

The Truth About Heaven

Merriam-Webster.com defines “heaven” as, “The place where God lives and where good people go after they die according to some religions.” Other definitions it offers include “A spiritual state of everlasting communion with God” and “A place or condition of utmost happiness.” A Harris poll found that 89% of Americans believe in heaven. Growing up in a Christian home, I have heard about heaven all of my life. When I was a child, we used to sing, “Heaven is a wonderful place, filled with glory and grace. I want to see my Savior’s face. Heaven is a wonderful place.” You know, heaven is a place that Christians like to think about. It’s a place that they dream about. Christians love to talk about heaven. In fact, it’s one of the main motivating factors in their lives. Christians want to go to heaven!

Now, before we go any further in this lesson, I want to stop and address the question, “Is heaven a real place?” Maybe you’re watching this video and you’re thinking, “I don’t believe in heaven. Heaven is nothing more than a superstition!” Allow me to say from the very beginning: Yes, heaven is a real place. How do I know this? Well, it’s not because of personal experience. I have never been to heaven. A person’s belief in heaven is based first on the proof of the existence of God, and secondly on the infallibility of the Bible. It’s not the purpose of this video to talk about the existence of God or the infallibility of the Bible, but the case can be solidly and logically made that God does exist, and the proof for the infallibility of the Bible is abundant. If you doubt the existence of heaven, I would suggest that you start with those two points. You can find powerful material addressing these issues at ApologeticsPress.org, as well as [other World Video Bible School videos](#).

For now we’re going to assume that you are a person who believes in God, you believe that the Bible is reliable, that heaven is a real place, and we are going to assume that you’re here to learn more about heaven. With that in mind, let’s begin with the question, “What is heaven?”

First, heaven is the dwelling place of God. Lamentations 3:41 says, “Let us lift our hearts and hands To God in heaven.” In fact, it is the dwelling place of the Godhead: God the Father, Jesus Christ the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. I John 5:7 says, “For there are three that bear witness in heaven: the Father, the Word, and the Holy Spirit; and these three are one.”

Secondly, heaven is the place where the righteous will spend their eternity. Matthew 25:34 — “Then the King will say to those on His right hand, ‘Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world...’” This verse also mentions that there is special preparation that has gone on in heaven to get it ready for the children of God. In John 14:2 Jesus said, “In My Father’s house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you.” Now listen, He says, “I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also.” And so, special preparation has gone on in heaven for the children of God.

Thirdly, heaven is a place where the angels dwell (Matthew 22:30). Though Christians love to talk about heaven, heaven is a place about which there are a lot of questions. In John 12, Jesus had come to Bethany to the home of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, and the text mentions the fact that Lazarus was there, but then it adds these words: “who had been dead, but that Jesus raised from the dead.” And so, there’s a group of people that are in Bethany. They’re sitting around the table eating, and Jesus is there, and Lazarus is there. In fact, if we stopped and thought for a minute, can you imagine what it would be like to sit at a table with Jesus and with Lazarus, who had been dead? Don’t you know there would be a lot of questions that you would like to ask? In fact, listen to this. Verse 9 says, “Now a great many of the Jews knew that He was there; and they came, not for Jesus’ sake only, but that they might also see Lazarus, whom He had raised from the dead.” And so, the people came to see Jesus, but they also came to see Lazarus. Wouldn’t you liked to have talked to Lazarus, or wouldn’t there be some things you would like to ask Lazarus? “Lazarus, what was it like when you breathed your last breath? What happened then? Lazarus, did you go to heaven or paradise?” That’s a point that some people debate. “Lazarus, tell us what it was like when you got there! Did you see old friends? Did you recognize them? What did they look like?”

In II Corinthians 12:2, the Apostle Paul writes, “I knew a man in Christ above fourteen years ago, (whether in the body, I cannot tell; or whether out of the body, I cannot tell: God knows;) such an one caught up to the third heaven. And I knew such a man, (whether in the body, or out of the body, I cannot tell: God knows;) How that he was caught up into paradise...” Now listen to what he says: “...and heard unspeakable words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter.”

