



Resistance is Futile

Series: Acts -- Worldwide Witness to the Worth of Jesus Christ

Acts 12:1-24

April 27, 2014

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This text that we are looking at this morning is a very interesting one, not only because of the miraculous events that take place – the divine rescue of Peter and the divine retribution paid to Herod – but also because of the questions that this text provokes and the lessons that it teaches. To be sure, there is one big theme that runs throughout this text. God cannot be successfully opposed, His power and His purpose cannot be thwarted, cannot be successfully resisted. We will see that in this text. But as we trace this text, we will also come face to face with questions of God’s providence, questions of the place and the value of prayer, and the issue of lingering pockets of unbelief in the hearts of the disciples. This is a great text, and rather than making the application at the end, we will make application as we go. So let’s get started by looking at the

Persecution by Herod Agrippa (1-4) Luke records: “About that time Herod the king laid violent hands on some who belonged to the church. He killed James the brother of John with the sword, and when he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also. This was during the days of Unleavened Bread. And when he had seized him, he put him in prison, delivering him over to four squads of soldiers to guard him, intending after the Passover to bring him out to the people.” (Acts 12:1–4, ESV) The church in Jerusalem, you remember, had been enjoying a relative respite from the persecution that had erupted with the martyrdom of Stephen but now Herod breaks this peace by first seeking out James and killing him and then laying hold of Peter as well. All of this took place during the high holy days of the Passover and the subsequent Feast of Unleavened Bread, which by this time had become known simply as Passover.

In order to understand what was going on, you need to know a little about this Herod. We are familiar with Herods in the gospel account and we need to understand first that Herod was a title, like Pharaoh or Judge or Governor, not a name. It was a title given to the ruler of certain

portions of Palestine. The Herod in this text is Herod Agrippa I. His grandfather, Herod the Great, was the Herod who slaughtered all male children in Bethlehem and the surrounding region, two years old and younger, after Jesus was born in an attempt to kill our Lord when he was a toddler. Agrippa's uncle, Antipas, was the Herod who put Jesus on trial seeking from Him entertainment -- miraculous signs and wonders which Christ refused to perform.

Agrippa led, what we would call, an interesting life. His grandfather, Herod the Great, a violent and paranoid man, had Agrippa's father, his own son, put to death so that he could not usurp his kingship, when Agrippa was around three or four. To protect him from his murderous grandfather, his family whisked him away to Rome where he grew up as a close friend to the Roman Emperor's family. Agrippa was something of a playboy, always desiring to be the center of attention, always longing for praise and recognition. His lifestyle got him into great debt and he was always shooting off his mouth without thinking. This led him to be imprisoned by Tiberius, who was the Roman Emperor at the time. But when Caligula, a childhood friend, became Emperor, he not only freed him from prison, giving him a gold chain equal in weight to the iron fetters he had worn in prison, but made him ruler of some of the lesser Palestinian provinces. When his second childhood friend, Claudius, succeeded Caligula, he made Agrippa the Herod over Judea and Samaria as well.

Once put in such vast power, one of his very first acts was to have James arrested. This was James, the brother of John, one of Jesus' inner three, one of the sons of thunder, as Jesus called him, and one of the leaders in the Jerusalem church. Agrippa had him put to death by the sword -- beheaded and that was very significant. The Mishnah, the law book of the Sanhedrin, required that the sword be used for murderers, for apostates, and for false teachers, which would have thrilled the Jews who hated the church. To identify James in that way would have been extremely satisfying to them. Seeing that the Jews were pleased with the murder of James, he then ordered the arrest of Peter with the intent of carrying out the same kind of execution after the Passover was complete.

The most obvious question we have to ask is what motivated Herod Agrippa to do this? Like most people, it was not simply one motive, but a mixture of them. Agrippa was a megalomaniac -- a man with a deep-seated greed for power, for prestige, for honor that he thought he deserved and that he thought was being wrongly denied him. Persecuting the church offered him a unique opportunity. No one had been able to stop the growth of these Christian people. No one had been able to silence them and he was determined to make that

happen. To succeed where others had failed would be his chance to be seen as a man of consequence and power, an opportunity to exalt himself and to show himself more powerful than any of the rulers before him and more powerful and prolific than this Jesus Christ that His church proclaimed. And, like the Emperors with whom he had grown up, Herod longed to be worshipped and to be acclaimed as more than a man – as a god. In this sense, he is very much like Pharaoh was in Egypt.

