

**Autopsy of a Dead Church
Examining the Body at Sardis
Revelation 3:1 – 6 continued**

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As we reviewed last week, Jesus is addressing a letter to a Church who is supposed to be part of His Body, but not quite living that way. This is supposed to be a living group of believers, not only physically but also spiritually. Jesus, though, sees the heart, not the external stuff which we ooh and aaaw over.

1 Samuel 16:7

But the LORD said to Samuel, "Don't be impressed by his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. God does not view things the way men do. People look on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart."(NET)

The problem with looking with only our eyes began in Genesis 3 and we have been warned about it in the scriptures over and over again.

Genesis 3:6

"When the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was desirable to make one wise, she took from its fruit and ate; and she gave also to her husband with her, and he ate." (NASB95)

1 John 2:16

"For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world." (NASB95)

In order to stop relying on what we see, we have to rely on the Holy Spirit for guidance so we can see as Jesus sees. That means walking in the Spirit, which was not possible for many of those in Sardis since they did not know Jesus.

Galatians 5:16–26

"But I say, live by the Spirit and you will not carry out the desires of the flesh. For the flesh has desires that are opposed to the Spirit, and the Spirit has desires that are opposed to the flesh, for these are in opposition to each other, so that you cannot do what you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. Now the works of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity, depravity, idolatry, sorcery, hostilities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfish rivalries, dissensions, factions, envying, murder, drunkenness, carousing, and similar things. I am warning you, as I had warned you before: Those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God! But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Now those who belong to Christ have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also behave in accordance with the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, being jealous of one another." (NET)

Looking again at Revelation 3:1, we clearly see that that is a problem for the folks at Sardis, you see, they are dead, and when someone is dead, you have to see what it is that caused the death. That is called an autopsy, and we began to examine the body last week. Unlike Thyatira, which had some things to fix, how do you fix dead?

Revelation 3:1

To the angel of the church in Sardis write: He who has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars, says this: "I know your deeds, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead." (NASB95)

When Jesus was ministering during His last week here on earth, He came across a fig tree. The fig tree is a picture of the nation of Israel and He found in the physical fig tree, a problem that pointed back to the spiritual problem that existed in Israel at the present moment.

Mark 11:12–14

"On the next day, when they had left Bethany, He became hungry. Seeing at a distance a fig tree in leaf, He went to see if perhaps He would find anything on it; and when He came to it, He found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs. He said to it, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again!" And His disciples were listening." (NASB95)

The way that a fig tree normally would look like in the early spring, it would have the leaves and fruit showing at the same time. But the fig tree Jesus saw, again a picture of Israel, only had leaves, no fruit. This is a sign of there being something very wrong with the fig tree. The image then, there is something very wrong spiritually with Israel, no fruit = dead.

Mark 11:20–22

"As they were passing by in the morning, they saw the fig tree withered from the roots up. Being reminded, Peter said to Him, "Rabbi, look, the fig tree which You cursed has withered." And Jesus answered saying to them, "Have faith in God." (NASB95)

The church in Sardis is in the same state as the nation of Israel, dead works, dead faith, dead

Apparently untroubled by heresy and free from outside opposition, it had so completely come to terms with its pagan environment that although it retained the outward appearance of life, it was spiritually dead. (Mounce 1997, 92)

The body though lingered, it was still around all throughout the time of the reformation and up to today. The hyperbole used by Jesus here in Revelation is characteristic of the way too many churches operate today. Remember the digs we looked at showing the synagogue was part of the city and in fact integrated into the gymnasium complex. The church, which many times consisted of those who used to be Jews, or perhaps still were but did not bother to tell anyone about their encounter with Jesus, took a lesson from the synagogue there in town.

