The Joyous Return.

BY REV. C. H. SPURGEON,

"O Israel, return unto the Lord thy God; for thou hast fallen by thine iniquity. Take with you words, and turn to the Lord: say unto Him, Take away all iniquity, and receive us graciously: so will we render the calves of our lips. Asshur shall not save us; we will not ride upon horses; neither will we say any more to the work of our hands, Ye are our Gods: for in Thee the fatherless finde th mercy."—Hosea 14: 1-3.

We are in the last chapter of the book of the prophet Hosea. Throughout the book there has been thunder; some times a low rumbling, as of a distant tempest, sometimes peal on peal, as of a storm immediately overhead. And now the tempest has gathered all its force. Here it culminates. You expect the bolt of heaven to destroy. Lo, instead thereof a silver shower of mercy! The gentle drops come down plenteously, and you hear their fall upon the tender herb like music soft and low. God does not say, "O Israel—depart accursed." But, instead thereof, in dulcet tones, He cries, "O Israel, return unto the Lord thy God." In the midst of wrath He remembers mercy.

"When God's right arm is bared for war,
And thunders clothe his cloudy car,"

e'en then He stays His uplifted hand, reins in the steeds of vengeance, and holds communion with grace; "for His mercy endureth forever," and "judgment is His strange work."

This is a wonderful chapter to be at the end of such a book. I had never expected from such a prickly shrub to gather so fair a flower, so sweet a fruit; but so it is: where sin abounded, grace doth much more abound. No chapter in the Bible cap be more rich in mercy than this last of Hosea; and yet no chapter in the Bible might, in the natural order of things, have been more terrible in judgment. Where we looked for the blackness of darkness, behold a noontide of light!

While I am preaching from such a text, I feel the need of special help from the Holy Spirit. I lift up my heart for it. Will you not, my brethren, pray for me, that my hearers may not only hear my voice, but may perceive the inward voice of God speaking to their hearts! The Lord Himself is the speaker of the text; it is Jehovah who says, "O Israel, return." May many of you hear the voice of God, and in that voice perceive an overpowering omnipotence which shall turn your thoughts and souls into the right way, making you willing in the day of His power!

I. First, notice the call to come: "O Israel, return unto the Lord thy God." O that the call may be made effectual this day!

It is a very instructive call; for it tells the sinner exactly what he has to do. Return: that is, reverse your course. The course you have taken is the opposite of that which you ought to have taken; therefore, come back. You have gone from God; come back to God. You have been prayerless; begin to pray! You have been hardened; yield to the Word. You have been full of cavils; believe even as a little child. Bring forth fruits meet for repentance, and not the fruits of obstinate persistence in evil. To many there could be no better direction in spiritual morals than this word, "Return." Do what you have not done; leave undone what you have been doing. Reverse the engine. Take the other track! "Return!" is but a single word, but that word is full of meaning. There is to be a change, a total change, a coming back to God.

I would remind you also, that it is a divine call. "O Israel, return!" Who saith it? The prophet? Yes, and more than the prophet: He who pleads is the prophet's God. The first motion towards reconciliation is never from the sinner, but always from God. The sinner does not cry, "O Lord, my God, permit me to return;" but the Lord, Himself, who watches the wandering one, and sees him falling to his ruin, cries out, in the freeness of His grace, "O Israel, return!" What matters it to the Lord, though a man should even plunge down to hell? The Lord will be glorious, though the rebel perish. The Lord hath no need of men. Yet the Lord thinks much of wandering men, and longs for their return. Out of the freeness and riches of His love He calls them to Himself. He swears by His own life that He willeth not the death of the sinner, but that he turn unto Him and live. Because of His spontaneous love and pity, He crieth, plaintively, "O Israel, return unto the Lord thy God." Hearken, then, my hearers. If it were my call, you might refuse it with small blame; but it is God's call; shall your Maker call in vain? Will you add to all your sin the turning of your back upon the God of love? Shall Jehovah cry in pity to your souls, and cry in vain? God grant it be not so! Here from this text, which, once written, remaineth, there soundeth out of the eternal deep of boundless mercy this cry of grace "O Israel, return unto the Lord thy God!"

