

Why the Jesus Story Mattered to the Early Church—Why the Jesus Story Matters in my Life **By Bob Young**

Explanation

During February-March-April leading up to Easter 2017, I restudied Acts in an effort to freshen my understanding and appreciation of Jesus and the Jesus story (the Easter story, the gospel). As I explain in the introduction, I drew these studies from Acts, wanting to understand the way the early church lived out resurrection reality in their own lives. I share the results—a sermon series focused on the importance of the “Jesus story” (the gospel) in my own life.

(The sermon outlines below represent the detail to which I generally prepare notes—obviously there a lot things included in the sermons that exist in my mind and are not written down in detail.)

SERIES SUMMARY

Feb 26	In my life, Jesus is a “life and death” question, Acts 1-5
Mar 5	The good news of Jesus is to be proclaimed by his disciples, Acts 1-8
Mar 12	The good news of Jesus is to be proclaimed, even to the most unlikely, Acts 6-10
Mar 19	Seeking to understand afresh the story of Jesus, Acts 13:38-40, 17, 18, 20
Mar 26	NO POSTING, out of town at IDC-Fort Smith
Apr 2	The story of Jesus changes everything
April 9	To whom is God sending me with the message of Jesus? Acts 9,22,26

Introduction to the Series

I want to understand and appreciate Jesus more. I want to find depth, meaning, motivation. Where does Jesus fit into the life of a faithful disciple?

In many churches, the weeks before Easter are devoted to studying the Gospels. In biblical chronology, Acts follows the resurrection. However, it seems to me that the early church knew what I want to know. Therefore, my study calendar this year is different than ever before. I am delving into Acts during the weeks leading up to Easter. I do not have a weekly pulpit obligation during my retirement years, but this is my “preaching.”

Here are the series titles for the seven sermons—

- The story of Jesus is a life and death story
- The story of Jesus is to be told
- The story of Jesus is to be told—even to the most unlikely
- The story of Jesus is a story of forgiveness of sins
- What we have to understand about the story of Jesus
- The story of Jesus changes everything
- To whom is God sending you with the story of Jesus?

Feb 26 The story of Jesus is a life and death story

Hearing the Jesus (Easter) story correctly is a life and death matter

Thinking and rethinking Acts, the gospel, the good news of Jesus. This sermon is basically a summary of what I saw when I studied chapters 1-5. I will not mention many details of those chapters. You can read them. Pentecost, the church, conflict with the Jewish leaders, suffering, Ananias-Sapphira, following Jesus is costly. First steps toward obedience, responding to and living out the Easter story, the Jesus story. How?

The first step is hearing the story correctly. Getting the story right, hearing the story, the Easter story, the Jesus story, is a life and death subject. I purposely said "life and death" rather than "life or death." Hearing the story correctly requires hearing it again and again. Hearing it afresh. Reading, studying, thinking.

We have oversimplified the gospel, the contemporary version that exists among "us" is not the whole truth. Because it is not the whole truth, it is lacking in power. It is simplistic, it is not the result of intense Bible study. Jesus came preaching the gospel (Mk. 1), the gospel was announced in advance to Abraham (Gal. 3), those who fell in the wilderness had the gospel preached to them (Heb. 4). The gospel that Jesus is the Messiah is rich, fulfilling, challenging (Ac. 18).

The world does not understand the story, the story must be told again and again. (Perhaps we do not understand the story.) The world focuses at Easter on resurrection life. The Jesus story says that life comes only through death. The "old man" is gone so the "new man" can exist. But that is getting ahead of my story.

In Acts, Luke uses a code word for the process of moving from death to life; that word is "saved." We use the word in the same way today: he was saved from the swirling flood waters, the firefighters saved her, the doctors were able to save the boy. These are descriptions of life and death situations.

Listen to Luke--

- Acts 2:21, And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.
- Acts 2:38, Repent and be baptized for the remission of your sins. [In this text, remission of sins is equal to saved]
- Acts 2:40, With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation."
- Acts 2:47, And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.
- Acts 4:12, Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved.
- Acts 11:14, He will bring you a message through which you and all your household will be saved.

