

FINISHING
WELL

to the

GLOORY *of*
GOD

STRATEGIES *from a* CHRISTIAN PHYSICIAN



JOHN DUNLOP, MD

Finishing Well to the Glory of God: Strategies from a Christian Physician

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Introduction

Jeb would have been considered a Christian statesman. Having realized God's great love for him at an early age, he had learned that his greatest passion was allowing God to be glorified. He had been a leader in his church and founder of a major international Christian mission. But he had been a diabetic for many years, and over his last five years he developed severe heart disease. Jeb had bypass surgery twice, and decided not to go through it again. He knew that he had lived a full life, but that soon God would call him home. Jeb had begun to let go of his attachments to his life and was longing to see his Lord in heaven. One Sunday he was admitted to intensive care with a major heart attack. By Monday afternoon it was clear that he was dying. I went to see him that evening. Upon reviewing his status, I told him that his heart was failing rapidly and he would not likely live out the night. Thankfully, he was fully alert and coherent. His response was unforgettable. He took my hand and said, "John, thank you for being so candid. I would like to ask for three things. First, the visiting policies of this hospital stink. My wife and daughters are

in the waiting room, and I would like them to come back here with me—now! Second, as you know, I have been a diabetic for many years and I have watched my diet, but could you get me a piece of chocolate cake with chocolate icing? Third, I have not been able to have a cup of real coffee for some time and wonder if you would let me have one.” With tears in my eyes, I agreed to all of his requests. His family came right in. He fully enjoyed his cake and coffee, and shortly after finishing them he said goodbye to his wife and daughters, laid his head on his pillow, and died. There was no fight to the finish; he simply rested in Jesus. He had lived his life for God’s glory, and he came to the end of life to the glory of God.

I later saw a cartoon that will be forever imprinted on my mind. It showed an older fellow walking up to the pearly gates with a tube hanging from every orifice of his body. His comment to St. Peter was, “Sorry I’m late, but they kept me on life support for two weeks!” The point was well made.

I have practiced internal medicine for over thirty years with a special interest in geriatrics. As a result I sign a lot of death certificates. As I do the paperwork, I do some reflecting. I ask myself, Was this a good death? Were we aggressive enough? Or were we too aggressive? Was the patient prepared? Was the family ready? Because I have had the privilege of taking care of many like Jeb who had faith in Jesus, I have pondered other questions, such as, Is there a distinctively Christian way to come to the end of life? How do we finish well to the glory of God, assuring that death is an affirmation of faith, consistent with the gospel? These are critical questions, ones which we would do well to consider.

One thing I have learned is that dying well is rarely a coincidence. Rather it results from choices made throughout life. After all, dying well is nothing more than living well right up till the end. Deliberate planning for our final days is not a priority of our culture. But we need it today more than ever. The way we approach the end of life is rapidly changing. We are often forced to make difficult medical decisions during times of crisis. Many

of the options we have available now would have been science fiction less than a generation ago. It is impossible to anticipate what specific situations we will face down the line, but our values will determine whatever decisions we come to. It has been my experience that if we carefully think through the values that will inform future choices, we will spare ourselves and our loved ones the risk of making wrong decisions under duress. One of my goals, for you who read this book, is to help you define the values that will determine your approach to the dilemmas you will face toward the end of life. I trust that you will come to understand that the greatest value we can have is that God ought to be glorified.

The realities of modern medicine present potential problems of two sorts: choosing too much of the available technology or choosing too little. If we are unduly aggressive at the end of life, death, instead of being a peaceful resting in Jesus, will become a technological fight to the finish. On the other hand, if we forgo what could be truly effective interventions, we may not prove to be good caretakers of the life God has entrusted to us. This is particularly true when we are faced with the possibilities of physician-assisted suicide and euthanasia. Clearly we need balance. We should pursue treatment, when possible, to honor life. Yet, we should not resist God when it appears that he has willed life to end.

