

“Wisdom for Our Trials”

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Scriptural Foundation: James 1:5-12, ESV

Testing of Your Faith (Continued)

⁵ If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. ⁶ But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. ⁷ For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; ⁸ he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.

⁹ Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation, ¹⁰ and the rich in his humiliation, because like a flower of the grass he will pass away. ¹¹ For the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the grass; its flower falls, and its beauty perishes. So also will the rich man fade away in the midst of his pursuits.

¹² Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him.

In March of 2001, a young man high on crack was speeding away from police in a stolen van. He raced through a red light at a busy intersection in the little town of South Bend, Indiana. Shortly after, my brother Scott received a phone call. His mother-in-law, Rose Marie, had been driving through town at 1:30 in the afternoon running some daily errands. As she drove her car through a green light, a reckless van violently smashed into her. Rose Marie had been taken to the emergency room in grave and critical condition. Shocked, my brother hung up the phone and began making arrangements with his wife and three sons to travel to Indiana to be with his mother-in-law and father-in-law. His sons were particularly fond of their grandma as she had been one of those generous, joyful grandmas who made much over them all their lives. As Scott was quickly making preparations, he received another phone call. Rose Marie was unable to recover from her injuries. She had died and met her Savior that afternoon.

Scott called his wife, Carol, and his three sons together in their living room. With tears in his eyes he told them the news of Rose Marie's death. Then he wrapped his arms around them and said, "This is the moment that we decide that our faith is real." He communicated that their faith would either fade or flourish under this grievous trial. Scott then called his family to pray that God would help them. In prayer, this family told Jesus that He does everything right, even this hard thing that they did not understand. They told God that they trusted Him. My brother would later reflect on this moment, "It was a moment that we felt as close to the Lord and to each other as ever. It drew us to a recognition of how real Heaven is and how fragile life is."

Trials are never far from any of us. Some of us may receive a phone call this very week that knocks the breath out of our lungs and that buckles our knees. God calls us to prepare ourselves spiritually to meet them, and when we encounter trials of various kinds, God calls us to respond so that we will grow in faith through them. Scott and his family were examples to me that day of the truth that our Lord teaches us in James 1.

James is a book that urges us to a real, authentic, practical faith. Not a faith in God that thrives in pleasant days, but withers under the heat of trial. Not a faith that is easy, but one that is hard. Not a faith that is at peace with sin, but a faith that fights against it. Not a faith that is dead, but a faith that is alive! Earlier we studied Verses 2-4,

² Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, ³ for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. ⁴ And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

These verses teach us that our faith is always tested and that this testing works for us, not against us. True faith always perseveres under trial, and trials provide us with opportunities to mature, to purify our faith, as we respond rightly to those trials. Earlier we learned three key responses to troubles so that we might gain God's blessing through them.

We learned that we need a determined pursuit in the midst of troubles; that we are to pursue joy in God. We must not let painful trials sink us into despair and darkness, but we fight for our joy by focusing on the future glory that will be ours in Jesus.

Secondly, we are to keep a divine perspective in our trials. We put our minds to work when we meet trials of various kinds. We do not let our emotions lead us; instead we focus our thoughts on God's sovereignty, on His wisdom and on His love. We know that God has a wise design for us and for every event that comes to us. When we face trials in life, we evaluate them upon the basis of who God is and what God is doing in us and for us.

Third, we hold on to a disciple's passion. That is to say, we desire above everything else to glorify the God who redeemed our soul, who provided for us an inheritance in Heaven itself, and so we value a purified faith so that we might see God all the more clearly. If we value our comfort more than Christ-likeness, then trials will ruin us. As followers of Jesus we have a passion to know God and worship Him. We want God to accomplish His great and awesome purposes in our life even as it requires painful trial.

After thinking about these three responses, we might become discouraged, thinking, "I want to respond to trials this way, but how can I? I do not know if I have it in me to think this way about painful circumstances! I tend to spiral downward into the darkness of the trial." James 1:5-11 encourages us today that God does not leave us to our own resources when we are in trial. God meets us, and He supplies us with what we need so that we can persevere, so that we can consider it "all joy," even in the midst of the most difficult days.