2. Secondly, I beg you to notice the argument for coming. "Return unto the Lord thy God; for thou hast fallen by thine iniquity." What a wonderful argument is this! You are in an evil plight through sin; therefore return to the Lord your God. But, saith one, "I was afraid I might not come because I had fallen." See how your fear is anticipated. The case is reversed, and your having fallen is made by the Lord into an argument why you should return to him. "I am broken kneed," saith one; "I have fallen so badly that I shall never be worth a penny for any good work.' Yet the Lord cries, "Return for thou hast fallen." I hear one moaning, "I am broken to pieces by sin: I am like an old pot that has fallen on the stones. I am useless henceforth." For that very reason the Lord of mercy bids you return. "Return unto the Lord thy God; for thou hast fallen." What ingenuity of mercy there is in the heart of God! See, He takes away the reason for despair, and makes out of it an argument for hope. Because you have thus fallen, you have need to return; and God considers your need, not your merit. Because you are fallen, God's pity invites you to return. Use the word "fallen" literally. If you are a fallen man, return; if you are a fallen woman, return. Why is it that the word "fallen" has a force in reference to woman which it has not in regard to man: surely a fallen man is as sad a sight as a fallen woman. But whether male or female, here is the argument for your returning to God: "Thou hast fallen; therefore return."

I pray you, yield to so gracious a plea.

Dear friends, the argument is also this: the cause of your evil plight is sin. "Thou hast fallen by thine iniquity." Sin is the root of the mischief. Do not say, "I was fated to be so." "Thou hast fallen by thine iniquity." It is true that thou hast fallen in Adam; but thou hast also fallen by thine own actual sin, and thou hast enough to do to confess thine own act and deed. Thine own wilful omissions and commissions have ruined thee. Thou art wounded, but thine own hand has given the injurious stab. "Thou hast fallen by thine iniquity;" blame no one else. That you are an unbeliever is your own fault; you will not come to Christ that you might have life. The way you follow is the way of your own choice, in which you follow the imaginations and devices of your own heart. All the misery of your present estate is due to yourself alone. "O Israel, thou hast destroyed thyself!" Feel that it is so, and confess it before God, taking to yourself shame and confusion of face.

The only remedy for your evil case is to come back to God. If you have fallen by your iniquity, you must be set free from this iniquity; but you cannot free yourself. "Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots?" You have lain in the lye of evil till you are dyed ingrain with the scarlet of iniquity, and the color cannot be taken out except by miracle or grace. God alone can take away the spots from the leopard, and the blackness from the Ethiopian, and the crimson from the deep dyed wool. The Lord and the Lord only can work these marvels. Hence you are called upon to "return unto the Lord your God," for your only hope of restoration lies in God Himself.

O what a blessing it is that there is such a mighty Saviour! If anybody here perishes it is not because the Saviour is not able to save him. If any man here shall die in his sin, it can only be accounted for by the Saviour's declaration, "If ye believe not that I am He, ye shall die in your sins." "He is able to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by Him." "The blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanseth us from all sin." How intensely do I pray that you may return to God, urged by these reasons; namely, that you are helplessly, hopelessly lost, and Christ is a mighty Saviour, on whom your help is laid! I would that for this reason you would come to Him, even this very day! He will receive you even now; for He hath said it: "Him that cometh to Me I will in no wise cast out."

3. Now let us see how our gracious God meets us, and provides for us the help in coming.

The Lord helps our ignorance and our fear. He gives us direction as to what to bring. Read the second verse. "Ah!" saith the sinner, "I do not know what to take with me in approaching the Most High. I have no bullocks, no lambs, no incense. In my hand there is no price of money or merit." The answer is, "Take with you words." Your heart is right; you are longing for salvation; you need not say, "Wherewith shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before the high God?" "Take with you words;" you have plenty of them. The heart must be there first, and then nothing more is asked than "words." Cheap enough is this offering. Leaves of the wood are not so easy to come at. This is simple enough; he that hath a tongue can bring words. O man and woman, whatever else you cannot bring, you can bring words; for indeed you have multiplied words to sin. The Lord helping you to return, you need not hesitate for want of an offering, since He saith, "Take with you words." This is but another version of our grand hymn—

"Nothing in my hand I bring;
Simply to Thy cross I cling;
Naked, come to Thee for dress;
Helpless, look to Thee for grace;
Foul, I to the fountain fly;
Wash me, Saviour, or I die."