Look at some other life and death references from Acts. Acts makes clear that this life and death content. First, the Jesus story is a life and death story as it tells the history of Jesus. Second, it is a life and death story of every human being, because Jesus is the only source of life.

- Acts 2:32, God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of it.
- Acts 3:15, You killed the author of life, but God raised him from the dead. We are witnesses of this.
- Acts 5:20, "Go, stand in the temple courts," he said, "and tell the people all about this new life."
- Acts 11: 18, When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, "So then, even to Gentiles God has granted repentance that leads to life."

The content of the story of Jesus (the Easter story, the Passion) makes it a life and death story

Acts 2:23, 24, This man was handed over to you by God's deliberate plan and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him.

The preaching of the early church was the story of the death and resurrection of Jesus. Near the beginning of this century, the movie "The Passion" made clear that the story is a life and death story.

Because it is a life and death story, it seems to have less appeal in today's world. People want the life story without the death story. People want the blessing without the sacrifice.

The story of Jesus as reflected in the lives of his followers has always been a life and death story

Acts 5:33, When they heard this, they were furious and wanted to put them to death. The early followers of Jesus understood well that this was a life and death story, because their lives were threatened.

Acts 7 tells of Stephen's death. Acts 12 records the death of James the apostle.

Church history and church tradition tell the story of martyr after martyr.

Even today, some are martyred for their faith.

The story of Jesus is a life and death story today

Even today, some are martyred for their faith.

Too many Christians have forgotten that the Jesus story, the gospel, is a life and death question, a life and death decision. We choose death to self to live to him, we choose death to sin to live to him. The old gives way to the new. Rom. 6; 2 Cor. 5.

It is easy for us to forget. Christianity is for many of us today easy, comfortable, undemanding. We easily fall into habits that keep Christian commitment on the fringe of life. Life is not intentionally Christian, purposefully Christian, focused, discipleship-demonstrating.

We may never be called to give our physical lives for Jesus, but the Jesus story, the Easter story, the gospel story, is still a life and death story. It is a story of dying to self to live to Christ. Gal. 2.

Baptism illustrates that following Jesus is a life and death proposition.

Christian living, biblical discipleship, demonstrates that following Jesus is a life and death proposition.

The story of Jesus is a life and death story for me, for you, for this church, for every person.

Deciding to follow Jesus is costly, demanding, sacrificial, life-changing.

Mar 5 The story of Jesus is to be told

Thinking and rethinking Acts, the gospel, the good news of Jesus. This sermon is basically a summary of what I saw when I studied chapters 1-8. I will not mention many details of those chapters. You can read them—I mentioned them briefly last week. Pentecost, the church, conflict with the Jewish leaders, suffering, Ananias-Sapphira, following Jesus is costly; Stephen—the sentence, the sermon, the stoning; the scattering spreads the gospel far and wide.

First steps toward obedience, responding to and living out the Easter story, the Jesus story. How? Lesson #2, the story of Jesus, what does it mean?

The second truth—the story is to be told! In this lesson, we will support this point with a study of a very few chapters from Acts, right at the beginning. I will not list the multiplied Scriptures throughout the New Testament that address the need to tell the story. (In the sermon, this will be a detailed study, even though the notes are abbreviated here.)

In Acts 2, on the day of Pentecost, the story was told.

In Acts 3, Peter told the story to those who had seen the crippled man healed. This is, as it were, the second gospel sermon.

In Acts 4, Peter and John, and the apostles, were proclaiming Jesus and the resurrection from the dead. When they were commanded not to speak, but their response was that they could not help themselves! What would happen in the contemporary church if we could not help ourselves, could not keep from speaking the good news of Jesus? They rejoiced to have the opportunity to speak, and they prayed for even more boldness. But it is only the apostles to this point that are mentioned as testifying to Jesus' resurrection, perhaps because they are the only "witnesses" available.

