



**BELIEVERS CHAPEL**

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The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

The Theology of the Reformers

TRANSCRIPT

“The Cause, or Ground of Justification by Grace”

[Prayer] Father, we are grateful to Thee for the privilege and opportunity of studying again the doctrine of justification by grace. And we pray that Thou wilt give us guidance and understanding as we seek to follow that which the New Testament has to say concerning this important teaching.

We pray that Thou will be each one of us, enable us to think clearly, to understand truly the grace that Thou hast manifested to us in the Lord Jesus Christ. We pray in his name. Amen.

[Message] Let me again try to make plain to you what I've been trying to do. We have sought to show the relevance and legal character of justification by grace. We have sought to show that it is relevant because it is the central doctrine of the Christian religion, so far as salvation is concerned. Everything else is foundational in the sense that the incarnation, the sufferings of Christ, the death, the burial, the resurrection, are all laying the foundation, they are the foundations of the doctrine of salvation, or justification by grace. So that the things that have to do with the ministry of the Lord Jesus are necessary for this work of justification by grace.

We also sought to point out in our first study that the doctrine of justification by grace overthrows the legalism of Pelagianism and Arminianism because it lays stress upon

the fact that our standing before God is not accomplished by any works of our own, even by an act of our free will, but is ultimately traceable to the work of God in the work of the Holy Spirit in the bringing of the just to faith in Christ on the ground of the atoning work of the Lord Jesus.

We sought to establish the legal character of justification, pointing out that justification does not mean to be made righteous, but rather, to be declared righteous. As Luther said, *simil justus et peccator*: we are at the same time just and sinners. The fact that we are justified does not change the fact that we are still sinners. We are justified, but the work of sanctification is necessary to bring us in our state to our status before God.

Now we have turned in our last study to imputation. And I sought to simply point out what the word meant, first of all. Imputation is one of the great theological words. I think it’s fair to say that if we do not understand what imputation means, we do not really have a good understanding of the soteriology or the doctrine of salvation of the Bible.

Imputation enables us to understand how we may have the righteousness of God, and how we may have righteously. What does impute mean? Well, I looked at I think a few passages in Romans where the Greek word *logizomai* is translated in different ways. It is translated, for example, in Romans chapter 2 verse 3, “to think.” It is translated in Romans chapter 4 verse 3 and Romans chapter 9 verse 8, “to count.” It is translated “to impute” in chapter 4 verse 6. And it is translated “to reckon” in chapter 6 verse 11. So, to impute, or imputation means “to regard as” or “to reckon as.” And to spell it out in theology, it means to make an effectual grant of righteousness to another person on the ground of Christ’s representative work. So, imputation is that act by which God reckons to us the righteousness of God through the mediatory work of the Lord Jesus Christ.

I think I read also John Owen’s statement on imputation, in which he says, “Positively, this imputation is an act of God, *ex mera gratia* (that is, of pure grace, is the meaning of that), of his mere love and grace whereby upon the consideration of the

mediation of Christ he makes an effectual grant and donation of a true, real and perfect righteousness, even that of Christ himself, unto all that do believe, and accounting it as theirs on his own gracious act, both absolves them from sin and granteth them right and title unto eternal life.” So imputation is to make an effectual grant of righteousness to another on the ground of Christ’s representative work.

Every person who has been saved has had imputed to him the righteousness of God on the basis of what Christ has accomplished on the cross as our representative. That’s imputation.

There are three great acts of imputation. First, there is the imputation of Adam’s sin to men. And then second, there is the imputation of the elect’s sin to Christ. Incidentally, I changed this a little from last time – if you want to change your notes, you can – that’s the second great act of imputation, the imputation of the elect’s sin to Christ. And the third great act of imputation is the imputation of righteousness to the elect. Now these three acts of imputation are the spelling out in some detail of just what we have said previously.

Now I want to turn again to Romans chapter 5 verse 12 through 21 and briefly review what we were talking about last time. Remember, the apostle says, in Romans chapter 5 and verse 12,

“For this cause, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death passed upon all men, because all sinned. (I’m going to read it in the New American Standard Bible; I had just cited that from the Authorized Version. This text reads,) Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned.”

