart in

repentance feels sorrow for sin and hatred of sin. It is not only an intellectual realization, but a heartfelt sorrow and hatred. In faith, your heart treasures God, treasures Jesus Christ, and embraces his promises. Faith is an act of the heart as well as of the mind.

In repentance, your will makes a choice to fight sin rather than go along with it, to strive to change. You will not be perfect right away, but in your will you choose to be an enemy of sin. In faith, you choose to trust Jesus as your Savior, and by your will you commit to serve Jesus as your Lord. Faith has the mind embracing Jesus as the way, the truth, and the life. The heart treasures God and Jesus Christ and all of his precious promises. The will chooses to trust Christ as Savior and to serve him as Lord. You cannot cut Jesus in half and say, "I want the Savior part, but not the Lord part." True faith accepts what Jesus has done for our salvation and honors him as Lord, the one we are committed to obey and follow.

Justification and Sanctification

When that happens, we are justified by faith. Justification is a once-for-all new legal standing with God. The instant we believe, the instant we exercise repentance and faith, God forgives all our sins, past sins, present sins, and future sins, because Jesus paid for them with his blood. God counts Jesus' perfect obedience as ours. God accepts us as we are and gives us a right standing based on Jesus' finished work. That is done the moment we, with our whole self, embrace the whole Christ and receive that once-for-all new standing.

Sanctification is also a wonderful work of God, but it is different from justification. Sanctification is an ongoing, lifelong process. In sanctification, our relationship with God grows closer, our sin has less and less power over us, and we become more and more like Jesus. God gradually changes what we are like by the Holy Spirit's work within us.

Justification	Sanctification
Instantaneous	Lifelong
Once for all	Gradual
Imputed	Imparted
Legal status	Moral character
Based on Christ's work outside us	Grows from Spirit's work within us
God accepts us as we are	God changes who we are

Justification and sanctification are both great works of God, but they are quite different. Let me highlight a few of those differences here. Justification is instantaneous. When the whole you embraces the whole Christ by faith, you are instantaneously declared forever right with God. Sanctification is not a one-time, instantaneous thing. It is lifelong. It is a continuing work of God.

Justification is once for all. When you are justified, you are justified, and nothing can ever undo your status and standing with God. Sanctification is not once for all. It is gradual, often a little at a time. Sometimes there will be great leaps forward as the Lord does a tremendous work of

changing who you are, how you relate to him, and growing your ability to overcome sin in significant ways. At other times, the growth may be very gradual.

Justification, to use a theological term, is imputed. It is credited to you, counted to your record. Even though it is not fully true of you that you are a perfect person, you are counted as perfect because Jesus' goodness is imputed to you. In sanctification, Jesus' goodness is gradually imparted to you. You become more and more Christlike. Gradually, you see the difference.

In justification, God credits you as already having all the righteousness of Jesus Christ in your account, so to speak. In sanctification, it is the process in which, inwardly and in your way of living, Jesus' character is little by little more and more imparted to you, made a part of who you are. Justification is your legal standing, and that legal standing is to be right with God and accepted by God. Sanctification is not your legal standing. It is your moral character. God is changing you to have a character that is full of the fruit of the Spirit and that more and more reflects Jesus Christ. In this life it is always partial and always incomplete.

Justification gives you a complete legal status. Sanctification is the working out, gradually, toward greater maturity. Justification is based on Christ's work outside of us, his finished work in his perfect life, his atoning death, and his glorious resurrection and ascension. Your standing with God is based entirely on what Jesus did for you, outside of you, and is already finished. Sanctification grows from the Spirit of Jesus working within you. The one is already done, paid for, and completed, and your justification is based on that. Sanctification continues to grow as the Spirit does his work.

In justification, God accepts us as we are because our whole self embraces the whole Christ. He accepts us as we are and justifies us, but he does not leave us as we are. In sanctification, God changes who we are. Justified people always make beginnings in sanctification. Only in rare circumstances, such as the thief on the cross, who died shortly after he was saved, is there someone who is justified but in whom sanctification hardly began its work. In most cases, when people come to Christ in faith, are justified, and receive their new standing, God sets in motion this process of sanctification by his Holy Spirit.

