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THE LOVE OF GOD

I, II, III

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The Protestant Faith

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The love of God is beyond our capabilities to express. It is, however, an extraordinarily important theme, for it should control our views of God and the world. For example, God's sovereignty has no meaning for us did we not know He has a concern for us. Indeed it is a frightening concept, if it were not that the sovereign God is an infinitely loving God. So too, as we consider the awful depths and solemnity of His holiness we must never forget His love if we are to avoid a twisted view of His character

It is much easier to experience and to meditate on the love of God than to describe it in words in a sober Bible study. It is a theme which lends itself to apostrophe and poetry, for it needs words of imagination and feeling to do it justice. Like the holiness of God, it is a truth which transcends our ability to express; something which we may apprehend perhaps with our feelings if they are directed by our reason, rather than simply by our rational powers exclusively. Nevertheless, we must do what we can and I hope that you will fill in your own mind and thoughts my exposition of what the Scripture says on this subject, allowing your mind to meditate, not only now but always on the love of God.

God's revelation is a unity and therefore we ought not to be surprised that the love of God is as truly revealed in the Old Testament as in the New. The Old Testament lays the foundations, and one of these foundation truths is the love of God. Right at the beginning, in Genesis 3, God showed His love and care for the sinful race by promising salvation and providing for the need of clothing in the new situation in which these sinners had involved themselves. The Old Testament is full of texts about the love of God. It is a very grave error to think that the Old Testament deals with God's judgement and the New Testament with His love. The other way about would be just as correct, because both Testaments deal with God as He is in His relationship to us, and no true thought about God can leave out His love, any more than it can leave out His holiness and that aspect of His holiness which is expressed as judgement and wrath. An example of the unity of the two testaments is the

fact that when our Lord was asked to sum up the whole of God's mind for man, that is, the whole of the law, He quoted two verses from the Old Testament: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart" - a verse from Deuteronomy and secondly, "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself" - a verse from Leviticus.

First, consider the love of God as expressed in creation. Our natural life is a life of real pleasures and enjoyment. Take for example family life, what pleasures that provides and these are quite independent of the degree of civilization or material possessions we may possess. The same is true of our ordinary individual life. We all enjoy living in the sunshine and fresh air, and appreciate the beauty and colour of the landscape and the sea and the sky. And we all enjoy the fruits of the earth. These are all pleasures. And these are the gifts of God to us in creation, quite apart from the additional gifts He gives us through civilization. As we read in Genesis 1, God's creation is good. We should reflect on the fact that God provides us with good things abundantly. This has been so from the beginning. In the Genesis story Adam and Eve were entitled to eat of the fruit of every tree except the one that was restricted; so too in the world of today we are surrounded by blessings. We rightly say in the General Confession, "We thank Thee for our creation", because creation is an unmerited blessing. God did not need to create us; He had no need to bring us into being and give us life, and yet our creation is a very real blessing and it springs from His love. The love of God is unstinted. For example, Psalm 104 sings of God's love and care for every aspect of His creation: He cares for the vegetable life, the animal life, and for man. And not only for man's basic needs but for man's enjoyment. Not only for his bread, but also for wine to gladden his heart and oil to make his face to shine. These were apparently the sort of things the people in the Psalmist's time had by way of luxuries, and they thanked God for them, because God is the source of all our enjoyment.

Psalm 103 celebrates God's goodness to His children. It begins, "Bless the Lord O my soul, all that is within me bless

His holy name....who crowns you with loving kindness and tender mercies, who satisfies your mouth with good things". And intertwined with this is the thought of God in salvation forgiving our sins. "...who forgives all your iniquities".

Turning to the New Testament, in Acts 14, Paul began his sermon to his Gentile hearers with God's goodness in life around us. He fills our hearts with joy and gladness by giving us fruitful seasons, with all the pleasure and contentment that the goodness and abundance of nature brings. From this common basis of experience the preacher went on to speak about the God of revelation.

