A **Long Line of Godly Men** Profile

The Unwavering Resolve of

Jonathan Edwards

STEVEN J. LAWSON

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Chapter One

Edwards' Life and Legacy

I am tempted, perhaps foolish, to compare the Puritans to the Alps, Luther and Calvin to the Himalayas, and Jonathan Edwards to Mount Everest! He has always seemed to me the man most like the Apostle Paul.[1]

—D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones

It has been almost three centuries since Jonathan Edwards last ministered in Colonial New England, and yet, he is still widely regarded as the most distinguished minister ever to grace the American church. With enduring influence, Edwards continues to tower over the intellectual and spiritual life of the evangelical church. His theological writings were stunningly brilliant, his pastoral ministry was fruitful, and his Christian walk was exemplary.

Providentially placed into the eighteenth century, in the

years before the United States came into being, Edwards lived at a strategic crossroad of church history. Considered "the last of the medieval Scholastic theologians"[2] and "the last representative of Puritan theology and thought in the New World,"[3] Edwards also was "the first of the modern American philosopher-theologians."[4] In like manner, George Marsden, author of an acclaimed biography of Edwards, calls him "the most acute early American philosopher."[5] Revered Princeton theologian Benjamin B. Warfield agrees, asserting that Edwards "stands out as the one figure of real greatness in the intellectual life of colonial America."[6] And B. K. Kuiper writes that he was "the outstanding intellectual figure in colonial America."[7]

Many regard Edwards as the most eminent preacher ever to come from what is now the United States. He delivered what many believe to be America's most famous sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." Others esteem Edwards as one of America's greatest theologians. He is recognized as "the theologian of the First Great Awakening,"[8] for he stood squarely at "the headwaters of the revivals"[9] in the 1730s and 1740s. It also has been said that Edwards was America's "greatest [theologian] of any variety"[10] and one of "the half-dozen greatest theologians of all time."[11]

Edwards also excelled as a writer. Marsden believes that three of Edwards' many works—*Religious Affections*, *Freedom of the Will*, and *The Nature of True Virtue*—stand as "masterpieces in the larger history of Christian literature."[12] Reformed theologian R. C. Sproul estimates that *Freedom of*

the Will "is the most important theological work ever published in America."[13] Paul Ramsey, an Edwardian scholar, writes that *Freedom of the Will* "is sufficient to establish its author as the greatest philosopher-theologian yet to grace the American scene."[14]

Edwards' lasting influence can be measured in other ways, as well. At the beginning of the twentieth century, a study traced Edwards' descendants. The results were staggering. From Edwards came a large and distinguished progeny: three hundred clergymen, missionaries, and theological professors; 120 college professors; 110 lawyers; more than sixty physicians; more than sixty authors of good books; thirty judges; fourteen presidents of universities; numerous giants in American industry; eighty holders of major public office; three mayors of large cities; three governors of states; three U.S. senators; one chaplain of the U.S. Senate; one comptroller of the U.S. Treasury; and one vice president of the United States.[15] It is hard to imagine that anyone else has contributed more vitally to the soul of this nation than this New England divine.

There is no doubt that Edwards was a giant of the Christian faith, one whose influence is still keenly felt today. As S. M. Houghton writes, Edwards became "a star of the first magnitude in the annals of the Church of God."[16] Meic Pearse believes that he was "the most influential single figure in American Christianity until the twentieth century—and arguably down to the present."[17] Harry S. Stout marvels over Edwards' "enduring ability to speak across the ages."[18]

Why Jonathan Edwards?

From these facts and accolades, it is obvious that Edwards' life is worthy of our study and emulation. But certain questions beg to be addressed: What made Edwards so great? What caused this man to be used so effectively by God? In short, why Edwards? Ultimately, God by His sovereign grace chose Edwards to be a distinguished and influential leader. But on a more personal and practical level, Edwards uniquely combined spiritual godliness with intellectual genius. Both his mind and his heart were engaged in the pursuit of God, his piety the equal of his intellect. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones believed this was the key to Edwards' achievements: "The spiritual always controlled the intellectual in him."[19] In other words, "All his rich and brilliant gifts were not only held to be subservient, but were used as servants."[20] To put it yet another way, Lloyd-Jones writes, Edwards was "God-dominated."[21]

In short, though Edwards was intellectually brilliant and theologically commanding, his true greatness lay in his indefatigable zeal for the glory of God. He was distinguished as a man after God's own heart by his "profound . . . and exceptional spirituality."[22] The soul of this American Puritan was devoted to pursuing the unrivaled honor of God. In a word, Edwards was *resolved*. He was determined to live with uncompromising fidelity for the greatness of God. His eye was singular; his soul was steadfast; his will was strong. This fixed determination to seek the majesty of God will be the focus of this book.