Most people believe that Paul is speaking about himself here, that he’s the man who was caught up the third heaven. Many believe that he’s referring to an incident in Acts 14 when the Jews drug him out the city and stoned him, and then he went to the third heaven. He says, “I don’t know if I actually, physically went, or if it was a vision. I don’t know if it was actually me or if God was allowing me to see these things.” But he does say this: “I saw things that were unlawful to be uttered.”

Wow, doesn’t that get your curiosity up? David Lipscomb wrote, “The veil which conceals the mysteries and glories of heaven God has not permitted to be raised. It is enough that we know that in that world the saints shall be made perfectly happy and perfectly blessed in the full enjoyment of God forever.” What’s the point we’re making from all of this? The point is it’s sufficive to say there’s a lot about heaven that we don’t know. But what we want to do for the next several minutes is to answer some questions about heaven, based on what we do know and what the Bible does tell us about this place.

Where is Heaven?

Will heaven simply be the Earth renovated? Well, of course, there are some people who teach that heaven will be on this earth. The Jehovah’s Witnesses, along with many denominational

writers, contend that with the Second Coming of Christ, the Earth will be purified by fire, and this Earth will be the residence of the faithful throughout eternity. In fact, they speak of it as the “New Earth,” and they like to go to passages such as Rev. 21:1 — “And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away...” And they’ll argue that God is basically going to burn off this old earth and recreate it as a paradise. And they’ll use passages like Matthew 5:5 — “The meek shall inherit the earth.” But friends, they are mistaken about this. Heaven will not be on this earth. We could give a lot of passages here, but for the brevity of time, I want you to notice with me John 14:2. Jesus said, “In my Father’s house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you.” Now listen: “I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also.”

Jesus described heaven as a place that he went away to. It is not a place here. It’s a place that he will take us to. In Matthew 6:10 Jesus taught his disciples to pray that God’s will be done “on earth, as it is in heaven.” Clearly, they are different places. Consider II Peter 3:10 — “But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night; in the which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat...” Now listen: “...and the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up.” Friends, this material universe will cease to exist. It’s not just going to get a make-over. It’s going to be gone. You know, it’s interesting that people who believe in the doctrine of a “rejuvenated earth” like to use this passage as a proof-text, because there is nothing said here about a renovation. It only stresses the fact that the earth will not be. The Jehovah’s Witnesses are wrong about this.

So, where is Heaven? Well, heaven is a “place.” Jesus said, “I go to prepare a place for you.” But it’s not a physical place. In Acts 17:24 the Bible says that God does not dwell in temples made with hands. John 4:24 says that God is a spirit. I Corinthians 15:50 says that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God. Put all this together we learn that heaven is a not a physical place. It’s a spiritual place. And so, when we try to answer the question, “Where is heaven’s physical location?” we’re going to come up empty.

Who will be in Heaven?

There are so many passages that we could go to answer this question. In fact, we could spend the rest of our time discussing this question. But for now, let’s just choose one passage. II Thessalonians 1:7-9 says this: “And to you who are troubled rest with us, when the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with his mighty angels...” Now listen to the next part: “In flaming fire taking vengeance on them that know not God, and that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ: Who shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his power...” We learn from this passage that those who “obey the gospel” will go the comforts and rest of heaven. Those who do not obey the gospel will receive everlasting destruction. A person obeys the gospel by hearing it, believing it, repenting of his sins, confessing his faith in Christ as the Son of God, and then being baptized into Christ for the

remission of his sins. At that point God adds him to the church of Christ (the church belonging to Christ), and if he lives faithfully in obedience to Christ for the remainder of his days, he will find a home in heaven eternally. Those who have NOT obeyed the gospel and become members of Christ's church will be punished with everlasting destruction in Hell.