In Acts 5, we may have a hint of this apostolic preaching, because it was the apostles who were arrested. But they were miraculously released, they returned to proclaiming Jesus and the resurrection that makes possible new life. Peter and the other apostles responded (v. 29), the apostles were flogged, and rejoiced to be counted worthy of proclaiming. 5:42 appears to refer to the apostles.

In Acts 6, the apostles chose a ministry in the word and prayer, the word spread, even to the priests.

In Acts 7, Stephen preaches the first gospel sermon not preached by an apostle so far as we know. We are seeing a change. Do not miss this. It was the apostles as witnesses who preached in Acts 1-6. Now we have a sermon by Stephen, the result of which is his death. The story of Jesus is a life and death matter.

In Acts 8, persecution comes to the church, all but the apostles are scattered, and all go forth boldly preaching the word, wherever they go!

This new step in the story will never end—in Acts or in the coming centuries. The focus in Acts will be on some special events, we will talk about those next week, but the story from now on will be of Christians sharing the story. Peter will get attention, Paul will get the majority of the attention along with his companions, but a quick reading of Acts will remind that the power that took the gospel to the Roman world and to the then-known world in the first century was not centered exclusively in Paul, it was a power that brought the gospel to Samaria through Philip, to Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch by those scattered (11:19), to Galatia as those who heard the message continued to spread it, to Asia Minor (several of those who led in the proclamation are mentioned in Paul's letters), through Aquila and Priscilla, through Apollos...and the story goes on and on.

Takeaways—

The story is to be told

It was first told by the eyewitnesses, the apostles

Afterward, it was told in every place by every Christian

The key phrase: We Cannot Help Ourselves! May that become a reality in your life during this Easter season.

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Mar 12 **The story of Jesus is to be told—even to the most unlikely**

Thinking and rethinking Acts, the gospel, the good news of Jesus. This sermon is basically a summary of what I saw when I studied chapters 6-10. I will not mention many details of those chapters. You can read them. Stephen—the sentence, the sermon, the stoning; the scattering spreads the gospel; Samaria; a proselyte Jew from Ethiopia; Saul-Paul, Cornelius. We know these stories—do we really know these stories?

First steps toward obedience, responding to and living out the Easter story, the Jesus story. How? Lesson #3, the story of Jesus, what does it mean?

The third truth—the story is to be told to everyone in every place—even to the most unlikely!

We miss the unlikely aspect of Acts. The summary statements of Acts. Almost always focused on quantity.

6:8, the word spread, a large number of the priests (Jewish priests!) were obedient the faith. They gave up their livelihood, they gave us status, prestige, power, position, prominence. Perhaps not at the beginning—with the integration of Judaism and Christianity, but certainly in the future.

8:1-4, scattered to Judea and Samaria! Samaria! To the Samaritans, this is a new group, they believe and obey, they are baptized. The preaching was the good news of the kingdom, the result was baptism. Whoops! Samaria! Is this OK? Is this acceptable? This was not apostolic preaching. This was not the authoritative group of preachers, the witnesses. This is second generation preaching, preacher. Is it OK to preach to the Samaritans? Can they be accepted? These are Jewish by religion, but only half-Jewish by birth. We must put ourselves in the context of first-century Judaism with the coming of Christianity, and all of the first Christians were Jews. This is not easy. Did God withhold the Spirit (temporarily) in this case? If so, it was for the benefit of the Jews, so they would accept the Samaritans. Or, that they Holy Spirit was not yet manifest, and that such was only possible by the imposition of the hands of the apostles? This is a traditional interpretation. Regardless, our point today is that the gospel was being told to the least likely.

8:26ff, to an Ethiopian nobleman, servant of queen, Jewish proselyte, Gentile by birth, Jew by religion. Philip goes to preach to him, by Holy Spirit. This time there will be no problem, no coming of the apostles to bless the preaching of Philip, Philip has been approved, the message can go forth without hindrance to the world. This is not normal, this is the most unlikely, but the preaching bears results.

9:1ff, Saul. Perhaps never a more unlikely candidate. Jesus intervenes personally, Ananias still has doubts. But the gospel is received. And the church grew in number (9:31).

