

August 9/10, 2008

## **Reaping Joy**

### **Psalm 126**

Pastor Jeff Petersen

**When the LORD brought back the captive ones of Zion,  
We were like those who dream.  
Then our mouth was filled with laughter,  
And our tongue with joyful shouting;  
Then they said among the nations,  
"The LORD has done great things for them."  
The LORD has done great things for us;  
We are glad.  
Restore our captivity, O LORD,  
As the streams in the South.  
Those who sow in tears shall reap with joyful shouting.  
He who goes to and fro weeping, carrying his bag of seed,  
Shall indeed come again with a shout of joy,  
bringing his sheaves with him. (\*NASB, Psalms 126: 1-6)**

As most of you I'm sure know, on Friday night the 2008 Summer Olympics got underway in the city of Beijing. If the beginning is any indication, the next two weeks I'm sure are going to be quite exciting for many people. It really is quite a spectacle, isn't it? You know, there are over 10,000 athletes from all over the world participating together in the Olympics. They need 70,000 volunteers to pull off all of these events. In fact, there are 302 different athletic events that will take place during the course of the Olympics.

But I think the number that is most staggering to me is that they are projecting 4 billion viewers. Four billion people are expected to tune in, at some point, and watch the Olympics. That's nearly two thirds of the population of all of the people on Planet Earth, all watching this one athletic thing taking place in Beijing, China.

I think there are a lot of reasons that the Olympics are so compelling. Certainly a lot of people watch because there's a sense of national pride, as people from their country participate on this global scale. But I think really one of the main reasons so many watch is because these really are events of great drama.

You tune into the Olympics, and if you think back through the years of some of the amazing things that have taken place, names come to mind of people who have overcome and achieved great victory—people like Mary Lou Retton or Carl Lewis or those no-name David's in 1980 at Lake Placid who somehow slew the great Goliath of the Soviet hockey team. Those become a part, not only of our national lore, but international lore.

I think we also enjoy the Olympics because often they provide us with pictures of joy. They really are events to celebrate. Usually part of what adds to the joy are the stories behind the victories, because often you'll hear stories told of athletes who have overcome great adversity and struggle to come to a moment of triumph. Or perhaps in the Olympics you'll see a time when victory is

literally snatched from the jaws of defeat. It's great drama and it's great joy. In fact, last night I got home from the service and I went into my house where I found my wife, who never watches TV, on the couch, crying, watching the Olympics and the triumph of some story.

I think part of why we like it is because it's an encapsulated picture of life, because some of our times of greatest joy are the times when we have overcome adversity. It's when we have gone through a season of great struggle and difficulty and somehow victory comes, that the joy is so sweet. Or sometimes in our lives it's those moments, when it seems that defeat is certain, and suddenly somehow—at the last moment—victory comes.

There was a time like that in the history of the people of God, and there is a psalm written to help us remember the power of God to deliver and to help us trust God for His perfect timing. So, if you have a Bible with you this morning, would you turn with me to Psalm 126.

Psalm 126 is one of the *Songs of Ascent* which we find from Psalm 120 to Psalm 134. These were likely sung as a part of the festival processional that took place three times a year as the people of God would go on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Literally, they would *ascend* to Jerusalem. As they went, they would sing these psalms as songs. As they sang, it would be an act of worship, but they would also serve as a reminder of the character and the faithfulness of God. In this particular Song of Ascent, they're reminded of a time when God miraculously delivered His people.

**When the LORD brought back the captive ones of Zion, we were like those who dream. Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with joyful shouting; then they said among the nations, "The LORD has done great things for them." The LORD has done great things for us; we are glad.** (Psalm 126:1-3, \*NASB)

There's some debate about the context that the psalm refers to, but it is most likely that it's referring to the end of the Babylonian captivity. If you can remember the history of the people of God throughout the Old Testament, you understand the importance of *the land*. For way back in Genesis God made a promise to Abraham and affirmed that covenant with his son Isaac, and Jacob, that He would make his descendants as numerous as the sand on the seashore. One day He would take those descendants into a land of promise—a land flowing with milk and honey.