And then, the Lord helps the coming sinner by a direction as to where to turn. "Take with you words, and turn to the Lord." "I was wanting to see the minister," saith one. Turn to the Lord! "I desire to converse with a man of God." Turn to the Lord! We read in the book of Job, "To which of the saints wilt thou turn?" My answer would be—Sinner, turn thou to the sinner's friend, and leave the saints alone. If thou wouldest be saved, turn not to Peter, nor James, nor John; but turn to Him whom all these call "Master and Lord." "Take with you words, and turn to the Lord." Have you been in the habit of turning to a man who is called a priest? I pray you do so no longer; for there is now but one sin-atoning priest, and He is the Lord Jesus. Have you turned to ceremonies? Do you look for rest in sacraments? You look that way in vain: for they are not the way of salvation. Turn rather to the Lord as He is revealed in the Lord Jesus. Take with you words, and turn to the Lord, Himself. Against Him have you sinned: to Him make confession. You need that His anger should be turned away; seek, then, a free forgiveness from Himself. If it is His love that you want: go to Him for it, and He will receive you graciously, and love you freely.

Here I find two sentences of petition. The first is, "Take away all iniquity." Follow me, and try to pray the prayer, "O Thou that takest away the sin of the world, take away all my iniquity. It is great, but pardon it, I pray Thee; for Thou didst bear our sins in Thine own body on the tree. By the precious blood, wash away all my iniquity! Let me know that Thou hast carried my transgression away, even as the scapegoat carried the sins of Israel into the wilderness of forgetfulness. Take away all my iniquity by an act of pardon, I beseech thee. Take it away, also, in another sense—Lord take it out of my heart; take it out of my life."

Dear seekers, I pray thee, do not look on one sin, and say, "Lord, spare it!" Do not wish to have one sin left; but cry "Take it away! Take it away! Take away all iniquity. However sweet, or fascinating, or deeply seated, Lord take away all iniquity."

The next petition is, "Receive us graciously." Confess that a kind reception of you by God must be by grace alone. Nothing but grace can open a door for our returning. Sinners can not be received of the Lord on any other terms but those of mercy. We would not ask to be dealt with according to our merits; but we thank the Lord that He hath not dealt with us after our sins, nor rewarded us according to our iniquities. As to our sins, we cannot answer Him one of a thousand. The Lord must receive us graciously or reject us righteously. Are we not glad that sinners can be received in the name of grace, and find a welcome in the tender mercy of our God? Offer, then, this petition. "Receive us graciously." I am not content merely to talk to you about these gracious words; I want every soul here to use them in personal prayer. O, that the Lord would touch all lips by His grace, and lead them to say from the heart—"Lord, receive me, I return to thee. Take away all iniquity, and take me to Thyself! Receive me as a subject of Thy kingdom. Receive me of Thy grace into Thy home of love. Receive me into the family of Thy redeemed on earth, and then receive me into Thy mansion in heaven. 'Receive us graciously.'"

One sentence of promise follows those two of petition: "So will we render the calves of our lips." What are the "calves of our lips?" They are sacrifices of praise and thanksgiving. Yonder are the calves of the stall which men bring in sacrifice; they are struck down and die at the altar. God does not ask us for bullocks which have horns and hoofs. He takes no pleasure in the blood of calves, or of goats. He desires a broken heart, true faith and a humble love; these live at the altar. "Whoso offereth praise glorifieth God." Let us bring Him our best thoughts, our best expressions, our best testimonies, our heartiest praises; these are not calves of our stalls, but "calves of our lips." Let our gratitude be a living sacrifice, and our conduct a constant testimony to the goodness of God. I think we can say this morning—at least I can—"Lord, if Thou wilt spare me, I will speak for Thee." I must do so during the rest of my life, or else I shall have to change my ways and habits.

