July 6/7, 2024

Rather, Fear God

Chasing the Wind: Searching for Meaning Series

Ecclesiastes 4:4-5:7

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We live in a world that is filled with tension! A VBS disco ball (here on stage) and then a preacher in Ecclesiastes that keeps echoing over and over again, "Vanity, it's all vanity. Everything is meaningless." So, dance your heart out…dance your heart out. We look at our world and we see that we have an amazing world, created by an amazing God, and yet we also affirm it is absolutely broken. We have a God that we affirm is a God of justice, and then we look the scene over and we see injustice everywhere. Ever since Adam and Eve committed that first sin in the garden and they were cast out of Eden, the world has been filled with tension. And that is precisely what the Preacher in Ecclesiastes has been wrestling with here, for three chapters. In the midst of a world with contrasts, with tension, where is hoped to be found? Where is there some significant meaning or purpose? Where is there a place to find a deep-rooted sense of identity? His journey/his quest here for three chapters, has been wearying. It's been tiring, but here, as we continue in chapter 4 today, he's going to find something that he can count on…something of significance!

The question he's asking is, "In a world full of momentary satisfaction, where is ultimate satisfaction to be found?" That's what we're going to find today in Ecclesiastes, Chapters 4, and 5. So, open your Bibles with me to chapter 4. We're going to pick up in verse 4, as he continues his reflections.

Now the Preacher, throughout our chapter, so far throughout our study, has affirmed the value, the goodness of work a number of times, of creating value in the world that is necessary. He's affirmed that there is good in that. It can even bring some satisfaction, and that should be a relief to us. Because the truth is, so much of our waking life is given to production—to work, to creating. The question, of course, still remains, "Does that mean that work can provide an ultimate sense of meaning, an ultimate satisfaction?" So here's what he has to say in verse 4:

> **I have seen that every labor and every skill which is done is *the result of* rivalry between a man and his neighbor. This too is vanity and striving after wind. The fool folds his hands and consumes his own flesh. One hand full of rest is better than two fists full of labor and striving after wind.** (*NASB, Ecclesiastes 4:4-6)

It was just two weeks ago that we went through the first part of chapter three, and in that reflection—that poem—the Preacher affirmed that to see good in your work is a gift from God. And we all collectively, probably internally, said, "Oh, okay, that sounds good." But now, just a few short verses later, the pendulum has once again swung back, and he's looking at the scene and saying, "This is a depressing reality." Labor—the drive to produce, the drive to excel, the drive to succeed—he's saying so often has at its very root: rivalry, competition, a desire or a drive to outdo

others, those around us—those who are around us—our neighbors. I think we can all affirm, as we look the world over, that that is very, very true. Now, of course, there is an aspect of all of our work where we say we just want to do our best. We just want to do the best we possibly can, and that's the way we often start. But what tends to happen with humans over time, is you kind of start there, but, in time, our motivation gets twisted, and we no longer want to do our best. We want to ensure that our best is better than other people's best. Rivalry! Competition! What starts out as, maybe a somewhat pure motive, quickly becomes something that we do in order to best others, and really be above them, in order to help us feel better about ourselves.

For the kids in the room, I think we can even affirm that. It feels so good to come home with a report card and you have good grades and you're so proud of that. But it doesn't take very long before the conversation becomes, "Did I do better than my friend? Did I do better than my brother or my sister?" Rivalry is built into our hearts. Doing our best becomes doing better than our friend.

And so the Preacher looks at this situation, just kind of in the way our heart tends to go, and he says, "This is all vanity; it's all meaningless. It's hopeless. It's craziness." And so he considers two possible alternatives. He said, "Either you can embrace a life of laziness, or you can just work yourself to the bone." And he concludes that neither one of those options is very good. If you embrace a life of laziness, you won't have any food to eat. You're going to have to consume yourself; you're going to starve. But if you embrace this drive to work and succeed, you will live a life that is lacking in rest, and you will be weary. And so his verdict is, "It's all vanity. Vapor… it's got no substance." But we know the Preacher. We should be familiar with the routine. He's not just going to say it once to us. He's going to pile up reasons that it is vanity. And so as he continues, he's going to expose the limitations of a life of relentless work. He continues in verse 7:

> **Then I looked again at vanity under the sun. There was a certain man without a dependent, having neither a son nor a brother, yet there was no end to all his labor. Indeed, his eyes were not satisfied with riches *and he never asked*, "And for whom am I laboring and depriving myself of pleasure?" This too is vanity and it is a grievous task.** (Vs. 7-8)

So, not only will the drive to produce—the drive to kind of invest solely in labor—create rivalry and make your world a competition, but it will also, in the end, lead you to a life full of isolation. You will be alone, isolated from others. And that will mean that at the end of your days, when everything goes back into the box, so to speak, you're going to look around and you're going to see no one there.

