

## **Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth One Verse at a Time***

### **John: The Apostle of Love**

Scripture: 1 John

Code: 62-1

The Apostle John is known to us because of his proximity to Jesus Christ in the gospel accounts. He's one of the inner circle of three, Peter, James and John, the brother of James, as you well know. John is a familiar figure in most of the scenes with Jesus and the disciples. We have sort of an image in our minds of what John is like. I think that's pretty typical of most people but the truth of the matter is, the image of John that most people have is probably not anywhere near what he was really like. I think when we think of the Apostle John, we have images of somebody who's somewhat meek, somebody who's maybe almost effeminate because this is the way he's been depicted in so many medieval paintings, somebody who is pale skinned, quiet, depicted as sort of leaning on Jesus' shoulder looking up with some kind of a dove-eyed stare into the face of Christ. The image of John is a far cry from what he's really like.

It was about a year ago that we were doing a series on the Apostles and in that series I gave a message on John. And I'll go back over a little bit of that as we get to know this one who is the writer of these three amazing epistles. But let me just say, to start with, that John was a very outgoing and almost volatile person. In some ways he is the very opposite of the way he is depicted...highly emotional, somewhat demanding.

He is really a man for our times. His writing is very bold, it is very direct, it is very dogmatic. I don't think there's another New Testament writer that is as dogmatic as John is. He is authoritative in his writing. He is committed to absolutes. He is black and white. He is a very exclusive preacher much needed in a very inclusive time. These, as you know, are great days in the life of the church. These are days when Christian thinking is loose, if there's any Christian thinking at all. It is accepting, it is tolerant, it is inclusive, it is uncertain, it is lacking in doctrinal clarity, it is lacking in dogmatism, it is lacking in conviction. It is given to tolerance, it is given to compromise. This is a perfect time to hear from John, this black and white, dogmatic, exclusive, absolute, authoritative Apostle. His epistles provide for us a powerful message for a compromising, conviction-less, open-minded, permissive and liberal thinking church. He's really the perfect writer to address the church today.

If John the Baptist had written any epistles, we would be well served to study those because John the Baptist is a man, I think, like John the Apostle. But John the Apostle is the writer of choice and he is a man for our time to confront the laxity in the church, the shallowness among the professed people

of God and the lack of conviction about what is really true and what is not. John writes with simple words. He writes in clear certainties. Nothing in John's writing is vague, nothing is ambiguous. He is firmly committed to establishing the absolute truth in the mind of his readers. And I really do believe that our study of John's letters will...will bring, I think, a new sense of certainty to all who hear and understand. And if there's anything lacking in modern evangelical thinking, it is certainty...it is certainty. If we're already certain, he'll make us stronger in our certainty.

Now just a few interesting notes. John never identifies himself as the author in any of these three letters. As you read through them, 1 John, 2 John, and 3 John, you don't find his name and that brings up the question: How do we know he wrote them? And the answer to the question can be given in a, I think, understandable way.

We know he wrote them, first of all, because that is the strong and consistent, universal testimony of the early church. There were people in the early church who knew John and they knew what John wrote and they knew John wrote these epistles and they told their friends and fellow believers that John wrote them. They passed that down to the next generation and the next generation and the next and it kept passing down. The universal, strong and consistent testimony of John's authorship can be traced all the way back to those people who knew John. These epistles have a universal attribution to John, this disciple, this apostle, this brother of James, well-known, a dominant figure in the apostolic band. Also, John lived the longest of all apostles. He lived till almost the end of that first century, probably dying in the year or around the year 98 A.D. And so his life overlaps many in the generation following the apostles. And so when there is a universal attribution of these epistles to John, and that tradition goes way, way back to the church fathers, that is a solid foundation to believe in his authorship. There is even one early church writer by the name of Papias in the generation after John who knew John personally and called John, "A living and abiding voice for God."

Also, the very fact that John doesn't name himself argues for his authorship. Since only a well-known, only a prominent, in fact only a singularly preeminent Apostle would venture to write epistles that he intended would have divine authority, divine impact and not use his name. For an Apostle to write a letter demanding submission, demanding obedience from his readers without identifying himself could only be done if he were in fact a singular Apostle. All historical evidence leads us to conclude that John's writing period in his life was at the end of his life, that it was in the nineties of that first century that John did his writing, including the book of Revelation which is usually thought to have been given to John around the year 96 A.D. By that time, John is virtually the last man standing, the last remaining Apostle. And so when he writes it's almost unnecessary for him to identify himself, he being the only one left, everyone knew who he was.