Of further interest to us is the fact that the synagogue was very close to the gymnasium, and in a pit nearby which was probably a cooking area have been found remains of nonkosher animals, horse and pig. This would mean either that the ruins did not belong to the synagogue or that the dietary prohibitions obtaining among the Jews were not so strictly observed by the Jews in Sardis. (Ford 2008, 411-412)

Sardis was not Christian enough to entertain a heresy or be led astray by a false system; it had lost all vigour and life, and had sunk back to the ordinary pagan level of conduct, which from the Christian point of view was essentially vicious and immoral in principle. (Ramsay 1904, 383)

The reputation of this church was good, but that, in the Lord's eyes, was all.

Just as the city, by this time, was relying on their reputation for being a rich town, even though it had been a long time since riches were actually found nearby as in the past, the city though is in decline, they have a name, a reputation, but it is going south. In this letter, the Greek word for name comes up four times.

"The name," the word which would be used by a Jew, is Hashem. They would use this rather than saying the name of YAHWEH. The name by which the church would be called. The reputation they should have is to be Jesus followers and to be a living expression of agape to the community around them. Because of the failure, the death, the name will be examined a bit more as we look at the corpse.

Revelation 3:2

“Wake up, and strengthen the things that remain, which were about to die; for I have not found your deeds completed in the sight of My God.” (NASB95)

Jesus will outline five things the church at Sardis must do. Five commands. We see that the Greek which has been translated wake up, is probably more appropriate to be translated as be watchful, and the tense of the verb which makes this imperative, also makes this a continuing action. You don't just be watchful, or wake up once, the we have to be waiting and watching continually

Micah 7:7

“But as for me, I will watch expectantly for the LORD; I will wait for the God of my salvation. My God will hear me.” (NASB95)

Although Sardis could be pronounced dead, it still had the possibility of restoration to life. (Mounce 1997, 94)

In other words, they have to change their ways and “prove” that they are vigilant. (Osborne 2002, 174)

The term that John uses, is one that not only points to the need for immediate action, but it is a term used frequently in the scriptures to point to the need for us to be watching for the soon return of our Savior.

To be distinguished are (1) passages with a direct eschatological reference: to be prepared for the coming of Jesus Christ, the Son of Man, watchfulness is necessary (Matt 24:42; 25:13; Mark 13:35, 37; 1 Thess 5:6; Rev 3:2f.; 16:15); (2) passages without a direct eschatological reference: the danger of negative developments in the Church, the snares of Satan, among other things, demand watchfulness (Acts 20:31; 1 Cor 16:13; Col 4:2; 1 Pet 5:8); (3) passages in which normal vigilance is a metaphor for being ready for the coming of the Son of Man (Matt 24:43; Mark 13:34; cf. also the metaphorical sense in Luke 12:36–38). (Balz and Schneider 1990-, 265)

This is not a requirement to pay attention to their Christian walk, that is obvious from the context, but it is to be aware of what is going on around them and be able to distinguish the times in which we live.

Unfortunately, one of the hallmarks of many churches today is to stay away from prophecy and not to say anything about the soon return of Jesus simply because it is not something, they are even looking for. Many today are anti-rapture and anti-prophecy and do not even come close to teaching anything about last things.

The great leaders of the Reformation were amillennial in their eschatology. They were content to follow the Roman Church's teaching, which in turn followed Augustine. (Ryrie 1999, 520)

The natural result of an amillennial (no millennium) and allegorical perspective is to cease looking for the soon return of Jesus, this is precisely what had happened during the Middle Ages with the teaching of Augustine as he moved away from premillennial thought to amillennial.

The major Reformers, like Luther and Calvin, were amillennial. As they were largely preoccupied with soteriological matters. (Geisler 2005, 572)

1 Thessalonians 5:4–10

“But you, brethren, are not in darkness, that the day would overtake you like a thief; for you are all sons of light and sons of day. We are not of night nor of darkness; so then let us not sleep as others do, but let us be alert and sober. For those who sleep do their sleeping at night, and those who get drunk get drunk at night. But since we are of the day, let us be sober, having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and as a helmet, the hope of salvation. For God has not destined us for wrath, but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep, we will live together with Him.” (NASB95)

...an effort must be made to restore vigilance, and to maintain it when restored. (Swete 1906, 48)