He illustrates with a story. It's a familiar story. A young man spent his whole life working like crazy, constantly striving for more and more and more. But this person never stopped to ask. "Who am I doing this for? Why am I working like crazy? What benefit is this?" And he says, "This too, is vanity. It's vapor…smoke." He even says it is **grievous**, something that should cause grief when we look at and consider it.

As I was considering this, I thought of a little amusing story that took place in Florida a few years ago. Down in Florida, they still race dogs, and I'm not saying that's a good thing; I'm just saying it's true. So, they do these Greyhound dog races down there and, you know, these dogs spend their entire life running after a mechanical rabbit…chasing…chasing…and chasing, but never catching. They're not supposed to catch. That's the trick. They're essentially chasing a cotton ball with a motor…running…running…and running. It is a depressing reality. A few years ago, at one particular track, the rabbit broke. The rabbit broke, the motor broke. Around the third turn the dogs suddenly halted to a stop and looked at each other with confusion. This had never occurred before. They'd never caught the rabbit. And so they sat there around this motorized cotton ball, and they barked and they didn't know what to do. They finally caught the thing they had been chasing their entire life, and it was a fraud. Empty! Now the dog racing industry functions on the fact that a dog is never going to stop and ask itself, "Why am I doing this?" But we aren't dogs. And the Preacher is saying, "Why are we driving so hard? What is there to gain from this relentless pursuit?" Will you stop and consider what is the thing that you're pursuing? Is it capable of providing the satisfaction that you so deeply hope it provides? Endless striving, endless labor creates an isolated life, and an isolated life is an empty life. And, as the preacher continues, he's going to turn his attention to a better alternative: not a life of isolation but a life filled with others, a life of community. He says in verse 9:

> **Two are better than one because they have a good return for their labor. For if either of them falls, the one will lift up his companion. But woe to the one who falls when there is not another to lift him up. Furthermore, if two lie down together they keep warm, but how can one be warm *alone*? And if one can overpower him who is alone, two can resist him. A cord of three *strands* is not quickly torn apart.** (Vs. 9-12)

This drive to constantly fill your world with more and more and more will inevitably make the entire world your competition, and life will become one big transaction. That might help you accumulate a lot of wealth, a lot of success—maybe a better title—but it will leave you desperately alone. And to be alone is a dangerous place to be. As he reflects on community, he begins with something that's very pragmatic, very practical. "First," he says, "if you want to produce having two people work is better than one because you can produce more." So number one: not going it alone is a good idea. But he didn't stop there. He continues and says, "If one person falls and they are alone," inevitably in life, all of us will fall. But, if you are alone, there is no one there to help you up. If you are alone, you are warming yourself alone at night. If you are alone, your life is dangerously in peril…dangerously in peril! To live in isolation means there is no help in life, and we have to admit, in this moment, that there are times where the words of Scripture kind of step up and contrast our American culture. This certainly is one of those moments, because we glorify the idea of the self-made person. "Look! He did it all alone; she did it all alone!" The idea of pulling yourself up by your own bootstrap is an American idea. That is not a biblical idea. And here the Preacher says, **Woe to the one who falls and there is not another to lift him up.**

To live a life of isolation is a dangerous existence, and it actually runs contrary to the way we were made, because we were made for community. God created us for deep relationship with others,

but I think we can all readily admit that in our world, community and deep relationships are increasingly rare, aren't they? We certainly live in a world that is more connected electronically than ever, but I think also we can affirm more alone than ever. And we can name a lot of reasons for that, but I think the deepest reason comes down to this. I think deep down we aren't sure having a life filled with deep community is actually all that important. We're just not sure it matters. So here's a question.