(For more on this question, I would direct you to www.BeingSaved.org.)

Will we know one another in heaven?

I have been asked this question many times over the years, and I believe the answer to this question is "Absolutely, yes we will." I've never had any doubts about this. I think the reason people struggle with this question is they realize that when we get to heaven, we'll have a different body. The resurrected body will not be flesh and blood. It will not be corruptible, and so in light of that they wonder, "How will we recognize each other?" I believe absolutely, positively that the Bible teaches that we will know one another in heaven.

First, I want you to think with me about the implications of this question. If we do not know one another in heaven, then that means, number one, that death is the final separation. That means that the last time that you were with your dear loved one will truly be the last time. It means that when you stood at the graveside to lay to rest the body of your departed spouse, it truly is the end, and that one day soon, you too will pass into that nameless land to join those anonymous who have gone on before you. Friends, our very souls shrink at the thought that that could be true — that bonds so precious and so dear in this life are in this life only.

A second implication of this would be that on the Day of Judgment, I will stand among total strangers. Either that, or after the invitation to inherit the kingdom, the Lord is going to wipe my memory so that I enter into heaven with strangers. Friends, you've got to admit that if that proved to be true, it would greatly alter our concept of what heaven is going to be like. We sing the song, "If we never meet again this side of heaven, I'll meet you on that beautiful shore." We'd have to stop singing that song because it's not going to happen like that. It's not going to be true if there is no future recognition.

Thirdly, it's hard to even to visualize a place of perfect happiness, as heaven will be, when you strip away the sweet reunion. Heaven just doesn't seem as sweet when you take away my loved ones. In fact, that's one of the motivating factors to make me want to go there.

What does the Bible say?

Now somebody says, "Okay, I hear the implications, but I don't care about that. I want to know, 'What does the Bible say about this?'" I want you to listen to some of the Biblical descriptions of death. In Genesis 25:8, I want you to listen how the Bible describes the death of Abraham. It says, "Then Abraham gave up the ghost, and died in a good old age, an old man, and full of years; and was gathered unto his people." That phrase, "and was gathered unto his people," or

one very similar to it, is used also to describe Ishmael's death in Genesis 35:29, Jacob's death in Genesis 49:29 and verse 33, and Moses' and Aaron's death in Deuteronomy 32:50. Now, that phrase can't be referring to the burial of their physical bodies, because Moses was buried in a secret place in a valley in the land of Moab far from the sepulchers of his ancestors, away from his people. Somebody says, "Then what's it talking about?" It has to be a reference to his spirit. His spirit was "gathered unto his people."

Friends, it's a clear reference to the fact that he went to be with "his people" after he died. Listen to this passage. Listen to the hope that David expresses. In 2 Samuel 12:23 David is grieving over the death of his child with Bathsheba. Verse 23, he asks, "Can I bring him back again? I will go to him, but he will not return to me." Now, what did David have in mind when he said, "I can't bring him back, but I will go to him?" I think we're seeing David expressing a hope for the future. He anticipated a time in the future after his death, when he would be with his child. He understood that he would recognize his child, that he would take joy in being with his child. A few years ago, a friend of mine lost his daughter to cancer. Later I heard him make this statement. He said, "I determined that this is going to be the best thing that ever happened to me." Now you say, "That's a strange thing to say." But this is what he said. He said, "Because this going to motivate me to be stay faithful, because I want to see my daughter again, in heaven." Isn't that a beautiful thought?