The church, as we could imagine, was shocked by the death of James. Up until this point, the Apostles had been jailed, beaten, threatened, warned to stop preaching the gospel, but they had always escaped with their lives. Not this time. The seeming aura of invincibility surrounding the Apostles was stripped away by the arc of a sword. Peter was now in prison, facing a similar fate. What was the church to do? How would they respond – in the way that only the church can – they prayed.

The Prayers of the Church (5) Luke tells us: “So Peter was kept in prison, but earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church.” (Acts 12:5, ESV) Earnest prayer went up from the church. They prayed to God and that was all that they did. Now, can I be candid and say that to some of us, if we are honest, this seems like a weak response. In our day of seeking to meet opposition in kind, this would not have been our first response or at least only a passing, obligatory one. Of course we will pray – we’re the church – but we need to do something else that will get some results. We need to march on the capital, need to petition the government, demonstrate in the streets, need to hold a rally and shout down the injustice of Herod, need to put a commando team together and raid the compound. We must do something to get results. Can I be equally candid and say that this sort of thinking reveals a grave lack of faith in the power of God and a grave lack of understanding of the power of prayer and of the nature of the weapons at our disposal as God’s people. “For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds.” (2 Corinthians 10:3–4, ESV)

Divine power was what was needed, so the church did what only the church can do and that is to petition the God of all power to intercede and act and that is what they did. They prayed earnestly – that means to pray fervently, intensely, in a persevering way, in agony even. It is the same word that is used of Jesus’ praying in Gethsemane in Luke 22 where it says: “And being in an agony he prayed more earnestly; and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground.” (Luke 22:44, ESV) This is the kind of prayer that the church gave

themselves to. This is the kind of prayer that moved the hand of God and it is the kind of prayer that is mostly missing from our churches today, and honestly, from ours as well.

You see, they did not see this gathering to pray as “just a prayer meeting.” That kind of thinking – just a prayer meeting -- reveals a blindspot in our theology, a gaping hole in our gospel. Prayer is never “only” prayer. Prayer meetings were the arteries of the early church. Through them, pulsed life-sustaining power. I fear that the very reason that we do not see God move in such powerful and unmistakable ways in our days as He does in this text could rightly be attributed, at least to a great degree, to the absence of this kind of prayer in our own lives.

Oh I know the sorts of arguments that we form in our minds, prayer--reducing, prayer--minimizing arguments. We say to ourselves and even to one another: If God is sovereign, isn't He going to do what he wills anyway? God is omniscient, we don't need to tell Him, and He knows what we need anyway. God would save Peter anyway.” Now listen, as we will see, God did determine to save Peter and He was going to carry that out, but the problem with that statement is the word “anyway.” God had determined to save Peter but the way in which God determined to save Peter was in response to the prayers of His people. Without the prayers of His people, God would not have saved Peter, but Peter was saved through their prayers because that was the way that God determined to save him. What else has God determined to do by our prayers if we would only pray? What the church needs today is not more or better machinery, not new organizations, or more novel methods; but men and women whom the Holy Spirit can use – men and women of prayer, men and women mighty in prayer.

Look, there is no denying the mystery of prayer, how it works, how it moves the hand of God. But one thing we do know, for so many of us individually and as the corporate church: “You do not have, because you do not ask.” (James 4:2, ESV) “Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it.” (John 14:13–14, ESV) “If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, (if your desires and your requests are formed by my words abiding in you, from remaining and abiding in me) ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.” (John 15:7, ESV) But we must ask.

Spurgeon said, and he is right, “The condition of the church may be very accurately gauged by its prayer meetings. So is the prayer meeting a grace-ometer, and from it we may judge of the

amount of divine working among a people. If God be near a church, it must pray. And if He be not there, one of the first tokens of His absence will be slothfulness in prayer.”