Over the centuries God went about a process of eventually fulfilling that promise. Sure enough, under the leadership of Joshua, eventually the people enter the land, conquer the land and take possession of the inheritance promised to them by God. But, within the third generation after the death of Joshua, the people begin to turn away from God. They begin to go astray. They begin to serve false gods—other gods and idols. They begin to live for themselves and not for the Lord.

The Lord, in His love, tries to woo them back and call them back. He begins to discipline the nation of Israel in order to get them to return to Him. So He allows seven nations to come and invade, to rob, to plunder and to destroy—all to discipline them in the land, with the intent that they would turn back to God. But still they become more and more unfaithful, turning further and further away from the Lord God.

As a result, the Lord takes the drastic step of disciplining them by taking them out of the land. Nebuchadnezzar comes and they are taken into exile in Babylon and they are in exile for 70 years. Eventually Persia defeats Babylon and in 537 Cyrus issues a decree, and the Lord brings back the captive ones of Zion.

That's where we're at in verse 1: "**When the LORD brought back the captive ones of Zion, we were like those who dream.**" Now in our vernacular it would be a little bit like when we say, "Pinch me," because when something great happens that's unexpected, sometimes it can seem completely unreal.

Two of my spiritual heroes are two women I never have had the privilege of meeting, but they are two women whose lives absolutely amaze me. Their names are Betsie and Corrie. During World War II these two devoted followers of Christ were caught helping and harboring Jews, and they were sent by the Nazis to a place that only could be described as "hell on earth". Many of you, I know, also have been impacted by the lives and the story of the ten Boom sisters and how they chose love and faith in circumstances that cried out for hatred and fear. Listen this morning to just one excerpt of their story from Corrie ten Boom's autobiography:

"Morning roll call came at Ravensbruck, and by 4:30 a.m. we had to be standing outside in the black pre-dawn chill, standing at parade attention in blocks of 100 women, ten wide, ten deep. Sometimes after hours of this we would gain the shelter of our barracks only to hear the whistle again: 'Everybody out! Fall in for roll call!'

"Barracks 8 was in the quarantine compound. Next to us, perhaps as a deliberate warning to newcomers, were located the punishment barracks. From there, all day long and often into the night came the sounds of hell itself. They were not the sounds of anger or of any human emotion, but of a cruelty altogether detached—blows landing in regular rhythm, screams keeping pace.

"We would stand in our ten-deep ranks with our hands trembling at our sides, longing to jam them against our ears to make the sound stop. At the instant of dismissal, we would mob to the door of Barracks 8, stepping on each other's heels in eagerness to get inside, to shrink the world back to understandable proportions. It grew harder and harder. Even within these four walls there was too much misery, too much seemingly pointless suffering. Every day something else failed to make sense; something else grew too heavy. *Will You carry this, too, Lord Jesus?*

"As the rest of the world grew stranger, one thing became increasingly clear: and that was the reason the two of us were here. Why others should suffer we were not shown, but as for us, morning until lights out, whenever we were not in ranks for roll call, our Bible [the Bible God had miraculously allowed them to smuggle into the concentration camp] was the center of an ever-widening circle of help and hope. Like waifs clustered around a blazing fire, we gathered about it, holding our hearts to its warmth and light. The blacker the night around us grew, the brighter and truer and more beautiful burned the Word of God. 'Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him that loved us!'

"I would look about as Betsie read, watching the light leap from face to face. *More than conquerors*. It was not a wish; it was a fact. We knew it. We experienced it minute by minute—poor, hated, hungry—we are more than conquerors. Not we *shall be*, we *are*.

"Life in Ravensbruck took place on two separate levels, mutually impossible: one, the observable external life grew every day more horrible; and the other, the life we lived with God grew daily better, truth upon truth, glory upon glory."<sup>1</sup>

Betsie and Corrie honored Christ in the midst of such suffering. It makes me ashamed of the things that I complain about. The suffering was so great that eventually Betsie died in that place. But two days later, as Corrie was standing in roll call, suddenly her name was announced over the camp loudspeaker. She had no idea what this meant, but as soon as roll call was dismissed, she was led by a guard into another building. She went into the building where there was a small line of prisoners, and she wondered what could this mean.