It was also consistent with John not to refer to himself by name. In his gospel, for example, he doesn't use his name. He refers to himself by descriptive phrases. He refers to himself, for example, as the Apostle whom Jesus loved. He refers to himself as the one who reclined near Jesus at the Last Supper. He does this a number of times when wanting to identify his presence at an event, he doesn't use his name but describes himself in another way. There's a measure of humility in this. Apparently he was a self-effacing man in that regard. But I think even more than that, he described himself not just in humble ways, but in ways that portrayed this magnificent, overwhelming reality that he was an intimate and beloved companion of Jesus. You could call yourself the Apostle who was sitting next to Peter, but how much better to call yourself the Apostle or the disciple whom Jesus loved? Every opportunity that John had to make reference to himself seemed to be an opportunity to celebrate his intimacy with Christ. And so when you don't see his name in his epistles, you're not surprised because you don't see his name in his gospel and most students of the New Testament would assume that the gospel and the epistles were written around the same time. There are a number of reasons for that, not the least of which is very similar vocabulary which is consistent with the develop of language through periods of time. Both the gospel and the epistles also combat a single heresy that later became known as Gnosticism. It eventually developed into that a century or so later, but the seeds of Gnosticism had begun to infect the church in the time of John's life, at the end of the first century. Already by the end of the first century, a few decades after the death of the Apostle Paul, the seeds of false doctrine had taken root that developed into this future Gnosticism. That is addressed in the gospel of John and it's addressed in the epistles of John, again arguing for common authorship confronting a common problem at a common time. Again causing us to believe that both the gospel and the epistles were written at the latter third of the first century. That also, as I said, is the time when God gave him the revelation, the apocalypse.

It is also thought by some scholars that the gospel of John and the epistles of John were written before 95 A.D. because in 95 A.D. there was this massive persecution by Domitian, a massacre of believers. And the reason some scholars believe these were written before that is because there is no reference to that in these epistles.

From 90 to 95 or so, John was in charge in particular of the churches of Asia Minor, modern Turkey. John was probably an overseer of the church at Ephesus which had been founded, as you know, by Paul and out of the church at Ephesus other churches were established that we know as the seven churches of Asia Minor, to whom letters are written in the first section of Revelation. John had responsibility as an Apostle and as an overseer, over the churches of Asia Minor during that period of time. Although he was an old man at the time, he was still a fiery proclaimer of truth, he was still a preacher and a teacher and a pastor and a shepherd. And for that preaching and for that teaching he was taken prisoner, probably around the year 95, and he was condemned to die in exile on an island out in the Mediterranean called the island of Patmos. It was on that island of Patmos around the year

96 A.D. in exile that he was given the apocalypse and the apocalypse was to encourage a very discouraged Apostle...very discouraged. We know he had reason to be discouraged, he was persecuted, he was put out of circulation, he was exiled to the island. But even more compelling than that in his discouragement was the churches over which he had leadership were beginning to turn away from the truth. And that is manifest in the seven letters to the churches in which two letters have a positive message to a church that's doing well, and five letters have a negative message to a compromising sin-riddled church. So God gave him the Revelation to encourage him that there was a glorious future, even if the present was tragic. He was in exile. Jerusalem had been destroyed in 70 A.D. The land of Israel had been massacred, 985 Jewish towns and villages had felt the slaughtering power of Rome. Didn't look good for God's promises to Israel, didn't look good for Christ's promises to the church, the church was in disarray and even after John's best efforts, the seeds of compromise and iniquity and sin had found their way into the church and here he was in exile himself.