Is there not some young man here who will begin at once to take up this service for the next forty years? I wonder what young man it is that I may lay hands upon for Jesus? And some Christian woman—no, she is not a Christian yet; but I call her such, for she is going to be, I am only anticipating a little—will she not now become a Christian, and straightway render unto the Lord Jesus the calves of her lips, by bearing her testimony in her family and among her acquaintances? Who will consecrate himself this day unto the Lord? While you cry to God for mercy as to the past, resolve that if you are saved you will confess His name, and so offer Him the calves of your lips. The Lord claims your hearts first, and your lips next. You must confess Christ before men. Salvation is promised to a confessed faith; always remember that "he that with his heart believeth, and with his mouth maketh confession of Him, shall be saved." "He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved." Faith should be confessed in God's own way, by baptism, and to that faith the promise is specially given.

Now come three sentences of renunciation: "Asshur shall not save us; we will not ride upon horses; neither will we say any more to the work of our hands, Ye are our gods." First the natural, legal trust, so much esteemed among men, must go. Israel used always to fall back upon Assyria. If Egypt threatened the people, or if any other nation oppressed them, they sent a present to the King of Assyria to come and deliver them. But now they cry, "Asshur shall not save us." The popular trust of the world is in self-righteousness in its various forms. You were going to be saved by your own repentance, reformation and future well-doing; but of this you must say, "Asshur shall not save us." Are you trusting in sacraments? Give up so vain a confidence. They are not meant to save, but to instruct those who are saved already. Are you trusting in your hereditary godliness, your birth-right religion? Away with so poor a foundation! Are you trusting in your prayers, your givings to the poor, your attendance on sermons, your honesty, your good nature? Set these on one side, and cry, "Asshur shall not save us." All confidences must go save Jesus Christ, whom God has laid in Zion for a foundation stone. On Him must we build, and on none o her; for "Asshur cannot save us."

But, next, they gave up all confidence of their own; "neither will we ride upon horses." The kings of Israel were forbidden to multiply horses, because they were not used in commerce, but only for military purposes, and Jehovah would not have His people rely upon these creatures. Egypt might glorify in horse and chariot, but Israel must not do so. Hence we find pious Hezekiah keeping this law so strictly that Rabshakeh reviled him by offering to send two thousand horses if he could set riders upon them. When we come to God we must quit all trust in ourselves of every sort; in our tears, our prayers, our moral life, our excellent instincts, or anything else we must place no trust. "Some trust in horses, and some in chariots, but we will remember the name of the Lord our God." It may be you have fine horses of morality and religiousness, you have many virtues upon which you think you might fairly depend; give up these trusts. Have you been lately trotting out your horses before your own family, and saying to your wife, "I am not like many men. I never drink too much, neither do I treat my household unkindly?" Put away these horses. You cannot come to God riding in pride. Say, "We will not ride upon horses." Put away every confidence in yourself, in whatever fashion it appears.

One more stroke of renunciation remains. Down must go the gods of our former estate. He that would come to the true God must have done with the false gods. If we have been living for any objects save the glory of God, we must away with those objects. If we have been paying religious reverence to anything save God Himself, we must away with it. "Neither will we say any more to the work of our hands, Ye are our gods." It seems strange that men should ever have said such a thing; but since they have said it, they must say it no more. God help every one here now to make a complete renunciation of everything which usurps the place of God! Whether it be an object of trust, reverence, desire, fear or love, we must cast it down and worship God alone. He saith to us, "Look unto Me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is none else." In the work of salvation the work of our hands is out of court, and God alone must be glorified.

Let us come to God, for He will help us to come. You see He helps us by giving us words; but as He never helps men to be hypocrites, He will also help us to feel the words. He who gives us words to speak, will give us grace to speak them sincerely. Are not these words the true desires of your hearts? On your knees, when you get home, pour them out before God. In your pews while you are here, present these petitions in silence. Say, "Take away all iniquity, receive me graciously: so will I render the calves of my lips." The Lord's help will suffice, not only to teach us the desire, the faith, the love, the resolve which make up this prayer.

Let your coming to the Lord now be decisive and actual. You have meant it for years, and yet nothing has been done. Some of you have been hearing me preach now for a quarter of a century. Think of that! I met the other day with one who heard me at New Park Street, and at last he has come out to confess his Lord after more than thirty years. Slow work this! Better late than never. Come, my friends, are you going to stick in the mud forever? Will you lie outside the wicket gate throughout another year? God grant you may cry now, "Take away all iniquity, receive us graciously!"

The Gospel of John.

BY DR. JOHN A. BROADUS.