As you consider your life, as you consider your pursuit of success, and just wanting to do well in the workplace—and again, we want to affirm it's good to want to do well—but the question is, "Does your pursuit of friends, of relationship, of community, does it exist with the same intensity as your pursuit of success? Of promotion? Of titles?" I can't answer that question for anyone. But I do want to say that if you would say that your intensity and your intentionality in pursuit of promotion outpaces your pursuit of friends, it's a good thing to stop and ask, "Why is that, and what is the result of a life lived that way?" I think the deep truth is that we are always driven by our vision of what is good, of what is valuable. And deep down, if what we find is we are more driven to succeed in our work life, in labor, in building something, than we are to build a life of friendship and community, we have to admit that deep down our vision is that work, production, and success is the thing that matters most in life. So, it's a moment where, in the quietness of our own heart, we just want to ask, "Lord, have I prioritized the wrong things? The thing that I place first and foremost in my life, is it leading me down a path that ultimately is going to bring me harm? Is it going to put me in a desperate situation later in life? Am I putting all my eggs in a basket that cannot deliver, seeking ultimate satisfaction in that which cannot ultimately satisfy? Can a vision of success and the accumulation of power and status and wealth, can it satisfy?" Well listen, as the Preacher continues, he's going to tell us a little story. Verse 13:

> **A poor yet wise lad is better than an old and foolish king who no longer knows *how* to receive instruction. For he has come out of prison to become king, even though he was born poor in his kingdom. I have seen all the living under the sun throng to the side of the second lad who replaces him. There is no end to all the people, to all who were before them, and even the ones who will come later will not be happy with him, for this too is vanity and striving after wind.** (Vs. 13-16)

Now, the grammar of those four verses is a little confusing, and the repetition of the word **second** starts to make the scene a little confusing, so let me retell it really quickly. The Preacher is describing an old king who becomes foolish in time, and thankfully he is replaced by a young and wise man. It's a great success story—a rags to riches tale—and we love those. This young man went from prison to the throne. You can just imagine what people would say if they saw this, a leader of destiny. "This is it. This is the one that's going to change everything, the one that's going to turn it all around." You can imagine what that coronation would have been like, the crowds just kind of flocking out to see this new young, wise king, with confetti everywhere. But then, as the story continues, there's another person that comes along, as another third candidate for the throne, and the winds of hope and change that stirred up everyone and caused them to cheer on the second king now shifts, and the hope of last year is no longer on that king. The hope shifts now to another

king that will replace him, and on and on the cycle goes…one after another after another. Elation and then we say, “Who is next?”

This should sound very familiar to us. We're in an election cycle right now. Every four years, we know the routine. Everyone gets whipped up into a frenzy. “This'll be it!” “This is the one!” And then someone gets elected, and half the country says, “Yay”; the other half says, “Boo.” And then over time, the governing occurs. Inevitably, for most presidents that are elected, the approval rating looks like the ski slopes in Colorado. Over time, it just goes down and down and down. And then there's the next candidate. “This is the one!” Truth is, once the election is over, once the coronation comes to a close, the confetti gets swept up; the party is over; all the fervor will eventually be turned to someone else. And what the Preacher is saying is, “Don't stake your life on success. Don't count on it.” Yes, he's making a comment about political leaders, and in time as we move through Ecclesiastes, he's going to come back to that, but here, the lesson for us isn't about that. The lesson is about just the fickle nature of success. It is here today and gone tomorrow. It is an empty hope. Success will come; success will go…just like the wind.

So where does that leave us? Is work bad? No! We were created to work. Work is good. Creating value in the world is good. Work is good, and work can even give us some satisfaction. It just cannot ultimately satisfy. See, for all of us, there is a warning in these verses that to throw ourselves with reckless abandon into something like work, or success, or labor, is to put ourselves in a precarious position, because God never intended work and labor and productivity to be something that provides ultimate satisfaction. It's not a place to find meaning. It's not a place to find purpose. It's not a place to find our rooted identity. Eventually, if we go down that path, and throw ourselves fully into it, everyone will become our rival. We will start to be more and more alone, and, in time, our success will be outpaced by another, and our success will be forgotten. It is fickle. It is like the wind. Work is satisfying, but work cannot ultimately satisfy.

