

## 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday in Lent

**Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7; Psalm 32; Matthew 4:1-11; Romans 5:12-19**

Since Lent is the season for penitence, fasting and personal examination of one's life, it is a season in which we are reminded of both our sinful nature and of the acts of disobedience and disregard that act out that nature in ordinary life. It is therefore fitting that the First Sunday in Lent examines the biblical origins and nature of sin, particularly concentrating upon the source of our temptation to live for one's own objectives rather than for God and God's kingdom.

**Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7** describes God's assignment to humanity of the primary work to which we are called in life (2:15-17), and then how humanity has defaced that work by our response to temptation (3:1-7).

"The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to till it and keep it. And the Lord God commanded the man, "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die" (2:15-17).

The mission of humanity as intended by God is profoundly stated in this passage. First, the word translated "man" in Genesis 2:15 is the Hebrew generic word for humanity, "*adam*" rather than the Hebrew word for a male homo sapien ("*ish*"). Thus, the author is indicating that the work assigned here to "the man" is the primary task of humankind – to "till and keep" the "garden". Our task is to care for the environment.

That this is the intent of the writer is made particularly clear by the use of the Hebrew to "till" or "cultivate" (Hebrew "*abad*") the land. The Hebrew word literally means "serve". That is, the task of humanity is to serve the earth as they would serve each other. Elsewhere, this Hebrew word is used to describe servants serving their master (Gen. 12:6), one group of people serving another (Exod. 5:9), and people serving God (Exod. 4:23). But here, it is used of '*adam* serving the earth by cultivating it so that it might realize its full potential. Unlike the first creation story (Gen. 1:1-2:4) that stated that the task of humanity was to have "dominion" over the world, this second creation story places humanity in a co-dependent relationship with the earth, so that both thrive by the '*adam* serving the earth by cultivating and caring for it.

But then the story radically changes! "Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God say, "You shall not eat from any tree in the garden'?" The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die'." But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves" (3:1-7).

Enter the serpent! This tempter has not appeared previously in the narrative, and thus both his presence and his intentions are here introduced. Satan will play a key role in both the Gospel and Epistle lessons for this First Sunday in Lent, so this dark figure needs to be initially examined here.

This Old Testament text does not name the serpent as Satan, but there is no question to who the text is referring. In the biblical world, snakes were symbolic of life and wisdom (because they annually shed their skin and thus seemed to be eternal), but also of malevolence and chaos (e.g., Job 26:12, 13; Isa. 27:1). The serpent as introduced in this story in Genesis is all of these, for he can speak, he obviously has a knowledge and wisdom that can manipulate and out-think both the woman and the man, and is described as “more crafty than any other wild animal”. But this epitome of temptation and evil is not eternal, co-existent with God for the writer is careful to note that the serpent is “more crafty *than any other wild animal that the Lord God has made*”. That is, he is a creation of God’s every bit as much as is the man and the woman. Yet he leads the man and woman to sin.

What is particularly significant about this text is that it teaches that evil and humanity’s response to evil comes from the outside, not from within. That is, sin was an intruder into the lives of this man and woman. They were not created evil by God, but “very good” and “in the image of God” (Gen. 1:31, 27). Thus, the work of Satan brought evil into the world and sin into the life of humanity.

It is intriguing to examine the strategy the serpent used to tempt Eve. He emphasized God’s prohibition (“Did God say, ‘You shall not eat from any tree?’”) rather than God’s provision (“We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, but not from the tree in the middle of the garden”). He changed God’s command into a question (“Did God say?”) as a subtle way to cast doubt on that command. He casts doubt upon God’s integrity by suggesting that God actually made the rules He made in order to protect His status and position (“God knows when you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you will be like God”) and he denied the truthfulness of God’s threat (“You will not die”).

Further, it is intriguing to note how the woman responded to the serpent’s temptations. She doesn’t immediately yield but rather is seduced by the snake into accepting what appears to be his superior logic (vs. 3) and by minimizing the threat she faced (v. 6). The man then follows the woman’s lead, deciding to disobey God; together, they choose to base their sin-initiating action upon practical values (“the tree was good for food”), aesthetic appreciation (“it was a delight to the eyes”), and intellectual gratification (“the tree was to be desired to make one wise”). Therefore, “she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate”.