Those opening words of chapter 5 verse 12, therefore or for this cause, more literally – incidentally, I think that rendering of the Authorized Version is more accurate than this – the therefore.

For this cause, or on account of this, the point is that since there is salvation by one man as the preceding context in Romans shows, there is a likeness between Adam and Christ. Salvation is through the one man; condemnation is through one man. In the case of the first Adam, sin, condemnation, and death have come to men because of the act for which he was responsible in the Garden of Eden.

And, righteousness, justification and life have to come to others by virtue of the activity of the last Adam on the cross at Calvary. So, the apostle says, there’s an analogy between these two: the first Adam and the last Adam. What the first Adam did was to plunge us into sin, condemnation and death. What the last Adam has done in the cross makes it possible for the elect to have righteousness and justification and life.

Now he says in verse 12, in the opening part of the verse, “Therefore just as through one man sin entered into the world.” That’s the origination of sin and death. That word, entering, is very significant, because says here that sin did not really originate in the Garden of Eden. Sin entered the human race in the Garden of Eden, but sin existed before the Garden of Eden.

The apostle doesn’t tell us a great deal about these matters concerning which we are very curious. He does, however, say, that it was in the Garden of Eden that sin made its entrance into the human race, through the temptation of Adam and Eve. So, sin and death originated then.

Then he speaks of the imputation of sin and death. He says, “And death through sin, and so death spread to all men.” So as a result of what Adam accomplished in the Garden of Eden, if accomplish is the right word, as a result of what he did in the Garden of Eden, death has passed through all men. In other words, from entrance into the human race in the Garden of Eden, there has now come the penetration of sin into every

human heart. And what Adam did in the Garden of Eden has made this whole world of which everyone of us is a part one vast cemetery.

It’s an amazing thing that Adam accomplished in the Garden of Eden. Talk about a negative work. That’s probably the greatest negative work that was every accomplished by anyone.

Now the apostle then comes to the point over which there has been a great deal of controversy. The last part of that verse which contains the foundation of the imputation of sin: for, or because, all sinned.

This has been a theological battleground, and remember in the last study, I sought very hastily – and this is the reason I felt bad about last week – I didn’t really give you an opportunity to think through some of these things. This is a controversial passage, and I think it would be important for us to understand some of the major attempts to explain what Paul meant when he said, “because all sinned.”

I think I mentioned Pelagianism, the contention of the Pelagianists was simply that when Paul says, death has spread to all men, because all sinned, what is meant by this is that everybody has committed personal sin. And since everybody has committed personal sin, death has therefore spread to all men. It has been the contention of the Pelagians and others like them that we are not responsible for any sin but the sin that we personally commit by an act of our free will.

The self-determined, contingent will, is their view, accounts for all of man’s sinning. When we say contingent, we mean accidental or conditional or happening by chance. So, the self-determined, contingent will accounts for all men’s sinning. So that everybody, in a sense, is a little Adam, and because everyone has a contingent will, he’s faced with a test and everyone has failed.

Now, think about this for a moment. I want to ask a number of questions. I want to ask, why does a contingent force always produce uniform effects? If it’s contingent, if it’s accidental, if it’s conditional, why does everybody fail? Now, the Pelagians have never

been able to explain why everyone fails. It was the contention of Pelagius himself that everybody failed because they have bad examples. Why do we have nothing but bad examples? What about Jesus Christ? He didn’t fail. But everybody else has failed.

You know, I don’t do this anymore, but there was a time when I used to play dice. We’d have a crap game over at the fraternity house, and I know it’s difficult for you to imagine this happening [laughter], but I assure you it did. It’s a long time ago, now. But if somebody brought out dice that simply began to come up sevens or elevens every time, we didn’t think of that as being a contingency. [Laughter] We realized after a little while those dice were loaded [more laughter]. And it’s the same thing with reference to the human race. If in test, everyone came up the same way, failure, then there’s a loading of the dice somewhere. Pelagianism cannot explain the universality of sin.