A few years ago, I read a book where this person was just asking you to consider your life—you and me—the readers. And so he said, “Hey, look at your calendar. Pull your calendar out and do a long reflective look at your calendar. I think, by looking at it, you will start to see some of your values.” Then he asked this question. “As you look at your calendar, who are you trying to impress?” Then he asked a few questions. He says, “God, give me a break.” We can't impress God. Others? Maybe. And then he says, “Yourself?” Bingo! Bingo! See, so often we are driven to seek ultimate satisfaction in that which cannot ultimately satisfy. And as we do it, we are driven to do that, because deep in us, there is a deficit and a longing to find ultimate meaning…ultimate value… ultimate identity. God created work. Work can satisfy, but work cannot ultimately satisfy. And when we make that which cannot ultimately satisfy, ultimate in our life, we are on a soul-crushing journey. So the Preacher says, “Don't do it.”

I think all of us can say, from our own experience, “We know what that's like.” A few weeks ago, we introduced a conversation between a couple of members of our congregation, as they considered the words of the Preacher. We want to do that again today, on this topic of work and labor and success. So, I'd invite you to join me as we listen in on Clint and Sydney's conversation.

Sydney: So, we grew up pretty poor—my older brother and I—and then, by the time my youngest brother was born, my dad had started working at a local educational service unit. And he worked his way up from the very bottom. Like he went to college to be an engineer, finished his degree as an education major, but he read a book called "Engineering for Dummies," and got the job as an engineer at like the lowest of the low. He worked his way up, got a new job, worked his way up. and now he is like the vice president of the network engineering of The Buckle. He makes a lot of money doing it. My mom went to college to get her physical therapy degree, and then got married and was a stay-at-home mom. But even as a stay-at-home mom, she worked and she worked. She was our lunch lady, and then she was the preschool teacher for my youngest brother. And now, she went back to college after COVID, got her counseling degree, and has just continued to work to start her own business and stuff. So I can kind of relate to that. And my grandparents, like, worked to get their master's in teaching. My other grandparents, they worked really hard. They were farmers. So they, like, everything in life was kind of about work and like kind of about making money. And so, growing up, we detasseled. We got part-time jobs. And we always had to work really hard on homework. We always had to do chores. Even the grades I earned I'm like, "This is not as good as it could be. I'm not working hard enough." That's soul crushing!

Clint: I've talked a lot about my work before to people, but probably not in this context. I mean, just hearing your story, we have so much in common. I mean, I grew up in rural South Dakota, and, like, in the first 18 years of my life, I was in a trailer park…yeah, essentially, right. And while there was a financial aspect to it, that you mentioned, growing up thinking about work, I think, for me, the twist came to be about identity. When I think back to my formative years, I think I felt like a nobody out there…nowhere. "I'm a nobody, going no place." And that's really what it felt like for a lot of people in rural communities. I mean, I know that feeling. And I think that I had this drive, just that, "I don't want that." I call it a drive. but it might be a fear. You know, like, because the reality is we're all people doing great things, but you know, I think I was scared of being that. And so when I came here, and the business I started, it was because it was about identity. And it was very selfish in that way…because I wanted to be somebody. I wanted to do something important. Those were actually the words I used, because I wanted to do something important. But I think identity has been a challenge of mine throughout my career. Do great things and at the same time not, "How does what you do not become who you are?" And you see yourself that way. Because when you have success in a little bit, you want more of it, and your identity grows, and you want more and more and more, and pretty soon, "Who is Clint without the work?" And I've found myself in some tricky spots in the past. There was a point where I actually had to take six months off of work to separate myself from what I did. I was like, "I'm no longer part of this." I'm doing this, and that was rough. You know, you feel like you're having an identity crisis. That was probably one of the hardest things I've done, but, you know, I know, "People have done a lot harder things than that." But, for me, separating identity out from who you are, and finding who you are away from work was…yeah, I mean, that's very challenging.

Sydney: I've been to so many seminars, heard so many sermons, where they're like, "Okay, introduce yourself to the people next to you." And so I'm like, "Hi, I'm Syndey Haffener. I'm a Biological Systems Engineering major." And, every time they're like, "Okay, stop. Say something else about yourself besides that." And then I'm like, "Okay, my identity and family." So I'm like, "I have this many siblings and this many parents." "Okay, stop. Like, what are you after that?" And it's like, "What are you without your family? Without your work?"

