

Healing

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The episodes of Jesus Christ's earthly ministry that attracted the most public attention were the many incidents of physical healing. In our day we also find people who give the appearance of special healing ability can draw a large crowds. Since the supernatural healing work of Jesus and the apostles was foundational to their message, claims of healing deserve consideration by those who seek to know God.

Healing was uncommon until the time of Jesus. While the Old Testament records many miracles, miracles of healing were rare among them. The Old Testament records Elijah raising a widow's son from the dead (1 Kings 17:17-23), Elisha raising the Shunammite's son from the dead (2 Kings 4:19-37) and the cleansing of Namaan of leprosy (2 Kings 5:10-15). The healings by Jesus were a sudden shift in the miraculous work of God on earth in bringing blessing more than judgment to man.

The healing ministry of Jesus was clearly dramatic. Well over half of Christ's recorded miracles involved healing. The apostles likewise healed many and often. It is because of the high profile of healing in the New Testament and because of the claims of many charismatics today, the topic of healing deserves special attention among Christ's miracles.

As we investigate the topic of healing, the question is not "can God heal?" but rather "will God heal?" and more specifically, "will God heal miraculously through men?" The answers to these questions extend beyond God's ability and involve God's revealed practice. Simply because God is able to do something does not mean He will. For example, God has demonstrated that He is able to flood the earth but He will not according to Genesis 9:11. There are times when God chooses not to do something that He has the power to do.

While God does heal, He has chosen to limit His healing power through certain individuals. Along with other types of miracles, God healed through select people and during three major historical eras. This does not mean that God is unable to heal through men at other times, but only that He has chosen to limit this type of healing ministry to periods of new revelation.

Also, this does not mean that God has chosen to no longer directly intervene to bring unexpected and dramatic healing apart from the ministry of select individuals. God's direct healing does not necessarily violate His revealed will. However, God's healing through the ministry of people was done *for the specific purpose of confirming the revelation of God through His messenger.*

As we examine further modern claims of healing, we will see that not only is the *purpose* of God's healing ministry through people not met today, but the *nature* of God's healing ministry is not met today either. The healing claims of today pale in comparison with the miraculous healing ministry we see in the Bible.

God's promise of physical healing

1. The physical healing that God promises

Many in the charismatic movement teach that it is God's will that we be healed. If we are ill, then it is due to a lack of faith on our part. While this teaching is flawed, there is an aspect of physical healing that God does promise. All believers will be relieved of their pain and suffering when we leave behind our mortal bodies and receive immortality. The redemption of our body still awaits us (Romans 8:23; 1 Corinthians 15:50-54) for one day there will be no more pain and suffering (Revelation 21:4). This total physical healing is just not in this lifetime. This eventual healing follows the spiritual healing we receive positionally.

2. The physical healing that God does not promise

God does not promise that our physical problems will necessarily be healed in our lifetime. No passage of Scripture teaches present physical healing will be definitely granted to us and there is nothing we can do that can guarantee physical healing. The example of the church in the New Testament proves this. Paul was ill (Galatians 4:13), associates of Paul were ill (Philippians 2:27; 1 Timothy 5:23; 2 Timothy 4:20), all the apostles died, and the entire early church died. If physical healing were promised this would not have occurred. If physical healing were conditional upon faith, then we must conclude that everyone lacked faith and that Paul misled Timothy by telling him to take wine for his stomach instead of to have more faith (1 Timothy 5:23).

Bible verses that are misused to teach that physical healing is promised

1 Peter 2:24 *and He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds you were healed.*

While many charismatics claim 1 Peter 2:24 promises physical healing in the atonement of Christ, this is a misinterpretation for the following reasons:

1. The meaning of "*by His wounds you were healed*" is not physical healing but spiritual healing. The context is sin and righteousness, not sickness and health. The verse says we are to live to righteousness, not live to health.
2. The healing is in the past tense, "*by His wounds you were healed.*" This refers back to the cross of Christ, which is the basis for our spiritual healing. The healing has already occurred. The verse does not say that by His wounds we will continually be healed of our physical ailments.
3. The context of 1 Peter 2:18-25 says just the opposite of what most healing advocates teach. Peter says that since Christ physically suffered, then we should be willing to physically suffer for Christ's sake. Peter actually is encouraging endurance in the midst of suffering and explicitly states we have

been called to suffer (2:21). This is directly opposed to the teaching that God desires us to be freed from physical suffering and illness in this life.