These issues have prompted me to think a lot about how to help my patients prepare to finish life well. I realized some time ago that the amount of material I would have to share with them was much more than I could cover in an office visit; it would actually fill a whole book. That is what led me to write *Finishing Well to the Glory of God*. I write this book from several perspectives. First, I write as a Christian, and the longer I live, the more convinced I am that God alone is the source of all true joy and fulfillment. Second, I write as a physician; third, as a son who has seen his parents go through their later days; and finally I write as a cancer survivor who in his sixties is confronting some of the issues of aging myself.

Strategies from a Christian Physician

Finishing Well to the Glory of God is written from an explicitly Christian perspective. Here I need to make three comments.

First, while being a book *about* Christians, this is not exclusively a book *for* Christians. If one is considering the validity of the Christian faith, it is essential to reflect on a Christian view of the end of life. Christianity, after all, is the only major world religion based on the death of its founder. Yet it is not Christ's death but the fact that he rose from the dead that gives his followers a uniquely triumphant view of the end of life. For the Christian, death is not so much an end but a beginning. I have embraced this hope for most of my life. It is, therefore, difficult for me to put myself in the intellectual position of a non-Christian. But, if I were doing an honest investigation in the marketplace of the world's religions, I would first want to examine their bases for claiming to be true. Then, I would want to know how the religion would help me not only to live but also to die. Finally, I would want to consider what sort of experience the religion promised after death.

Christianity tells adherents that death leads a believer immediately into the presence of God with the expectation of a continued relationship with many of the things and people enjoyed on earth. Furthermore, followers of Jesus can know their eternal future with surety before death, for entrance into heaven is not based upon good works but upon what Jesus accomplished when he died in their place. A Christian has stopped trying to earn God's favor and is simply willing to accept what Jesus has done. Most impressively, Christianity teaches that the relationship we will experience with God for all of eternity will fulfill the deepest longings of our beings. This is not the extinction of desire as so many Eastern religions teach but its fulfillment. If you do not consider yourself a Christian, this book will be valuable because many of the strategies apply whether you are a Christian or not, and it will allow you to evaluate basic Christian beliefs about life and death.

A second thought about my Christian perspective is that I do not claim dogmatically that my application of Christian truth is the only one. Many of the issues I write about are far too

complex, and the latitude we find in the Bible is far too broad, for me to claim to have the only approach to the end of life. I believe though, that my approach is consistent with biblical truth and can be practically applied in the complex medical world we face today.

A third comment is that I understand and appreciate that there are cultural biases on these issues. My background would be categorized as white, middle class, and suburban. Though I have sought to reach into the city and to cultivate deep friendships in the African-American and Asian communities, I am still keenly aware of my biases. I have tried to distinguish those opinions that are truly Christian from those that are merely cultural.

Sources

God has graciously given me a number of sources from which I have learned these strategies.

First, my patients: I have had the joy of serving a host of amazing people over the years. Many have been Christians, others have not. I have seen many die well from both groups. They have shown courage and kindness in the face of death. You will read many of their stories. I have altered names and many details to protect their anonymity. In some instances I tell an anecdote that is a composite of several stories. Some of the histories are hypothetical.

Second, but most important, the Scriptures: in them I find truth and wisdom. I quote them freely, but I do so committed to the fact that any passage of Scripture must be read and studied in the context of the whole. It is dangerous when we think our own good thoughts and then turn to the Scriptures to prove our point. I try not to do that, intending instead to have my thinking flow out of the wisdom of the whole Bible. It is my intention to use the biblical quotes as examples, not just as a means of proving my point.

Third are a host of authors and friends who began wrestling with these issues long before I did. Some are theologians, some medical professionals, all of them very wise people. I have

attempted to give them credit when I cite specific material, but I acknowledge that it is not possible to give due recognition for the little things I have picked up along the way. One person I particularly want to recognize is Charles Sell. “Chick” is a retired seminary professor and experienced writer who holds a doctorate in Systematic Theology. After reviewing some of my notes, he befriended me and generously offered to assist in my writing. Chick has made numerous contributions to most of these strategies. In particular he wrote the sections on grief in strategy 2 and appendix 3. The other individual who deserves special appreciation is Tara Davis, on behalf of Crossway, who has carefully edited this manuscript.