All of this writing then is crammed into a few years at the end of the first century. This last man standing, this last Apostle alive has a great burden to bear as he unfolds the truth of God for the last time as an Apostle to wrap up the writing of the New Testament. He's very old at this time, but until he was put in exile he was still preaching, still teaching, still evangelizing, still overseeing and most importantly, he was writing...he was writing. It must have been pent up, you know. All those years before that other Apostles were writing. Peter was preaching and John...we don't even hear John preach in the first thirteen chapters of Acts, Peter does all the preaching. John doesn't even say anything. Paul comes on the scene and he's preaching and teaching and writing and the other Apostles in various places having opportunity to preach and on some occasions to write or to assist the writers who are writing, but John hasn't preached a sermon, there isn't one of his sermons recorded anywhere in the New Testament. And finally after all these years as he comes to the end of his life in a flurry, an explosion of revelation he pens the gospel of John, three epistles and the book of Revelation. And truly as Papias who had direct contact with John said, "He was a living and abiding voice for God's truth." He was the last contributor to divine revelation. He was the last to add the record that God wanted written to the Scriptures.

So John was in Ephesus at the time and there was his ministry being carried out. Turn to Acts chapter 20 for a moment before we look at 1 John, I just want to show you something I think is kind of an interesting prophecy. We don't normally think of the book of Acts as a book of prophecy but there is an indication here of a prophecy that John lived to see fulfilled. Paul is the speaker here. He is in Ephesus. He has founded the church at Ephesus. He has established the elders there. And he now comes back to meet with them. They are meeting at a place called Miletus which is near Ephesus. Paul is meeting with his own elders that he has established, he has been away, he's come back and he's meeting with the elders of the church at Ephesus. And in verse 28 he says, "Be on guard for yourselves, and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood." He says, "Gentlemen, I want you to be

on guard, I want you to get in a protective mode. You are overseers and you are shepherds. You have been entrusted with the church of God that is precious because it has been purchased with His blood, be on guard."

Why? "I know..." there is the language of Revelation, there is the language of certainty, Paul has received divine revelation, "I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock." That is a prophecy. "And from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore, be on the alert, remembering that night and day for a period of three years I didn't cease to admonish each one with tears. And I am telling you, I have to commend you to God and to the Word of His grace as your only protection." Now that is...be on guard, be alert, stay with the Word because I have been told, I know from God Himself that when I leave, wolves will come in from the outside and perverse men will rise up from the inside leading you astray as much as is possible. Decades earlier that prophecy was given by Paul and John writes his epistles to combat the very fulfillment of that prophecy. False teachers did come in. They came in to Ephesus. They started by attacking first love, as we find out in the letter to the church at Ephesus in the book of Revelation. They also were sowing the seeds of what later became known as Gnosticism, questioning the fundamentals of the Christian faith, the true relationship between the deity and the humanity of Jesus. And they were questioning who really is a Christian, who is a genuine believer. They wanted some inclusiveness. They wanted to open it a little wider to include some other people. John living to see the fulfillment of Paul's prophecy writes these letters to cry out for the truth of the gospel, the narrowness of the gospel. John is writing from Ephesus to the church, the church, first of all, in Asia Minor, but of course the Revelation of God was then distributed to the whole church warning them about the insidious inroads of false doctrine. And he calls for this exclusive kind of perspective and he does so in terms that are absolutely clear and unambiguous.

Now before we look at the letter itself, let me just help you to kind of regrip John a little bit so you understand what makes John tick. There are two major realities in the spiritual realm, two inseparable, essential, irreplaceable realities that are most critical to all effective ministry. Those two realities are truth and love...truth and love. Ephesians 4 talks about evangelists and pastors who were preceded by Apostles and prophets. And whether you were an apostle or a prophet, whether you are an evangelist or a teaching pastor, that passage in Ephesians 4 says we are to speak the truth in love. And at the end of the day those are the two most compelling realities in all ministry. The priority is the truth, proclaimed in love. That's the balance. That's the divine balance...sound doctrine and the graciousness, the love of the Spirit. It's not enough to have the love and the gentleness and the graciousness and leave out the truth. You have to have the truth. The ignorant and the deceived need the truth. And it's not enough to love them, that is to leave them in error, leave them in shallowness. It's not enough to come to people clothed in tolerant sentimentality which is a poor substitute for genuine love. There must be the truth.