1 Timothy 6:17 is an interesting passage which reflects St. Paul's sense of God's goodness, and the purposes of His kindness to us. We are to honour God for His goodness, but not, of course to use it selfishly or to forget God as we enjoy His benefits. That is a gross misuse, so common in our own lives as well as in our community, of taking God's gifts for granted and because of their abundance forgetting that God is their source, so that we rely on the gifts themselves and the abundance of them rather than on God from whom they come and whose character of love they express. The passage reads: "Charge them that are rich in this present world that they be not high minded or have their hope set on the uncertainty of riches, but on God who gives us all things richly to enjoy". Here is the apostle's attitude towards the gifts of life God has given to us. He recognises that God is their source and that He gives them to us to enjoy them. The purpose of His goodness is that we should enjoy what He gives us by using His gifts. And our enjoyment of these good things should lead us to the fuller joy of trusting the God who gives them, and as we enjoy them, as we enjoy the swimming, or the skiing or the beauty of the day, or our friendships, or our family life, the food on the table, or our fellowship with our spouse through sex, or whatever it may be, our hearts should rise in the midst of our enjoyment to God who is the source of all good things, to thank Him for them. That will not diminish our joy but will actually increase it as we contemplate God who is the author of it. If we cannot thank God in our enjoyment, then for us at least what we are enjoying is a sinful pleasure.

If we cannot thank God for it we ought not to be doing it; and if we do not, at least from time to time, thank God for our enjoyment while we are experiencing it, we are self-centred and forgetful of God who is the author of these pleasures.

Now let us look at some more verses in the Psalms: Psalms 16:11 and 36:8. These indicate the character of God as He has revealed Himself in the experience of the writers, that He is a God who delights to provide us with good and enjoyable things. Psalm 16:11 reads "In thy presence is fulness of joy, in thy right hand there are pleasures for evermore". God is not a God who stints us, but is a God who gives abundantly, giving without stint, giving for our enjoyment and pleasure. He delights to see us enjoy His good things, but of course, not in a God-forgetful way. Turn to Psalm 36:8 "Thou shalt make them drink of the river of thy pleasures". The imagery which the poet uses is that of a broad, sweeping river, "the river of thy pleasures".

The God who has revealed Himself in the Scriptures and who has called us into a knowledge of Himself is a God of infinite goodness and of infinite gifts. There is no end of His goodness, no end of His determination that those who are His should share in His blessedness. We think first of the blessedness of creation, of the things around us, and which are given to us, and of the fact that our life is a life capable of enjoyment and that God is the One who loves to provide and has provided in super abundance all sorts of pleasures and enjoyments, if we take the time to think about them, to look at them and to thank God in them as we appreciate them. We see then that God is not a God who begrudges us things, and we should keep that in mind as we are thankful, and thankfulness will help us to remember this. The fatal mistake is unthankfulness (Rom. 1:21). There is within our hearts a natural inclination to think that God isn't anxious for us to have too much - just enough, you know, and then turn off the tap, and perhaps we ought to turn it off ourselves lest He turn it off too hard - that sort of feeling finds an expression in Ancient Greek religions quite clearly, and this suggests that it finds a lodgment in the natural heart, because the religions of antiquity are religions of the natural heart. This feeling that

God is a God who does not want us to have too much, just a moderation, then it is time to turn it off, is not in any way to be found in the New Testament, or in the Old. "At thy right hand are pleasures for evermore". "Thou shalt make them to drink of the river of thy pleasures". "God gives us all things richly to enjoy". "Who fills our hearts with joy and gladness...". These are the phrases from Old and New Testaments which describe the character of the loving, giving God, the real God who is in charge of the world.

Therefore, remember that God does not ask us to give up things for the sake of giving them up, but rather He gives them to us that we might enjoy them. Therefore, we want to be on our guard lest this lurking feeling in our hearts gets the better of the truth, as though there was some virtue in giving up things for the mere sake of giving them up, that is, asceticism for its own sake, going without for its own sake. Now I must not be misunderstood; there will be numerous opportunities and obligations all the time for us to go without things, to give up things, to discipline ourselves in the midst of the enjoyments of life. But there must be sound and good reasons for this self-discipline beyond the mere giving things up. The notion of giving for the sake of giving is a completely irreligious concept which springs from the natural heart of man who does not comprehend that the bounty of God is for our enjoyment and so does not give Him thanks for it. Asceticism and thankfulness cannot co-exist.