Finishing Well to the Glory of God

Before I introduce the strategies to finish life well, I need to explain what I mean by the phrase “finishing well.” Some say it means being happy, pain free, and contented throughout life. Many desire to maintain their dignity and to have enjoyable times with their families and loved ones. These are reasonable goals, but Scripture presents a uniquely Christian approach to the end of life. Consider this:

As it is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. (Phil. 1:20–21)

Paul, the apostle, had a God-centered view of life. He longed for God to be honored in his life right up to the end. Upon death he looked forward to being in God’s presence, where he knew that Christ would be honored all the more.¹ Finishing life well means that God is glorified in our lives till the moment of our deaths and then by the legacy we leave behind.

Overview of Strategies

A summary of the nine strategies will enable you to appreciate the end-of-life issues we deal with and help you sense the impor-

tance of preparing to face them. Each strategy begins with a list of questions designed to prime your thinking before you read. If you are in a group and discussing *Finishing Well* together, these questions may serve to kick off your discussion.

Strategy 1: Live Well

Finishing Well begins with advice on how to live life well near the end. I encourage you to recognize your God-given value while keeping your focus on serving others and maintaining your health.

Strategy 2: Let Go Graciously

This strategy explains how to let go of some of the things and values of this world in order to more fully embrace eternal life. I try to be sensitive, recognizing how difficult some of these transitions are. I discuss the essential role of hope as we face the end of life, emphasizing that our hope must be in God and not in this world.

Strategy 3: Treasure God's Love; Love Him in Return

In this section, I demonstrate how having an inner experience of God's love will result in a passion for God and godliness as well as a longing for heaven and our resurrected bodies. This longing will transform our attitudes toward the end of life. I show how Christians can have the ultimate joy they were designed to experience.

Strategy 4: Grow through Adversity

This chapter explains how suffering, far from being meaningless, can be productive. It helps us understand a God-centered perspective on some of the challenges of the end of life including pain, suffering, and dementia.

Strategy 5: Embrace a Biblical View of Life and Death

A biblical view of life is much more than our existence here on earth. Death is not a part of God's original good creation but is at root a punishment for sin. It is therefore an enemy. But now

it can be a defeated one—one that God uses to lead a Christian to eternal reward.

Strategy 6: Complete Your Agenda

Dying slowly gives an opportunity to strengthen your relationship with God and seek closure with loved ones. I offer an agenda of things you can do to allow closure with your loved ones and to leave a legacy of godliness.

Strategy 7: Make Appropriate Use of Technology

Medical technology is a gracious gift from God that allows us to improve and prolong our lives. But it raises tough questions. In this strategy I provide practical guidelines for choosing whether to pursue aggressive life-sustaining treatment.

Strategy 8: Changing Gears from Cure to Comfort Care

There will come a point when it is appropriate to change the goal of medical care from cure to comfort care, accepting that death will come. This chapter answers the why, when, and how questions that are so difficult. I also discuss advance directives.

Strategy 9: Rest in Jesus

After proper physical, emotional, and spiritual preparation, death need not be a fight to the finish but a gentle resting in the arms of the Savior as we finally yield complete control to him. But death is not always easy; at times it is nasty and ugly. This strategy helps prepare us for a more difficult end.



Finishing Well concludes with three appendices. The first presents my views on how to maintain health, the second gives guidelines needed when considering specific life-sustaining treatments, and the third advises survivors who must make many decisions while dealing with their own grief.

An Admission

In writing these strategies I am trying to idealize some complex issues and situations. Without doubt the end of life can be very difficult. It may sound from this book that I have always handled things well. I have not. I have made, and continue to make, my share of mistakes. As they say, I am still *practicing* medicine.

Prayer

Even though it is difficult to think about end-of-life issues, I am reminded of what Moses wrote: “So teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom” (Ps. 90:12). My prayer is that as you reflect on the later days of your life, you will live wisely and recognize your need for God’s help in your decisions. I pray that you will have God’s wisdom as you approach your later years, allowing you to finish well. I encourage you to pray for God’s help after you read each strategy. I have included a brief sample prayer with each one. Reflecting on the reasons we as Christians can finish well should also lead us to worship. To facilitate that, I have closed each chapter with a meditation to draw out your heart to God.