Let us begin our study of Jonathan Edwards with a survey of his remarkable life.

A Puritan in the Making (1703–1726)

Born Oct. 5, 1703, to the Rev. Timothy and Esther Stoddard Edwards in East Windsor, Connecticut, Jonathan Edwards was the only son among ten daughters. His was one of the most respected families of Colonial America. Edwards' father was a Harvard-trained pastor who faithfully preached at the same church in East Windsor for more than sixty years (1694–1758). His mother came from one of the most prominent families in Connecticut, perhaps in all New England. She was the daughter of Solomon Stoddard, who pastored one church for almost sixty years (1672–1729), the congregation in Northampton, Massachusetts, one of the most prestigious flocks in the early Colonies. Such was Stoddard's stature that he was known as "the Northampton Pope" and the "Pope of the Connecticut River Valley."[23]

Remarkable brilliance marked Jonathan as a young man. His father, an "excellent teacher [and] . . . strict disciplinarian,"[24] taught him, along with many of the town's children, giving him a superior grammar and secondary education. Timothy groomed young Jonathan for the ministry by teaching him the Scriptures, the Westminster Shorter Catechism, and Reformed theology. From his father, he also received firsthand exposure to the Christian life and the responsibilities and

rewards of pastoral ministry. His mother, Esther, was known for her "native intelligence . . . [and also was] demanding."[25] Jonathan's ten sisters all were sent to Boston for finishing school and, upon returning home, assisted their brother in his studies. As a result of these influences, young Edwards was well-focused upon God and the richness of Puritan theology. Nevertheless, Jonathan was not converted to Christ during these formative years.

When Jonathan was thirteen, Timothy enrolled him at the newly founded Collegiate School of Connecticut, later to be known as Yale College. Timothy had been educated at Harvard, which had been established as a Calvinistic school, but had weakened under Arminian influences. This doctrinal erosion prompted Timothy to enroll Jonathan at Yale, which was unashamedly true to Reformed theology. In the bachelor's program, Edwards received a broad liberal-arts education, studying grammar, rhetoric, logic, ancient history, arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, metaphysics, ethics, natural science, Greek, Hebrew, Christian theology, natural philosophy, and classical literature. He also received a healthy exposure to the greatest Puritan and Reformed minds, reading John Calvin, John Owen, William Ames, and other divines. He graduated at the head of his class with a bachelor of arts degree in 1720 and delivered the valedictory address.

Edwards immediately began the master's program at Yale, which required two years of independent study. During his second year, Edwards, age seventeen, was suddenly converted

to Jesus Christ. He wrote that, while he was contemplating 1 Timothy 1:17, "There came into my soul, and was as it were diffused through it, a sense of the glory of the Divine Being; a new sense, quite different from anything I ever experienced before."[26] His heart immediately was overjoyed with rapturous thoughts of God. Edwards would later write:

> I began to have a new kind of apprehensions and ideas of Christ, and the work of redemption, and the glorious ways of salvation by Him. An inward, sweet sense of these things, at times, came into my heart; and my soul was led away in pleasant views and contemplations of them. And my mind was greatly engaged to spend my time in reading and meditating on Christ, on the beauty and excellency of His person, and the lovely way of salvation by free grace in Him.[27]

Upon completing his class work for the master's program, but before writing his thesis, Edwards traveled to New York City to serve as the interim pastor of a small Scottish Presbyterian church near Broadway and Wall Street. During this formative time, he "felt a burning desire to be in everything a complete Christian."[28] This proved to be a soul-stretching time in which Edwards gave careful thought to the priorities that he desired to be the guiding principles for his life. It was then that Edwards, eighteen years old, began writing his "Resolutions." He eventually composed seventy purpose statements, each

designed to direct his newly begun Christian journey. They were "the guidelines, the system of checks and balances he would use to chart out his life—his relationships, his conversations, his desires, his activities."[29] At this time, Edwards also began keeping a diary to monitor his spiritual pulse (1722–25, 1734–35). Further, Jonathan began writing his "Miscellanies," a collection of maxims, observations, and reflections, ranging from philosophical thoughts to exegetical insights into a biblical text. Wherever he was, Jonathan recorded his penetrating thoughts as they flowed from his mind, often pinning them to his coat.

