

## Podcast Transcript

6.18.2023 and Pentecost 3A

- Genesis 18:1-15, (21:1-7) and Psalm 116:1-2, 12-19 • Exodus 19:2-8a and Psalm 100 • **Romans 5:1-8** • Matthew 9:35-10:8, (9-23)
- Title: #WrestlingWithRomans - Finding Our Share
- Description: Explore Romans 5:1-8 with the Rev. Liz Kearny as she learns how to reclaim this heavyweight text of the New Testament from the ways it has been co-opted by empire. What does it mean to remember with our whole selves that Abraham and Jesus are indeed our ancestors? How can we follow them in the path of faithful resistance to every system that seeks to destroy life? #WrestlingWithRomans #StopCopCity

Transcript available here: <https://surj.org/our-work/surj-faith/twir/>

<<Music: “Building Up a New World,” 1st verse, fade out under opening sentence.>>  
<<“We are building up a new world, builders must be strong.”>>

[Intro and Transition:]

[Intro:]

- Hi everyone. Welcome back to The Word Is Resistance, the podcast where we’re exploring what Christian sacred texts have to teach us about living, surviving, even thriving in the context of empire, tyranny, violence, and repression - the context in which we are living today. Through Christian scripture and our various traditions, what support can we gather, especially as white folks, in finding our mutual interest in movements that liberate all of us?
- My name is Rev. Liz Kearny. My pronouns are she/her.  
I am an ordained Presbyterian Church U.S.A. pastor living in the occupied ancestral homelands of the Cowlitz Indian Tribe in so-called Longview, Washington. I’m a member of the SURJ Faith organizing team and I’m feeling so grateful to be with you!
- This podcast is a project of SURJ Faith and is particularly designed for white Christians—white Christians engaging with other white Christians in conversations about challenging every system that threatens life. We believe white Christians have a responsibility to commit ourselves to resisting white supremacy, settler colonialism, the cishetero-patriarchy, antisemitism, ableism, and every system of oppression that stands in the way of our collective thriving. We are called to show up and disrupt these powers and principalities wherever we find them, especially through the Christian tradition.

- This live recording of Dr. Vincent Harding’s song for the freedom movement is of a multi-racial “movement choir practice” in Denver, CO in December 2014, being led by Minister Daryl J. Walker. We are deeply grateful to the Freeney-Harding family for letting us use the song for this podcast.

*[Transition:]*

*<<Music interlude, verse 2 of “Building Up a New World.”>>  
<<“Courage, sisters, brothers, people: don’t get weary, though the way be long.”>>*

*[Main Content:]*

Join me in a moment of grounding. If you feel comfortable, close your eyes.

Picture your favorite grouping of trees,  
And yourself standing amongst them,  
Your bare feet on a soft, loamy forest floor,  
The shade of the branches above cooling your skin to the perfect temperature,  
A few birds singing back and forth to each other somewhere in the canopy.

Like you, these trees are surrounded by forces of empire  
That take and take and take  
Without giving back.  
Greed that leads to fossil fuel consumption that leads to fires and droughts and floods and storms  
that threaten the life of these trees.

But let your mind’s eye follow the gnarling roots of these trees underground  
Into the gorgeous dark  
Where even as greed machines rage outside,  
Networks of fungi, known as mycelium, are helping one tree ask another,  
“Do you have any food to spare?”  
While the neighboring tree responds,  
“Yes, I have more than I need! Here, take some of mine.”  
Back and forth these trees cooperate with the mycelium  
To share so freely that every last tree in the grove and beyond has what it needs to thrive.

Let your mind’s eye rise above ground again and gaze up to the leafy branches above you.  
Hear those birdsongs again.  
Notice how none of these birds pay one penny of rent  
And yet they are welcomed by the tree to stay as long as they want.

The birds in turn eat up some of the crawly ones who aren't quite right for the tree,  
And that fills the bird's belly with sustenance.