I wrote *Finishing Well* with the words of the apostle Paul constantly on my mind: “For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen” (Rom. 11:36). My desire is that, after reading this book, you will recognize God as the origin, means, and goal of your life, and then perhaps “finishing well to the glory of God” will itself be numbered in the “all things” that bring him glory.

3. Cultivate and maintain deep friendships.
4. Laugh a lot.
5. Invest in your health.
6. Avoid the things that rob quality from the older years.

Unfortunately, we don't naturally follow these guidelines. To do so requires deliberate planning.

Recognize Your God-Given Value

My friend in the nursing home had no motivation to get up and get going because he failed to appreciate his value.

In our youth-oriented culture, aging is feared, something to be put off as long as possible. It has been said: "Everyone wants to live a long time, but no one wants to grow old." Our culture values youth, physical beauty, and athletic prowess but does not place much value on the elderly. As persons grow old, they become less like what society most esteems.

Contrast this view of the elderly with that of Scripture. A classic passage is in Leviticus: "You shall stand up before the gray head and honor the face of an old man, and you shall fear your God: I am the LORD" (Lev. 19:32). This strong statement affirms that as we honor the elderly, we are showing reverence for God. Appreciate the significance of this statement: "Gray hair is a crown of glory; it is gained in a righteous life" (Prov. 16:31).

In an insightful book, *Growing Old in Christ*, Richard and Judith Hays summarize well the biblical view of the elderly:

Nowhere in the biblical canon are they pitied, patronized, or treated with condescension. Nowhere is growing old itself described as a problem. Nowhere are elders described as pitiable, irrelevant, or behind the curve, as inactive or unproductive. Nowhere are they, as in so many Western dramas and narratives, lampooned as comic figures.²

It's crucial that we cling to the biblical, not the contemporary, view of the elderly. If we do otherwise, we may compromise our own future. If in your younger years you feel that life for the elderly

is of little value, chances are you will devalue your own life as you get older. Many seniors respond to aging by continually trying to be young. I've seen ads for senior living facilities showing a group out on the ski slopes. There's nothing wrong with such a vigorous picture of life at that age—unless it forces the elderly to deny who they really are and pretend to be something they are not. Our culture's failure to value the aged is pervasive; I have found myself unthinkingly caught up in it. In years gone by I would congratulate ninety-year-olds for appearing to be only sixty. They would always smile and accept it as a compliment. Then, when I came to realize that by doing so I was implying there was something wrong with being (and looking) ninety, I stopped saying such things.

Rather than deprecating age, we ought to recognize the benefits of growing older, seeing old age as being chronologically gifted rather than chronologically challenged. Wisdom is one of those benefits: "Wisdom is with the aged, and understanding in length of days" (Job 12:12). Granted, young people can be wise and older ones can be foolish. But Scripture validates a certain kind of wisdom that only comes through years of experience. Wisdom is not the same as knowledge. Knowledge is an accumulation of facts. Wisdom is the ability to use well the knowledge we have. It includes the ability to set priorities, to assess value, and to see things in larger perspective. If we want knowledge in today's world, we can surf the Internet, but unfortunately that does not buy us wisdom.

Whether we are young, middle-aged, or elderly ourselves, we need to affirm the value of the elderly.

Find Purpose for Each Day

Those who trust in God should never view any season of life as unproductive, even the last stage. So, wrote the psalmist:

The righteous flourish like the palm tree
and grow like a cedar in Lebanon.
They are planted in the house of the LORD;
they flourish in the courts of our God.
They still bear fruit in old age;
they are ever full of sap and green. (Ps. 92:12–14)

In this passage the godly are characterized by endless vigor. The older years are a time for accomplishment, not a time to sit back and relax. They are an opportunity to do spiritual work. The adage “carpe diem” (seize the day) pertains to all ages. Remember my second rule for retirement: “Go to bed every night knowing that you helped someone.” God has a purpose for you to fulfill each day of your life. As we age, however, his purpose for us will undoubtedly change. I may not be serving at my office, giving lectures, or writing books. I may be less involved in things that require physical strength and more committed to quieter activities like praying and encouraging others. Those activities may be more important in God’s eternal kingdom than the things I am currently doing. As members of Christ’s church we are to be involved in its mission. As part of the body of Christ we are to do his work in the world. That does not mean we need to continue to work at our vocation or even that we need to have a paying job. None of the Bible’s commands that tell us to serve are age specific. We read about all believers having spiritual gifts.³ That surely includes the elderly.