You know, many references of the Apostle Paul could be given to make this point. In I Thessalonians 2:19, Paul asks the Thessalonian Christians, "For what is our hope, or joy, or crown of rejoicing? Are not even you in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ? For ye are our glory and joy." Explain to me how the Thessalonian Christians were going to bring Paul joy on the Day of Judgment if he wasn't even going to know them. But listen to this one. I think this really settles the question. I Thessalonians 4. Some of the Christians in Thessalonica were concerned about their brethren. They were concerned about their loved ones who had died. Listen to what Paul writes to the them. He says in verse 13, "I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep [that is, dead], that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him. For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord will not precede them which are asleep." Now listen to verse 16. "For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ will rise first: Then we which are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so will we ever be with the Lord. Wherefore comfort one another with these words." Friends, if these words don't teach future recognition, then I don't what does. Paul tells them, "Don't worry about your loved ones who have died. You are going to see them again. You are going to be with them and with the Lord, so take comfort in this fact." Will we know one another when this life is over? I believe the Scriptures teach absolutely, we will!

Let's talk about some objections that sometimes, people will make to the idea that we will know one another in heaven. Sometimes people will argue, "But we will have lost our physical characteristics. You're not going to look the same. Brother So-and-so has always been bald. When he has a resurrected body, he's going to look completely different, and so I won't know what he looks like." Sometimes people have even said to me, "What about a baby who died at birth, or even an aborted baby? What will they look like in heaven? How would we recognize them?" Friends, here's the answer — I have no idea.

I don't know the answer to this question. I know that David anticipated knowing the child he had with Bathsheba. Maybe it's going to be a super-natural knowledge that will come along with the new spiritual body. I just don't know. I don't think this is a question that we really have an answer for. I John 3:2 says, "Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is." Notice that he says "it does not yet appear what we shall be." Now, what's the point? We don't know the answer to this. But I do know this. Though I don't know what my changed body is going to be like exactly, I know it's still going to be me. Listen to this passage from Job. In Job 19:25-27, Job said, "For I know that my Redeemer lives, and that he will stand at the latter day upon the earth: and though after my skin worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh will I see God: whom I will see for myself, and mine eyes will behold, and not another." Job had the idea that he, as Job, would see God, and that he, in his flesh, with the change implied (in his incorruptible body), was going to see God, and he stresses this. He says "not another." He says "it will be me." It will be Job.

A second objection that sometimes people make to the idea that we will know one another in heaven is that we will be as the angels. They have reference to what the Lord said in Matthew 22:30 when He said that "in the resurrection they neither marry, nor are given in marriage, but are as angels in heaven." But to me, this argument actually lends heed to the point that we're making. Angels have memory. Angels know one another. This statement of Jesus was made to show that in the next life, the marriage relationship will not exist. The point is that marriage ends at death, not that we won't know one another in the next life.

Another objection that is sometimes made to the idea that we will know one another in heaven is sometimes people will say, "What about loved ones who are not there?" Sometimes people have rejected the idea that we will know each other in the next life because they believe that if we know one another, and we recognize that some of our loved ones are not there, that recognizing their absence is going to detract from the joy of heaven. But I want us to remember Revelation 21:4. The Bible says that "God will wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there will be no more sorrow, nor crying, neither will there be any more pain." Now, how the Lord is going to accomplish that, I don't know, but I believe it.

You know, God will not force anyone to go to heaven. He lovingly allows each person to make his own choice. Now, he hopes that everyone is going to go to heaven. In fact, He hopes it so

much that he sent Jesus Christ to die so that it could happen, but still, he doesn't force it. Each man has freedom. He has freedom to choose heaven, or freedom to choose Hell. And I believe that when we stand with God for eternity, and all misconceptions are gone, and we can see perfect love and perfect justice for what they really are, that we will be able to fully stand in agreement with God and his perfect judgment. Friends, I believe absolutely the Bible teaches that we will know one another in heaven.

Will there be degrees of reward and punishment in Heaven and Hell?