The deed was done! The act of eating the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was essentially an act of refusing to trust in God, in God’s word, and thus in God’s ordering of life. Theirs was an act of breaking relationship with God, of deciding upon autonomy for themselves rather than at-oneness with God, and thus eschewing obedience. And with that act, humanity became estranged from God, committed to the building of their own power and thus committed

to a lust for power that would manifest itself in the oppression of each other, a life of scarcity leading to greed and the exploitation of others, and an existence both separated from and yet longing for God. This radically-changed reality was expressed by the author of Genesis in the most poignant words. “Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves” (vs. 7). But such a feeble attempt would not remove the shame and the guilt of what the man and the woman had done both to themselves and to all who would ever spring from their loins!

**Psalm 32** is about the joy of forgiveness when one honestly confesses his sin to God. It can be divided in two ways. One way is to see it as a two-way conversation – the penitent’s confession of sin and sense of forgiveness (vss. 1-7 and the concluding statement in vss. 10-11) and God’s response to the penitent (vss. 8-9). A second way to divide the psalm is to perceive its first part as vss. 1-5 which concentrates on the joy of thanksgiving in the light of confession and forgiveness of sin, and the second part as vss. 6-11 as a witness to God’s redemptive work within us. In this division of the psalm, verses 8-9 is not a statement by God but rather the Psalmist’s witness to God’s grace. I personally prefer the first way of interpreting the psalm, seeing it as a two-way conversation between the penitent and God.

The psalm begins with a declaration of grace. “Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Happy are those to whom the Lord imputes no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit” (vss. 1-2).

The psalmist then continues that as long as he kept his sin to himself and didn’t confess it or deal with it, “my body wasted away through my groaning all day long” (vs. 3). He could try to cover up his sin, but he knew that he had done wrong and that knowledge weighed heavily upon him. But “then I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not hide my iniquity” (vs. 5). When the psalmist became honest with himself and both admitted his sin to himself and to God, then – and only then – did he begin to become free enough to deal with that sin. Unacknowledged sin would only work its damage within him. Redemption began by being honest enough to admit it to himself as well as to God.

Once he acknowledged his sin, confessed it and knew that God had forgiven him, then a miracle occurred within him. “You are a hiding place for me; you preserve me from trouble; you surround me with glad cries of deliverance” (vs. 7).

Now that the psalmist has become free of his sin because he has confessed it, become penitent and received the forgiveness of God, he can get on with the rest of his life. God now speaks, instructing the psalmist on the next steps he needs to take if he is to move toward wholeness. “I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go; I will counsel you with my eye upon you. Do not be like a horse or a mule, without understanding, whose temper must be curbed with bit and bridle, else it will not stay near you” (vss. 8-9). Confessed and forgiven sin becomes the seedbed for one’s own spiritual maturation. So faith does not consist only of confession of sin and accepting of forgiveness. That is only the beginning. One must also desire to grow in his knowledge and commitment to nurturing one’s relationship with God. And when one does that,

then God can begin to work within one, curb that which has formerly defeated him, and open himself to a new way of life in relationship with God and his companions on the way.

Thus, the Psalm concludes “Many are the torments of the wicked, but steadfast love surrounds those who trust in the Lord. Be glad in the Lord and rejoice, O righteous, and shout for joy, all you upright in heart” (vss. 10-11).

**Matthew 4:1-11** deals with another temptation, intentionally developed in parallel with the first temptation that signaled the fall from grace of the human race. As the first temptation was leveled at the first man (“*ish*”) and woman (“*ishah*”), who together represented all humanity (“*adam*”), so the second temptation was leveled at the *Son* of God, the first man of a new humanity. As the first temptation occurred because of the seducing actions and words of the Satanic serpent, so the second temptation was the action of the Satanic devil (the Greek word *diabolos* means tempter or accuser – exactly the same role the serpent played in the first story). As God led the first man into the Garden (Gen. 2:15), so God the Spirit led the first man of God’s new creation into the wilderness (Matt. 4:1). The temptation of the first humans was for them to seize power, wealth and authority for themselves; the temptation of the first man of God’s new creation was also to seize power, wealth and authority for himself. Both the first humans and the first man of the new creation were called to make a decision whom they would worship. God deals with the first couple in the light of their decision, and through his angels, God cares for the first man of the new creation in the light of his decision. The only significant difference in the two stories is the decision that was actually made by both the first couple and the first man of the new creation! And it is that decision that makes all the difference in both the outcome of these parallel stories and in the impact upon the entire created order that both decisions wrought!