The love of God gives us richly all things to enjoy. Yet remember that those words are used in the context of counselling the readers to give sacrificially for other people's needs so that the verse must not be quoted in any selfish way. Our starting point is the love of God and the generosity of God. God gives from His infinite love. He pours down blessings and we should love Him. The first response of love is thankfulness. In the midst of our pleasures we ought to be thankful to God, for it is God's gift that we are enjoying. And thankfulness will not diminish any pleasure but actually increase our appreciation of it. At the same time as we remember that God's character is that of a God of love and giving, we ourselves are called upon to be generous. We have been put into a

community, we are not mere individuals, not isolated people, and if we look around we will find plenty of people who haven't as much as we have been given, and as there will be the opportunity for giving as we have ourselves received, reflecting and expressing in our own lives the love of God. Love is the principle to guide us in the use and enjoyment of God's gifts of creation. These gifts come to us abundantly from love. They are intended for us to enjoy, but they are not intended for us to enjoy selfishly. If we were the only person in the world that might be all right, but we are not, we are in community in which there is inequality. Now inequality gives the opportunity for the exercise of generosity. The inequalities around us, which Providence brings to our attention, are simply opportunities for our reflecting the love and character of God in our own response to those needs; recognising that what we have received is from a God who gives generously, and ourselves responding generously to other people's needs.

Now it is at this point that faith is so essential. If thankfulness is the first response of our love to God for His love to us, then faith in Him is the second. At every point in the Christian life faith in God is the one thing which enables us to do the will of God. In dealing with our money, if faith fails here and we take our eyes off God, His gifts and His faithfulness of provision and put them on "the uncertainty of riches" we will be frightened lest in sharing generously with others we leave ourselves short. Not that we are to give away everything but there is to be a sharing and an equality. We are to share from a sense of God's love and God's provision and God's faithfulness, and in so giving (as St. Paul says in 2 Cor. 8 and 9) we honour God; we express our sense of God's faithfulness, that is to say we worship God, and in Hebrews 13 the writer says this is one of the ways that God likes to be worshipped. Generous giving towards others is a way of honouring God because it is a way of expressing your belief of what God's character is like, by your readiness to share. With such ways of honouring Him, says the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews, God is well pleased.

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### God's Longsuffering

From the concept of God's love in creation we turn to consider His love in salvation. First, the very fact that judgment for sin has not already over-taken us and the whole human race springs from the love of God. God's longsuffering, His bearing with mankind while we go on rebelling against Him, flouting Him, ignoring Him, arises from His love, and is for the purpose of salvation. 1 Peter 3:20 speaks about the longsuffering of God in the time of Noah, how He bore with that generation; and 2 Peter 3:9,15 tells of how He is bearing with us. The postponement of the coming of Christ which is sometimes such a trial, so that we cry out to God to vindicate us, is for the purpose of completing God's purposes of grace in salvation. As we long for His coming with the prayer "come Lord Jesus" (Rev. 22:17) we remember that the times are in His hands, in the hands of the loving Father and that the delay is for the purpose of salvation. Do not mistake God's longsuffering for indifference, and think that He is not going to come at all, like those of whom St. Peter spoke, or do not tempt God by thinking that God's longsuffering allows us to continue on in sin. We dare not presume on His love; we dare not tempt Him because He is greater than we. In Matthew 5:48 our Lord teaches how God's goodness takes the form of longsuffering: "He makes His sun to rise upon the evil and the good and sends rain upon the just and unjust". God's continuing to fill our hearts with joy and gladness through the fruitful seasons is a sign of God's love. It is a form of His longsuffering in that He bears with rebellious insulting sinners for the sake of converting and saving His people.