Exodus 15:26: *And He said, "If you will give earnest heed to the voice of the LORD your God, and do what is right in His sight, and give ear to His commandments, and keep all His statutes, I will put none of the diseases on you which I have put on the Egyptians; for I, the LORD, am your healer."*

Exodus 15:26 makes a conditional promise to a specific group, the people of Israel. The promise is rooted in the Mosaic covenant, which is that if Israel obeyed God they would be blessed and if they disobeyed they would be cursed (Deut. 28). This conditional promise in Exodus 15:26 does not apply to believers today, since the Mosaic covenant was given to Israel and not the church. God remains our healer, but only according to His revealed will in Scripture.

Psalm 103:2-3: *Bless the LORD, O my soul, And forget none of His benefits; Who pardons all your iniquities; Who heals all your diseases;*

Psalm 103:3 states that God will heal all our diseases. The word for disease always referred to physical ailments. Psalm 103:3 refers to our future redemption in the poetic form of a parallelism. God will heal us spiritually by forgiving our iniquities and will heal us physically by healing our diseases. The timing of this is when we are with Christ and fully redeemed. This is not a promise of present healing.

Mark 16:17-18 *And these signs will accompany those who have believed: in My name they will cast out demons, they will speak with new tongues; they will pick up serpents, and if they drink any deadly poison, it shall not hurt them; they will lay hands on the sick, and they will recover.*

Some use Mark 16:18 to teach that healing is part of the Great Commission of Christ to the church. Mark 16:9-20 is a questionable text that many biblical scholars consider to be added at a later date. The oldest existing Greek manuscripts, dating from the fourth century, do not include the ending of Mark 16:9-20. While the evidence is not conclusive, we should certainly avoid building any doctrinal system on the uncertain foundation of Mark 16:9-20.

Assuming the validity of Mark 16:18, it is reasonable to conclude that Jesus was only intending this verse for the eleven disciples to whom He was speaking. The context of Mark 16:20 shows that Jesus was referring to the immediate converts of the ministry of the eleven disciples and these signs were for the purpose of confirming the word that God was revealing. There is no hint that the signs would continue beyond the ministry of the apostles. In fact, we see the fulfillment in Acts 28:3-5 as Paul was bitten by a viper. As we have seen, as the revelation passes, the need for such signs also passes.

John 14:12 *Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes in Me, the works that I do shall he do also; and greater works than these shall he do; because I go to the Father.*

Some use John 14:12 to teach that we should be doing greater miracles than Jesus. However, as we look at the ministry of the people whom Christ addressed in the upper room, we find that they did not do greater miracles than Jesus did. While they did perform miracles, the miracles were not greater in quantity or in quality. The fewer miracles they performed were not regarding nature (calming storms or controlling fish) or regarding creation (creating wine, fish or loaves of bread).

The “greater works” are ministry of the disciples to more and more people. This interpretation is strongly supported by John 5:20-21. The “work” in John 5:20 is the physical miracle of resurrection and the “greater work” is the granting of eternal life. Likewise, the disciples participated in the message of eternal life on a far greater scale than the number of people to whom Christ ministered while He was on earth. This verse does not then address healing at all.

Hebrews 13:8: *Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today, yes and forever.*

This verse is misunderstood to say that Jesus will always act in the same manner as He did before. The truth of Jesus Christ being the same yesterday and today, yes and forever only affirms His unchanging nature as God (cf. Hebrews 1:12). That God varies His work in nature is not only consistent with Hebrews 13:8 but is abundantly clear. God simply does not act in the same way throughout history, although He is unchanging in His character. For example, God does not strike every liar with death (Acts 5:1-11), He does not part every sea (Exodus 14:13-31) and He does not always supply His people with food supernaturally (Exodus 16:1-21).

Likewise, God does not heal everyone although His ability to heal is unchanging. Just as God can choose to heal some and not others without changing who He is, God can choose to heal during certain periods of time through His selected servants and He can also choose to cease the ministry of healing for other periods of time without changing who He is. Hebrews 13:8 speaks of Christ’s person, not His purposes.