In the temptation story as told by Matthew, the Spirit leads Jesus into the wilderness. As Jesus’ story, as told by Matthew, is the story of a Messiah who is marginalized from the centers of Jewish and Roman power and authority, so the story begins at the margins – in a wilderness after being baptized far from Israel’s and Rome’s power.

It is important to appreciate the journey through which Jesus is going. It is at his baptism that Jesus, already recognizing that he is not like all the others coming to seek baptism (3:14-15), suddenly “sees the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him” (3:16). And it is there that Jesus hears “a voice from heaven saying, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased” (3:17). Thus, it is at his baptism that Jesus receives the clear and unequivocal credential from God that he is, indeed, the Messiah, the Son of God, God’s Beloved, the One with whom God is uniquely and fully well-pleased! Coming out of this experience, there is no doubt in Jesus’ mind either about who he is or what it is he is called to do!

How could Jesus understand so clearly from God’s pronouncement the mission to which he was being called? These words, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased” seem to be the same idea stated in three distinct ways. But for any Jew who had spent considerable time meditating on the Old Testament, these words would have meant far more. For these

apparent words of blessing are actually two separate opening lines to Old Testament prophecies about the Messiah.

“This is my Son, the Beloved” is a quotation from the Second Psalm. That psalm describes the Messianic king of Israel – the Messiah all Israel hoped for – the one who would bring ultimate peace to the world by conquering and subduing all other nations. It is the traditional Jewish expression of the conquering Messiah.

But “with whom I am well pleased” is not simply the second half of that sentence. “With you I am well pleased” is the opening line of the 42<sup>nd</sup> chapter of Isaiah – the opening prophecy of the Servant of the Lord who “will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; a bruised reed he will not break and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice. He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth” (Isa. 42:2-4). This Messiah is the one “who was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities, upon him was the punishment that made us whole and by his bruises we are healed” (Isa. 53:5). Thus, God’s declaration of Jesus as God’s Son, the Beloved, was not a compliment but a call to responsibility. Those words were a call for Jesus to take on the burdens and pain of the world, so that through his life, his ministry and his death, humanity might be set free to become what God created them to be before the first temptation stole innocence from us all. Thus, God’s words were actually the traditional Jewish expression of the marginalized Messiah!

Thus Jesus now knows his mission. But how is that mission to be carried out? Since Jesus is the unique Son of God, God’s Beloved, how is he to act out this calling? It is into the wilderness that the Spirit of God leads Jesus so that he might be able to think and pray through the strategy he will follow to carry out the task of the Son of God, which is to return civilization to God’s intentions for it.

Why the wilderness? Why not go to the centers of power – the Temple in Jerusalem, the market square in every city and town, the political power center of Herod’s and Pilate’s courts? Why not go to a sacred retreat site where Jesus’ bodily needs could be met as he contemplated and planned in silence? Why the wilderness?

Why the wilderness? It was in the wilderness that Moses met God at a burning bush. It was into the wilderness that the escaped slaves from Egypt fled. It was in the wilderness that these former slaves met with God at Mount Sinai and were formed into the nation of Israel. It was in the wilderness that Israel received the Law that taught them God’s intentions for society. It was into the wilderness that Israel’s great prophets fled in order to be emboldened for their mission in the world. It would be out of the wilderness that Israel’s remnant people would return from Babylonian exile. John the Baptist was to be found, not in the palaces of emperors, kings or high priests, but in the wilderness! For it was in the wilderness that Israel had traditionally met God and had been shaped by God into the nation that God intended them to be! Thus, Jesus “was led by the Spirit into the wilderness” to meet with God and gain clarity about the strategy he was to follow in returning humanity to God’s intentions for it.