The first of our five commands; five imperative “to do’s” from Jesus

1. Be watchful – and don’t stop watching for Jesus

“...strengthen the things that remain”

“...whatever remained at Sardis out of the wreck of Christian life, whether persons or institutions: all must be preserved and set on a firmer basis—a principle of reconstruction worthy of the notice of Christian teachers who are called to deal with corrupt or decaying branches of the Church.” (Swete 1906, 48)

The little bit of faith that survived needs to be restored. They need to “start to strengthen.” “Their weakness in this area was destroying their church. The verb itself means to “support” or “stand something on its feet” and has the idea of establishing a thing by making it strong.” (Osborne 2002, 175)

It may be accomplished, besought, or commanded. It presupposes that the Christians who are to be strengthened are under assault and in danger of becoming uncertain or slothful in their faith or walk. (Harder 1964-, 656)

Wake up is also a reference to the history of Sardis. By this time in history, Sardis had been conquered, twice. In both cases, as we reviewed earlier, by a small group sneaking up and getting in while everyone slept. They operated just like a thief would.

The mention of “remaining things” (τὰ λοιπὰ) implies that the readers have begun a life of faithful service, but something has happened that impeded further progress. There are still some things left for these Christians to do to show the genuineness of their faith and the legitimacy of the Christian “name” that they profess. (Beale 1999, 273)

Those things which remained, the remaining ones are about to die. There is something that started back at the beginning that needs to be picked up again. There are a few things that still are there and Jesus says to get them going, there is so much that is wrong, start with little things that still are there and are ok and expand as those become stronger.

Sometimes, there is so much wrong, we have to find what is right and major on that.

The fact that even the little things are about to die shows the need for speed to correct even those. Notice Jesus does not say repent just yet, that will take place naturally as the church begins to make the corrections that are needed, but He will get to that natural point.

As we major on what is right, we find other things that need to be corrected and we move to those. Otherwise the task is incredibly overwhelming.

There are five imperatives at work here, the second:

1. Be watchful – and don’t stop watching for Jesus
2. Start to strengthen, act fast

Now we get to the reason why the first two imperatives have been presented, “...I have not found your deeds completed in the sight of My God.”

If I got a message direct from Jesus that said that, I would want to know what the problems are ASAP so I can fix it, I would also pay attention to just how Jesus points this out. Remember, this church has a reputation that they have very carefully put out there via all of their press releases and postings on Facebook and other social media. The church has this reputation, but not the name of Jesus. Jesus goes so far as to say that He has “not found completed your deeds completed in the sight of My God.”

He does not say “your God,” how could He since they are no longer worshipping that God, they have moved on to some other god. When Jesus has to point out that it is His God, you have a serious problem.

The city of Sardis used to be completely on the top of a mountain and impregnable, but there was this problem with erosion that kept taking bits and pieces of the city away forcing it to relocate. Now there were things that could have been done to stop that or slow it down, but nothing was done. Everyone remembered the glory of the old city and pointed back to that. The church in Sardis was doing the same and pointing back to the good old days while seeing their faith being eroded away. There was an erosion taking place in the church, something was destroying what had originally been built.

Those who were leaders in the church at Sardis should take action. There are actions that could have taken place in order to stop the gradual erosion of faith. Fences could have been put up to keep the world out, warning signs could have been set, walls built to keep out the enemy and maintain the fortress, but it was not completed in the sight per Jesus. They were no longer following the God of Jesus, which is why He makes reference to them using the term “of My God.”

We find out that the death is impending, but not total yet, it is still possible for life to return, not everything is eroded just yet. A shock is needed, just as a shock would be needed to the heart to restart someone who has had their heart stop, this church needs a shock of some type to restore life. For many churches today, a shock will be required to return the church back to who it truly belongs to and that shock is alluded to in verse 3. The shock, that will turn many back to Jesus will be the sudden discovery that what He said is true, every word. He is coming back, very soon. There is a shock that many in the “church” today will receive when that suddenly takes place.