3 John 2: *Beloved, I pray that in all respects you may prosper and be in good health, just as your soul prospers.*

3 John 2 only says that the apostle John is praying that Gaius, whom he loves, would prosper and be in good health. This is a fine prayer to emulate today. This is clearly not a promise that Gaius would be healed. There is not even a claim that this would be in Gaius’ best interest, for it is simply a prayer request and is for the Lord to answer. It is important to observe that John only prays for Gaius’ health without even hinting of a possible healing.

How God healed in the Old Testament

Healings in the Old Testament were rare. There are far more incidents of God afflicting people in the Old Testament than there are of God healing people. While people quickly seek healing, they conveniently forget God’s supernatural acts of judgment.

The methods of healing in the Old Testament varied. God did not favor a technique or pattern. The healing methods ranged from God's direct intervention, to answered prayer, to strange cases of touching the bones of Elisha (2 Kings 13:20-21).

Faith in God was not a direct issue in the healings of the Old Testament. God even healed unbelievers, such as a Syrian general (2 Kings 5:1-14) and a Babylonian king (Daniel 4:28-37).

How Jesus healed in the New Testament

In light of the healing in the Old Testament, the healing ministry of Jesus was clearly unprecedented. In the three years leading up to Christ's death, Jesus directly healed a countless and overwhelming number of people. Below is a summary of the nature of Christ's healing ministry:

1. The healing of Jesus had a purpose

Jesus healed in order to authenticate Himself as the true Messiah, and thus His message (John 10:25; Acts 2:22). He did not heal to draw a crowd or even merely for the physical benefit, for He did not heal everyone (John 5:3-5) and He did not heal upon request (Matthew 12:38-40).

2. The healings of Jesus were immediate and complete

All of Christ's many healings were instantaneous, with three exceptions (Matthew 8:22-26; Luke 17:11-19; John 9:1-7). These three delays involved only minutes and the men were totally healed. There was never a relapse of the affliction mentioned.

3. The healings of Jesus were abundant

Jesus healed as a normal course of His travels in large numbers. He was not restricted to times, locations or people. His disciples never selected out some of the crowd to be healed. Jesus frequently healed everyone who came to Him, without limits. Christ's healings were so abundant that He is often described healing the multitudes. John alludes to more miracles that were never recorded (John 20:30).

4. The healings of Jesus did not require His physical presence

A centurion's slave (Matthew 8:5-13), a Canaanite's daughter (Matthew 15:21-28) and the son of an official in Capernaum (John 4:49-53) were all healed without Jesus needing to even be there.

5. The healings of Jesus were undeniable

Everyone, even Christ's enemies, stood amazed for they were unable to deny or discredit the miracles. No medical examinations were necessary, for the healings

were clearly evident to all. The validity of the healings were not based on one person's testimony but what was observable by many.

6. The healings of Jesus were never prearranged

Jesus healed people from the outset of His public ministry (Matthew 4:23-25) to its conclusion (John 11:1-44). He healed those He came to and those who came to Him. The healings were not done under special circumstances but through the course His daily ministry.

7. The healings of Jesus varied in their method

Jesus did not have a favorite healing custom. He touched (Matthew 8:15), spoke (John 5:8-9), was touched (Matthew 9:20-22), spit (Mark 8:22-26) and used clay (John 9:6). Christ's healings were not dependent upon a technique.

8. The healings of Jesus did not depend on a person's faith

Healing proponents commonly claim that great faith is necessary in order to be healed by God. If healing does not take place, the blame can then be placed on the individual's lack of faith rather than on the healer's lack of ability.

In the Bible, faith is never described quantitatively. There is no unit of measure for faith. While Jesus rebuked men for "little faith" (Matthew 6:30; 8:26; 14:31; 16:8; 17:20), this type of faith does not fall short in amount but rather in nature. Littleness of faith is a figure of speech to mean no faith at all. This can be clearly seen in Matthew 17:20: "Because of the littleness of your faith; for truly I say to you, if you have faith as a mustard seed, you shall say to this mountain, 'move from here to there,' and it shall move; and nothing shall be impossible to you." It is not the *size* of our faith that is essential, for a mustard seed was the smallest seed in Palestine, but rather it is the *object* of our faith that is essential. If our faith is in God we have great faith that can move mountains.