Consider how the apostle Paul viewed his life:

For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account. Convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with you all, for your progress and joy in the faith, so that in me you may have ample cause to glory in Christ Jesus, because of my coming to you again. (Phil. 1:21–26)

Facing execution at the hands of Nero, Paul had no idea how long he would live. He wrestled with a basic quandary: was he to hope to go on living, or should he hope to die soon and go to be with his Lord? He chose to hope to go on living because he saw purpose in doing so. His remaining days would be spent encouraging the Philippian Christians in their spiritual walk.

Paul displayed the same attitude in 1 Corinthians 15 where he wrote concerning the resurrection of the body. He longed for this new body which he would have in heaven, freed from the constraints of his deteriorating physical health and strength. He described in glowing terms the resurrection that lay ahead for believers. Yet he did not conclude that we should idle away our lives dreaming of this glorious future. Instead, he challenged, "Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain" (1 Cor. 15:58).

The apostle Peter laid down the same challenge, even when writing to people who were suffering. To them he wrote: "Therefore let those who suffer according to God's will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good" (1 Pet. 4:19). Realizing that their suffering was not an accident but according to God's will, they were to put themselves in God's hands and through their suffering learn more about his faithfulness. In addition, they were to "continue to do good"! That life was tough did not excuse them from being out on the front lines serving the Lord.

Joni Eareckson Tada, herself paralyzed, has helped others see that no matter how desperate our situation, we must find some purpose in continuing to live. She spoke by telephone to a young woman who was severely debilitated and confined to bed: "What purpose can I possibly have?" the young woman asked Joni. Without hesitation, Joni answered. Having found that the young woman knew many Scriptures by memory, Joni suggested she could quote passages of the Bible to others. "You can encourage those who visit you or those you speak to on the phone. . . . Besides this," Tada continued, "you can offer others an opportunity to serve and encourage you."⁴

I am often asked to speak to groups of younger Christians about the issues of aging. I frequently ask those in the audience who had been significantly impacted in their spiritual lives by a grandparent or another senior to raise their hands. I am always impressed with how many hands go up. I remember my own grandmother

repeatedly reminding me of one verse from the Old Testament: “For those who honor me I will honor . . .” (1 Sam. 2:30).

The Bible is replete with illustrations of seniors making significant contributions, some very near the end of their lives. At age eighty, Moses led the people of Israel from Egypt to the Promised Land. Then there were Abraham and Sarah who, well past the reproductive years, gave birth to their son Isaac. King David made preparations for Solomon to build the temple just prior to his death. Elizabeth, married to an aging Zacharias, gave birth to John the Baptist. Anna and Simeon were at the temple to welcome the predicted Messiah. The apostle John received the Revelation of Jesus Christ when he was over ninety years old.

Perhaps the greatest example of doing good as the end of life approaches is that of our Lord Jesus himself. In the last days of his life he met with his disciples, served them by washing their feet, and instituted the Lord’s Supper. In the garden he healed the ear of the High Priest’s servant. From the cross he provided for his mother and offered forgiveness to his assailants. Jesus was not focused on his own suffering but considered the needs of others.

Unfortunately, as motivated as some people are to continue to serve others in their later years, they are simply unable to do much. For physical, mental, emotional, or even spiritual reasons, many are limited. When we encounter others facing such limitations, we who are active and involved should be slow to criticize. What is important is that they are serving to the limit of their capabilities. They may be expending more of their maximal capacity than others who seem to accomplish much more.

For as long as God gives us life and abilities, he has a purpose for us to fulfill each day. It is simply our job to find it and to make sure that we are living for Christ and his kingdom.