### God's Provision of Salvation

The clearest proof of the infinite depths of God's love is the provision of salvation. Exodus 34:6 is a reminder that the Old Testament is based on the love of God. This is a very interesting passage because it is a description from the early chapters of the Pentateuch, of the character of God. Moses had asked to see God's glory and he was told that he could not see

it in its completeness but he was given the opportunity of seeing it in part, and (v.6) "the Lord passed by before him, and proclaimed the LORD, the LORD (that is to say, JEHOVAH, JEHOVAH) a God full of compassion, and gracious, slow to anger, and plenteous in mercy and truth, keeping mercy for thousands and forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin." The Bible uses the phrase "the Name of the Lord" to sum up the whole character of God as He has made Himself known to us. In this passage the character of God is proclaimed by God Himself. Notice where the emphasis falls, "A God full of compassion and gracious, slow to anger" (i.e., long-suffering), "plenteous in mercy and truth. "Keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin". The phrases expressing the depths of God's love are piled up one on the other. This is clearly recorded in the early chapters of the Old Testament that God is love. But also in this same passage is a clear and explicit statement of the holiness of God, which inevitably brings judgment on those who turn their backs on Him and despise His mercy. The passage continues "and that will by no means clear the guilty; visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, and upon the children's children to the third and fourth generation". Here in the early chapters of the Bible is God's character of God is to be found throughout the pages of Scripture. Notice where the emphasis falls, it is on the love of God. This love is the background of all we have to say about God, as well as our chief theme. Yet if we only speak of love we are not saying all that is said here. The love of God is not the only thing that God reveals about Himself when He reveals His Name. Do not fall into that error of thinking that we can spend our time talking only about the love of God. The love of God cannot be understood truly except in its relationship to His holiness. Moreover, His love has been pre-eminently revealed in the way in which He saves. It is a salvation of sinners. God's salvation is not through the ignoring of sin, as though it did not matter. That is the sort of salvation we would prefer. We do not like to think that actions are serious; that differences are important; that truth is something of infinite value and that falsehood is something to be abominated. We would like life to have a dreamlike unreality and we would like our actions whether of one sort or the other to have an ultimate irrelevancy. But the contrary is true. Life and the actions of the present

moment, are infinitely serious and real; for God is holy. He abominates every trace of unholiness. But the Gospel is of a loving God, and His love is seen more deeply as we sense the depths and the heights and the awefulness of His holiness. Throughout the Scripture the holiness and love of God are put together, as in Exodus 34, or in Genesis 3, when God in condemning man revealed His provision of salvation for him. God gave man a hope; it sprang from the love of God. Judgment was not ignored but alongside the judgment a hope was given by which the repentant sinner may be saved from the judgment. Now as the pages of the Scripture open up that hope becomes clearly focused on the Lord Jesus Christ taking our curse upon Him. And so the love of God and the love of Christ intermingle. The two cannot be differentiated. "God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself". The love of God the Father and the love of Christ have the same depths. Christ has revealed God the Father, He who has seen Him has seen the Father, and we cannot distinguish between the love of the one and of the other. We may, as it were, move from one to the other in our thoughts without distinction. John 3:16 is a famous verse which speaks of the love of God in that "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son". In Romans 5 St. Paul speaks of the same love of God expressed in the love of Christ, "God commended his love towards us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us". Again, "The Son of God loved me and gave Himself for me" (Galatians 2:20). In view of this love of God and this gift of God of His Son, and of Christ giving Himself up for us all, it is impossible to think that salvation can be earned. Salvation comes to us from beginning to end by way of gift. All legalism is out of keeping with this love. God is not served by finically keeping rules, we love in response to His love. Love sums up the whole law, and this frees us from dependence on rules, for we know in our consciences what love requires from us. Jesus said "Love your neighbour as yourself". We know what this involves. Again He said: "Do unto others as you would they should do to you". We know what we would like; love motivates us to do these things for others. By filling the mind with the Word of God and so knowing His character we will be directed by His Spirit in the way of love. We may make mistakes, because our judgment and our knowledge is not yet what it shall be, but if we follow this rule we will find that we

will be led along in right behaviour towards others. The Christian life can be summed up under two heads: faith towards God, love towards our neighbour. Everything falls within those two rules. Now faith takes many forms. For example, it will mean generosity towards other people's needs. As well as being an act of love towards others, generosity is an expression of faith towards God. It is not the keeping of rules, giving so much money to such and such, but the supplying of someone's need, because of love. The way of worshipping and serving God is faith, which rules out any form of ritualism or legalism, of doing this or doing that because it is laid down. Towards our neighbour we are to act in love. Now apart from these two principles, faith towards God, love towards your neighbour, life is free. Of course it is not really free, for we are bound by tremendous bonds of love, but we are free in our conscience. We may make mistakes, and we may then ask for forgiveness and fuller knowledge; but we remain free in conscience.