And now, imagine you can see the oxygen  
Floating abundantly off of each leaf of these trees,  
As you take a deep breath of the oxygen in  
And then release it slowly  
Expelling carbon dioxide  
Remember that each of your leafy friends breathes in the very compound you are breathing out.  
As you breathe,  
Feel yourself take what you need,  
And give what you have,  
And take and give,  
And take and give,  
In a circle of care  
With this, your favorite grove of trees  
Who teach you every day  
How to be surrounded by empire  
While always resisting its scarcity mindset  
With every single breath in  
And every single breath out.

Beloveds, this week, we continue our #WrestlingWithRomans series that Rev. Anne Dunlap launched for us last week. This series will follow the lectionary selections from Romans all through the summer, weaving our way through this heavy letter from Paul to the church in Rome, the empire's capitol city.

Dipping into Romans takes me back to being a 19-year-old college student, sitting on the worn carpet of my evangelical Christian intentional living community with my friends, poring over Paul's words to the Romans with heartfelt tenacity as we tried to understand the weightiest theological concepts of our Christian faith. Because like a game of quoteunquote "Christian orthodoxy bingo", you could pretty much find all of the buzzword concepts somewhere in this piece of Paul's mail, from "justified by faith" to "the righteousness of God" to "be no longer conformed to the patterns of this world." There was such an earnestness in how my friends and I studied those words together, because many of us had grown up believing they were mainly written to teach us how we had been personally and individually saved from our sins by Jesus' death and resurrection. I remember studying Romans like an anxious treasure-hunter, hoping deep down that I'd dig up some lasting feeling that God was ok with me after all.

Not once in the hours I spent studying the words of any number of the mostly white, cisgender men providing commentary on Romans did I hear much mention of the deeply political context of the empire in which Paul was writing to Jesus-followers in Rome. Politics only came into the conversation if we were looking at Romans 13 and hearing the interpretation that, in no uncertain terms, this is where Paul had given us his final say on how Christians should interact with our governments. I'm gonna link a must read essay from Rev. Anne on that exact topic, so please take a look for a much more compelling reading of that often abused text!

So, as I join the #WrestlingWithRomans journey with y'all today, I'm past ready to start peeling back the layer of sticky veneer that American imperialism has laid over this text to depoliticize Paul's letter to the Romans, at best, and justify state violence against so many of our beloveds, at worst. A central interpreter that you'll likely hear many of us draw from in this series is the incredible Dr. Pamela Eisenbaum, who has done a huge amount of work to put Paul's writings back into their original empire-soaked context. I love how Dr. Eisenbaum puts it when she says, "Paul's letter to the Romans is not an answer to the question, How can I be saved? Rather it is his answer to the question, How will the world be redeemed, and how do I faithfully participate in that redemption?"<sup>1</sup> If you haven't already, pause this podcast and go one episode back to Rev. Anne's introduction of Romans and comments on Romans 4. Listen to that one first if you haven't already. That will give you some deeply grounding analysis as we go on this journey together.

Leading up to our text today, Paul has just retold the story of Abraham, an ancestor who showed us that it is possible and, indeed, the way to thriving for all of us, to follow the God "who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist," as Paul wrote in Romans 4. This was a not-so-subtle jab at the Roman emperor who claimed *he* should be worshiped like a god through whom all those who went along with Rome's program would find "peace and security" in this life. Prior to today's passage, Paul had been reminding Gentile Jesus-followers of both Abraham and Jesus, who showed us with flesh on what it looks like to follow God's way of life, even when the empire is seeking to "hand us over to death," in the words of Romans 4: 25.

And that brings us to the lectionary text from Romans for today, chapter 5, verses 1-8.

...

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, 2through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. 3And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, 4and endurance produces character, and character

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Pamela Eisenbaum, *Paul Was Not a Christian: The Original Message of a Misunderstood Apostle*, pg. 252.

produces hope, 5and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

6 For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. 7Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. 8But God proves [God’s] love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.