Let me say something else. Some of us think that we can pray just as effectively, maybe even better, on our own, but I would say to you that fervency in prayer, it seems to me, is difficult if you are by yourself. It’s like logs in a fire pit. One log doesn’t burn so hot, but stack a bunch of logs together and they burn fervently and add a little gas and look out. And prayer that is fervent, consistent, persevering, and intense is much more likely if we gather together to pray and add the gas of the Holy Spirit and you have the makings of world-changing power. Corporate prayer is the powerhouse of the church. It knits our hearts together in a way that nothing else can. It makes us a people and not just individuals. It joins us to something greater than ourselves. Corporate prayer edifies and unifies us as we share our common faith. And call upon our Lord and Savior, knitting us together in a unique bond of fellowship and power found nowhere else in life.

I would say, in light of this text, we truly need to examine our prayer as a church. Do we really believe in the power of prayer to lay hold of the omnipotent God? Is prayer an indispensable part of our life as a church? Do we really believe that we have life changing power within our grasp as we as the propel of God, “with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (Hebrews 4:16, ESV)? Judging by the attendance that we have on Wednesday nights, we still think of it as “just a prayer meeting” and as long as we do, we can forget about seeing the power of God manifest in this church as it could be. Please beloved, hear my plea, there is much for which we need to be praying all the time – for the power of the gospel to make a difference in this city, in the lives of people we love, for the waters of baptism to be stirred – I know you want to see people saved – we need to pray. We have been faithful to pray for things that seemed critical at the moment, but all moments are eternally significant. We need to be more faithful in prayer. I beseech you in the name of Christ, be here on Wednesday and gather with the people of God to pray – earnestly. This church prayed and because they prayed, God delivered Peter from the hand of Herod.

God Delivers Peter From the Hand of Herod (6-17) Luke tells us how it happened. “Now when Herod was about to bring him out, on that very night, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and sentries before the door were guarding the prison.” (Acts 12:6, ESV) They have taken extraordinary precautions with Peter – two chains not one, two guards sleeping on either side of him, a guard at both of the inner doors to the prison – probably as a

result of Peter's earlier escape with all of the Apostles in chapter 5. The point is that Peter was in an impossible situation from a human perspective. He was not getting out of there by human power or ingenuity. But all the preparations and planning in the world by men cannot oppose the power of God.

"And behold, an angel of the Lord stood next to him, and a light shone in the cell. He struck Peter on the side and woke him, saying, "Get up quickly." And the chains fell off his hands. And the angel said to him, "Dress yourself and put on your sandals." And he did so. And he said to him, "Wrap your cloak around you and follow me."" (Acts 12:7-8, ESV) An angel of the Lord shows up in the cell and the light of his glory fills up the room. The guards are oblivious, in a deep, angel-induced coma. The interesting thing is that Peter is sound asleep. Do not miss the significance of the fact that the angel has to hit him to wake him up. What does that tell us about the state of Peter's heart at this moment? He is not agonizing over what he believes will be his soon death in the morning. He is not planning an escape, not fretting and worrying about what tomorrow will bring, not wringing his hands over the injustice of it all, not anger at having his life cut short or what he was going to miss out on, not even outrage over the victory of evil Herod -- God would take care of Herod. No, he is sleeping the sleep of the righteous. Here is what Peter knew -- He was immortal until the Lord was finished with him on this earth and then it was eternal joy and satisfaction in the undefiled, unfading, and imperishable inheritance of heaven.

The angel wakes him from his slumber and almost like you have to do with kids, the angel has to tell him exactly what to do -- get up, get dressed, put on your shoes, wrap your cloak around you and follow me. And he does. "And he went out and followed him. He did not know that what was being done by the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision." (Acts 12:9, ESV) Peter is not sure what the angel is doing. He thinks that he is dreaming or seeing a vision, but it is real.

"When they had passed the first and the second guard, they came to the iron gate leading into the city. It opened for them of its own accord, and they went out and went along one street, and immediately the angel left him. When Peter came to himself, he said, "Now I am sure that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from the hand of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were expecting."" (Acts 12:10-11, ESV) He has to go through 3 gates, two of them guarded and the third that opens into the city opens on its own, like he is leaving Wal-Mart.