Where actions prompted by love are not involved, it does not matter morally whether you do this or do that; you are perfectly free; you have Christian liberty in the matter; and it is important not to allow any sort of legalism to come in so as to think that you have to please God by doing this or avoiding that, when the action is not classified by our knowledge as required by love.

It is a wonderful think to know that God has set us free. We are free to enjoy His fellowship, and His gifts, so long as our eyes are looking towards Him all the time in faith and in obedience to Him, going out in love towards those who are brought within the orbit or our lives by His providence.

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I mention lastly the love of God in the application of salvation to rebellious sinners like you and me. His love is shown in the fact that He has chosen us to know Him undeserving as we are. In Deuteronomy 7:8 and also in 4:37; 10:15, Moses states that the reason why the Israelites were chosen to be God's people was because God set His love on them; He loved them. And Moses made clear that His choice of Israel was not because they had, as it were, any particular aptitude for religion, as some writers would have it; nor was it by mere fortuitous chance; but he emphasised that God chose Israel because He loved them, and because of His faithfulness to those towards whom He already extended love, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. What is true of ancient Israel is true also of us: 1 John 3:1 "Behold what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us that we should be called the sons of God". As we enjoy our relationship to God let us realise that the love of God has brought us into this relationship. It is He who has chosen us. Now Malachi 1:2 expresses this truth in a way that is a little too stark for our ears. The prophet speaks in God's name, "Jacob have I loved; Esau have I hated". Nevertheless, not only is this verse in the Old Testament, but it is quoted approvingly in the New. We may not bypass it. It is an indisputable fact that Israel was blessed with the blessing of relationship with God which the nations around them (for example Edom) did not have. Why was that? Only because God had given this blessing to them out of love for them. Here is a mystery; but we must guard against the temptation to find any explanation for this gift of being chosen to be the children of God other than the love of God. Deuteronomy 7:7 is quite clear on this point. And if God's love is such that He extends it to rebellious sinners, then we must trust His love in everything, even in mysteries in which He has not revealed to us more than this. In Malachi we have the statement that the difference between Jacob and his twin brother is God's choice based on His love. God was under no compulsion to treat Jacob any differently from Esau; both were sinners; both deserved the condemnation of God, because God hates sin and those who sin. (It is unreal to distinguish too sharply between sinners and sin). We all deserve God's disapproval (if you like a weaker word), or God's giving of us up (to quote Romans). "Esau have I hated" is the way it is

put in Malachi. In other words, God treated Edom with disapproval and condemnation, because they were sinners. This is true of every nation too. Why then was it that Jacob, that nation, was saved? Because God set His love on them. There is a mystery here but let us firmly grasp the fact that the reason we are within the realm of the knowledge of God is the love of God. God could have left us to what we deserved, but He has not. He has chosen us for salvation, as St. Paul told his friends at Thessalonica, (1 Thess. 5:9) So salvation, like creation, flows from the love of God. The blessing of salvation which we enjoy is not because of some merit in us. It was not because Israel was a greater nation than other nations, nor is it because we are better people or quicker in response (or whatever else it might be), but because God has set His love on us. And what tremendous benefit this love brings us. He has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the spiritual, real, world in Christ. Because the Lord loves us, we lack nothing.