I’d like to work on reclaiming this text back from empire, one little bit at a time. Did you ever use one of those decoding filters as a kid, that you’d hover over an otherwise inscrutable mess of squiggles and through the pink lens, it would reveal with clarity what was there all along? I want to try that here. I think I’m too new to this analysis of Romans to do that with every word of this heavy text, but I want to comb through some of it and share the ways I’ve been learning that quoteunquote “neutral and academic” theological concepts are actually very politically pointed ways Paul was trying to help Gentile Jesus-followers in the empire’s capitol resist “the ways empire gets embedded into our bodies,” as Rev. Anne put it in a conversation with our podcast team. Let’s look at what some of these words and phrases are *not*, and then let’s see what they *are* in their rightful context.

Verse 1, “justified by faith.”

This is not, as I was told, believing in Jesus and by virtue of that intellectual “saying yes in my brain to the right set of ideas”, knowing that I’ll be saved.

Instead, “justified by faith” is all about being woven into the lineage of faithful resisters of empire that came before us. People like Abraham. People like Jesus. As Rev. Anne mentioned last week, Caesar had been using that word “justified” in reference to his supposedly divinely-given right to use violence in “uphold[ing his] power and wealth”<sup>2</sup> at the expense of the people at the bottom. We, on the other hand, Paul says, are justified by the faith of those who showed us how to resist an empire’s domination no matter what. As Dr. Pam Eisenbaum puts it, “...this righteousness has been made manifest through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ and is available to anyone who demonstrates faithfulness themselves.”<sup>3</sup>

The faithfulness of Abraham to resist idolatry and follow the one God who wants life for all of us.

The faithfulness of Jesus to follow this one God’s way of sharing resources so that everyone has enough, even if it meant the state would target him and then execute him.

Also in verse 1, “*peace* with God through our *Lord* Jesus Christ.”

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<sup>2</sup> Rev. Anne Dunlap, “Episode 287: #WrestlingWithRomans: Participants In the Promise”, 6.11.2023, *The Word Is Resistance* podcast, transcript:

[https://docs.google.com/document/d/1-ot\\_6\\_rPJXjOb9OJ-Z5HLQDKI5eQmxCHzajF7hnRO4s/edit](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1-ot_6_rPJXjOb9OJ-Z5HLQDKI5eQmxCHzajF7hnRO4s/edit)

<sup>3</sup> Dr. Eisenbaum, *Paul Was Not a Christian*, pg. 249.

This is not some innocuous phrase, pious and devoid of political meaning. It is a statement directly opposing Emperor Claudius's propaganda-style<sup>4</sup> "peace" which involved expelling Judeans from the city "due to civic disturbances there, which he showed no interest in investigating."<sup>5</sup> It is a statement countering the "lord" - Greek word *kyrios* - of that political context. *Kyrios* was a name by which Caesar was "regularly hailed"<sup>6</sup> as he prepared "the cities of a province for a coming change in regime" (98). Paul is using this phrase to reveal that Rome's "peace" is a lie thinly veiling the violence it requires to keep an order in place that benefits some at the expense of others. "Yes, there's a regime change coming", Paul is saying with this phrase, "but it's not with Caesar's military. Instead, it's in following a man that Rome murdered for getting the people what they need." Dr. Pam Eisenbaum says, "when Paul... went around proclaiming Jesus as Lord, his message was anti-Imperial. Thus, Paul turned from persecutor to persecutee because he turned from having a complacent attitude toward the Romans to preaching a message of defiance."<sup>7</sup>

In verse 2, "we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand." Again, this is not just any way of saying that, because of Jesus, we stand in God's grace. That word "access" is "a word used to describe admittance into the presence of royalty."<sup>8</sup> But Caesar, the official royalty of the land, was not the ruler being referenced here. We don't look to Caesar, who colonizes with military might, Paul is saying, but rather to Jesus, who rode into that Jerusalem protest on Palm Sunday on a donkey that mocked Rome's war horses. I think something I'll wrestle with throughout Romans is that Paul does still use a lot of this royalty language to get his point across about what God is doing, and I don't love that reliance on a paradigm of inherent domination. And - I do recognize that Paul was re-spinning the language Rome was using in order to turn things upside-down for the people he was writing to. And so I wonder if Paul is saying here, again, "we are welcomed into a throne room where grace is shared freely, but y'all, it ain't the throne room of the emperor!"