Peter comes to himself, that is, he gets a clue, he wakes up and realizes that God has delivered him by an angel from certain death.

Now two things stand out here that I want to mention. The first is this. Peter's deliverance is a picture of how God saves sinners. Charles Wesley most likely had this scene in mind when he wrote the verse of his great hymn, "And Can It Be?":

Long my imprisoned spirit lay fast bound in sin and nature's night; Thine eye diffused a quick'ning ray, I woke, the dungeon flamed with light; My chains fell off, my heart was free; I rose, went forth and followed Thee."

Before God saves us, we are like Peter, sleeping in the darkness, but our sleep is not the sleep of the righteous, but instead the sleep of spiritual death, numb to our sin, and not able to see the light of the glory of the gospel of Christ. Our sins chained us so that we could not escape even if we had desired to be free. We were under God's sentence of death. While we were in this desperate and helpless condition, God broke in with the light of His glory, woke us out of our spiritual slumber, broke our chains and opened our eyes to the glory of Jesus Christ and crucifixion for our sins so that we could willingly and joyfully follow Him out of this prison of death. Like Peter, our salvation was totally from the Lord in His great mercy, and so He gets all the glory. We can only boast in Him because He saved us. We had nothing to do with it. I love the ways that God fills His word with such pictures of our great and glorious salvation. That's the first thing I want for us to see.

The second thing I want us to think about is more of a question: Why did God deliver Peter and not James? We could venture all sorts of guesses, and there is no shortage of people who do, but ultimately what we have to see is that Luke does not tell us. We know it was according to God's will but we want to know why? And why do we want to know? Because it seems so unfair? I would say to you that we radically need to rethink that thought and especially in light of the gospel. What was so unfair for James? He is captured and given grace by God to stand firm in the face of martyrdom and then he is received in Heaven with a "Well done, good and faithful servant, enter into the joy of your Master." Is that unfair? It is the most glorious thing in the world if we believe the testimony of the gospel. This earth is not our home. "For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come." (Hebrews 13:14, ESV) James entered the glory of heaven. That's not unfair.

But more than that, let me say this. We often ask the question “why” about situations in our own lives and those of who we love – why cancer, why infertility, why death, why heartache, why suffering, why trials – but, let me say this as gently as I can, it is the wrong question to be asking. The right question is “who” – “who” holds all of this in His hands? The answer to that question is the sovereign God of the universe who has revealed His heart and His love for us in Christ, the God who loves us, the God who is good, the God who is faithful, the God who never leaves us nor forsakes us, the God who does all things for His glory and for the good of His people. We may not be able to see that clearly in moments like this. But when things do not make sense from our human perspective we can rest confidently in the fact that God can be trusted and that is all that we really need to know.

James knew what he signed up for in following Christ. We need to remember that our call to follow Christ is call that has as its emblem an instrument of execution. “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it.” (Luke 9:23–24, ESV) The call to unqualified discipleship in the life of James and of Peter meant that they could trust that whatever befell them was according to the wisdom and the eternal goodness of God, whether that was readily apparent or not.

On top of this, we have to reckon with the fact that God’s will, His eternal counsel still remains, in many respects, a mystery. It so complex, so far-reaching, so beyond our understanding that even if God should give to us the answer of why, we simply do not have the capacity or the context to understand it in all of its complexity. It is like a child asking the question of why a car starts when you turn the key. You don’t explain the intricacies of the internal combustion engine. The answer is “because it does.” We may never know the answer to all of the questions that we have, but we don’t need to have them. All we need to know is that God is good, faithful, loving and trustworthy and “this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.” (2 Corinthians 4:17–18, ESV) That is enough; it must be enough because it is the essence of faith. God can rescue and God can sustain and strengthen in martyrdom and whatever He does it is good and right and loving.