In the midst of trials, we have one more important response to consider that answers the question of our own inadequacy and our own frailty. We are given a promise to claim as our own in these verses, and the fourth key response to trial connects us with a discernment promise that is a divine promise, but it is a promise for discernment: God promises to give wisdom to every person who asks for it. Such wisdom enables us to discern God's purposes and then to persevere under every trial we face. Look at Verse 5,

⁵If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him.

This promise from God to grant us wisdom and discernment is specifically given in the context of discussing how we can count it "all joy" when we meet trials of various kinds. The context of Verse 5 is not the believer choosing a career for himself. The context of Verse 5 is not the believer having to make some big decision in life. That is not the context in which James tells us to ask for wisdom. It is appropriate to ask for wisdom in those circumstances, but that is not what James is talking about. The context is difficult circumstances, and James says, "In the midst of difficult circumstances, if any of you lacks wisdom to respond to those circumstances, let him ask God for wisdom; the God who is generous, the God who is willing to give, and He will give you wisdom so that you can respond with discernment and understanding."

James knows full well that we all lack wisdom when he says, "If any of you lacks wisdom...". Not one of us possesses wisdom in our own hearts and minds. Any wisdom that we possess is a derived wisdom. It does not come from within us, but it comes from outside of us. It comes from God's revelation to us through His Word and by His Spirit as He instructs in His wisdom. So wisdom is always needed, a wisdom that comes from God and one that is divine.

Wisdom is particularly needed in the midst of trials, because trials can confuse us and they can muddle our minds, and they can lead us to believe all kinds of wrong ideas about God, about His workings and His ways, and His will for us. Trials do not necessarily produce perseverance and a purified faith. Trials can create in a person greater fear, greater despair, greater selfishness, and even anger toward God. We need wisdom. We need a right way of thinking, a right way of acting, and a right way of believing if we are to be blessed in the midst of our trials.

In the midst of trials, we ask huge questions such as, "What is the purpose of this trial? How can I endure it? How can I hold on to my joy in God through this?" These are not questions we can answer by looking deeply into ourselves. We need wisdom from above. The greatest need we have when we encounter a painful trial is for wisdom; wisdom so that we can endure it and persevere through it, and wisdom so that we can redeem that trial for God's glory, so that we can receive that trial from God with joy, looking towards the future of what God's purposes are.. Thankfully, God opens Heaven to us so that we might find wisdom and so that we might obtain it.

Before we look closely at this promise, let us consider what wisdom is: wisdom is the practical discernment needed to make right decisions in our lives. Wisdom is not an academic knowledge so much as a functional understanding of life, of God working through our lives and in our lives. Wisdom is the understanding we need to desire God above all things and to live godly in this present world. It is a divinely given ability to live life to the glory of God. Without God's wisdom we are left to act upon our own understandings of life, and if we lean upon our own understandings for our life, we will do what is right in our own eyes, and we will do what seems right to us at that time. In short, without wisdom, we will waste our lives.

Remember that James in Chapter 5 considers Job to be the quintessential example of how to respond to deep, burdensome, painful trials in life so that we can be blessed by them. I love what Job says, in Job 28:12-21,

¹² "But where shall wisdom be found? And where is the place of understanding? ¹³ Man does not know its worth, and it is not found in the land of the living. ¹⁴ The deep says, 'It is not in me,' and the sea says, 'It is not with me.' ¹⁵ It cannot be bought for gold, and silver cannot be weighed as its price. ¹⁷ Gold and glass cannot equal it, nor can it be exchanged for jewels of fine gold.

²⁰ "From where, then, does wisdom come? And where is the place of understanding? ²¹ It is hidden from the eyes of all living and concealed from the birds of the air."

Up to this point, as Job discusses wisdom, he seems to be saying that wisdom cannot be found at the heights that the birds are flying and not even at the depths where the sea creatures are and that wisdom cannot be found on this earth. But then Job declares in Verse 23,

²³ "God understands the way to it, and he knows its place."