A second interpretation (skip over some, but this is more important), a second attempt to explain what Paul means when he says, “Because all have sinned” is the attempt of realism. This was the view of Augustine, and it was the view of one of our outstanding theologians, William G.T. Shedd. This view admits that there’s a solidarity between the race and Adam, but it affirms that there was a seminal relationship between Adam and everybody in the human race; that is, Adam is our physical father, he is our natural head. If we all could trace our family trees back far enough, at the top would be Adam – of everyone of us. We’re all related; we’re all part of the family.

So it was the contention of Augustine that when Adam sinned in the garden, we sinned. That is, when he committed his act of sin, you and I being in him physically are regarded as having committed that sin ourselves, so that we are specifically guilty, because of the seminal – semen, remember, means “seed” – the seminal relationship between Adam and us.

Now there is one thing that view does say, and it says it correctly, and that is that the one act of Adam has affected his ancestors, or his followers. And it does say that sin and guilt are related to the act of the one man, which the apostle says here. But this view

does not satisfy because there is an analogy between Adam and his followers by this view that is not the same as the relationship between Christ and those that are in him, and the apostle seems to make an analogy between the two that is similar.

What I mean by that is simply this. That when we are to be reckoned to be righteous in Christ, we are reckoned to be righteous by the act of the Lord Jesus Christ, and we are not seminally in him when he accomplishes his redeeming work for us. But according to this view, we are seminally in Adam. And Paul draws an analogy between Adam and Christ, and the analogy does not hold. We are seminally in Adam when Adam falls, but we are not seminally in Christ and therefore are justified when he accomplishes his saving work. So the analogy breaks down. Our righteousness is not personally our righteousness.

Furthermore, how can we possibly act before we are? We are not even persons when Adam sins in the Garden of Eden. And so, the attempt to obviate the obvious criticism, we are held responsible for something that we didn’t do, is not satisfied by this interpretation because we then ask, how can we possibly act before we really existed? And why are we only held responsible for Adam’s first sin and not his later sins also, if the relationship is simply a seminal relationship? Why just the one act of the eating of the fruit of the tree? Why not all the rest? Whereas the Bible does not seem to say anything other than that we are responsible for that first act of Adam.

The 14<sup>th</sup> verse, however, is the denouement of this particular view. It is the Achilles heel of realism, because it says, “Nevertheless death reigned from Adam until Moses, even over those who had not sinned in the likeness of the offense of Adam.” But you see, according to realism, everybody does sin in the same way. But the apostle makes a distinction then between those who sin in the likeness of Adam’s offense and those who don’t sin in the likeness of Adam’s offense – evidently a reference to infants or those who don’t have all their senses (retarded). Now if it’s true that we are guilty when Adam sinned, then there is no distinction possible in types of sin. So, realism does not

enable us to understand what Paul means when he says, because all sinned. He doesn’t mean that we sinned because we were in Adam.

Now, by the way, we were in Adam, and he was our natural head, and we don’t deny that. We simply deny that that is the ground of our imputation of sin and condemnation and death.

Mediate imputation was another attempt to explain what Paul meant when he said, “because all sinned.” Mediate imputation is an attempt to relate our sin to the fact of imputation. Realism is not imputation at all, because realism says we sin when Adam sinned; our sin is not imputed to us, we committed the sin, and so you shouldn’t speak of imputation is you speak of realism.

The mediate imputationist, Joshua de Laplace was probably the originator of this particular theory in its present form. Assumes that there is a union between Adam and his descendants – it’s a representative union; he represents us – it assumes that there is an imputation of sin, but it differs in the manner of the reckoning of the sin to Adam’s posterity.

What mediate imputationists have said is that we inherit from Adam a corrupt nature, and this corrupt nature that we inherit from Adam – incidentally, we don’t deny that – but this corrupt nature that we inherit from Adam is the ground of the imputation of the guilt of sin. So that the mediate imputationist said, we have a corrupt nature from Adam, and because we have a corrupt nature from Adam, we are therefore guilty of Adam’s first sin. And the guilt of Adam’s first sin is dependent upon participation in Adam’s corrupt nature, which he has bestowed upon us.