Somebody says, "You know Hell sounds really bad. Are you saying that it will be worse for some people than for others?" Friends, I believe the Bible answers absolutely, yes to this question. I want you to consider this passage with me: 2 Peter 2:20. The Bible says about a Christian who departs from the truth, "For if, after they have escaped the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and overcome, the latter end is worse for them than the beginning." Now, I want you to ponder this. In the beginning they were lost, but now, he says, they are worse. The latter state is worse. They were lost, now they are worse than lost. What could that possibly mean? I think it has to mean that there are degrees of punishment. There is something worse than being lost. In Matthew 11:22, Jesus says to Chorazin and Bethsaida, "It will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon in the day of judgment than for you." What are the implications of the words "more tolerable?" Sometimes I've heard people say, "I think there's going to be an especially hot place in Hell for a person like that!", and they're describing some heinous sin. Now, I don't know if it relates to temperature, but I believe absolutely the Bible teaches that there will be degrees of punishment in Hell.

Somebody says, "What about degrees of reward? Will heaven be better for some people than for others?" I don't think this one is as obviously taught, but I believe the Bible teaches there will be levels of reward. Daniel 12:3 says "they that turn many to righteousness [shall shine] as the stars forever." What about those who turn only a few to righteousness? What about those who turn none at all to righteousness? Are they going to shine just as brightly as those who turn many? And if they're going to shine just as brightly, then what's the point of this verse?

In the New Testament in 1 Corinthians 3, Paul has a discussion about Christians converting people to Christ, about their converts. Listen to verses 14-15: "If anyone's work which he has built on it endures, he will receive a reward. If anyone's work is burned, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire." What's the point of this verse? The point is there seems to be a reward tied to the converts who endure, and there seems to be a loss associated with converts who fall away. Now, is that similar to the thought being expressed in Daniel 12:3? It kind of seems to me that it is a similar thought. Paul said in I Thessalonians 2:19, "For what is our hope, or joy, or crown of rejoicing? Is it not even you in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ at His coming?" Paul views faithful brethren as a "crown of rejoicing" at the

Day of Judgment. Once again, there appears to be a greater joy, or a greater reward, associated with those we convert being faithful.

When we die, do we go straight to heaven or an intermediate place called Paradise?

First, let me say that I know good and knowledgeable people who disagree about this, and I certainly don't think this is a matter of fellowship. Secondly, whether I go to Paradise or Heaven when I die, I'll be happy either way. With that said, I believe that the Bible teaches when we die, the righteous go to paradise, the wicked go to torment, and that heaven and hell do not come until after the Day of Judgment. Let me share with you some of the reasons why I believe that:

#1 – Hebrews 11:39-40 indicates that all of the righteous will go to heaven at the same time. Listen to the text: “And all these [talking about the “heroes of faith” in Hebrews 11], having obtained a good testimony through faith, did not receive the promise, God having provided something better for us, that they should not be made perfect apart from us.” That means that all of the saved who have died before me didn't go to heaven before me.

#2 – A second reason why I believe this: In I John 4:12 the apostle John said, “No man has seen God at any time.” John wrote that near the end of the first century, and yet John says, “No man has seen God.” If we go straight to heaven when we die, how could that statement possibly be true?

#3 – A third reason that I believe we go to an intermediate place, a waiting place, Hades, is because in John 3:13, Jesus affirmed that only He, only Christ, had ascended to into Heaven. No one had gone there except Jesus Christ. Well, that pretty much answers the question in my mind.

#4 – If we do go straight to heaven when we die, the implication is that on the Day of Judgment, then we would come back out of heaven to the Judgment, and then Christ would say, “Come ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.” (Matthew 25:34) That would be strange language if we had already received the kingdom once.

#5 – I believe that there is an intermediate place that we go prior to heaven because Christ's parables teach rewards coming at the Day of Judgment. We could cite several examples of this, but I'm just going to give you one – the Parable of the Talents (Mt. 25). It's not until the Lord returns that the servants hear the words, “Enter into the joys of your lord.” We could say the same thing about the parable of the Wise and Foolish Virgins. It's not until the bridegroom comes that they get to enter into the feast.