At any rate, Peter was free. And Luke continues: “When he realized this, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose other name was Mark, where many were gathered together and were praying.” (Acts 12:12, ESV) Peter goes where he knows there will be believers gathering to pray. “And when he knocked at the door of the gateway, a servant girl named Rhoda came to answer. Recognizing Peter’s voice, in her joy she did not open the gate but ran in and reported that Peter was standing at the gate.” (Acts 12:13–14, ESV) The church is praying when all of a sudden there is a knock at the door. There would have been a gate with a door, a solid door, and so she asks who is there. Peter replies, but in her joy and astonishment, Rhoda leaves the door locked – the only gate that won’t open to Peter, ironically enough, is the gate into the house where members of the church are gathered. So Rhoda, a servant girl, goes running back to the prayer meeting and tells them that Peter is there. Maybe they are so intensely in prayer that they don’t really think about what she is saying. Maybe they didn’t expect God to answer their prayers so quickly or so dramatically. Maybe some of them were not really praying in faith and expectant that God would answer.

For whatever reason, Luke tells us how they respond: “They said to her, “You are out of your mind.” But she kept insisting that it was so, and they kept saying, “It is his angel!”” (Acts 12:15, ESV) First they attack her reasoning – You are crazy!” Pocket of unbelief still infect even a believing heart. No one is free from doubt. When she keeps pressing them, they turn to superstition. They say, “It’s his angel who’s out there.” That means, his guardian angel or even his spirit -- it was irrational Jewish superstition. The last thing they think to say is, “God has answered our prayers.” But it is not according to reason and it certainly not according to superstition, but according to the supernatural power of God.

Now this is a strange response from the church who prayed for Peter’s release, to be sure. They don’t want to believe – it seems too good to be true. Before we cast stones let’s be honest and admit that we are often that way. I am. Something happens, something for which I have prayed and I hesitate to believe that it is true. Why is that? Part of it may be that we are not convinced that answered prayer is a gift of grace and not of merit. Sometimes it is because we doubt God’s power. But most often, I would say to you, it is because we doubt God’s goodness. But thankfully the answer to their prayers won’t go away.

“But Peter continued knocking, and when they opened, they saw him and were amazed.” (Acts 12:16, ESV) Sure he did. This is Peter and he is not known for his patience. He is probably about

to break the door down with his pounding. When the praying disciples finally come to their senses, they are amazed to find him standing there alive and well.

“But motioning to them with his hand to be silent, he described to them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison. And he said, “Tell these things to James and to the brothers.” Then he departed and went to another place.” (Acts 12:17, ESV) Peter doesn’t even go in the house. There at the gate, he tells them how God had delivered him and then instructs them to tell James, the brother of Jesus who will become the leader of the church in Jerusalem, what has happened. His words to them finished, he takes off to go and hide in secure place and, except for Acts 15, that is the last we see of Peter. But God is not finished – He is going to deal once and for all with Herod.

God Deals With Herod (18-23) The story continues in verse 18: “Now when day came, there was no little disturbance among the soldiers over what had become of Peter. And after Herod searched for him and did not find him, he examined the sentries and ordered that they should be put to death. Then he went down from Judea to Caesarea and spent time there.” (Acts 12:18–19, ESV) Waking to find Peter gone, the guards are terrified. They know what that is going to mean for them, especially with such a despot as Herod Agrippa. Determined that it had to be an inside job, that there was no way that God could deliver Peter and thwart Herod’s plans, he has all of the guards put to death before heading to Caesarea for a very important meeting.

“Now Herod was angry with the people of Tyre and Sidon, and they came to him with one accord, and having persuaded Blastus, the king’s chamberlain, they asked for peace, because their country depended on the king’s country for food.” (Acts 12:20, ESV) Herod was always angry at someone, always angry that he was not receiving the glory and the honor of which he thought that he was due. The self-governed provinces of Tyre and Sidon were that way. They were not giving him the praise he thought he deserved so he threatened to cut off the food supply on which they were dependant. So having persuaded Blastus, the king’s chamberlain, they sought for meeting, one in which they could come, hat-in-hand, and beg for his kindness.