When his interim pastorate concluded in April 1723, Edwards returned home to Connecticut to write his master's thesis and provide pulpit supply. He graduated from Yale in October 1723 with a master of arts degree after orally presenting and defending his thesis on the doctrine of imputation. The title of his thesis was "A Sinner is Not Justified in the Sight of God Except Through the Righteousness of Christ Obtained by Faith." Edwards then served a short interim pastorate at the Congregational church in Bolton, Connecticut, from November 1723 to May 1724, before returning to Yale to assume an instructor's position (1724–1726). It was then that he began courting young Sarah Pierpont, the daughter of James Pierpont Sr., a pastor in New Haven. The two would marry in July 1728 after a four-year courtship.

During this time, Edwards wrestled intensely with his vocational calling. Should he pursue the world of academics

or the pastorate? After much soul-searching, Edwards gave himself to the high calling he had closely witnessed his father and grandfather pursue.

Early Years at Northampton (1727–1739)

Young and energetic, Edwards accepted a call to serve as the assistant minister in Northampton, Massachusetts, alongside his 83-year-old maternal grandfather, the renowned Solomon Stoddard. The aging Stoddard was "the most influential clergyman in the region,"[30] but many felt that he needed assistance. Jonathan was ordained as his associate on Feb. 15, 1727, with the understanding that Stoddard would train young Edwards to succeed him. When Stoddard died two years later, Edwards was suddenly thrust into one of the most visible pulpits in New England at the age of twenty-six. He would pastor this church for the next twenty-two years, through both momentous and miserable times.

In the pulpit, Sunday by Sunday, Edwards soon distinguished himself as a preacher. His sermons were marked by "riveting expository skill . . . wide thematic range, a wealth of evangelical thought, a pervasive awareness of eternal issues, and a compelling logical flow to make them arresting, searching, devastating, and Christ-centeredly doxological to the last degree."[31] His preaching style was "commanding and by all accounts was almost hypnotic in its power to fix his hearers' minds on divine things."[32] During this time, Edwards also

emerged as "a determined opponent of Arminianism."[33] Roger Olson remarks that "No theologian in the history of Christianity held a higher or stronger view of God's majesty, sovereignty, glory and power than Jonathan Edwards."[34] He "ardently defended the Puritan Calvinistic doctrines, . . . [declaring that] God is the all-determining reality in the most unconditional sense possible and always acts of His own glory and honor."[35]

One prime example of Edwards' staunch defense of Calvinistic doctrine was his address to the Puritan ministers of Boston in July 1731. The young preacher chose for his text 1 Corinthians 1:29–31, an unmistakable assertion of the absolute sovereignty of God in salvation. The message, titled "God Glorified in Man's Dependence," was designed to counter the growing influence of the man-centered Arminianism in his day. The Harvard alumni who gathered were impressed with the force of his argument, and the sermon soon became the first of Edwards' works to be published. Although Edwards had fought earlier against the biblical doctrine of divine sovereignty—a truth he once called a "horrible doctrine"[36]—through personal study, he had become convinced that God irresistibly orders the salvation of His chosen people, and he soon arose to be a guardian of this sacred truth.