Verses 3 and 4, "suffering produces endurance, 4 and endurance produces character, and character produces hope..."

This isn't the idea that God needs us to suffer to make us into better people.

No, the Greek word for "suffering" is akin to "a pressing, pressing together, or pressure," and it denotes oppression.<sup>9</sup> It's the unjust weight coming down on a community so that a few people at the top can get rich. I don't think Paul is saying here "suffering is a good thing and we should

<sup>4</sup> Neil Elliot, "The Apostle Paul and Empire," chapter six of *In the Shadow of Empire: Reclaiming the Bible as a History of Faithful Resistance*, ed. Richard A. Horsely, pg. 105

<sup>5</sup> Elliot, "The Apostle Paul and Empire", pg. 102.

<sup>6</sup> Elliot, "The Apostle Paul and Empire", pg. 98

<sup>7</sup> Dr. Eisenbaum, *Paul Was Not a Christian*, pg. 253

<sup>8</sup> Thomas L. Hoyt Jr., "Romans," *True to Our Native Land: An African American New Testament Commentary*, pg. 256

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/g2347/rsv/mgnt/0-1/>

seek it out to be holy.” I think back to what one of our podcast members, the Rev. M Jade Kaiser said several weeks ago about the difference between being a “martyr” and a “witness”: “...a martyr, being someone who either is or makes a significant sacrifice, sometimes to the point of death because of its benefit to others, or commitment to a belief. A witness is going to be someone who either testifies or embodies a perspective on something and then is willing to... endure the consequences of that witness.”<sup>10</sup> And I think that’s the kind of suffering Paul means, a pressing together or pressure that occurs when we are willing to endure the consequences of our anti-Empire witness.

And that word “endurance” is the “characteristic of a [person] who is unswerved from [their] deliberate purpose.”<sup>11</sup> So even as empire presses down on them, they stay the course, refusing to give up on the promise of God to bring every last one of us into that abundant life where everyone has what they need.

And then “character” is simply “a proof.”<sup>12</sup> It’s the evidence of joy and abundance that miraculously starts to live in our bodies when we do share resources freely with each other in ways that don’t follow the “earn it or die” logics of capitalism. It’s that grounded feeling of enoughness that fills us when we spread around wealth as each has need, like the early church was persecuted by Rome for doing.

And all of that together? It adds up to a hope that will not disappoint us in the ways that empire does every single time. We don’t need to look further than the American empire’s system of policing and prisons and the capitalism that lies underneath them to know that, as I heard Rev. Anne say in an abolition workshop recently, “this system does not love us.” The world we build together in resistance, however, will produce a hope that will not let us down.

Verse 6, “...at the right time, Christ died for the ungodly.”

This word - “ungodly” - is not a way of shaming a certain group of people who are somehow not worthy of God’s love.

No, the Greek word translated “ungodly” - *asebēs* - means “destitute of reverential awe towards God.”<sup>13</sup> So this word actually references, I think, any of us who need help remembering that *God* is God, *not* Caesar. It’s a word referencing any of us who need to bring ourselves back into alignment with the God who made all of us for abundant life. So I think a better way to translate

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<sup>10</sup> Rev. M Jade Kaiser, “Episode 284: #FailureLab: Bearing Witness as Repair,” 5.21.2023, *The Word is Resistance* podcast, transcript:

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1XeqfR1izITzYAKcUfjneicPhgUs4w9w3/edit>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/g5281/rsv/mgnt/0-1/>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/g1382/rsv/mgnt/0-1/>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/g765/rsv/mgnt/0-1/>

this is, “...at the right time, Christ died for those who were out of alignment with the ways of life.”

Verse 8 - “...while we still were sinners Christ died for us...”