Job tells us, if you want wisdom in the midst of trials, you will not find it in exploring the oceans deep below or the stars high above. Wisdom is hidden from the eyes of all the living. You will not find wisdom in the classrooms at Harvard or the temples of Tibet. God alone possesses this wisdom. When you face problems in life, your friends cannot give you wisdom, and neither will you find it in the self-help books in Borders, nor from the musings of the philosophers, or the psychologists, or the counselors. Job says,

²⁴ "(God alone) looks to the ends of the earth and sees everything under the heavens...²⁷ then he saw it and declared it; he established it, and searched it out. ²⁸ And he said to man, 'Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom, and to turn away from evil is understanding.'"

In James 1:5-9, God gives us a command, He communicates a promise, and He outlines two conditions necessary to receive wisdom. First, God commands us to ask for wisdom, as we see in Verse 5,

⁵ If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God...

This is not just a suggestion. This is a command. God intends for our trials to drive us to Himself and so He says, "ask for wisdom." God knows that our first response to trial is often to run somewhere else closer, somewhere in this very sphere, to figure out answers to our problems. So, for instance, when a spouse experiences a trial in their marriage, the natural response is to run to a friend for counsel and advice. They may even run to a marriage counselor, but God says, "First, ask me!"

Now we provide marriage counseling here at the church so I am a strong proponent of it. But, all good counsel is for the purpose of discovering God's wisdom; wisdom that is given in His Word and to seek Him for it, and to ask Him for it. No true, biblical counselor claims to have a source of wisdom rooted in themselves, in their thoughts, and in their own imaginations. Our role as counselors is to say, "Let's go to God and ask Him. Let's search what He has already said to us about wisdom in His Word."

When a teenager wonders about a romantic friendship and they are tied in knots over the decisions that this relationship sets before them, God comes to that teenager and says, "Ask me for wisdom. Have a heart that is fully committed to me and ask me for wisdom and I will make things clear for you!"

When a parent suffers the trial of a wayward son or daughter, God says, "Ask Me!"

When a person is burdened by crushing debt, a financial problem, a serious illness, the loss of a job, or a thousand other trials, what does God say? God says, "Ask Me!" Trials are intended to drive us to our knees in prayer so that God may receive all the glory for liberating us, for giving us the strength to endure them, and to make us wise. Why do we look to other sources for wisdom in the midst of life's circumstances when we have a God full of wisdom, so ready and liberal and generous to give it?

I love Proverbs 3:5-7:

⁵ Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. ⁶ In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths. ⁷ Be not wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD, and turn away from evil.

The opposite of asking God for wisdom is leaning on one's own understanding. When we are experiencing a painful trial, let us not look to ourselves or to other people around us for answers. Rather, let us trust in the Lord with all our heart. Let us ask Him for wisdom.

Psalm 118:8 says,

⁸ It is better to take refuge in the LORD than to trust in man.

Notice now the promise connected to the command. It says, in Verse 5,

⁵ If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him.

God is a generous God. He is not a stingy God. God does not listen to our cries in the midst of our trials and then reproach us. He gives generously and without reproach. He does not shake His finger in our face when we say, "God, I am encountering this trial." Sometimes our trials are because of our own folly and because of our own foolishness, but when we go to God asking for wisdom, He doesn't say, "I told you so. You shouldn't even be in this circumstance. Shame on you!" No, God gives wisdom without reproach the Scripture says. God does not reproach us when we approach Him. God does not give His wisdom reluctantly. He gives it lavishly, freely, joyfully, and lovingly. God wants to bless us with His wisdom more than we want to receive it! that is the God we have and isn't that awesome!

In Proverbs 2:6-7, we read,

⁶ For the LORD gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding; ⁷ he stores up sound wisdom for the upright; he is a shield to those who walk in integrity...