In December 1734, a sovereign movement of God's Spirit came to New England. It began when Edwards preached a series of sermons on justification by faith, which was "directed

against the tendency toward Arminianism . . . then developing in New England."[37] Through the winter months, nearly all the people of Northampton were seized by a deep concern for their souls, and more than three hundred professed faith in Christ. Edwards wrote: "The town seemed to be full of the presence of God; it never was so full of love, nor so full of joy. . . . There were remarkable tokens of God's presence in almost every house . . . everyone [was] earnestly intent on the public worship."[38]

After this intense revival (1734–1736), Edwards recorded its extraordinary effects in an eight-page letter to Benjamin Colman, a Boston minister. Edwards later expanded the content and Colman subsequently published it as *A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God in the Conversion of Many Hundred Souls in Northampton* (1736). This account soon reached London, where Isaac Watts, the gifted hymn writer, and John Guyse, a London minister, published it in England. Immediately, Edwards' influence was expanded overseas.

Summarizing the effects of the revival, Edwards wrote:

> Our public assemblies were then beautiful, the congregation was then alive in God's service, everyone earnestly intent on the public worship, every hearer eager to drink in the words of the minister as they came from his mouth; the assembly in general were, from time to time in tears while the Word was preached; some weeping with sorrow and distress, others with

joy and love, others with pity and concern for the souls of their neighbors.[39]

The Awakening Reignites (1740–1749)

A fuller measure of God's power came to the Colonies in 1740–1742. This movement, known as the Great Awakening, was linked with the itinerant preaching trips of the English evangelist George Whitefield, who traveled through the Colonies, calling people to repentance and faith. Edwards invited Whitefield to Northampton to preach, and he sat on the front pew and wept under the power of the great evangelist's pulpit ministry. Throughout New England, it is estimated that "out of a population of 300,000, between 25,000 and 50,000 new members were added to the churches"[40] during the revival.

In Edwards, the awakening had "a vigorous defender."[41] In fact, the awakening reached its height on July 8, 1741, when Edwards preached his most famous sermon. Titled "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," the sermon was based on Deuteronomy 32:35b: "their foot shall slide in due time" (KJV). Edwards had preached the sermon a month earlier in his own church with little visible effect. But when he delivered it at Enfield, a powerful revival occurred. Sinners were convicted and souls were shaken. Edwards was forced to motion for silence as people clung to the pews for fear of dropping into hell. Marsden comments: "What is extraordinary in this sermon is . . . the sustained imagery Edwards employs to pierce

the hearts of the hearers. . . . He focuses everything on the central theme of what it means for guilty sinners to be held in the hands of God . . . they were left with no escape."[42]

But with the Great Awakening came much emotional excess. A controversy arose within the churches regarding the true nature of this movement. Many ministers opposed the revival; they were known as Old Lights, while the pastors who supported it were called New Lights. Yale College was torn down the middle. A turbulent meeting of the trustees was held Sept. 10, 1741. Edwards, providentially, was to deliver the commencement address the next day, and he gave his full support to the revival. In an exposition of 1 John 4:1–6, Edwards identified five marks by which an authentic work of the Spirit is to be recognized. Such a true work, he said, "(1) raises [people's] esteem of Jesus as Son of God and Savior of the world, (2) leads them to turn from their corruptions and lusts to the righteousness of God, (3) increases their regard for Holy Scripture, (4) establishes their minds in the objective truths of revealed religion, and (5) evokes genuine love for God and man."[43] Each of these, he believed, was present in the awakening. The message was published a month later under the title *The Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God* (1741) and was given a wide circulation.

Edwards again wrote on the subject of revival in a major work titled *Treatise Concerning Religious Affections* (1746). In this work, which became "the most important and accurate analysis of religious experience ever written . . . [Edwards]

endeavored to identify what constitutes true and authentic spirituality."[44] He wrestled with the difference between true and false Christian experience, comparing what might not *necessarily* indicate saving faith with the true marks of conversion. This book is regarded by many historians as "the leading classic in American history on spiritual life."[45]

In these years, Edwards influenced an army of young men for the ministry. He preached the ordination sermons for numerous young ministers. Others lived with him, such as Joseph Bellamy, Samuel Buell, and Samuel Hopkins, who "became influential figures in New England."[46] One young man who stayed in the Edwards home was a daring missionary to the Delaware Indians in New Jersey and Pennsylvania, David Brainerd. In fact, Brainerd died of tuberculosis under Edwards' roof on Oct. 9, 1747. Edwards' daughter, Jerusha, was Brainerd's nurse in the home and, tragically, she contracted tuberculosis and died months later. Afterward, Jonathan edited and published Brainerd's diary, a record of his "selfless devotion to missions to the Indians."[47] Further, he wrote a biography of this young man, titled *An Account of the Life of the Rev. David Brainerd* (1749), which "helped inspire the missionary movement of the next century."[48]