Clint: Yeah, I think I've struggled to answer that question in the past. I mean, I don't know who I am, because everything I've done up to this point, has felt like about creating and doing, making things work. And, you know, that's…that's a good thing, you know, I know that God provided work, and it's a very good thing. But it's taken me places where I can recognize and go, that are not healthy at all. I've had about 20 years of feeling that way about the next project…and the next project…and the next project. "Each—the next one—is going to be the one that feels fulfilling." But that's a tale as old as time, right? Like, there never will be that. And I don't know, I mean, maybe…maybe we never figured that out in this life. I'm still trying to figure out what I think.

An incredibly honest conversation. Clint asked, "How does what we do not become who we are?" As the Preacher continues throughout Ecclesiastes, he's going to seek to answer that question. But here, as we turn to chapter 5, he provides a bit of an answer, and his answer is worship. It's to think of God rightly. In what one commentator calls the most positive verses that have occurred thus far in this book, the Preacher gives us seven verses reflecting on worship. Chapter 5, verse 1:

> **Guard your steps as you go to the house of God and draw near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools; for they do not know they are doing evil. Do not be hasty in word or impulsive in thought to bring up a matter in the presence of God. For God is in heaven and you are on the earth; therefore let your words be few. For the dream comes through much effort and the voice of a fool through many words.**
>
> **When you make a vow to God, do not be late in paying it; for *He takes* no delight in fools. Pay what you vow! It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not pay. Do not let your speech cause you to sin and do not say in the presence of the messenger *of God* that it was a mistake. Why should God be angry on account of your voice and destroy the work of your hands? For in many dreams and in many words there is emptiness.** (Vanity) **Rather, fear God.** (Chapter 5:1-7)

Rather, Fear God! Throughout this book, so far, the close of a thought so often has occurred with the word **vanity**. Vapor…meaningless. But here, in this reflection on worship, he finishes: **Rather, fear God**. Throughout Scripture, whenever kind of the imagery of walking or of taking steps is used, it's always describing kind of the overall posture of life. And what the Preacher begins saying is, "When you approach God, do so seriously, intentionally, with humble reverence. Don't approach God with kind of just this posture that is cavalier, that just starts blurting out and

blabbering all these things as a fool would do. Rather approach Him with humility, with a listening ear. Approach Him with seriousness. Approach Him with reverence." In other words, here in these seven verses so far in Ecclesiastes, the question is, "What should I throw myself into?" Answer: "If you're going to be serious about anything, be serious in your pursuit of God. Take God seriously."

A vow was a very common thing back in the Ancient Near East, and even in Israel they would use vows as a way of making a promise to God. And even today, people still do it sometimes. They'll say things like, "Lord, if you get me out of this jam, then I'll do X, Y, and Z. I'll do these things." I don't necessarily recommend that kind of attitude, but what the Preacher is saying is, "If you are going to do that, don't do that in a haphazard way. Take that approach very seriously." God was serious. The seriousness that He is due is because there is no being more magnificent, no being more wonderful than Him. So don't just utter empty speech. When you make a vow, intend to keep it. This apparently was such a serious thing in Israel that there was an official office referred to as **the messenger** in verse six. The **messenger** would go around and ensure that people kept their vows. It's important to keep a vow before the living God. To not do that was a great mistake.

You know, when we were walking through the book of Exodus, we were just considering God's grandeur, His might, and Bryan uttered a phrase that really stuck with me. He said, "God is not to be trifled with." In other words, take God seriously. Consider who He is. There's no being more wonderful, there's no being more "*aweful*", (in other words, full of awe). There's no being more magnificent, more powerful than Him. And so the Preacher is saying, as you approach Him, approach Him with the seriousness that He is due. Approach Him with earnestness…with reverence…with humility.

During that series in Exodus, I had a conversation with a number of people that struggled a little bit with this image of God being just so powerful, so powerful that He had to warn people not to come too near to Him. You know, He's awesome, and actually dangerous in holiness. And sometimes we like to say things like, "We like the God of the New Testament more than the God of the Old Testament." But we have to reject that kind of thinking. We serve a God who is absolutely awesome and holy and almighty. And we serve a God who sent His Son, and who, on the cross, accomplished forgiveness for us, that we might draw near to Him with confidence. Both of those things are true. We serve a God who is absolutely almighty, and a God who is absolutely merciful, a God who created everything from nothing, and a God who is love. When we approach Him, approach Him with reverence; approach Him with awe; approach Him in a manner that is worthy of who He is, because there is no one like Him.