Nowhere in the Scripture is anyone admonished to measure faith, since faith is truly an either/or proposition. How much faith does it take to be saved? There is no amount; either a person believes or not. Just as there are no degrees of faith in salvation (i.e., "believe just a little harder and you will be saved"), there are no degrees of faith in healing.

In addition, not only is the amount of faith not an issue in healing, faith is not even a requirement at all for God to heal. A common passage that is used to say that faith is essential for healing is Mark 6:5 (cf. Matthew 13:58), that says that Jesus could not do many miracles because of the lack of faith on the part of the people. However, this must be understood *not as an inability of Jesus' power but rather as a choice that Jesus made to not turn His ministry into a healing sideshow for people who had already rejected His message.* Jesus raised people from the dead who obviously had no faith. In addition to the dead (incapable of displaying faith) that Jesus raised to life (Matthew 9, Luke 7, John 11), Jesus healed ten lepers in Luke

17. Of the ten who were healed, only one had faith (Luke 17:17-19). Faith was not essential for Jesus to heal.

Sometimes the faith that existed was displayed by someone other than the person afflicted (cf. Luke 5:20). In Matthew 17:19-20, Jesus rebuked the disciples for their lack of faith in curing a demoniac! If modern healers are going to introduce faith as an issue in their supposed healing ministry, they ought to be discussing their own faith rather than the faith of those they are proposing to heal.

9. The healings of Jesus involved organic diseases

An organic disease is where an organ of the body is somehow physically impaired, through maiming, defect, disease, etc. Examples are broken bones, infections, heart attacks, hernias, gallstones, slipped discs, cancer, deformities, lacerations and amputated limbs. With an organic disease, something is actually wrong with the organ. The body is able to heal some organic diseases without help, such as minor sprains, colds and abrasions.

In contrast, a functional disease is the dysfunction of a perfectly good organ of the body. Many people suffer from pain or from organs that do not function properly but with no damage to the organ. The organ itself is sound, but for some reason it does not function properly. These types of healings are difficult to document and result from any number of cures.

It is important to note that the Scripture never describes Jesus healing a functional disease. All of His healings involved organic problems, such as blindness, crippled legs, withered hands, an ear that had been sliced off, etc. These types of healings are undeniable and dramatic.

The alleged healings of today do not begin to match these types of serious organic diseases. This is the Achilles' heel of the belief that God heals through men today in the same way that He healed in the New Testament. The healings that are claimed today are not of the same category and leave open the question of their direct cause or even if a healing had occurred at all.

How apostles and their associates healed in the New Testament

The apostles and their associates followed the same pattern of healing ministry of their Lord.

1. The healings of the apostles had a purpose

God used healing as a sign to authenticate the apostles and their ministry (Romans 5:18-19; 2 Corinthians 12:12; Hebrews 2:4). Their healing ministry, and on occasion the healing ministry of their associates (Stephen in Acts 6:8, Philip in Acts 8:7 and Barnabas in Acts 14:3), served to validate them as vessels of God's revelation.

If non-apostolic Christians throughout the centuries could also perform these works of healing, then the works could not have served the purpose of being a sign of apostleship (2 Corinthians 12:12). These healings were equal to those done by Jesus in order to attest to their words as being as authoritative as the words of Jesus, who had chosen them as His spokesman (Matthew 10:11-15; 1 Corinthians 14:37).

2. The healings of the apostles were immediate and complete

All of the apostles' healings were instantaneous and total, with no need for a period for recuperation. No one needed to claim their healing by faith, since they were healed on the spot. There was never a relapse.

3. The healings of the apostles were undeniable

Even the most vocal opponents of the apostles, the Jewish rulers and Sanhedrin, could not explain away the healings of the apostles since they were so public and spectacular (Acts 4:16-17).

4. The healings of the apostles varied in their method

Like Jesus, the apostles did not have a favorite healing custom. They healed by command (Acts 3:6), with their shadow (Acts 5:15), through a cloth from their body (Acts 19:11-12), and by the laying of their hands and praying (Acts 28:8-9). The apostles' healings were not dependent upon a technique. Like Jesus, they did not prearrange their healing ministry and did not have to be present (Acts 19:11-12).