Doctor Ryrie provides some background about the slippage we see today. “Early Christians expected the speedy return of Christ to establish an actual kingdom on this earth, over which He would reign for a thousand years. When Christ did not return, the church’s concept of the Millennium changed to a nonliteral one (amillennialism). Augustine (354–430) taught people to look for the Millennium, wholly spiritual in character, in the Christian dispensation. During the Middle Ages and the Reformation periods, the idea of an actual kingdom was not taught by mainline groups, some of whom considered such teaching heretical. In the seventeenth century a new millennial teaching, postmillennialism, appeared, affirming that before the return of Christ there would be a worldwide experience of peace and righteousness due to the efforts of the church.” (Ryrie, What You Should Know About the Rapture, Current Christian Issues 1981, 10)

The church at Sardis is a picture of the church of the reformation. It is also a picture of most main line denominations today; the lights are on but the deeds, the necessary work, has not been completed. They reject the pre-tribulation rapture of the church and in many cases, also reject the idea of an actual 1000 year rule of Jesus Christ here on planet earth.

Amillennialism (or No-Millennium) is that system of theology “which rejects the idea of any period of a thousand years either before or after the return of Christ.” (Fruchtenbaum 1994, 5)

There is no expectation of the soon return of our Lord and Savior at all with this group, they are not even looking for Him. Churches that actually teach prophecy are becoming fewer and fewer every year. A church which is following the model of Sardis, no longer deals with this at all.

Revelation 3:3

“So remember what you have received and heard; and keep it, and repent. Therefore if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come to you.” (NASB95)

”Remember” is the command and the solution.

The basis for renewal is to bear constantly in mind the manner in which they had received and heard the gospel. (Thomas 1992, 251)

The word for remember in the Greek is the same word that we obtain the English word mnemonic from. We use mnemonic devices many times to help us remember things, for example, Roy G Biv or Gel ND. Roy G Biv would help us to remember the colors of the visible spectrum of light, or the colors of the rainbow. Gel ND is not a town in North Dakota but helps us remember the books of the Torah.

The command from Jesus to the church of Sardis or any church that finds itself in this situation is to first of all, remember. The next step is then to keep on remembering and not stop remembering. To constantly and consistently keep in mind what had been received and heard. They are being pointed back to the point in time that they first received the Lord based on what they heard. They have to be taken back to the very beginning.

Members of the church had received the faith as an abiding trust at the moment faith came by hearing. Christ calls on them to remember what they had been taught. (Mounce 1997, 94)

1 Thessalonians 1:5–6

“for our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. You also became imitators of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit,” (NASB95)

One day in the past, they heard and received the gospel. They took action and believed. Sanctification began to take place. There was a change. The church at Sardis needs to go back to that very first day, the day of salvation, the day of new beginnings and begin again. The whole foundation is suspect currently.

Whatever the church needs to do in terms of a mnemonic device in order to remember, needs to happen and become a living part of the church once again. “In order to stimulate the Church in her work of self-recovery, her thoughts are sent back to the first days...” (Swete 1906, 49)

Back to our five imperatives, also known as commands, that are at work here:

1. Be watchful – and don't stop watching for Jesus
2. Start to strengthen, act fast
3. Remember and continue to do so, from the beginning

This leads us to the next imperative or command that Jesus for this church. As you remember what it is you heard, you will also recall and remember what it all means - keep it. The word is also known as obedience, and it is not a one time keeping, but you keep keeping. This is a continual action.

The verb itself means not only to “keep” or “guard” but to “obey.” Spiritual vigilance is seen in perseverance and obedient living of these spiritual realities. (Osborne 2002, 176)

Looking at where we are with the five imperatives now:

1. Be watchful – and don't stop watching for Jesus
2. Start to strengthen, act fast
3. Remember and continue to do so, from the beginning
4. Keep / Obey and keep doing so

The last command, the last imperative to this church sums up all the previous four, it is a simple word that most do not want to deal with – repent. It is the one single word that I have used in counseling believers who have strayed away from the truth and it is the one thing that most of them will not do. Sin is more attractive to them than obedience. It is not something hard to do, other than stop doing what it is you are repenting of.