She watched as one prisoner stood before an officer who sat at a desk, at a table, shuffling papers. Suddenly that officer looked to the prisoner, took a stamp, stamped a paper and said, "Entlassen." Corrie ten Boom heard *entlassen*, which is the German word for "released," and her mind began to spin and she wondered what could be happening. The next person stepped up and the prison guard took the stamp and stamped the paper *entlassen*, "released." Sure enough, just a few people more and Corrie ten Boom received a paper that said "released," and in an instant, everything changed. Corrie ten Boom describes herself as being in a daze. Sometimes when we suffer for so long, when the deliverance comes, it can be literally unbelievable.

Now I don't think that the people of God in Babylon suffered in their captivity to the degree that Betsie and Corrie and thousands of other Jews suffered at the hands of the Nazis. But still we need to understand that they had spent 70 years in captivity in a foreign land. And now—suddenly—it's over, and it's like a dream. **"When the LORD brought back the captive ones of Zion, we were like those who dream."** They were in a daze. But then the shock begins to clear and the reality sinks in, and obviously, it's time to celebrate.

**Then our mouth was filled with laughter and our tongue with joyful shouting.** (vs. 2a)

They've gone from captivity and imprisonment and out of the land of promise, to going back to that land. Their mouths are filled with joyful shouting and laughter is on their lips. As all of this is taking place, the nations around them begin to take note. They understand and realize what's happening.

**Then they said among the nations, "The LORD has done great things for them." The LORD has done great things for us; we are glad.** (vs. 2b-3)

"We are glad." You know, those are some of the sweetest times in life, when we experience the joy of deliverance, and when that joy is made all the sweeter because it comes after a time of struggle. That was the case for God's people back then, and I know that's been a reality for many people right here in this room today. As you've walked through some of the trials and the struggles of life and you've come to that point of realizing there is nothing like experiencing the power of God to deliver from suffering or pain, or to bring victory at the point of seeming certain defeat.

I think God's people back then and those of us here today would all say the same thing, "Bring it on." That's sort of what they do say in verse 4:

**Restore our captivity, O LORD, as the streams in the South.**

Now a quick reading of the English in this might be a bit confusing because we might assume that "restore our captivity" is a prayer request to become captive again, but it's not. Actually, the Hebrew wording in both verse 1 and verse 4 means "to turn again". It's an idiomatic expression that has to do with a return to a former happy state or a former good condition. Thus, in verse 4 the psalmist is pleading with God to again bring deliverance in a powerful way.

The use of "our captivity" is a reference to the idea of a military force subduing a foe and taking plunder. I like Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of this in *The Message* where he simply says, "And now, Yahweh, do it again. Show up and deliver again, and do it in a really powerful way."

That's the prayer as verse 4 illustrates where it says, "**Restore our captivity, O LORD, as the streams in the South.**" "The streams in the South" would be a reference to the area of the Negev. It's an area that was so typically dry and so arid that the ground would be hard and baked, and the idea of a stream would be a dry riverbed at best. And really they wouldn't even be riverbeds so much, in the sense that they would be gullies that had been cut through the hard ground and the rock, and it would just all be dry. But once in a while the rain would come, and when it came, everything would change almost instantly. What seemed impossible in one moment would be possible the next, as all of a sudden the flow of water came and formed powerful raging rivers.

Now I never really understood the power of water in the desert until, when I was in college, my parents moved from Nebraska to a town just outside of Las Vegas, Nevada. I would go out and visit them and I got quite a lesson one of the first times I was there, when we were watching the news on a day when it had rained. Now in Nebraska thunderstorms are so regular they're really no big deal. And truthfully the storm that took place in Las Vegas was nothing more than a typical thunderstorm that we'd have on any given day here—which is why I was so amazed when we were watching on the news and we saw that three people died that day. *How in the world could they die?*

The reality is they had drowned because they had got caught in the sweeping water. I thought, *Why is it different here?* I would have assumed that, because the ground is so dry, that when it rained, it would just soak it all in. But in fact it was just the opposite. The ground was so dry and so hard that the water could not be absorbed. Immediately, even a little bit of a rain could form raging rivers that could sweep away cars and people, even to their death.