5. The healings of the apostles did not depend on a person's faith

At times the faith of the person afflicted was praised (Acts 3:16), yet personal faith was not a prerequisite for healing (Acts 8:6-7; 9:34). A commendation is not the same thing as a condition.

6. The healings of the apostles involved organic diseases

Like the healing ministry of Jesus, the apostles healed people of organic disease, not merely functional problems. Peter healed a man in his forties who had been lame from birth (Acts 3:1-10, 22), as did Paul (Acts 14:8-10). Both Peter and Paul each raised someone from the dead (Acts 9:36-43; Acts 20:7-12).

In summary, in order to claim that any healing ministry today is on par with the healing ministry of Jesus and the apostles, and thus qualified as a genuine healing miracle to validate new revelation, the following criteria must be met:

- The disease must not be the kind that normally heals itself over time.
- The healing must be complete and total.
- The healing must be of an organic disease.

- The healing must be of a disease that neither the medical community nor the human body can heal instantly or absolutely.
- The healing must take place in the absence of any medical treatment that might normally be expected to affect the disease.
- There must be adequate reason to believe that the disease was present before the application of the means used to bring about the healing miracle.
- There must be adequate reason to believe that the disease was not present after the application of the means used to bring about the healing miracle.
- The healing must be immediate.
- The healing must be completely convincing, even to skeptics.
- The healing must be done in public without elaborate services.
- The healer must not use the lack of faith of the afflicted as an excuse for a failed healing.

These criteria was clearly the pattern of the healing ministry of Jesus and the apostles followed Christ's pattern. Healing proponents are not able to follow Christ's pattern for the simple reason that God is no longer providing us with the power to perform healing miracles, since there is no longer any new revelation to authenticate. Because they do not have the power of God to heal as Jesus and the apostles did, they are left to try to convince the unsuspecting that what they are doing is similar. As we can see, there is no comparison between the healings of Christ and the apostles and what is being passed off among us today.

Explanations of claims of healing today

Reports of healing are common, particularly among our charismatic brethren. If gifted healers are indeed limited to the periods of new revelation, then how can we explain these testimonials? Below are several reasons that may account for these reports:

1. Through direct healing by God

A legitimate explanation is that God worked sovereignly to restore a person to health. It is in fact accurate to say that healing is from God, since every good thing bestowed is from above (James 1:17). He commonly does this in many ways, but certainly one possibility is that God could even directly intervene to restore a person to immediate health. We even have an example to follow of prayer for the good health of others (3 John 2). Yet this healing is apart from a supposedly gifted person who acts as an agent of the healing.

2. Through the natural healing capacity of the body

God has designed our bodies with a built-in ability to heal themselves of many physical problems. Sometimes the best treatment is no treatment at all. This is probably the most overlooked explanation for reported healings.

3. Through medical treatment

Most people who claim to be healed have been to doctors, received treatment, altered their diets and sometimes even had operations. Yet the medical practice can be easily overlooked. This is particularly true given the increasing disdain that some in the Christian community view the medical profession. Professed healers today are among those who malign doctors. One worldly tactic to build ourselves up is to unnecessarily degrade another. Jesus and the apostles affirmed the role of physicians and medicine (a physician even wrote two New Testament books).

4. Through an emotional change which affects the physical body

One standard medical text estimates that fifty to eighty percent of all diseases have their origin in stress. While not all emotionally induced illnesses are reversible, there is no doubt that improving our peace of mind will improve our physical health. It is in this sense that a simple belief that healing had occurred may produce relief in some cases of functional diseases.

5. Through a psychosomatic cure

Psychosomatic illnesses differ from emotionally induced illnesses in that psychosomatic illnesses falsely register an apparent physical infirmity in the mind. Emotionally induced illnesses are actual physical problems brought on by our state of mind. In both cases however, a change of mind can bring a change in physical well-being.

6. Through the placebo effect

The placebo effect is an improvement that occurs as a result of medical treatment that has no known documented medical value. Placebos are used in testing new drugs to determine their medical value. One group of patients receive the actual medication and another group, without their knowledge, receives the placebo. Not uncommonly, the placebo group improves as much as, if not better than, those who received the actual medication.