But it's not unloving, self-exalting orthodoxy either. It's not good when love is missing and the truth is just cold facts stifling and unattractive. Ministry must possess truth and love for that is the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ. Christ was the perfect image of truth and love in balance. If you're seeking to minister, these are the two things you seek. You seek to know the truth as God has revealed it, and you seek to love as Christ loves. And there all, as always in every era, lots of imbalance with respect to these two virtues. Plenty of shallow teaching, plenty of tolerance of error in the name of love, and there's always plenty of hard, harsh, brash, self-righteous, cold orthodoxy. Sentiment and superficiality on the one hand, and orthodox indifference on the other. Critical mix and the critical balance is what God desires.

The perfect example of that, of course, is Jesus Christ. But John is a marvelous example of that as an Apostle. He may be the best New Testament model to look at, although it's hard not to see Paul as at least his equal. If you understand those two things, you understand John. Eventually he became humble. It wasn't that way in the beginning. Jesus called him a "son of thunder." He didn't manifest humility at the start, he manifested a bold, self-promoting ambition. And even, along with his brother James, asked his mother to ask Jesus if he and his brother could sit on the right and left hand of Jesus in the Kingdom. He had a volatile personality. He had a fervent passionate personality. He was intolerant, very ambitious. He was anything but that dove-like person he's often painted as being in those medieval paintings. In fact, when James one time wanted to bring down fire and burn up all the Samaritans, that's a little less than the desirable evangelistic love, when James wanted to call down fire from heaven and just burn up all the Samaritans, John was in agreement. John agreed. John wasn't the passive brother, they were both sons of thunder. When James' mother went to Jesus to ask for special privilege and honor from the Lord, John was there too. They were explosive, ambitious, driven.

You may think, "Well it was just John tagging along with James." Well you might think that till you turn to Mark chapter 9. Turn to Mark chapter 9 for a moment because here in the gospels is the only time when you see John alone. In the first ten verses is about the transfiguration, Peter, James and John, verse 2, are going up to the mountain, Jesus is transfigured, that is in a miraculous way the veil of His flesh is pulled away and they see the glory of God shining through. His garments became radiant, exceedingly white as no launderer on earth can whiten them. Elijah appears along with Moses, they're talking to Jesus and you remember the amazing experience there. A cloud formed in verse 7, overshadowing them. This is God appearing and out of the voice...out of the cloud comes the voice of God, "This is My beloved Son, listen to Him." All at once they looked around, saw no one, that is Moses and Elijah disappear, God is gone, only Jesus. They have seen a glimpse of the glory of God in His Son. Unique privilege...unique privilege.

And while it was a glorious privilege, it also had the ability to appeal to their ambition, didn't it? Make them think that they were better than everybody else because they had been given such a privilege. Over in verse 33 of that chapter, Mark 9, "They came to Capernaum, Jesus was in the house and they went into the house at Capernaum and Jesus asked them a question. He said, 'What were you discussing on the way? What were you guys talking about while we were coming over here?' But they kept silent for on the way they had discussed which of them was the greatest." Boy, there is a sad discussion. The whole way over there they're like a bunch of kids arguing about which of them is the greatest. And you can know what James and John were saying, "Na-na-na-na-na...you weren't up there during the transfiguration, only Peter and we were there."

"Sitting down He called the Twelve and said to them, 'Anyone wants to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all.' Taking a child, He set him before them and taking him in His arms He said to them, 'Whoever receives one child like this in My name receives Me, and whoever receives Me doesn't receive Me but Him who sent Me.'" Boy, what a rebuke. You need to be humble. You need to be last of all. You need to be the servant of all. You need to be like a child. They are convicted. They are embarrassed. They are silent. They are indicted for their personal ambition. And particularly Peter, James and John were rebuked. And then John speaks for the only time, verse 38, the only time it's recorded that he spoke, "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in Your name and we tried to hinder him because he was not following us."

"But Jesus said, 'Do not hinder him, for there's no one who shall perform a miracle in My name and be able soon afterward to speak evil of Me, for he who is not against us is for us.'"

You know, why did John bring this up? Well his conscience was bothering him. In light of Jesus' rebuke, John's conscience bothered him. Jesus said, "You need to stop trying to be in charge, stop trying to be in control. You need to start being last. You need to be a servant. You need to be like a little child who opens his arms to somebody." John's feeling guilty. He says, "Well, Lord, I didn't do that. I saw somebody casting out demons in your name and I should have received him like a little child like You said, but I didn't, I tried to stop him because he wasn't following us, he wasn't one of the group."