Just a few nights ago I was watching the news, and once again it had rained in Las Vegas, and you saw these rivers that were just running down the street. So that's the imagery when they speak of "as the streams in the South". It's as a raging river that would come in an arid place suddenly and with great surprise.

So the prayer in verse 4 is, *Do it again, Lord. Come quickly and with great power. With the force of a raging river, bring deliverance. Change our circumstances.* This, of course, might make us wonder why is the psalmist praying that, when we just saw in verses 1 through 3 that God has brought a miraculous deliverance? But, you know, when the people of Israel were brought back to the land, while there was great joy at being returned from captivity, it didn't mean life was easy. Though the nations around knew it, and knew that God had done great things for them, it didn't mean they liked it.

So almost immediately the people, as they went back into the land, found themselves facing opposition from without and from within. They faced the great difficult task of rebuilding their world, of rebuilding Zion. As they faced that, certainly they began to grow weary. Certainly they began to face the difficulties and the hardships of trying to once again eke out an existence in the land. So the joy of verses 1 through 3 wore off and they found themselves once again crying out to God, pleading with God for another deliverance.

It's just like us, isn't it? I've seen God do amazing things in the course of my life. I've seen God show up with great power—suddenly—and accomplish things I thought never could happen. I have celebrated and shouted with joy and had laughter on my lips...only to not very long thereafter sense things beginning to change, and life once again becoming hard, and that joy fading, and sometimes that joy even being completely replaced by sorrow or fear.

So what do we do? We once again cry out, "Do it again, Lord! Come, come with great power like a raging river to defeat our enemies, to overcome our obstacles, to change our lives." Sometimes He does, and when He does, we experience the joy of verses 1 through 3. And sometimes, often, He doesn't. We cry out, we pray, we plead, we hope, we wait...and nothing happens. No change, no rain, no deliverance. How come? Do you ever wonder about that? I mean, if our God is who we say He is—all-powerful and filled with love for us—why doesn't He always deliver when we ask? Why didn't God leave some guard to stamp *entlassen* before Betsie ten Boom died in that horrible place?

Do you ever wonder why God doesn't always answer our prayers for deliverance in the time and in the way we ask? Have you ever been in a situation where you've cried out, you've begged God to come like a mighty raging river, and there's seemingly nothing but silence? It's certainly something I've struggled with over the years with my spiritual journey. I remember when I first came to the point of deciding I was really "all in" for Christ. I had spent a lot of time in my early days as a Christian, kind of riding the fence, and I was trying to decide whether I was really going to live for God or live for myself, and really sort of wanting "some" of God, but mostly what "I wanted" to do anyway.

God orchestrated a series of circumstances to show me that life is found only in Him. So I came to that point of unreservedly surrendering all that I am—laying all of my life and all of my heart down before Him and saying, "Lord, all of my days, all of my hopes, all of my dreams, You can have it all." When I did that, and when I had that sense that *I'm totally in, Lord*, I was ready to go.

God began to do some neat things in my life and it changed my life, but I had been raised in a situation where there was a lot of work that needed to be done. I needed a lot of change in my character. I knew God wanted me to be more like Him and I was so far from that, so I began to beg God to change me, to make me like Him. I expected Him to answer. I sort of thought pretty quickly I would be a completely different person. Later I would finally get some imagery to help me understand what I was wanting at that point in time.

Many of you I'm sure, over the years, have seen some sort of an episode of some of the genres of the *Star Trek* shows. In the earliest one way back in the 1960s, you know this was cutting edge stuff. It looks so nice and cheesy today when you go back and watch it. But, you know, they would go out to explore new worlds and go all over the universe. They had this incredible technology for back then, and one of the things that was really cool was when they wanted to go explore another

planet, they didn't just take another ship off of the main ship and fly down there. No, they had a thing called *the transporter*. They would just go stand on this little circle and they'd kind of slide the knob, and the next thing you know, they would just dematerialize and then they would appear down on the surface of the earth. In the first episode you'd always see the landing party down there with Captain Kirk, and the guy with no name would die and they'd go kind of through the mission. You know, they'd get back to being ready, and he'd flip the communicator open and he'd say, "Scotty," and he'd talk to him and say, "We're ready to go," and then, you know, say, "Beam me up!" And they'd dematerialize and they're right back on the ship, just like that.