Professed healers are often no more than spiritual “placebos.” One factor that accounts for certain testimonies of healing today is some people when they think they are receiving something that will help them, are in fact helped by it, even though what they are receiving has nothing to do with their improvement.

7. Through the power of Satan

Can Satan copy God’s work? To a certain degree he can. The magicians of Egypt were able to copy some of the miracles of Moses (Exodus 7:11; 7:22; 8:7).

Unbelievers will claim at the judgment that they performed many miracles (Matthew 7:22-23). 2 Thessalonians 2:9 tells us that the man of lawlessness will come with the activity of Satan and perform signs and false wonders. The beast and

the false prophet will perform miracles (Revelation 13:14; 16:14; 19:20). The healings that are claimed today are not uncommon among other religions.

2 Corinthians 11:13-15 teaches us that Satan and his servants disguise themselves as angels of light. While it does not appear that Satan has the power to create (such as healing a withered arm), there is no doubt he is skilled at deceiving people into believing that healings are being performed when in reality they are not. This deception accomplishes the satanic goal of confusing the glory of God while never needing to actually help someone.

8. Through misdiagnosis

An illness can be wrongly diagnosed. As a result the treatment prescribed is ineffective. The patient may seek out a healer who supposedly heals a disease that the person never really had in the first place. During April of 1991, the University of California in San Francisco surveyed the most serious errors of 114 internal medicine residents at three major U.S. medical centers. Thirty-eight of the residents named "diagnostic error." Interestingly, while healing proponents too often malign the practice of medicine, they are content to hold the diagnostic ability of the very same doctors in high regard.

9. Through a misleading report of the case

Often an alleged healing is embraced by people because of a convincing but misleading report of the facts of the case. As more data is gathered the testimony becomes less and less convincing. It sounds much better without the detailed facts of the case.

This type of misleading report can be the result of either simple ignorance or of outright manipulative deceit. Most people are willing to pass along secondhand reports of what seemed to have happened or jump to conclusions regarding the nature of a healing. However, there are certainly more people than we would like to admit who are willing to use deliberate deceit to fool the public. Sadly, it is often the secular media that brings these manipulations to light while believers in Christ hesitate to challenge the manipulators. Far better if the church would seek to discipline its own.

10. Spontaneous remission

The medical field recognizes an unusual spontaneous regression in some diseases for no apparent medical reason. The most common illness in which this phenomenon occurs is cancer. We should acknowledge a certain variability among certain diseases.

Summary of God's healing ministry today

Matthew 5:45: *"God causes the sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous"*

Christians are no more or less prone to illness and death than non-Christians. Those of great faith do not have a greater life span than those of no faith. While certain wise practices may produce greater health and certain foolish practices may cause our health to deteriorate, healthy living is not promised to believers and should not be expected by Christians. It is the spirit of Matthew 6:11, "Give us this day our daily bread," that should bring thankfulness for the blessing of life that we enjoy. God has blessed us with healing in many ways:

- Through the natural healing process of our body
- Through the practice of medicine (1 Timothy 5:23)
- Through confession of sin and wise living (Proverbs 3:7-8; 4:20-22)
- Through answering our prayers (3 John 2)
- Through direct divine intervention

Healing in this present life is not promised, nor to be expected. God's will in sickness is also clearly revealed. His purposes for illness include:

- His glory (John 9:3; 11:4)
- Our spiritual maturity (James 1:2-4)
- The fulfillment of God's will (1 Peter 3:17; 4:19)
- Understanding our dependence on God (2 Corinthians 12:7-10)
- Enabling us to encourage others (2 Corinthians 1:3-4; Hebrews 12:1)
- Authenticating our faith (1 Peter 1:6-7)
- Disciplining our sin (1 Corinthians 11:20-22; 29-30)
- Accomplishing God's unrevealed purposes (Deuteronomy 29:29; Isaiah 55:8-9)

It would be a serious mistake to assume healing is always a good thing and sickness is always a bad thing. God is able to work our sickness for good, according to His purposes.

Since there are clearly no miraculous gifts of healing being performed by individuals in the biblical pattern, we can conclude that there is no additional revelation from God being entrusted to man today. Conversely, since God's purpose in empowering people with a healing ministry was to confirm His messenger, we can conclude that the absence of revelation results in a corresponding absence of the sign gift of healing.

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