The Painful Separation (1750)

Despite Edwards' ministry successes at Northampton for more than two decades, his distinguished pastorate came to an abrupt and bitter end in "one of the great mysteries of church his-

tory."[49] Stoddard, his predecessor and grandfather, had allowed people to take Communion based on a simple profession of Christ. Edwards became convinced "they must profess Christianity [and bring forth the fruits of conversion in their lives] before they could take Communion."[50] When Edwards tried to enforce this stronger standard, a firestorm developed in the church against him.

In a letter to his Scottish friend John Erskine in 1749, the year before his dismissal, Edwards reveals this mounting tension:

> A very great difficulty has arisen between me and my people, relating to qualifications for communion at the Lord's table. My honored grandfather Stoddard, my predecessor in the ministry over this church, strenuously maintained the Lord's Supper to be a converting ordinance, and urged all to come who were not of scandalous life, though they knew themselves to be unconverted. I formerly conformed to this practice, but I have had difficulties with respect to it, which have been long increasing; till I dared no longer in the former way: which has occasioned great uneasiness among my people, and has filled all the country with noise; which has obliged me to write something on the subject, which is now in the press. I know not but this affair will issue in a separation between me and my people. I desire your prayers that God would guide me in every step in this affair.[51]

The requirement of evidence of personal faith in Christ proved to be too much for the older members of Edwards' congregation. Several prominent families marshaled the majority and succeeded in having Edwards dismissed on June 22, 1750—truly one of the great tragedies of church history. Only 10 percent voted to keep Edwards as their pastor.[52]

The next Sunday, Edwards preached his farewell sermon from 2 Corinthians 1:14, speaking of that day when they would gather together before God as pastor and congregation and give an account to Him. Then, in a remarkable display of humility, Edwards remained at Northampton for a year, occasionally filling the pulpit until his successor could be found. Numerous ministry offers came to him, including invitations to pastor in prestigious places such as Boston and Scotland. A group of loyal supporters in Northampton even wished to start a new church there. But Edwards declined each of these offers. Once his replacement was found, he accepted a call to be the pastor and missionary to Native Americans at the frontier settlement of Stockbridge, Massachusetts.

Pioneer Missionary (1751–1757)

In the winter of 1751, Edwards moved to begin his new work with the Mohican and Mohawk Indians in the isolation of Stockbridge, some forty miles away. There Edwards faithfully pastored and preached the gospel to approximately 250 Indians and a dozen English families. In an irony of history, this

towering intellectual genius communicated the gospel in a humble setting on the equivalent of a fifth-grade level.

Out of the public eye, Edwards experienced both highs and lows. Positively, God granted Edwards many converts and changed lives, but negatively, there was again conflict and controversy. The Williams family, which had caused him much trouble in Northampton, continued the fight in Stockbridge. Ephraim Williams, a thorn in Edwards' flesh, tried to smear Edwards' name, accusing him of embezzlement from the school established to teach the Indians. Although Edwards was cleared of wrongdoing, the Mohawks left the school, weary of the attacks against their leader. As a result, the school was forced to close and the mission was later ended.

But in these years, Edwards was given time to put his thoughts on paper. Spending thirteen hours a day in study, he wrote his three weightiest works: *Freedom of the Will* (1754), *The End for Which God Created the World* (1755; published with *True Virtue* under the title *The Two Treatises*), and *Original Sin* (1758). *Freedom of the Will*, his greatest literary achievement, was a monumental treatment of the inability of the fallen will to believe on Christ. In it, "Edwards argues that only the regenerate person can truly choose the transcendent God; that choice can be made only through a disposition that God infuses in regeneration."[53] The one who wills to believe in Christ, Edwards taught, is the one in whom the Holy Spirit has already performed His sovereign, monergistic work in the new birth.