I realized as a young believer, what I wanted was God to just "beam me up". I wanted to say, "God, You want me to be different. I want me to be different. We're in agreement on that. So just do it. Beam me up!" And for quite a while I couldn't figure out why God wouldn't answer that prayer.

You know, I think I'd be lying though if I said that was just something I struggled with as a "young" believer. I still struggle with that. You know, there are things I've asked God to do in my life for over 20 years. If you were to ask me 20 years ago what would my life look like 20 years from now, I would have been so certain that I would have had it more all together, that I would have been so much more like Jesus.

Yet after begging God for more than 20 years to make me like Him, I still find myself so often so impatient. I still find myself so often failing to really love and care about others. I say, "God, why don't You create more of Your love in my heart for my next-door neighbor and the people all around me? And God, I still find myself so often, really, when I'm being totally honest, just selfish." Yet I've begged God to change me. And why won't He "beam me up"?

Part of what I've had to do is, I've had to go back and I've had to get to the heart of the thing. I won't claim that I have all the answers by any means, but I do think God has taught me some things, and one of the questions I've had to come back to is: Why was I asking those things? What am I looking for? Truthfully, what I have often been looking for in my prayers for deliverance, is for God to enable me to get it all together so I can have a happy and comfortable life.

You know, I look at some of you who have it all together and I think, *God, why don't You make me like them?* Really, what God has shown me is the heart of my prayer is a prayer for self-sufficiency. I want God to overcome all of my weaknesses, really deep down so I don't need God, so that I am able to be all that He wants me to be, on my own. But what does God want?

You know, the amazing, unimaginable thing for me is to recognize what God wants is "me". He wants my heart. He wants a relationship with me. He wants me to abide in intimacy and dependence upon Him for all of the days, for all of the moments of my life. He doesn't want to enable me to just get it all together so I can go it alone. He wants to show me how incapable I am of getting it all together, so that I'll walk in dependence and in relationship with Him.

I have to ask the question: "What if God had answered that prayer and those pleas for so many years? Would I truly love Him and know Him more?" Maybe for a time. But it seems to me that it's the times when everything is good and easy and happy that I am the most quick to go it alone and to fade in my love and my intimacy with Christ.

So I circle all the way back around to the question again and I ask: "What do I *really* want?" I want "Him". I want to know Christ. I want to be found in Him. And when I get to the end of my days, what I want more than anything else is that somehow, by God's grace, it could be said of me that, "There was a person who loved God with all his heart, all his soul, all his mind, and all his strength". Ultimately, that's what I want. And you know what? God is answering that prayer. I am still so far from having it all together, but I am growing to fall more and more in love with our gracious God, because the reality is that God does do the amazing all the time. But it is most often not through the raging river of miraculous deliverance, but rather it is through the intentional and often difficult and painful process of sowing and reaping.

Verse 5:

**Those who sow in tears shall reap with joyful shouting.**

Now why do those who sow, sow in tears? I think the reason is because sowing is an act of death. Jesus Himself said, "Unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it bears much fruit." You know, we forget what sowing was really like back in the time when this was written, because you see, back then, there was no crop insurance. There were no seed companies. They were taking the grain—the only grain, the very grain they could be using to feed their family—and they were putting it in the ground, where it would die. It was an ultimate act of faith, and it's a picture of death.

The reality is that today each and every one of us is called to sow every day. We are to sow to the Spirit. In Luke 9:23 through 25 Jesus said, "If anyone wants to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me. For whoever wants to save his life shall lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake, he is the one who will save it. For what will it profit a man to gain the whole world and yet lose himself?" Jesus says the way to find life is not by trying to make it happen. He says it's by laying our lives down. It's by surrendering to Him. It's by sowing to the Spirit every day—choosing not to sow to our own desires, living for ourselves, and going our own way. Instead, it's choosing to sow to the Lord and to the things that are on His heart. Often it comes down simply to an issue of abiding, and an issue of obedience when God calls us, even in difficult times, to believe Him.