#6 – Another reason I believe we have an intermediate state instead of going straight to heaven or straight to hell is because many passages teach that the righteous will receive their reward on the last day. In Luke 14:13-14 the Bible says, “But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you; for you shall be repaid at the resurrection of the just.” When is the reward going to come? At the

resurrection day. I Peter 5:4 — “and when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that does not fade away.” Now, the question is, when will we receive the crown of glory? When the chief shepherd appears. Friends, that’s the Day of Judgment.

Now, somebody asks, “If we don’t go straight to heaven when we die, then how do you explain II Corinthians 5:8? It says that to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord.” The argument goes something like this: “God is in heaven, and if when we are absent from the body, then we are present with the Lord, that must mean that we go to heaven when we die.”

Sometimes people will also use Philippians 1:23 where Paul says he’s in a dilemma. He says he wants to remain living for the sake of the brethren, but he says to depart and be with the Lord is far better. Again, it’s the same thought — the idea is that the Lord is in heaven, and Paul says that he was going to die and to be with the Lord, therefore it implies that he went to heaven.

The question is, how do you answer that? Well, first I would point out that Paul did not expect to receive his eternal reward immediately when he died. In II Timothy 4:8 Paul says, “Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day, and not to me only but also to all who have loved His appearing.” Paul was not expecting to receive his final reward until the Day of Judgment. And he also says that all of the righteous will receive their reward on that day.

Somebody says, “Then what does it mean to depart and be with the Lord?” It simply means to be in the comfort of the Lord. You know, many people who believe that we go straight to Heaven when we die, believe that it did not used to be that way. They believe that prior to Christ’s resurrection and ascension, people did not go straight into heaven. They believe that in the past, prior to Christ’s ascension, that people went into Hades. But after Christ ascended into heaven, now all the righteous can go. They believe that Jesus had to be the first to defeat death and the first to go to heaven, but after that everyone could go. But here’s the point I’m getting to: In the Old Testament they believed that the righteous went to Hades or Paradise. But when you read the Old Testament, Solomon wrote in Ecclesiastes 12:7 that when we die, the spirit returns to God who gave it.

Now, what’s his point? The soul went into Hades. It went into Paradise, and yet the Bible says that the soul returned to God. The Psalmist wrote, “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for thou art with me” (Psalm 23:4). David refers to death, and he refers to God being with him, though he would be going to Paradise, not to heaven. Psalm 139:8 — “If I make my bed in Sheol...” “Sheol” is the Hebrew word for Hades. He said “I’m going to go into the Hadean realm, specifically Paradise, [and] behold, You are there.” You see, even though some people believe there was a holding place in the Old Testament, but they don’t believe it is there today, they believe that we go straight to heaven today, the Bible indicates that the holding place in the Old Testament, the Lord was there. The Lord was with them. So, the fact that Paul says that he would be with the Lord when he dies, I do not believe that is any proof that

a person goes straight to heaven at the point of death. Again, no one has ascended to the heaven, but Jesus (John 3:13).

What will heaven be like?

2 Thessalonians 1:7 says that there will be “rest” there. Revelation 21:4 says that there will be no tears in heaven. “And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away.” 1 Thessalonians 4:17 says it will be a place of sweet reunion, where we will see our faithful friends and family who have gone on before us. II Samuel 12:23 – David said he would see his baby again, the one that had died shortly after birth. Hebrews 11 informs us that all of the great, faithful Bible heroes will be there. Matthew 25:46 calls it “life eternal.” Revelation 22:1 describes a “pure river of water of life, proceeding out of the throne of God... and in the midst of the street was there the tree of life.” And so, we will be forever in the presence of God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit. We will have no pain, only happiness and sweet reunion for all eternity.

We began early on in this lesson with II Corinthians 12 and I want to conclude with the same verse. Paul said that he saw things that were unlawful to be uttered. Friends, the point is there are a lot of things about heaven that we don’t know. But I do know this — like the song says, “Heaven will surely be worth it all.”

Credits:

Shall We Know One Another in Heaven? by Guy N. Woods

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