The Princeton Presidency (1758)

Aaron Burr Sr.—Edwards' son-in-law, husband of his daughter Esther—was president of Princeton College, then known as the College of New Jersey. When Burr died in office on Sept. 24, 1757, the trustees turned to Edwards. Initially, Edwards declined their offer, insisting that he was unworthy for such a high position. But the trustees persisted, and despite some reluctance, Edwards accepted the presidency. He arrived in Princeton in January 1758, with Sarah remaining behind until the harsh winter had passed. On Feb. 16, 1758, Edwards was inaugurated the third president of Princeton, the school that would emerge as the greatest influence for orthodox theology in America in the nineteenth century.

Edwards then prepared to write what he believed would become his *magnum opus*, a theological work tracing the history of redemption through the Scriptures. But God had other plans. Within his first month as president, there was a smallpox outbreak, and Edwards chose to be inoculated to show others they need not fear this medical advance. In a strange providence, Edwards contracted a secondary infection and died March 22, but five weeks into his presidency. With only his daughters Esther and Lucy at his side, he whispered his last words:

> It seems to me to be the will of God, that I must shortly leave you; therefore give my kindest love to

> my dear wife, and tell her, that the uncommon union, which has so long subsisted between us, has been of such a nature, as I trust is spiritual, and therefore will continue forever; and I hope she will be supported under so great a trial, and submit cheerfully to the will of God.[54]

Upon receiving the tragic news of Jonathan's death, Sarah wrote to Esther, who had lost both her husband and her father, in order to console her:

> My very dear child, What shall I say? A holy and good God has covered us with a dark cloud. O that we may kiss the rod, and lay our hands upon our mouths! The Lord has done it. He has made me adore His goodness, that we had him so long. But my God lives; and He has my heart. O what a legacy my husband, and your father, has left us! We are all given to God; and there I am, and love to be.[55]

Esther herself died a few days later, on April 7, from a similar reaction to the smallpox vaccine. Sarah did not arrive in Princeton until that summer. When she did, she stood over the fresh graves of her son-in-law, her husband, and her daughter. Then she herself contracted dysentery and died Oct. 2, 1758. Sarah was buried next to her husband in the Princeton Cemetery.

Edwards Was Resolved

The legacy of Jonathan Edwards endures strong to this day. Historian Mark Noll concludes that Edwards produced "one of the most thorough and compelling bodies of theological writing in the history of America."[56] Through this corpus of work, this Colonial Puritan pastor speaks even louder to this generation than he did to his own time. His life exudes a moral excellence that is immediately apparent to all who study his remarkable history. To this day, Edwards remains "one of the great fathers of evangelical Christianity in America."[57]

Let us, then, return to our primary question: Why Edwards? What put him on a path to such greatness? The answer lies in this fact: Edwards possessed a rare combination of Reformed theology, extraordinary giftedness, and fervent piety. However, it was this latter virtue—his true spirituality, marked by a fixed resolve—that positioned him to be used so mightily by God. Few have equaled his relentless pursuit of personal holiness. Edwards' godliness fitted him to be the mighty instrument in the hand of God that he was.

It was in his late teens, while serving as an interim pastor in New York City, that Edwards recorded his "Resolutions," which would set the course for the rest of his life. Remarkably, Edwards strove to follow these seventy purpose statements until his last breath. In this sense, it is no secret why God used him as He did. Edwards was singularly focused on living the Christian life for God's glory. He was fully committed to hon-

oring the Lord in *every* area of his life, and to doing so with an unwavering resolve.

What resolutions did Edwards record? What were his life priorities? What direction did they take him? I invite you to turn the page and discover the path that Edwards pursued in his quest for godliness.

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50. Mark Dever, "How Jonathan Edwards Got Fired, and Why It's Important for Us Today," in *A God-Entranced Vision of All Things: The Legacy of Jonathan Edwards*, 133.
51. As quoted by Nichols in *Jonathan Edwards: A Guided Tour of His Life and Thought*, 61.
52. Dever, "How Jonathan Edwards Got Fired, and Why It's Important for Us Today," in *A God-Entranced Vision of All Things: The Legacy of Jonathan Edwards*, 129.
53. Beeke and Pederson, *Meet the Puritans*, 203.
54. Edwards, as quoted by Dodds in *Marriage to a Difficult Man*, 160.
55. Sereno E. Dwight, "Memoir," in Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards, Vol. 1* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), 178.
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