You know, one of the things that is amazing about Betsie and Corrie ten Boom is how they "sowed" in a concentration camp. In another part of their autobiography they talk about when they were moved to another barracks and it was so overcrowded and it smelled so bad. They got on these sour straw mats and they were up where they couldn't even sit up, and there were so many people on top of each other, and then to make matters worse, everything was covered with fleas. They were so struggling with the circumstances and it was then that the Lord put on Betsie's heart, *Give thanks in all things, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus*. Corrie was astounded, but that's exactly what they began to do. Even in the most horrific of circumstances, they began to give thanks. That's sowing to the Spirit. As a result, God transformed their hearts and God used them to transform many lives.

The question for us is: Will we deny ourselves, surrender to Christ, lay down our lives and sow in obedience as an act of the will? Second Corinthians 5:15 says, "He died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died and rose again on their behalf." The truth is, dying to self is not easy and it's often painful. Thus we often, as verse 5 says, "sow in

tears", because God doesn't usually just "beam us up". Instead He calls us to lay our lives down. And that's not easy, but it's so important that we remember the rest of the story, the rest of the psalm, because the truth is, it's worth it because "He" is worth it. And we will reap a harvest. Verse 5 again, **"Those who sow in tears shall reap with joyful shouting."**

Verse 6:

**He who goes to and fro weeping, carrying his bag of seed,  
Shall indeed come again with a shout of joy, bringing his sheaves with him.**

I love the wording. Did you notice it? In verse 5 it says those who are sowing in tears "shall" reap. It doesn't say you "might" reap. It doesn't say "hopefully" you'll reap. It is a promise from God that, as you sow to the Spirit, you *shall* reap. Verse 6, **"He who goes to and fro weeping, carrying his bag of seed, shall indeed come again."** I love that, "shall indeed"—*shall indeed* reap, *shall indeed* come with a shout of joy, bearing his sheaves with a harvest that God has brought about in his life.

That's what God wants to do in our lives, and you see, the thing is, five times Psalm 126 speaks of laughter and of joy, because God does bless His people. God is all-powerful and He is so good and He loves us with an everlasting love, and He has plans to prosper us and not to harm us. But we do have to trust Him enough to do it *His* way. And we have to trust that there will be a joyful harvest, but it will be in *His* time.

This concept of sowing and reaping is carried into the New Testament in several places. In Galatians 6, verses 7-9 we read this: "Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh shall from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit shall from the Spirit reap eternal life. And let us not lose heart in doing good, for in due time we shall reap (a harvest) if we do not grow weary."

The one who sows to his own flesh will reap destruction. But as we sow to the Spirit and live lives of trust and abiding and obedience with Christ, living in nearness with Him, allowing Him to live His life in and through us, He promises that at the proper time—in His time—we *will* reap a harvest, if we don't give up.

As you watch the Olympics, as you get immersed in the drama and in the thrill of victory, I encourage you over the next two weeks, to remember that there is another even greater drama being played out. And there's an even greater victory to be had. And you are in the game. What you sow every day will ultimately determine what you will reap. So I encourage you, just keep sowing to the Spirit—the seeking and walking with and following Christ—for if you do, you shall indeed one day shout with joy. Let's pray.

*Heavenly Father, we just want to thank You so much that You, God, are so good and that You do have plans, Lord, to transform us and that You do it in a way that is for our best. And God, even sometimes when You seem to be silent and You don't answer our prayers for deliverance, Lord, we can trust that You are still doing the amazing. And Lord, You are calling us to walk by faith into a nearness of a relationship with You. And God, I just want to pray that if there is anyone here this morning who is wrestling with trusting You, I just pray right now in the silence in their own seat they'd just say, "Lord, just have all that I am. And Lord, I just want to again turn toward Your way. And Lord, I want to be intentional this coming week that I'm going to sow to the Spirit. I'm not going to sow to my own desires and to live to please myself. I'm going to live for the Lord Jesus Christ, by Your grace and in Your strength." God, none of us can do it on our own. We pray for Your enabling grace, and we pray, Lord, You'd do it as You change us from the inside out, in Your name, Amen.*

<sup>1</sup>*The Hiding Place* by Corrie ten Boom (Chosen Books, a division of Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, Mi 49516)

\*Scripture taken from the NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE  
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