Josephus tells us that Herod determined to make it a big public affair, both to sufficiently embarrass the leaders of Tyre and Sidon and so that he could give a windbag of a speech and

bask in the false praise and worship of the people. He desired to be seen as wielding the power of death – whether by sword or by food. He was consumed with his own glory. Maybe that is the answer to our earlier question of his motivation to destroy the church. Perhaps it was as simple as the fact that he resented Christ being preached as King and saw Him as an obstacle to His own glory. Remember I told you that he was a megalomaniac. What he really wanted was to be thought of as a god, like the emperors of Rome. “On an appointed day Herod put on his royal robes, took his seat upon the throne, and delivered an oration to them. And the people were shouting, “The voice of a god, and not of a man!”” (Acts 12:21–22, ESV) He put on his robe of woven silver, Josephus tell us, and delivered his speech before basking in the praise of the people. No sooner had he delivered his speech than he was struck by an angel.

“Immediately an angel of the Lord struck him down, because he did not give God the glory, and he was eaten by worms and breathed his last.” (Acts 12:23, ESV) It is divine poetic justice. Just as an angel struck Peter to awaken him and rescue him, this angel, how perfect if it was the same one, struck Herod for retribution from God. He refused to give God glory, tried to stand in the way of the glory of God, and the glory of His Christ through the preaching and expansion of the gospel, stood against God and suffered an ignominious death. It doesn’t get much worse than being fodder for worms, but that is just what this pompous, arrogant, self-deluded, God-hater was. It was abasement in the worst sort of way.

There are many God-haters in our day, many Christ-haters. Our own president, many of our politicians, the vast majority of our college professors, the Hollywierd crowd, men like Peter Singer, Stephen Hawking, Richard Dawkins, author of *The God Delusion* who only revealed how deluded he is by saying, “Christianity is not only irrational, but profoundly harmful,” and the fool who directed that unbiblical farce of a movie, *Noah*, Darren Aronofsky and tall of their ilk. They think themselves wise but in the end, unless they repent, they are all worm-food.

If you oppose the gospel, you may temporarily win, but you will finally lose and lose big. In his commentary, John Stott says: “At the beginning of the chapter Herod is on the rampage, arresting and persecuting church leaders. At the end he himself is struck down and dies. The chapter opens with James dead, Peter in prison, and Herod triumphing. It closes with Herod dead, Peter free, and the word of God triumphing. Such is the power of God to overthrow hostile human plans and to establish His own in their place. Tyrants may be permitted for a time to boast and bluster, oppressing the church and hindering the spread of the gospel, but they will not last.” In fact, the postscript to this story is telling and it is simply this:

“But the Word of God Increased and Multiplied.” (24) That’s it, isn’t it. The gospel keeps moving forward. The gospel cannot be extinguished. The church cannot be defeated. The fame of Christ cannot be quenched. There is no hope of opposing God or opposing His glory. Resistance to God is futile. Nothing and no one can stop Him. That is the overarching message of this entire text. This is the goal of all God does— the increase of the gospel, magnifying his wisdom and power and spreading the fame of his Son who saves sinners and glorifies his Father.

The gospel of Jesus Christ has been unleashed on the world, and nothing can hold it back. Not the Jews, not Herod, Not the Roman Empire, not Nazi Germany, not Russia, not Korea, not America. Nothing is able to contain or to constrain the gospel. And the gospel is not asking to be recognized as a religious option in our society; it is not a matter of private opinion, despite the attempts of our secular society to make it that way. No, the gospel is a matter of public truth and it lays waste to every falsehood. It declares the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, who is the son of God, and it tells us of the forgiveness of sins and the promise of eternal life. This is the core of the gospel. And it divides all of humanity – not according to race, or economics, not according to culture or political affiliations – according to what really matters – lost or saved, damned or delivered and all according to one’s response to the gospel truth.

This gospel we believe with all of our hearts and souls. This gospel we know to be true and without error. This is the gospel that we are to proclaim with our lips and our lives in the power of God’s Spirit. It is this gospel that will be triumphant. It is this gospel in which we delight and rejoice and give thanks. And it is this gospel that demands that we take up the challenge of faithfulness that was demanded of the Apostles before us and proclaim it and live it faithfully for the fame of Christ our Lord.

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