Similarly to “the ungodly” in verse 6 *not* meaning some person who falls short of what empire has decided “the perfect person” should be like, “sinners” here should be thought of in the context of how Paul thought about sin. “...it is not at all clear that the final judgment for Paul,” Dr. Pam Eisenbaum writes,” involves each and every person accounting for each misstep. It is the big sins of the world that need to be accounted for... In modern terms,” Dr. Eisenbaum writes, “we may think of these as the sins of oppression, racism, pollution, corporate greed...”<sup>14</sup>

In looking a bit at the Greek word for “sinners” here, I noticed that one rendering means a person “devoted to sin”<sup>15</sup> which I think here could mean being devoted to systems that oppress our people rather than to the God who calls us to care for each other. Even more interesting to me is that the root of that word for “sinners” in the Greek can mean “to be without a share in.”<sup>16</sup>

To be without a share in. What if being a “sinner,” in this context, means failing to find our own share, our mutual interest! - in building the world God longs for?

So what if verse 8 is actually something like, “While we still hadn’t found our mutual interest in the world God is building, Christ showed us in his faithfulness even to death that we are *still* invited to find our share in making a world where everyone has what they need”?

So, after some of that decoding, here’s how I would paraphrase the anti-Empire message Paul is trying to get across in this passage...

“Therefore, since our ancestors have shown us that it is possible to trust God instead of empire, we are aligned with our Creator through the one who resists, and not the one who oppresses, through whom we remember the truth: that all life is a free gift, and we boast in our hope of sharing in this ever-inclusive, world of abundance God has made.

And not only that but we also boast when empire comes after us for our ways of love, because we know that the weight of our resistance pushes us to practice the world we know is possible, and practicing it makes it more real in our bodies, and that reality shows us that this world isn’t just on its way - it is here. And that present “here”-ness won’t let us down because God’s love has been poured into us through the mutual aid we share with each other daily, reminding us again and again that all life is a free gift. For while we were still trying to figure out how to live this way of love in the midst of the empire’s death cult, Jesus showed those of us who were out of alignment with the ways of life how to get re-aligned with God’s ways of abundance, even though it cost Jesus his life. Indeed, we see all around us that people don’t tend to give up their lives even for someone who seems to be on the right path of faithful resistance, though I guess it

<sup>14</sup> Dr. Eisenbaum, *Paul Was Not a Christian*, Pg. 253

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/g268/rsv/mgnt/0-1/>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/g264/rsv/mgnt/0-1/>



does happen sometimes. But God proves Their wildly inclusive love for every last one of us in that while we still hadn't found our mutual interest in the world God is building, Christ showed how to find it, faithfully resisting empire even to death, reminding us that we are still invited to find our share in making a world where everyone has what they need."

*<<Music interlude, verse 2 of "Building Up a New World.">>  
<<"Courage, sisters, brothers, people: don't get weary, though the way be long.">>*

*[Call to Action and outro:]*

*[Call to Action:]*

- Our call to action this week circles back to those trees who are our ancient teachers of how to live as resisters of oppression, even as empire presses in on all sides. Within the last couple weeks, the Atlanta Police Department raided a house and arrested three organizers with the Atlanta Solidarity Fund, which provides legal defense and bail support to those using their first amendment rights to protest, like those who are putting their bodies on the line to protect the Weelaunee forest from being destroyed by the building of a mega-cop-training-center. To me, these folx who were arrested embody the kind of faithful resistance Paul has been calling us to in our Romans text this week. So let's get in alignment with their resistance. Head to [atlsolidarity.org](http://atlsolidarity.org), scroll down, and support The Atlanta Solidarity Fund's work through a financial gift, spreading the word about them on your social media account and to your friends, and/or by organizing a fundraiser to show them some love. Let's join these folx in "finding our share" in a world where trees and humans can breathe freely and where we actively divest from relying on cops to keep us safe. And if you want to get extra fired up as you get on your computer to get involved, follow the link I'll put in the transcript to the recording of over 10 hours of testimony from members of the Atlanta community to their city council, almost entirely speaking against Cop City and speaking for an Atlanta that treats every life as precious.