Cultivate and Maintain Deep Friendships

In younger days we may value activity more than relationships. What we have done, what we are presently doing, and what we intend to do will often define our identity and reflect our values. As we age, we tend to value these activities less and our relation-

ships more. I was impressed that as my dad got older, he talked less about his accomplishments and more about his children, his wife, and his friends. By doing so, he was demonstrating a much wiser and perhaps more biblical value system. After all, as one of my good friends frequently remarks, “People are the only things on earth that God will take to heaven.”

Family is often the main source of satisfying relationships. As we age, we must take particular care to nurture close loving relationships with our family. The adage “Be nice to your kids for they will choose your nursing home” has a grain of truth in it. But far beyond the benefits to you will be the legacy that you can leave your children and grandchildren. Nevertheless, family relationships are not enough. We need to cultivate deep friendships within our peer group. Studies have documented a mortality benefit for seniors who maintain deep friendships.⁵ I love to see a group of four men (all of whom are my patients) meeting daily for coffee at the local McDonald’s “solving the problems of the world.” It is not wise for couples to do all of their socializing with themselves or with other couples. When one of them is gone, the survivor needs an established support group.

Christians should build their friendships on the biblical idea of fellowship (often translated from the Greek word *koinonia* in the New Testament), which presents a picture of meaningful interdependence and involvement in the lives of one another. Paul is explicit in what he meant by this when he wrote to the Galatians: “Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ” (Gal. 6:2). Note this is a command, not a suggestion.

For believers, much of this deep fellowship should take place in small groups within a church. Many churches have groups that help promote fellowship specifically among seniors. If your church does not have this type of group, you may want to consider starting one. You may also choose to develop deep friendships with those who are not Christians.

Bible studies for seniors abound. These are splendid ways not only to provide a social outlet but also to encourage the saints in their walks with the Lord. I am impressed every Sunday night

when I talk to my eighty-nine-year-old mother about how she is preparing for her Bible study the next morning, which she attends with other residents of her retirement community. I often meet friends for breakfast at a restaurant near the hospital where I start my workday. Two mornings a week I see a group of seniors from the community gather there for a time of Bible study. Some of the group leaders are seniors themselves, but others are younger people. They are all doing a great service.

As I observe my older friends, I also see the necessity of developing friendships across generational lines. Younger people need the wisdom and support of the elderly, and the elderly need the energy and opportunity to serve the younger. I do not believe that the trend in many churches to isolate the elderly to their own peer group is healthy. The psalmist agreed:

Young men and maidens together,
old men and children!

Let them praise the name of the LORD,
for his name alone is exalted;
his majesty is above earth and heaven. (Ps. 148:12–13)

Our church puts a great emphasis on small groups. Most of them include people of similar age. However, at least once a quarter we have a social activity that crosses all generational boundaries. That is good.

Relationships contribute a lot to the quality of our lives in the later years. We need to keep that in mind when we have to face difficult choices in our later years. These include our living situation and how we spend our time. We must choose our friendships carefully and cultivate them well.

Laugh a Lot

It's healthy for seniors to laugh and enjoy life with good friends. Ecclesiastes encourages "a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance" (Eccles. 3:4). Ed Creagan, a Mayo Clinic physician, has done a lot of careful thinking about

“Dying well is rarely a coincidence. Rather it results from choices made throughout life. After all, dying well is nothing more than living well right up till the end.”

From the Introduction

“Drawing from his years of experience as a physician who has shepherded countless patients through the ‘valley of the shadow of death,’ Dunlop provides pastoral wisdom and sound strategies. He gently addresses spiritual, emotional, psychological, financial, and physical needs. This book helps us plan our final decades, months, weeks, and hours with a God-centered attitude toward death and dying.”

PAIGE CUNNINGHAM, *Executive Director, The Center for Bioethics and Human Dignity*

“Don’t face your death or that of a loved one unprepared. *Finishing Well* is the most comprehensive, deeply Christian, and readable resource I know of its kind, and will prepare you and your loved ones to die well.”

DAVID STEVENS, MD, CEO, *Christian Medical and Dental Association*

“The strategies Dunlop offers are clearly the result of years of experience in caring for persons in their twilight years. This book will be helpful for patients and families both before death and afterward.”

ROBERT ORR, MD, *Professor of Medical Ethics, Loma Linda University, Center for Christian Bioethics*

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