The fourth Gospel is obviously the most divine of them all, and yet at the same time, in some respects, the most human. Or rather, while bringing out so strongly our Lord's divinity, it also exhibits His humanity in some ways that are unequalled even in the Gospel according to Mark. It is occupied chiefly with great discourses, and yet contains some of the most beautiful narratives to be found in the whole Bible. To the story of the first disciples attached themselves to Jesus, in chapter one, and one of the wedding at Cana, chapter two, add the story of our Lord's conversation with the woman at Jacob's well, chapter four. Then take the vivid and tender narrative of the raising of Lazarus in chapter eleven, and of the last scene beside the lake of Galilee in chapter twenty-one, and how can anyone fail to acknowledge that the book is unsurpassed, and scarcely equalled, among the Gospels, in bringing close home to us the actual presence, the very countenance and speech, of the loving Saviour. It is well to insist upon this fact when entering upon a study of the fourth Gospel with a class of young people, as it will incline them to a more patient study of those profound discourses by which the Gospel is chiefly marked.

It should also be noticed that this Gospel alone informs us concerning our Lord's early labors in Judea, which seem to have occupied a considerable time, and which serve to account for the numerous disciples in that part of the country, who subsequently appear in this and the other Gospels. It is also this Gospel that indicates for us the duration of our Lord's public ministry. If we had only the other three Gospels, we should not be able to prove conclusively that His ministry occupied more than one year. But John certainly mentions three passovers during His public ministry, and probably a fourth in John 5: 1; and so we know that His ministry occupied more than two years, and probably more than three.

One who studies the discourses of this Gospel must cultivate spiritual sympathies, and must be willing to bestow some patient reflection. The style is by no means wanting in clearness, but the subjects are often profound and require a certain true and living interest in spiritual things. It is not strange, however sad, that a writer like Renan should speak slightingly of these discourses. He can take a certain sentimental interest in the external facts of our Lord's life, and in some traits of His character, but he shows no love of deep spiritual truth. In like manner Taine speaks slightingly of Milton's "Paradise Lost," and thinks that these riousness of English literature is due to English fogs. Therefore let the teacher make special effort at devout and penetrating reflection upon these blessed discourses, and earnestly strive to exhibit their teachings in such ways as will awaken similar feelings in the minds of pupils. Do not tell the class that the next lesson will be very hard, and, if they do not take care, they will fail to understand it; but tell them that, if they will notice carefully, it will give them some precious views of our Lord's most delightful teachings, and then strive earnestly, when they come to recite, to help them in perceiving these truths, and appreciating their interest and their value to us all.

In various portions of this Gospel, as in the writings of Paul and elsewhere, we need to make the distinction, above hinted at, between obscurity of style and depth of subject. People not infrequently say of some passage that it is obscure, and they cannot see the meaning, when the difficulty lies in the essential nature of the topic treated. Thus, in the opening sentences of the fourth Gospel, we meet subjects of which, from their very nature, we can know but little; yet, if we are willing to accept the inspired writer's statement, there is no difficulty at all in perceiving what he wishes to tell us. So then do not raise questions that lie beneath or beyond Scripture statements, but simply try to bring out just what those statements convey, and stop at that. Many minds incline to fly off in contemplating such a passage, and go to discussing some related topic, or to raising questions about the subject involved which really have nothing to do with the teaching here presented. The wise student and teacher must seek to hold his own mind and that of his pupils to a quiet and steady consideration of what the passage presents. And then, if we can only all of us be willing to let the Bible everywhere mean just what it wants to mean, beginning where the passage begins with the subject, following just where the passage leads, and stopping where it stops, and desiring above all things to receive its teachings into an humble and loving heart, and carry them into an earnest and useful life, we may hope that, by God's blessing, we shall never study nor teach in vain.—*Sunday-School Times.*

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Expect Great Things, Attempt Great Things.