That's the only thing John ever says and he feels guilty about being stubborn, obstinate. He feels guilty about being narrow. He feels guilty about being prejudice. He feels guilty about being sectarian. He's wired like that. Yeah, burn up the Samaritans. Yeah, we want to be in the chief seats. Yeah, buddy, you're not in our group, shut up! This is John. He had a real competitive spirit. It showed up in condemning this man who was trying to minister in the name of Jesus, whether he was actually doing it or not, he was trying to do it. John shut him down. Jesus rebukes John for that sectarian attitude.

So John has the ability to be narrow. He has the ability to be dogmatic. He has the ability to be exclusive. He has the ability to be prejudice. He has the ability to isolate himself and draw a hard line. He has the ability to be black and white. You want to know something? That's usable if it's for the right things. Why would God choose a man like that? Why would the Lord Jesus make him an Apostle? Because this is the kind of man that can be shaped into strength. He had the potential to be hard for the truth. What the Lord had to do was make him loving. And perhaps it was that critical rebuke there in Mark 9 that catapulted John toward being loving. He had that kind of personality of conviction, of narrowness, uncompromising, intolerant devotion to what was true. He was very black and white, he had a clear-cut view of spiritual realities. There was nothing vague in his world. And that was good and God needed it but it had to be tempered with love.

And so, that's why...that's why when the medieval artist starts to paint John, he starts to paint a lover because it was eventually true of John. And it shines through the gospel that he wrote and it shines through the epistles that he wrote. For in the gospel of John you see this unwavering regard for the truth. Everything with John is absolute, there is light and darkness in the gospel. There is life and death, there's the Kingdom of God, and there's the kingdom of the devil. There are the children of God and there are the children of the devil. There's the judgment of the righteous and there's the judgment of the wicked. There is salvation and there is damnation. There is receiving Christ and rejecting Christ. There is a vine and it has some branches with fruit and some with no fruit. There is obedience to His commands and there is disobedience to His commands. And that's the way it's always portrayed by John. And when you get to the epistles, it's the same thing. There are those who are in the light, and those who are in the darkness. There are those who confess their sin and those who deny their sin. There are those who are disobedient to Christ and those who are obedient to Him. There are those who love others and those who don't, those who love God and those who don't, those who are righteous and those who are sinful, those who keep the commandments and those who don't, those who believe and those who don't, and it's just that simple.

In the second epistle, 2 John, calls for complete separation from all those people who aren't faithful to the truth. And the third epistle says essentially the same thing. The one who does good belongs to God, the one who doesn't hasn't seen God. John gives us a fundamental understanding of Christianity in its absolute sense, but he does it in these epistles as we will find with a tenderness and a love of a pastor. Somewhere along the line, this man had been tempered. Jesus wanted his strengths, He wanted his resolution, his commitment, but He needed to get rid of all the hints of selfish ambition and pride and He needed to turn him from being a sectarian to being a lover who could embrace while calling them to the truth.

And so, this is John. And what we're going to get is vintage John in these epistles, vintage John...a man who had been transformed literally into one that church history calls the Apostle of love, the Apostle of love. In fact, his theology of love appears in his gospel. John writes in the gospel that God is a God of love, that God loved His Son, that God loved Christ's disciples, that God loves the world, that God is loved by Christ, that Christ loved the disciples in general, that Christ loved them as individuals, that Christ expected men to love Him, that Christ taught that we should love one another and that love is the fulfilling of the whole law. That he writes in the gospel and in 1 John chapter 3. But John's love never slid into some sentimentality. It was never sentimentality and tolerance masquerading as love. Until the end of his life as the last Apostle to die at the end of the first century, he never, never tolerated deception, he never tolerated lies, he was always committed to the truth. He never tolerated sin of any kind.

And I think the Lord knew that the most powerful advocate of truth, the most black and white Apostle had also to be the most powerful representation of love, or that truth would come across harsh. And so isn't it interesting that the most clear-cut, black and white, authoritative, absolute writer of the New Testament is known in history as the Apostle of love? Not a love that takes you down the road of tolerance, but a love that takes you down the road of truth, for telling the truth is the most loving thing anyone could ever do. John was a lover of the truth more than anything and he loved the truth and the God of the truth and the Christ who is truth incarnate so much that he would tell people lovingly the absolute truth. And so we're going to learn the truth in no uncertain terms from a man who is committed to it but also with a heart of love.