Get this clearly. Your standing with God never depends on any earnings you have done, any works you have done, any growth in your character, or anything the Spirit has done within you. Your standing with God depends on what Jesus did outside of you and on God accepting you as you are. When you are facing hard times, or when you have slipped and fallen into sin, you need to look to Christ as your righteousness and your justification, as the one who has earned your standing with God once for all, so that your heart does not give up on God. You know you are accepted for the sake of the beloved Jesus Christ. Then you say, "Lord, please work in me, change me, make me more and more like Jesus."

We want to grow in grace. We want to grow more and more like Christ. But never think that the things we do are part of earning our standing with God. That was the mistake of the Roman Catholic Church taught at the time of Luther and is still sometimes taught today, that our salvation and standing with God depend on our advancement in sanctification. The doctrine of

justification by faith alone means that God accepts us as we are and gives us this new legal status. Thank God for that.

Keep this important difference in mind. Justification is a once-for-all new legal standing. The instant we believe, God forgives all our sins, past, present, and future, because Jesus paid for them with his blood. God counts Jesus' perfect obedience as ours. God accepts us as we are and gives us a right standing based on Jesus' finished work. Sanctification is an ongoing, lifelong process. Our relationship to God grows closer, our sin has less power over us, and we become more and more like Jesus. God gradually changes what we are like by the Holy Spirit's work. This is a wonderful work of God. It is wonderful to grow more and more like Jesus, but never mistake it as the ground for God's acceptance of you. God accepts you because of Jesus, and he justifies you through faith, through your whole being accepting by faith the whole Christ.

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Luther: "Saint Anne, help me! I will become a monk!"

A priest's terror

At these words I was utterly stupified and terror-stricken. I thought to myself, "...Who am I, that I should lift up my eyes or raise my hands to the divine Majesty? The angels surround him. At his nod the earth trembles. And shall I, a miserable little pygmy, say 'I want this, I ask for that'? For I am dust and ashes and full of sin and I am speaking to the living, eternal and true God."

Troubled sinner

My situation was that, although an impeccable monk, I stood before God as a sinner troubled in conscience, and I had no confidence that my merit could assuage him. Therefore I did not love a just and angry God, but rather hated and murmured against him.

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Night and day I pondered until I saw the connection between the righteousness of God and that statement that "the righteous shall live by his faith." Then I grasped that the righteousness of God is the righteousness by which through grace and sheer mercy God justifies us through faith. I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise. The whole of Scripture took on a new meaning. This passage became to me a gate to heaven.

God justifies the ungodly

Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness. (Romans 4:4-5)

- Justifies: gives a right standing
- Believing, not achieving
- Faith, not works

Abraham

What then shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. (Rom 4:1-2)

Faith counted as righteousness

³ For what does the Scripture say? “**Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.**” (Romans 4:3)

Justifies the ungodly

³ Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. ⁴ Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. ⁵ **And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness.** (Romans 4:3-5)

- A wage is very different from a gift.

David

⁶ David also speaks of the blessing of the one to whom God counts righteousness apart from works: ⁷ “Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; ⁸ blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin.” (Romans 4:6-8)

Justifies the ungodly

All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. (Romans 3:23-26)

Justified through faith in Jesus Christ

We know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ... I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose... Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for “The righteous shall live by faith.” (Galatians 2:16, 21; 3:11)

Conversion = repentance + faith

My whole person receiving the whole Christ

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Mind	Admit that sin is wrong.	Believe that the gospel is true.
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Justification and Sanctification

- **Justification:** A once-for-all, new legal standing. The instant we believe, God forgives all our sins (past, present, future) because Jesus paid for them with his blood, and God counts Jesus' perfect obedience as ours. God accepts us as we are and gives us a right standing based on Jesus' finished work.
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