*[Outro:]*

- Thanks as always for joining us. We'd love to hear from you all, and especially folks of color and non-Christian folks, by commenting on our Soundcloud or Twitter or Facebook pages, or filling out the survey on our podcast page at [surj dot org](http://surj.org). Give us a "like" or rate us on iTunes, Spotify, or wherever you check out our podcast.
- You can find out more about SURJ at [surj dot org](http://surj.org), where you can sign up for SURJ-Faith updates and find transcripts for every episode, which include references, resources, and action links. Next week we'll have a resistance word from an especially phenomenal duo - the Rev. Jean Jeffress and Nichola Torbett - as they record their podcast live from the annual meeting of the Northern California and Nevada Conference of the United Church

of Christ! And finally, a huge thanks as always to our sound editor, Claire Hitchens! We appreciate you so much!

Again, I'm Rev. Liz Kearny, and being with you in this way is something I treasure. I want to close with an offering from the Rev. M Jade Kaiser of *enfleshed liturgies* (and this podcast!) to return us to our breathing relationship with our tree relatives, who teach us day in and day out the way of faithful resistance. This offering is called "And remember the trees"...

"Breathe in your inherent belovedness.  
Breathe out the lure of toxic cycles.

Breathe in love that makes your heart soft.  
Breathe out any anger that is being misdirected.

Breathe in acceptance that all cannot be immediately solved.  
Breathe out the need to control.

Breathe in the wisdom of ancestors who labored for collective love and justice.  
Breathe out the temptation towards the superficial.

Breathe in a breath of humility.  
Breathe out all that makes you shrink.

And then remember the trees.  
Their giving and receiving of breath.  
See them holding so much for us.  
Offer a confession. And a prayer of gratitude.  
And let your roots sink deep into the soil of God."

<<Verse 3 of "Building Up A New World, Verse 1 repeated.>>  
<<"Rise, Shine, Give God glory, Children of the Light"  
We are building up a new world, builders must be strong.>>

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#### RESOURCES:

"On Romans 13," an essay by the Rev. Anne Dunlap,  
[https://docs.google.com/document/d/1q5qTv1It2S5xcMwhaW33sQ4M\\_JtNSSOAB3azvrZGyOw/edit](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1q5qTv1It2S5xcMwhaW33sQ4M_JtNSSOAB3azvrZGyOw/edit)

10+ hours of testimony of Atlanta community members, mostly in opposition to Cop City:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CQK2B\\_Fo0pU&ab\\_channel=atlouncil-AtlantaCityCouncil](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CQK2B_Fo0pU&ab_channel=atlouncil-AtlantaCityCouncil)

Atlanta Solidarity Fund: <https://atlsolidarity.org/>

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#### REFERENCES:

Dr. Pamela Eisenbaum, *Paul Was Not a Christian: The Original Message of a Misunderstood Apostle*

Rev. Anne Dunlap, “Episode 287: #WrestlingWithRomans: Participants In the Promise”, 6.11.2023, *The Word Is Resistance* podcast, transcript:

[https://docs.google.com/document/d/1-ot\\_6\\_rPJXjOb9OJ-Z5HLQDKI5eQmxcHzajF7hnRO4s/edit](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1-ot_6_rPJXjOb9OJ-Z5HLQDKI5eQmxcHzajF7hnRO4s/edit)

Neil Elliot, “The Apostle Paul and Empire,” chapter six of *In the Shadow of Empire: Reclaiming the Bible as a History of Faithful Resistance*, ed. Richard A. Horsely

Word study translations taken from <https://www.blueletterbible.org/>

Rev. M Jade Kaiser, “Episode 284: #FailureLab: Bearing Witness as Repair,” 5.21.2023, *The Word is Resistance* podcast, transcript:

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1XeqfR1izlTzYAKcUfjneicPhgUs4w9w3/edit>

M Jade Kaiser, *and remember the trees, enfleshed: spiritual nourishment for collective liberation*, <https://enfleshed.com/liturgy/miscellaneous-offerings/>

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