The love of God is very clear in salvation; not only in its provision, as reflected in the depth of Christ's suffering for us on the cross; but also in the fact that we have been chosen to share in that provision. This, too, is God's love. Thirdly, we must remember that He perseveres with us. See for example how God says of Israel "How can I give thee up?" (Hosea 11:8) and in Revelation 3:19 "As many as I love I reprove and chasten, be zealous therefore and repent". Chastening is a sign of His love. It is not the judgement of giving us up, referred to in Romans 1, but he is persevering with us. Therefore, do not despise the chastisement of God, nor become sulky or anything of that sort, but rather remember that God is chastising us because we have failed to judge ourselves. If only we had judged ourselves first of all then we would not have been judged by the Lord; but when He judges us, it is in order that we, as His children, should not be condemned with the world. Similarly, in Hebrews 12, we read that in chastisement God is dealing with us as His sons. Chastisement is a sign of His love. He is not giving us up. He has set His love on us and He is persevering with us.

We reach the culmination of God's love in the heavenly reward which we are already beginning to enjoy here and now.

Though not restricted to heaven, I Corinthians 2:9 applies to heaven in its fulness: "Eye hath not seen nor ear heard, neither hath it entered into the heart of man the things which God has prepared for those who love Him".

God's love is seen in Christ and on this our minds must dwell. St. Paul spoke of "the love of God and the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ". In the New Testament grace always has the meaning of "favour". Favour leads to gifts, but grace in itself is not the gifts, it is the favour from which the gifts spring. It is unmerited, undeserved favour. We have already seen that God's favour towards us does not spring from something in ourselves; but it comes from within God Himself. He loves us though we deserve nothing else but His condemnation and His disapproval, or, as the Bible puts it, His hatred.

This love of God brings us into a fellowship with Him. II Corinthians 13:14, continues "The love of God, the grace (or favour) of the Lord Jesus Christ and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit". Fellowship is the experience that the love of God brings us into. It is a relationship of being sons on God, in His presence, and it is always fellowship based on forgiveness. We need in this life forgiveness daily, and we ought to pray for daily forgiveness. Throughout eternity our relationship with God will be that of forgiven people. An aspect of His love is His gift of hope, of eternal fellowship with Him, which he gives to all who in patience of well-doing seek it.

As we contemplate the love of God and His purpose of love for us bestowed upon us so undeservingly, we in turn should respond with trust and service. We love. We love God and we love one another - because He first loved us. And as we contemplate the love of God, our love will be evoked. The presence of God in our hearts, that is, God's Holy Spirit, will bring forth the fruit of love in our lives. God will work through His Word as we contemplate His love revealed in His Word, to bring His character of love into our hearts, as we respond through faith and prayer that God will give us more of His Spirit and more of His love. If we love God, we will love one another; it will be an active love with acts of kindness

towards one another. As Jesus said "If you love me, keep my commandments, and this is my commandment to you, that you love one another."

God's kingdom or rule is rule by love; and in heaven, I take it, that love is the mainspring of obedience. Calvary was where the love of God won the victory over evil and sin. The kingdom of God (that is, the exercise of God's sovereignty) is exercised through love. Now we are called upon to exercise the same sort of kingly rule, the rule through love. This is not easy for us; we need to be constantly asking God for help in this because only through love will the character of God be seen in us. If love is absent, then however right our action may be there is a very defective revelation of His character in us. "Though I speak with the tongues of men and angels and have not love it profits me nothing".

In this world of sin, love means suffering. But it will be a victorious suffering, an overcoming suffering, as it was on Calvary, a suffering by which the kingdom and rule of God is exercised. But it will not be a vain, or a fruitless suffering. We have to recognise that if we wish to reign with Christ in eternity, in the glory of His kingdom, we also will have to reign with Him now in His kingdom and sovereignty by suffering with Him. A kingdom of love will undoubtedly involve us in suffering, but it will be victorious suffering as Christ was victorious. We might sum up what we have to say about the love of God by referring to Revelation 1:5,6: "Unto Him that loved us and loosed us from our sins by His blood, and made us us to be a kingdom, to be priests unto His God and Father, to Him be the glory and the dominion for ever and ever. Amen."

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1. *Thus, when our Lord taught us to pray "Hallowed be thy name" it is a prayer that men might recognise God's character, honour it, hallow it in their hearts and honour it in their actions; if that prayer were fulfilled we would be in heaven, nothing further would be needed, because this is the whole basis of right adjustment, that God be honoured as God.*

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