1 John 1:9

“If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” (NASB95)

Why the urgency for this? “The urgent call for conversion in the epistles of Rev. (2:5, 16; 3:3, 19) is based on the prospect of the imminent end. This summons carries a threat to the Christian churches, calling them back to reflection, to turning from sin and weakness, to the renewal of their former state of life. The emphasis here is an enduring to the end. To convert is not just to give one’s life a new direction but in practice to reorientate oneself continually to the goal by the radical setting aside of evil.” (Behm and Wurthwein 1964-, 1004)

At the beginning of verse 3, we are provided, based on the situation in verse 2, the how. Exactly how should the church respond? Simple – repent.

In the Greek, the word which appears at the beginning of verse 3 shows up again, this gives us a hint that now Jesus is moving to the why side of the equation. In other words, how do we resolve the situation of verse 2, remember, obey and repent.

So here are the five imperatives, the five commands that Jesus is giving the church at Sardis and to those churches throughout the ages that are in the same condition:

1. Be watchful – and don’t stop watching for Jesus
2. Start to strengthen, act fast
3. Remember and continue to do so, from the beginning
4. Keep / Obey and keep doing so
5. Repent

I get it, but why should this be done?

Looking again at verse 3, it is intensely personal. Jesus is talking not just to the church as a whole, but to each individual believer in the Sardis church. Notice the multiple references to “you.”

Revelation 3:3

“So remember what you have received and heard; and keep it, and repent. Therefore if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come to you.” (NASB95)

Jesus wants us and the church at Sardis to know, that faith as well as having one’s name written in the book is not a corporate thing but is an individual thing. Just because we go to church does not make us saved, but it is our individual decision. It all comes down to each one of us, the decisions we make and how we live out our faith and obedience to our Savior and Lord. I cannot make a decision for you, only for me. Our relationship with Jesus is individual; yet we also pick up that there is a corporate aspect to this as well.

Why no revival – it is due to individual problems as well as corporate problems. Jesus outlines the requirements, the steps necessary for revival. Revival is simply a return of His people back to Him.

Steps for Revival

1. Be watchful – and don’t stop watching for Jesus
2. Start to strengthen, act fast and act now
3. Remember and keep doing so, from the beginning
4. Keep / Obey and keep doing so
5. Repent

Do you and I actually want revival? Jesus has just outlined all of the steps necessary and here in verse 3. He says it is all about you and me – individually. Why no revival? It is not their fault? It is mine.

Interesting, Jesus is calling for revival in Sardis. He is also calling for revival here and now.

Do we believe Him? Do you want revival? Let’s get started and wake up, remember, and repent.

Hebrews 9:27–28

“And inasmuch as it is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment, so Christ also, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time for salvation without reference to sin, to those who eagerly await Him.” (NASB95)

So, what is in the way of revival here in Jupiter? Is it the same as with Sardis? Do we have a problem, confessing the name of Jesus Christ to others? Are we relying on our old reputation? What if we do nothing? Jesus knows about us so, He made us, He knows we tend to be lazy and laid back in our faith. Jesus discusses what happens if we do not prove to be watchful, we wind up being like the 5 maids without oil.

Matthew 25:1–13

“Then the kingdom of heaven will be comparable to ten virgins, who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were prudent. For when the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them, but the prudent took oil in flasks along with their lamps. Now while the bridegroom was delaying, they all got drowsy and began to sleep. But at midnight there was a shout, ‘Behold, the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.’ Then all those virgins rose and trimmed their lamps. The foolish said to the prudent, ‘Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.’ But the prudent answered, ‘No, there will not be enough for us and you too; go instead to the dealers and buy some for yourselves.’ And while they were going away to make the purchase, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the wedding feast; and the door was shut. Later the other virgins also came, saying, ‘Lord, lord, open up for us.’ But he answered, ‘Truly I say to you, I do not know you.’ Be on the alert then, for you do not know the day nor the hour.” (NASB95)

Paul discussed the condition that existed in Sardis, the lack of watchfulness, the deadness. This is a common theme that arose during the early middle ages with Augustine and then further pushed by the western church as well as the churches coming out of the reformation. The common theme in many churches today, amillennial and not looking for Jesus at all.