10:1ff, Cornelius. Gentile, God-fearer. Can gospel go to “pure Gentiles”? Peter preaches and the Holy Spirit comes early. In Samaria, the Holy Spirit came late. Here it comes early. Why? To convince the Jews who had accompanied Peter. The Holy Spirit’s coming was known by speaking in languages to praise God. Thus they were baptized.

This is not the end of the unlikely candidates. The process has continued even in our day.

- Bill, neighbor to the church, pretty wild, but he became a Christian
- Countless examples, probably won’t do any good, but it did!

Mar 19 Seeking to understand afresh the story of Jesus

Introduction

Thinking and rethinking Acts, the gospel, the good news of Jesus. This sermon series seeks to summarize what I saw when I studied Acts. We know these stories—do we really know these stories?

I see in this series a study of first steps toward obedience, responding to and living out the Easter story, the Jesus story. How? Lesson #4, the story of Jesus, what does it mean?

The fourth truth—the story of Jesus is a forgiveness story. There may be a better word, there may be a word that connects with the contemporary world, but the story of Jesus is a continuation of God's forgiveness story for the world. I am not sure how we can tell the gospel story, the story of Jesus, the Easter story, without proclaiming that the story of Jesus is a forgiveness story.

There are softer words—redemption, reconciliation; there are related words and phrases that seek healthier living, better relationships, etc. etc. etc. But the message must not be forgotten. My greatest need must not be overlooked. The Easter story is meaningless without an awareness of sin. The importance of the Jesus story in my life depends on my understanding of my need for forgiveness.

In Acts, telling the Jesus story was a lead-in to offering forgiveness

Forgive--

Acts 2:38 Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the **forgiveness** of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Acts 5:31 God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Savior that he might bring Israel to repentance and **forgive** their sins.

Acts 8:22 Repent of this wickedness and pray to the Lord in the hope that he may **forgive** you for having such a thought in your heart.

Acts 10:43 All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives **forgiveness** of sins through his name."

Acts 13:38 "Therefore, my friends, I want you to know that through Jesus the **forgiveness** of sins is proclaimed to you.

In Acts, the Jesus story was related to salvation

Save--

Acts 2:21 And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.'

Acts 2:40 With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation."

Acts 2:47 praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

Acts 4:12 Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved."

Acts 11:14 He will bring you a message through which you and all your household will be saved.'

Acts 15:1 Certain people came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the believers: "Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved."

Acts 15:11 No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are."

Acts 16:17 She followed Paul and the rest of us, shouting, "These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved."

Acts 16:30 He then brought them out and asked, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"

Acts 16:31 They replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household."

The Jesus story is part of a much larger narrative

The Easter story is the story of my forgiveness, of your forgiveness. God doing what we could not do for ourselves. A death and life story for everyone, because everyone is need of God, restored relationship.

Summary:

- Creator God exists, evidence is all around us. There is a God. God is real.
- He wants to be recognized, he wants to be known, and he wants to be known as he is, for who he is— holy, loving, just. Recognize him.
- He wants to be revered, to be worshiped. Respect him.
- He created humankind for relationship, he desires relationship, which relationship was broken by the entry of sin into the world. Respond to him.
- He desires restored relationship—reconciliation, redemption, he has acted; his gracious action motivates repentance and changed lives; he makes possible restored relationship vertically, but also horizontally.
- He wants us to reflect his glory.

Telling the Easter story in the right way

When we tell the story of Jesus, do we make it easy for others to see its importance? In my observation, we too often begin in the wrong place, or we begin without establishing basic fundamental truths that make the story important to every person. The Easter story is not a story of human action; it is a story of God's actions.

The Easter story is good news because we understand the alternative bad news. No matter how well I live, how good I am, how much I do, how active I am, I need the story of Jesus. I am grateful for the story of Jesus. It is life-saving, it is relationship-building, it orients me for life. I am seeking God so I can share him. I am forgiven to forgive. He saves, he keeps me saved.

He places me in a safe place, a place where he keeps all of his saved ones. That is the church. That is not the subject of this series, but that is a biblical concept that we human beings have also messed up royally. I want to come to that after we study God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit.