Now if you’ll look at verse twelve here, Paul says, “And death spread to all men because all have sinned.” But now turn to verse 18, “So then as through one transgression there resulted condemnation to all men,” – notice the condemnation is linked to one transgression. Verse 19, “For as through the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners.” So you see that in the Pauline account here, the death that we



die is due to one trespass on the part of the Apostle Paul, and that one trespass is the one act of Adam in the Garden of Eden.

The analogy, incidentally, is again broken by the theory of mediate imputation. If we want to maintain this analogy, that analogy is broken. But most of all, this theory is weak because if inherent depravity is something that we have inherited from Adam, that’s a punishment, isn’t it? Surely we would think that we have a corrupt nature – that’s a punishment for something. Well, what is it a punishment for? Evidently, we have some previous guilt if we are each given a depraved nature at birth.

Well, what can the previous guilt be but the guilt that arises out of Adam’s first sin in the Garden of Eden? So mediate imputation does not really enable us to understand what Paul means when he says, “for all sinned.”

So, finally, we’re coming to what we call immediate imputation, or another term for this is federalism. Federalism. When we talk about federalism, we mean covenant relationship. Federalism. Now federalism contents that Adam was a representative, a federal head, for all men, that this arrangement was consummated by God in the Garden of Eden, and that Adam was given certain promises and he was given certain threats. And the fact that Adam was a federal head is confirmed by the fact that the threats are carried out on all of the members of Adam’s posterity.

Adam was told in the day you eat of that tree, you shall surely die. But the facts are that not only has Adam died, but everybody else has died since that time, except for those exceptions where God has overruled his own law, as in the case of an Elijah, for example.

So, the contention of the immediate imputationists is that men have stood their probation in Adam, and his act is our act, not simply because we were in him physically, but because he was our federal head. He was our representative. And when he failed, immediately – that is, without any necessary participation through the transmission of a corrupt nature – all of Adam’s descendants are declared to be under sin, condemnation,

and death, so that the judgment flows immediately from Adam to every one of us, not through the transmission of the sin nature. That’s why it’s called immediate imputation.

The arguments for this particular interpretation are many. We don’t have time to talk with all of them. But as I mentioned, the promises and threats to the race given to Adam are realized in the race. It also explains our birth in sin, for we read in Ephesians chapter 2 that we are – perhaps I should read that passage. Ephesians chapter 2 and verse 1, “And you were dead in your trespasses and sins, in which your formerly walked according to the course of the world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience.”

Now, verse 3 of Ephesians 2, “Among them we also formerly lived according to the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were, by nature, or by birth, the children of wrath, even as the rest.” That explains immediate imputation; why we were born in sin.

Furthermore, Paul in this passage – incidentally, I should explain that. We are born in sin because we are guilty of Adam’s first sin. Another thing, if you’ll turn back to Romans chapter 5 you will find that the apostle here says that all die because all of sinned in verse 12, doesn’t he? So death spread to all men because all sinned.

But then in verses 13 through 19, five times he says that all die because one man sinned. In one text he says, all die because all sinned. In the other text, he says all die because one man sinned. Incidentally, he never says that all die because all acted in Adam. He could have said that if he was a realist, but he did not. So, the same fact is expressed in terms of plurality and singularity. All die because all have sinned, all die because one man sinned. The simplest explanation is that Adam was our representative. He was our federal head. And his action is reckoned as our action.

Now immediately, someone says, it’s not right that Adam’s sin should determine by destiny. Well in the first place, Adam’s sin doesn’t determine our destiny. It hasn’t

determined mine, by the grace of God I have been taken out of Adam the first and placed in Adam the last through the sovereign work of our great, gracious God.

We do have analogies of this in human experience. I don't think that they necessarily explain all of the questions that we have, but in the final analysis, it comes down to the sovereignty of God. If he has done this, then this is of course what we must bow to.

I have, I think I said last time, that I am delighted that we have this system. I wish we had about another 30 minutes to argue the points about this system that suggest it's the finest thing that could have been thought by anyone for our situation. But let me just give you a few things that to me make me happy with God's work of imputation sin, immediately.