If we do not possess the wisdom necessary to count it all joy when we encounter our trial, it is because we have not asked God for it, or we have asked and we have not met one of the conditions. Every time we encounter a trial and we ask for wisdom, guess what God gives? God says, "This is a promise. You can take it absolutely to the bank. You can absolutely build your confidence upon it. I will give you wisdom!" What a promise!

Someone protests, "But I have asked for wisdom to count it all joy in the midst of my trial and it is not happening!" Verses 6-11 reveal two conditions that we must meet if we are going to receive wisdom from God. First, we need a believing heart, and second, we need a humble attitude.

Let's look at Verse 6 as we talk about a believing heart,

⁶ But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind.

When we ask God for wisdom, we must set aside cynicism, and skepticism. We must avoid the attitude that says, "God, you placed me in this painful place. You should not have placed me here. I do not deserve this distress, but God, since I am here, give me wisdom." That is a doubting heart. Friend, when we ask for wisdom from God, let us ask in faith, believing that God knows what He is doing and trusting in Him for it. Let us ask, in faith, believing that God is going to

provide us with the resources we need to endure and persevere through it. Let us ask in faith that we are going to receive joy as a result of it. If we doubt God's goodness in our trials then we will become like a wave of the sea, James says, tossed to and fro by every wave.

The term "doubting" is often misunderstood to mean that a person who doubts is a person who says, "God, will you give me wisdom, but I am not exactly, absolutely, 100% confident that you are going to give it." That is not what James is describing as a doubting person; someone who is a little unsure that God may or may not give it. A doubting person, according to James, is the kind of person who doubts whether or not God is worthy. He asks, "Give me wisdom," but at the same time he is doubting whether God is worthy of one's total commitment of one's life. He is wavering between two opinions: I want God in my life, but I also want to live my own life and I want what the world is offering to me as well. He is doubting! A doubting person is one who is living life with divided loyalties. They are uncertain about the wisdom of following God wholeheartedly and unreservedly. James, when he says that we have to ask without doubting, is saying that we have to ask with a full commitment to the God who loves you, and you have to ask with a whole heart of love towards Him.

James says, in Verse 7,

⁷ For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord...

Some believers remain in a state of confusion and utter darkness all through their trials, because when they ask God for wisdom, they ask with a debating heart, with a demanding heart, and with even a divided heart. Such a one must not suppose that he will receive wisdom from God. That sounds rather harsh, but what James 1:7 is giving us is a description, and not an indictment so much, of what happens; that when we ask we want to purify our hearts so that we come to God in full assurance of faith, believing that, indeed, He is worthy of our worship and that He is worthy of our commitment and He is worthy to make our bodies a living sacrifice to Him, and that that is a reasonable act of worship.

Listen to the final description of the one who prays to God in their trials, but who prays with doubts and a divided heart, in Verse 8,

⁸ ...(the doubter) is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.

Some dictionaries define double minded using the terms, "having different minds at different times," "unsettled," "undetermined." The double-minded man is an undecided person who vacillates between two opinions. It is the person who seeks to serve two masters.

I used to think that a double-minded man was a person who, insincerely, pretended to be "Christian" when they were around other Christians, but then showed their true colors when they were around unbelievers. I thought a double-minded man was one who cared more about his or her reputation than their character and so was willing to spend much of their life "faking" spirituality. Now, such a person does exist, but that is not the description of a double-minded man. This is the description of a "hypocrite" which Jesus condemns in the Gospels.

We are right to repent of that kind of heart attitude, that fake spirituality, but this is not what James means when he talks about a "double-minded" man. In essence, a double-minded person so lacks conviction in their belief in God that they often change loyalties, depending upon whom they are with, what they are experiencing, or even what they have eaten that day! Every wind seems to shift them to a different loyalty. One the one hand, this wave comes along and they say, "Okay, it makes sense to follow God. I am going to follow God." The next wave comes along and, "It makes sense to live out my life in this other direction." They are just unstable.