The Preacher is going to continue his quest. He's not done yet. He's going to go through highs and lows, but here in the midst of chapter five, he's arrived at something of substance, something that is sturdy. So far, every time he's considered something and thrown himself into something, he's come away saying, "It's vapor. It's meaningless. It's smoke." But here, there is something solid: "Live reverently before God. Take God seriously. Consider Him. Stand in awe of Him. Live with

fear of God." Fear is reverence. It is awe. Every time the conclusion has been vanity. This time he says, "**Rather, fear God**."

As we conclude, I just have a pastoral reflection. You know, the longer I'm a pastor, I kind of observe what's happening inside the church, outside the church, what people are going through, the struggles they face, the temptations they face, and the longer I've been a pastor, the more convinced I've become that the greatest threat, the greatest danger in the church, is that we would begin to settle for a low view of God. We will begin to settle for something less than standing in absolute awe of the One who created everything and called us to Himself. We allow, over time, through distraction, and just erosion of thought and passion, to start to just settle for a view of God that, ultimately, we're bored with. We come to worship Him, and we almost come with a yawn. We're bored with God. We're bored with His ways, and so we start to seek, when that happens, in the outside world, all of these things to help us feel some passion, help us feel alive. We pour ourselves into everything but seeking after Him. The greatest danger we face as a church is to have a low view of God. We need to be a people who stand in awe of God. There is no one like Him, and there is nothing better than to be caught up in the work He is doing. God is unfolding a drama in the world, and as the most magnificent drama there is, He is working His plan slowly, patiently, and He intends to use you and me. God is doing amazing things. If there is boredom in our heart towards God, we need to ask ourselves, "What would it take to say, 'Fear God,' while standing in awe of Him."

Do you walk through life, do you stand, do you enter worship, even today, with a fear of Him and an awe of Him in all His majesty? If not, how do we start to restore that? I think the easiest thing that I can offer to you is just spend time reflecting on who He is. Just consider His ways, His might, what He has done in the world, how He created everything from nothing, how He knit you together in the womb, how He formed you, how He redeemed you through the blood of Christ—all that He did for you. And then, in turn, stand in wonder and awe of who He is. An easy way to start to do that is just on Saturday night or Sunday morning—when we gather together—just enter this time with reverence. I'll admit it's not easy. Get here little late…just come in with your hair on fire. I know what it's like. I've got little kids. It's hard sometimes. But how do we be people who just say we want to walk in with the reverence that You are due, Lord, because there is no one like You.

In just a moment, we're going to close with a song. And as we do that, I want to encourage us just to be thoughtful about the words that we're about to sing. There's a phrase in this song that we're about to sing. It says, "*I've searched the world for a love that could fill my heart. Nothing compares to the wonder of who You are.*" Now, that is absolutely true. And so, in just a moment, we're going to sing that, but I want to encourage you to sing it as a declaration of what is true. But let's also sing it as a prayer, as a confession of our heart, because the truth is that all of us are prone to wander. All of us are prone to look to other things to fill us up, to satisfy our heart. And so when we say, "Nothing compares…" let's say, "Lord, help me to believe that. Help me to live as if that's true. Grant me such a large vision of how wonderful, how awesome You are, that I can say with my entire being, 'Nothing compares to the wonder of who You are.'" So, we say it as a declaration, but we say it also as a confession and a prayer… "Lord, make it so in our life. Help us stand in

awe of You." In a world full of vapor, in a world full of vanity, let us be a people that say, "**Rather, we will fear God."** Let's pray together.

Our Father, we come before You, confessing that we are so easily distracted and so easily pleased with the things that You created to be good but not to be our ultimate good. Lord, help us not to be people that, in little minor ways, serve the creation rather than the Creator. Help us to recognize You for who You are, and to stand in awe of You. There is no one like You. And so, stir in our hearts a passion for You, a large vision for You, that we might be awed and astounded and fearful people, not afraid, but full of awe and wonder, because You are the only One who is worthy. Lord, we ask that You would do it, and we pray these things in Your name, Amen.

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