In the first place, if it were true that were all to stand our own probation individually, on our own, well I'm afraid, knowing my own heart, I'd have no confidence that I would not fall. I personally feel that I surely would have fallen. And there is a group of beings who evidently did have a probation, individually, and they fell, and the Scriptures say there's no redemption for them. I refer to the fallen angels. Those fallen angels failed in their probation, and they are fallen angels, and there is no plan of redemption for them.

So, I must say I am happy with this system, for I am sure that I would have fallen. And furthermore, because we have a system of federalism in relation to Adam and the human race, it is reasonable to expect that God is, as a result of that, free to arrange a system of federalism between Christ and those who are his. So, the fact that we have federalism in one case evidently makes it possible for God to have federalism in the other case. And, if we all were to stand on our own, then it may well have been that God in his wisdom would deem it impossible to have a system of federalism under those circumstances. So the fact that we all fall in Adam makes it possible for a last Adam to come and accomplish a great victory for the redeemed.

I mentioned the fact that a father strikes oil and the children get rich. We don’t object to that in our human experience, but I want you to know we really have hit a gusher in our Lord Jesus Christ as our federal head, because what he has done has become mine, since I in my Substitute have borne the penalty in guilt and condemnation for sin.

Now I want to turn on and discuss in the remainder of our time the imputation of the elect’s sin to Christ. And I think we can be briefer here. I want you to turn with me to Galatians chapter 3. Galatians chapter 3. The force of Romans chapter 5 verse 12 is that as a result of Adam’s sin in the Garden of Eden, he was the federal head of the human race. The human race has had sin imputed to it, and as a result of the sin, condemnation and death follow.

The imputation of the elect’s sin to Christ. Let’s read Galatians 3 verse 10 through verse 14,

“For as many as are of the works of the Law are under a curse; for it is written, ‘CURSED IS EVERYONE WHO DOES NOT ABIDE BY ALL THINGS WRITTEN IN THE BOOK OF THE LAW, TO PERFORM THEM.’ Now that no one is justified by the Law before God is evident; for, ‘THE RIGHTEOUS MAN SHALL LIVE BY FAITH.’ However, the Law is not of faith; on the contrary, ‘HE WHO PRACTICES THEM SHALL LIVE BY THEM.’ Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us--for it is written, ‘CURSED IS EVERYONE WHO HANGS ON A TREE’-- in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we would receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.”

So here in this text, the apostle speaks about the imputation of the elect’s sin to Jesus Christ. If as a result of the Fall of men in the Garden of Eden, I now am reckoned by God to have fallen in him and to be in sin and under death and condemnation, what I

need is for someone to deliver me, and it is again by an imputation. And here we have the imputation of the elect’s sin to Christ.

The apostle first speaks about the condemnation of the law. He says, “For as many as are the works of the law are under a curse.” Notice the claim of the law: as many as are of the works of the law are under a curse, for, Paul says, “Cursed is everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law to perform them.” Now that is an amazing statement and explains what a terrible thing it is to be under a legal system for justification.

Look, he says, “Cursed is everyone who does not abide by all things.” Now to “do not abide” means you have to continually be everlastingly at it if you want to get saved by what you do. There is no way for you ever to get assurance of your salvation until you have breathed your last breath, having lived a perfect life. That’s why in all systems in which works is predominant, there can be doctrine of assurance of salvation. That’s why Arminians can have no assurance of salvation. For their system is essentially a defective system in which works forms part of the ground of our justification. That’s why the Roman Catholics, with their system, can never preach assurance of salvation, because their system is a system of works.

Cursed is everyone, Paul says, who does not continue. Now, it’s not continue in some things. It’s continue in ALL things – everything written in the Book of the Law. Now there are some who contend that that expression means the whole of the Old Testament. I don’t think we need to burden someone with that. Just burden them with the Mosaic law. Cursed everyone is everyone who does not continue with everything written in the Book of the Law. And the Greek expression “to perform them” is an expression that expresses the definite, complete doing of them. To fully do them; to do them completely.

How would you like to be under a system like that? Cursed is everyone who doesn’t abide in everything written in the Book of the Law to do it completely. You can

see why the Apostle Peter speaks about the burden of the law, the yoke of the law which neither we nor our fathers were able to bear.