A double-minded man is sincere in his desire to follow Christ. Such a person really is sincere and they mean it when they say, "I am going to obey God!" They believe that for themselves, but they are also sincere when they choose passing pleasures and friendships with the world; they have two minds working inside one head. They listen with one ear to God and with the other ear to the world around them, and they are so confused in life! I feel very sorry for double-minded people. I know that they cannot be very happy and yet the church is full of them.

A double-minded man comes to church and hears the Word of God taught and says to himself, "I need to change my life. I need to make different decisions about my priorities, my habits, my pleasures, and my relationships." When they say that, they mean it. They are really sincere when they say that and they leave church saying, "I am going to do this,"

but they also have another mind that controls their hearts and their behavior. Their other mind wields such influence as to blind them to the truth that was so very recently clear to them, and they now believe, later, as they leave church, that disobedience to God makes sense and that somehow will bring them joy and happiness. They know that they are going against what God has told them to do, but they somehow believe that this is going to work out for them and that is the best course.

If you were to give sound biblical counsel to a double-minded person, they often will receive it with joy and with sincerity. At the moment they are talking to you they truly believe the wisdom of God's Word and they sincerely intend to follow God's commands, but something happens between that conversation and their decisions and their ultimate behavior; they have another mind that also controls their hearts and they have other influences which toss them to another loyalty. They believe that their own understanding will place them on a path to happiness.

What happens when a double-minded man leaves the church service? The little bit of Truth that they carry in a cup, when they stumble over a crack in the parking lot, out it pours and they believe something else about their life to be true. James says that such a person is double-minded and unstable in all his ways. Does this describe your life? If it does, how long will you waiver between two opinions? Has that double-minded life brought you joy and happiness? Has it readied you for trial? Isn't it time to sink some roots and drive the stakes deep into your commitment to God and say, "I am going to choose God! I know that He is the source of life and that He is the source of joy."

The double-minded man is completely unprepared for hard trials! The first condition to receive wisdom is that we must put away the unbelief that divides our minds, that divides our allegiance, and that divides our hearts. We must believe that God is true, that He is the source of life and that if we follow Him we will find blessing.

The second condition to receive wisdom from God is that we must humble ourselves before Him. James addresses two different groups of people in the church: the rich and the poor, in Verse 9 through 11, and he tells both groups, the rich and the poor, who are in the church to humble themselves before God, but that application takes a different spin for each group. James first addresses the poor within the church in Verse 9,

⁹ Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation...

The "lowly brother" is the brother of humble circumstances and the brother who is struggling in life financially and in other ways.

Verses 9 and 10 are a bit of a riddle. When we first read them we say, "Well, what is James saying?" The key to understanding them is the key to understanding every difficult text and that is to look at the context. Remember, James is talking about how to gain God's wisdom in the midst of hard trials. He says to ask for wisdom in faith and then respond to the trials with humility before God. We must not respond to the trials with pride, but we must respond with humility.

The poor Christian going through painful trials can be as sinfully proud as the rich person going through painful trials. The poor person going through painful trials can take on a "Woe is me!" heart-attitude. They can proudly think, "I did not have much to begin with, and now what little I had is taken away. Life is not fair!" God says, "Do not degrade yourself with self-pity, instead think about your future exaltation. If you are poor in this world, and what little you have had to enjoy in this life is taken away through a painful trial, think about the joy and the exaltation that is yours with Jesus Christ. Consider the true nature of your spiritual treasure, of your true condition, before God. Boast that you have a Father in Heaven who cares for you. Boast that one day God will lift you up with His Son Jesus and exalt you into a position which you do not deserve. Boast that your pain and your suffering will one day completely come to an end and there will be no more tears and no more sorrow. Then put your hope and joy in your spiritual treasure!" That is what James is saying to the poor person going through trials – boast in your exaltation.

Now notice what God says to the rich in Verse 10,

¹⁰ ...and the rich in his humiliation, because like a flower of the grass he will pass away.