Conclusion

The story of Jesus is a story of forgiveness: help, hope, and home.

Mar 26 [NO POSTING, Out of Town, Fort Smith Iglesia de Cristo seminar]

Apr 2 **The story of Jesus changes everything**

Thinking and rethinking Acts, the gospel, the good news of Jesus. This sermon series seeks to summarize what I saw when I studied Acts. We know these stories—do we really know these stories?

I see in this series a study of first steps toward obedience, responding to and living out the Easter story, the Jesus story. How? Lesson #5, the story of Jesus, what does it mean? Resurrection living. Today I do seek to advance my study of Acts. I want to talk about us.

The fifth truth—the story of Jesus changes everything. This is not about baptism and then you get to stop, this is about changed lives. This is resurrection living. Easter is about changed lives. Easter once a year doesn't work. That is OT—Passover once a year. In the NT, remembering Easter is weekly, remembering resurrection is every week.

The book of Acts is filled with stories of changed lives—the apostles, 3000, 5000, the Seven, Simon the sorcerer—don't you want to think he got it right? Paul, Cornelius, the list continues. Today we live in Acts 29, and the list continues. This is about us.

The Jesus story is a story of resurrection. The topic that got the early preachers in trouble was resurrection. Nothing is quite so exciting as resurrection—the dead living again, anastasis, literally "to stand up." Spring is aptly named. This is a time of bounce back capacity, resiliency, renewal, rejuvenation, restoration.

Christ's resurrection story is told by all four gospels. Not many other resurrections in the gospels. The son of the widow of Nain, Jairus's daughter. One resurrection story, well-known, is unique to John's gospel—the resurrection of Lazarus. These are stories of physical resurrection. This is almost always the meaning of the word in the NT.

Today we think of resurrection, I want to affirm that Jesus is our leader in resurrection. He went first, he succeeded, he shows the way. In fact, in the Supper we celebrate his death and resurrection every Sunday, "until he comes." There is something nice about having a leader. Even more meaningful, it is special when the leader chooses us. Leaders are for leading. How can we know if someone is a leader? Is anyone following? Jesus is our spiritual leader.

Jesus leads us in a specific path--resurrection living. What does this mean? How do you understand this? Today we focus not on resurrection after our death, but on resurrection living in the world today.

This resurrection living is true life, authentic, genuine. It is not characterized by failure. It is not futile, it is not fatal, it is not final. It is life that is full, free, forgiven, and oriented toward the future.

When Jesus leads us in resurrection living...

1. Our lives are not futile. Jesus PROVIDES.

Literally, pouring out easily, empty, vain, useless. We would perhaps be empty were it not for the larger, eternal perspective. Jesus gives purpose. Life is difficult, not easy. Burdensome. But as the poem, "Footprints," suggests, Jesus helps carry that burden.

2. Our failures are not fatal. Jesus EMPOWERS.

Literally, resulting in death, mortal, lethal. The word is related to fate. Destiny, inevitable, predetermined, controlled, decided in advance, decreed. The results of our failures are not fatal.

We all make mistakes, but mistakes are not permanent, not eternal when Jesus is leading us. Through Jesus we find power to overcome.

3. Our death will not be final. Jesus PROMISES.

Promises of Jesus cannot be broken, undone, forgotten. In 1 Cor. 15, he is described as the firstfruits, the promise of what is to come.

Today, we celebrate, but tomorrow life's rocky road may return. The roses may show their thorns. Go away today knowing one thing, not just that it is so nice that Jesus was raised from the dead, but that because he was raised, "Burdens are lifted at Calvary." Sins are covered, futility, fatality, and finality are erased. As we become like him, we are "Christians." Will you on this Easter Sunday mirror Jesus--experience the death of the old person, bury that old self in baptism, experience the beginning of resurrection living? It is the beginning of life with him, for him, following him.

Apr 9 To whom is God sending you with the story of Jesus?