Now he says in verse 13, “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us.” Now in that statement, having become a curse for us, we have the apostle’s statement concerning the imputation of the elect’s sin to Christ. Now notice that he has said we are guilty of sin and we have had imputed to us sin, condemnation and death because of what Adam did. Now he says, Christ has become a curse for us so that the judgment of sin, condemnation and death, which was ours, has now been reckoned to the Lord Jesus Christ. He has become a curse for us. That’s the second of our imputations. And he states in verse 13, he has redeemed us from that curse.

Now let’s turn over to Romans chapter 3 and verse 21 through verse 26. And here we have the third of these great acts of imputation: the imputation of Christ’s righteousness to elect believers. Romans chapter 3 and verse 21 through verse 26. I’m embarrassed to spend such a short time on perhaps the greatest of Paul’s passages on justification, but we will come back and look at other aspects of this when we touch other aspects of justification. Let me read beginning at verse 21 of chapter 3 of Romans. I was getting ready to read from Galatians. Verse 21,

“But now apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe; for there is no distinction; for all have sinned.”

By the way, what is the reference of the “all”? Well, I don’t want to upset you, but he’s just said, even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe – he’s talking about believers – there is no distinction, for all, all believers is the context. Now, we’re not denying that all have sinned of course, but in the context Paul means all believers have sinned; just take a look at it. Look at the context. Shakes you

up a little bit. Know why? Because so often we read the Bible as if it’s a collection of proof texts.

But you see, if this referred to everybody, then the very next verse says, being justified as a gift by his grace, would teach universalism. Everybody who’s sinned is justified. But Paul’s a little more careful than that. He’s said – some of you are really looking surprised; been reading the Bible all this time, never saw that. Well, there are many things left for you to learn [laughter]. That you includes me, too.

“For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus;”

Frederick [indistinct] called this passage “the marrow of theology.” It’s a passage in which Paul challenges human pride with its peacock’s feathers, and points out so beautifully how we are sinners and are under divine condemnation. Just like all the inmates of a prison are criminals, so it is true the Gentiles are sinners, the Jews are sinners, and as the apostle states in verse 9, “What then, are we better than they?” Not at all, for we have already charged that Jews and Greeks are all under sin. That’s universal sin. Every saint would confess that fact. Job says, I am undone. Isaiah, Jeremiah said, I was black. Peter said, I’m a sinner. Paul said he was the chief of sinners. As Paul says, “Every mouth it stopped.”

But the important point I want you to notice is the fact that here in verse 24, with reference to believers, that,

“They are justified by a gift of his grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith.”

So the Father provides a satisfaction of his justice which secures our redemption from bondage to sin. Righteousness, the past, the present and the future is satisfied, and we go to read in verse 26,

“For the demonstration, I say, of His righteousness at the present time, so that He would be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.”

How is he the justifier? Why he is the justifier because by virtue of what Jesus Christ has done, he is free to pardon our sins and to give us a righteous standing before himself. A righteous standing that enables us to stand before God – that is the third of the imputations, the imputation of righteousness to elect believers.

So there are, then, three great acts of imputation. The imputation of Adam’s sin to all men. The imputation of believers’ sins, or the sins of the elect, to Jesus Christ. And then, the imputation of the righteousness of God to elect believers. This is the doctrine of imputation, it is the doctrine of federalism by which God, through the saving work of the Lord Jesus justifies by grace those whom he brings to faith in the Lord Jesus.

Now you can see from this that there is a justification that is by grace, not by works. Next week, we want to talk about this principle of justification. Let’s close in a word of prayer.

[Prayer] Father, we are grateful to Thee for these statements from the Apostle Paul which set forth so plainly and clearly the fact that we stand righteous before Thee, not because of anything that we have done, but by virtue of what our Lord Jesus has accomplished. And we thank Thee that this standing that we have is acceptable to Thee. Truly Lord, Thou hast been gracious to us.

Be with those who also attend the classes that follow. May Thy blessing be upon the teachers and each one of the students. For Jesus’ sake. Amen.



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