The action of the trustees of Colby University last week, in appointing a committee to raise for our educational work an additional half million of dollars, was the result of a careful consideration of the needs of our Maine Baptist college and its tributary academies. Those who toiled in connection with these institutions in earlier days would doubtless have deemed themselves happy if the endowment of these various schools of learning had been in their time what it is to-day. But the demands of the present are such that added funds are needed in order to hold the vantage ground which we have secured and to build wisely upon it. A half million of dollars is a great sum. But this is an age of interest in educational work. Men of large wealth, as never before in the world's history, are ready to use their wealth for the benefit of their fellowmen. Much money in recent years has gone on this account to our educational institutions, and doubtless much more will go in the years that are immediately before us. Gardner Colby and Abner Coburn gave their hundreds of thousands; their successors are giving their millions. The trustees of Colby accordingly believe that the wants and opportunities of our Maine Baptist institutions should be known in order that men of wealth, who are considering what use they can best make of the large means entrusted to them, may have knowledge of the same. The knowledge should be shared by all the friends of these institutions, that they may gird themselves for the greatest endeavor which has ever been been made in behalf of our educational work.

One of the noteworthy features of our church work at the present time is that in connection with our young people. Young people's societies are to be found in most of our churches, and the members of these societies are asking for some special work. A course of Biblical instruction is to be established at Colby. It is proposed by President Small that this chair shall be supported by the annual contribution of ten cents from each of the members of our Maine Baptist churches. The plan is a feasible one if the needed agents can be secured for the collection of these small contributions. Such agents, we are confident, can be found in our young people's societies, and should they enter upon this service heartily they can do an important service in connection with our educational work.

The above, recorded in *Zion's Advocate*, of the plans and purposes of our brethren in Maine, may well serve as an example for us in the provinces.

— The grand difficulty is, to feel the reality of both worlds, so as to give each its due place in our thoughts and feelings; to keep our mind's eye and our heart's eye ever fixed on the Land of Promise, without looking away from the road which we are to travel towards it. —*Hare.*

— Many of our troubles arise out of our petty vanities. We think of ourselves more highly than we ought to think, and the consequence is that we often lay claim to a consideration from our fellow-men to which we are not entitled. That they should resist this claim, and despise us for making it, is most natural. If we would only cultivate the grace of humility more carefully, we should be saved from much disappointment and mortification.—*Nashville Adocate.*

— The strength available for you this day, and in every moment of your need, is changeless, eternal, gentle, inexhaustible. Your life has been a record of change, and the strength of past days has waned to infirmity; but the Master is the same yesterday, to-day, and forever—just as strong as when He stilled the tempest, just as mighty as when He overcame the darkness of death and led captivity captive. Many an Ebenezer of help arises in your life-history; think not you have reached a crisis too hard, too crooked, for Divine strength to avail. Is *anything* too hard for the Lord?—*Quiver.*

—We all have our discouraged days, when things do not go well. The young people fail in their lessons at school, although they have studied hard and really done their best. The mothers are tried in their household work. The children are hard to control. It has seemed impossible to keep good temper, to maintain that sweetness and that lovingness which are so essential to a happy day. Try as they will to be gentle, kindly, patient, their minds are ruffled. They come to the close of the long unhappy hours disturbed, defeated, discouraged. They have done their best, but they feel that they have really failed. They fall upon their knees with only tears for a prayer. But if they will lift up their eyes, they will see on the shore of the troubled sea of their little day's life the form of One whose presence will give them strength and confidence, and who will help them to victoriousness. Before His sweet smile the shadows flee away; at His word new strength is given, and after that work is easy and all goes well again.—*Bits of Pasture.*

— We lack peace because we lack piety more than we lack love and good-will. Unbelievers are prayerless because professed Christians are so, or only mumble and monotonously mutter their printed page. "Do not borrow trouble," I said to a man in charge as a trustee of an entangled estate, and anxious about the morrow. "How can I help it?" he replied. "Let not your heart be troubled," I said to a nervous woman. "How can the heart help it?" she, too, said. Both these have been regular worshippers in church! Away from those dear to us, we long for the wings of a dove, not to reach the rest David yearned for, but to flee to them. We displace the first commandment of devotion to God, and make it second or leave it out. We shall not have peace till we restore and make it supreme. Till we do so the distance or death of our beloved will make us wretched. When we do so, we shall be at rest. "In thee," said Bunsen of his mate, "I have loved the Eternal." When Henry Ward Beecher came to that sentence, he said to me, "I had to stop." My friend, you must not depend on me nor I on you, save as we both depend on God.—*Dr. Bartol.*

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