And, you know, this to me...this is what kind of pushed me over the edge on doing 1 John because this is so desperately needed today. And the assumption today is that if you hold to the truth without ambiguity, without vagueness, if you hold to the absolute truth of Scripture, you're somehow not loving. Nothing, of course, could be further from the truth.

Turn to 1 John for just a moment and let me show you three things that are going to happen to you in this study. Three things are going to happen to you. The first one appears in chapter 1 verse 4, "These things we write...says John...so that your joy may be made complete." That's the first thing, that is the reason John wrote. That is his intent in writing. Yes he wrote in a time of crisis. Yes he wrote because he was seeing the living fulfillment of a prophecy made by the Apostle Paul decades earlier about error coming into the church and tearing up the church doctrinally and in terms of conduct. Yes it was a dangerous, dangerous time. Yes there was a crisis of the truth. But he had a bigger purpose than just saying I want to give you the truth, he says, "I'm writing these things so that your joy may be full." That's the real goal. It's not just the truth, it's the joy that the truth produces. It's the joy that the truth produces.

He learned that, I think, from the Lord Himself. He learned that the Lord did what he did, said what he said, taught what he taught that men might have joy. Listen to what Jesus said in John 15:11 in the upper room at the Last Supper, Jesus said, "These things I have spoken to you that My joy may be in you and that your joy may be made full." The Lord had taught John that truth is for the purpose of producing joy, lasting, full, complete joy. The straightforward, unambiguous, exclusive, black and white, dogmatic, authoritative, absolute, certain truth that Jesus taught was to bring joy. And so John would approach his ministry the same way. The first thing that's going to happen for you then is this study is going to increase your joy. Sound good? All right.

Second thing, turn to chapter 2. And again this is typical of the unambiguous John. If you want to know the reason he wrote, you just read it because he says it. Chapter 2 verse 1, "My little children, I am writing these things to you that you may not sin." Not too hard to interpret, is it? Here's the second purpose. His first purpose is joy, his second purpose is holiness. "I'm writing these things so you don't sin," and he launches into a discussion of matters that are concerning that very thing. He had heard his Lord say, "Go and sin no more." He learned from his own Lord that the Lord wanted men and women full of joy and He wanted them holy. And so he said my purpose is the same as my Lord's purpose, I want to bring you joy and holiness.

And then he has a third purpose, chapter 5 and verse 13. "These things I have written to you," isn't he straightforward? "I have written these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God in order that you may know that you have...what?...eternal life." I want you to have full joy, I want you not to sin, and I want you to know that you have eternal life. I want to eliminate your sadness, your sin and your doubt. This is assurance. I want to bring you joy. I want to bring you to holiness. I want to bring you assurance. I want you to know that you have eternal life. I don't want you to live in fear and doubt. I learned that from my Lord, too, he could say because He said, "Whoever believes in Him," John 3:15, "may have eternal life." "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whosoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life."

I'm an instrument, John is saying. There are three things that God wants in your life; joy, holiness and assurance. And I'm the agent of God to write a letter to you that will grant you these three blessings. And I can tell you this, when this study is over I believe God will honor the intent of these words. Your joy will be full. You will turn more readily and eagerly from sin. And you will have assurance of your eternal life. That's the purpose for which the Spirit of God inspired this letter.

Does that interest you? Good. Then you'll be back. Let's pray.

Father, as we just kind of start tonight, we can already feel the anticipation mounting and building as we sit at the feet of this beloved, blessed, old man who picked up his quill and under the inspiration of

the Holy Spirit wrote to believers to teach them truths that would give them full joy and holiness and assurance. And here we are as have many, many generations since, sitting at the feet of that old man who was as far as humanly possible the best illustration of truth and love in balance and we eagerly await his instruction, as well as the power of the Spirit of God to implement this truth in our lives. Grant to all this precious church family the happiness and the holiness and the security that this letter is intended to bring, for that we say thank You in our Savior's name. Amen.

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