Introduction

Thinking and rethinking Acts, the gospel, the good news of Jesus. This sermon is basically a summary of what I saw when I studied Acts. Here are the principles we have identified: the story of Jesus is a life and death story (or a death and life story); the story of Jesus is to be proclaimed; the story of Jesus is to be proclaimed even to the most unlikely; the story of Jesus is a forgiveness story; the story of Jesus changes everything.

First steps toward obedience, responding to and living out the Easter story, the Jesus story. How? It is appropriate that we have one more post-Easter lesson in this series. Lesson #6, the story of Jesus, what does it mean? The last truth—really a question: to whom is God sending you with the story of Jesus?

Acts is a story of God sending people to tell the story

- God sent the apostles to the multitudes of gathered Jews, 3000 responded.
- God sent the apostles to preach in the city of Jerusalem, many more responses, eventually 5000 counting only the men.
- God sent Stephen, he died.
- God sent Philip to Samaria.
- God sent Philip to the desert, to an Ethiopian nobleman.
- God sent Ananias to Saul.
- God sent Peter to Cornelius, a Gentile, but was thereafter content to send Peter to the Jews.
- God sent Paul to the Gentiles. Acts is filled with specific names and places.

When Paul was sent to the Gentiles, he was sent to some of the most unlikely

Paul tells about being sent to preach the gospel to the Gentiles three times in Acts: chapters 9,22,26. He mentions it in Galatians 1. He was acutely aware of having been sent by God to preach. He felt he had no other option, 1 Cor. 9. I learn from all of Paul's accounts, but I especially like 26:15-20.

- Paul was a servant and witness
- Paul experienced God's rescue, and was promised continued rescue as he went to preach
- Paul was sent:
 - to open eyes
 - to turn people from darkness
 - to turn people from Satan to God
 - to offer forgiveness
 - to show people the way of the sanctified life

Principles, Takeaways for your prayer life--

SACRIFICE. Ours is a world of opportunity, challenge, blessing. A poll found that most are "satisfied" with our evangelism and mission efforts. Wake up! Our efforts are meager at best. A man who served many years as a missionary was asked, "Do you like the work?" He replied, "Do I like this work? No, I do not like dirt, dirt floors, rough concrete floors. I do not like walking into houses through goat refuse and chicken litter. I do not like people who live like the world—but they do not know any better, and someone has to tell them. Is a Christian to do nothing for Christ that is unpleasant? Liking or disliking has nothing to do with it. We have orders to 'go' and we go. Love constrains us."

SENT BY GOD. A missionary is one sent. Missions is inspired not by the needs of men but the command of Jesus. I go because he told me to go. The great danger in missions is that what God's eternal plan for his creation is overshadowed by the pressing needs of humanity. Sympathy overwhelms the sense of "sentness." Seeing such enormous needs, human powers fail. We forget that we are not sent to elevate people, educate people, nor to ease the plight of needy people. We are sent with good news for eternity. Inspiration to preach the gospel is always first, never second.

URGENCY. We do not make our lists, thinking and praying about those to whom God is sending us, because we do not grasp the urgency. I read about a young missionary that went to a remote village to tell the gospel story. No one in that village of 231 people had ever once heard the gospel. The chief reluctantly let the missionary speak to the entire village. When the villagers were told about Jesus' life, arrest, crucifixion and resurrection, they were amazed. Some wept openly. They marveled that the Son of God loved them and died in their place so their many sins might be forgiven. They wanted to know more. An older man came to the young missionary immediately after the presentation and asked, "When did God give you this message? How long have you had it?" The missionary replied, "God gave this message to people long ago, but I only learned it a year ago." The obviously upset man grabbed the young missionary and through tears he cried out, 'God gave you this message last year and you did not come to tell us before my mother, father, and son died?" All around us are people who have not heard the gospel and those who need to hear the old, old story. All around us are people with problems so severe that only the gospel can provide relief. The gospel is God's power for salvation. In our world are billions of people who have never heard the gospel once. They are waiting for someone to tell them the Truth. Why are we not going? Are we purposefully disobedient? Are we ignorantly disobedient?

BE SPECIFIC. To whom is God sending you with the story of Jesus?

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