Paul’s discussion in 1 Thessalonians 5:2–6 “For you yourselves know full well that the day of the Lord will come just like a thief in the night. While they are saying, “Peace and safety!” then destruction will come upon them suddenly like labor pains upon a woman with child, and they will not escape. But you, brethren, are not in darkness, that the day would overtake you like a thief; for you are all sons of light and sons of day. We are not of night nor of darkness; so then let us not sleep as others do, but let us be alert and sober.” (NASB95)

Here Jesus mercifully seeks to help the church in Sardis understand that his coming against them will be worse than anything they might avoid by refusing to confess him before men. He will come “like a thief” (3:3)—that is, unexpected and uninvited. He will come, and they “will not know at what hour” (3:3). There will be no anticipating and preparing for the coming of Jesus; so immediate and constant vigilance is required. They must act now! Because if they do not, Jesus says, “I will come against you” (3:3). (Hamilton Jr. 2012, 107)

Apparently Jesus did not anticipate that the church would accept His terms of restoration. Their present evil state was almost hopeless, as indicated in vv. 1 and 2, so it was highly improbable that they would turn back at this point. (Thomas 1992, 252)

From a historical perspective, we know the reformation church started off much better than it ended. One of the end results was the development of the state church, a major reason for the separation of church and state in the US.

If the church does not get going and become watchful, judgement falls, in the near term, without notice, in the long term, and happens without notice. They do not even know what signs to be looking for much less heed a specific warning. As with many prophecies, there is a near term danger as well as long term. They must return to a constant state of spiritual vigilance if revival is ever to come. “If they should fail to

maintain watchfulness, the same fate will happen to them as happened to Sardis with both Cyrus and Antiochus III: a “thief” will come and destroy them.” (Osborne 2002, 177)

2 Peter 3:10

“But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, in which the heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat, and the earth and its works will be burned up.” (NASB95)

We learn here, as will be further reinforced by the letter to the church at Laodicea, that there are those who believe they have a relationship with Jesus. They believe they are Christians more from outward appearances than anything else; but they lack the primary ingredients. We are not believers because we belong to a specific church, or have done some specific thing such as baptism or take some sacrament. We are Christians because of our individual faith in the completed work of Jesus Christ on the cross.

Those who are clueless, like this church, Jesus says you will be overtaken like a thief. “There is no way they can be ready unless they return to a state of vigilance. The next phrase, ποίαν ὥραν (poian hōran, what time), shows that the coming will be sudden and unexpected, and it will be the harbinger of the final judgment.” (Osborne 2002, 178)

A church with spiritual life will not be surprised when Jesus returns for the Church. But a dead church will be caught unaware because they will not be expecting Him. And as unbelievers, they shall be left behind. (Fruchtenbaum, The Footsteps of the Messiah: A Study of the Sequence of Prophetic Events, Rev. ed. 2003, 62)

I find it interesting that in the first two churches which will continue on into the end of the age and the tribulation; churches which have promises of deliverance for some in the church, but not all, there is a common theme, the entire church is not where they should be. There is a drift taking place, a drift that has a beginning in the middle ages and which continues onto today. A drift that has its roots in religion, not in Jesus.

Jesus does not say “get your doctrine right.” He does not say make sure that you have a clear understanding of the terms and know what the difference is between grace and works. He does not say that anything is required, other than waking up and repenting. He does say, that those who do not get it, who do not wake up, who do not repent, will not be looking for His return and when He does return, it will be an unexpected event for them.

Revelation 16:15

“Behold, I am coming like a thief. Blessed is the one who stays awake and keeps his clothes, so that he will not walk about naked and men will not see his shame.” (NASB95)

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