The rich Christian going through trials can be as sinfully proud in response to trials as the poor person can. The rich person going through trials can fixate upon all the joy that they had in this world as a result of their riches and then it was lost or spoiled through difficult trial. The rich can proudly think, "I am important and wealthy. I should be able to

have an answer to the problems of my life.” The rich can proudly think, “God, why do I have to go through this painful trial?” God says, “You know, rich Christian, instead of becoming preoccupied with all you have lost, boast that this trial has helped you to see that your hope and your joy in life doesn’t come from things that can be taken away or things that can pass away. Boast in your humiliation. Boast in the joy that the things of this world that used to provide you with joy have now helped you to see that your real riches and real wealth are found in God alone and in His Grace.” The rich can rejoice that his troubles have made him realize how utterly powerless wealth is to answer the real problems of life. Trials help us to realize that true riches are found only in Christ Jesus.

Both the poor and the rich are called to humble themselves and rejoice in God’s Kingdom and in God’s provision! The person who has nothing in this world and the person who has everything in this world rejoice in the same thing! Whether rich or poor, trials level the playing field, don’t they? They level the ground. In the midst of trials, the rich man and the poor person are in the same difficulty and both of them must lean upon God to provide, and they must put their hope in God and in His promise of Heaven and of His Kingdom. That is the point of Verses 9-10. James explains, in Verse 11,

¹¹ For the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the grass; its flower falls, and its beauty perishes. So also will the rich man fade away in the midst of his pursuits.

Friend, if all we have is a great income, a nice retirement account, and a huge amount of money in the bank, then we are unprepared for the place our lives are heading. Our lives are moving in a direction and all of that we have relied upon to keep us safe in the midst of the turmoil and the pains and the difficulties of life, all of that will leave us completely unprepared for the destination we are ultimately moving towards. That is the reason why the rich man can rejoice in his humiliation, because it is better to learn that back here than to learn it here on this day when we face God.

Whether rich or poor, trials level the ground for everyone. In death, none of the things of this world matter. Jesus tells us this wonderful story, in Luke 12:15-21, to warn us away from trusting in riches. He told of a rich man who was growing in wealth and wondered what he should do with all of his resources that were accumulating. He said, “I know what I will do, I will build bigger and more barns so there I can store all of my resources and all of my crops. Then I will be able arrive at a day when I will say, ‘Self, take it easy. Enjoy life. Eat, drink, and be merry.’”

²⁰ *“But God said to him, ‘Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’* ²¹ *So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God.”*

What are you trusting in to ready you for the day you meet God? What are you trusting in? That is the question the Gospel asks us.

God, in love, sent His Son Jesus to die upon a cross to pay for your sin and for my sin and to ready us for that day. Nothing else will ready us to meet God, save the Lord Jesus, and God calls us to repent of our sin and to repent of our love for this world and to believe in His Son Jesus and to have Jesus as our own personal Savior. Have you ever trusted in Jesus as your own Savior? Jesus alone paid for your sin. Jesus alone can take your sin away so that when you meet God you will not be held to account for your sin. Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be rescued from your sins on that day. What are you trusting in?

James wraps up this discussion of trials in Verse 12.

¹² Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him.

No trial defines the course or our lives and no trial defines the direction of our lives, but our faith in God through our trials will. George Whitefield said, “All trials are for two purposes, that we may be better acquainted with our own wicked hearts and that we may be better acquainted with our own beloved Savior.”

That is God’s wonderful purpose. There is nothing that is more valuable to the maturing of our faith than our right response to trials. Are we responding rightly to them?

My brother gathered his son's and wife around him at the news of the sudden and tragic home going of sweet Rose Marie. He looked them in the eye and he said, "This is the moment that we decide that our faith is real." Yes it was, and you and I will have those moments, too.

What will we decide when we meet trials of various kinds? We choose a determined pursuit – the pursuit of joy in God; a divine perspective that God is sovereign and that He is wise and that He loves us; a disciple's passion – the passion to grow in faith, to have a pure faith, recognizing that is where our true riches lie; and a discernment promise – the promise from God that He will give us wisdom when we ask for it in faith.

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James 1:5-12



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CHURCH

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