But it was not God whom Jesus met in the wilderness. “The tempter came and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.” Then the devil took

him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down for God will command his angels to bear you up so that you will not dash your foot against a stone”. Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and said to him, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me”.

God does not tempt Jesus in the wilderness as his Son wrestles with how he is to carry out the mission given him by God. It is the devil who tempts Jesus. And the temptations with which the devil confronts Jesus are all temptations to use evil means to accomplish good ends!

The question facing Jesus was, “Since I am called by God as the marginalized Messiah to create God’s kingdom upon the earth, how am I to do it? What is to be the strategy I should use to enable God’s kingdom to come?” The end or objective of Jesus’ mission is good – to create God’s kingdom on earth. But the means embraced and acted out by Jesus has the potential for great mischief, because the means used to achieve God’s good end can be destructive or self-serving or harmful to the people – and thus, by that mean’s very nature, destroy the realization of that mission.

The tempting strategy commended itself to Jesus was to simply seek to reform the economic, religious and political systems of Israel (and of the world) – to get them to act in the just ways God intended them to act. But these systems had become evil, primarily serving the powerful, influential and wealthy of their society at the expense of the poor, the powerless and the marginalized – the ordinary people. Therefore, the task was not reform. The task was to embrace the vision of society as shalom (“the kingdom of heaven”), and to apply that vision to the daily activities of the systems, those who provided guidance to those systems, and those who lived under the authority of those systems.

The first temptation Jesus faced was an economic temptation – to “command these stones to become loaves of bread” and thus feed the hungry of the world. The second temptation was a religious temptation – to do a great miracle work (in this case, jumping from the pinnacle of the Temple 32 stories to the plaza below, and having angels “bear you up so that you will not dash your foot against a stone”) so that people would be astounded at Jesus and would follow him. The third temptation was a political temptation – to be given “all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor” if Jesus would fall down and worship Satan. Miracle economic works, miracle religious works, miracle political works – but all used in the service of Satan.

It is intriguing to note how Jesus counters each of these temptations. He uses scripture as his defense. To the economic temptation, Jesus quotes Deuteronomy 8:3, “One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God”. To the religious temptation, Jesus quotes Deuteronomy 6:16, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test” (that is, don’t use people’s faith in God to build your own power or success). To the political temptation, Jesus quotes Deuteronomy 6:13, “Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him” (that is, politics is to be centered in the worship of God, not the building of the power of the state).

But most important of all, this story reveals the depth of evil in “the world as it is” – the world under the bondage of economic systems built upon institutionalized greed that exploits society’s

most vulnerable, religious systems that seek to control and dominate the people, and political systems lusting for power while oppressing the people. Matthew wishes to demonstrate that even Jesus is tempted by the seductive, Satanic side of each of the systems which were created by God to order Israel's life and the life of the world. The first temptation was to feed the world's hungry by giving allegiance to a Satanic economic system. The second was to tempt Jesus to use miracle-working power in order to gain control of both the nation's religious system and the minds and hearts of the people. The third was to rule the world's political systems in a way that would bring about justice, but this could only happen if Jesus would serve the Satanic purposes of the political system.

All three temptations were turned away through Jesus' reminder to Satan of the true nature of each of these God-centered systems. Each of his quotations from Deuteronomy is from that section of Deuteronomy that summarizes the nature and purpose of that particular system as God intended it to be. Through quoting the relevant portion of Deuteronomy to each temptation, Jesus was reminding Satan (and also himself) of God's true intent for systems – economic systems that equitably distribute wealth so that poverty is abolished, religious systems that bring humanity into dynamic relationship with God and each other, political systems that provide justice and mercy for all.

It was not simply that Jesus was quelling Satan's arguments by throwing scripture willy-nilly at him. What Jesus was doing was reminding both Satan and himself what the systems he was being tempted to misuse in the achieving of good ends (feeding the hungry, doing deeds of healing and spiritual transformation, ruling with justice) were actually designed by God to be and do. In other words, Jesus was saying to Satan, "these systems cannot simply be reformed into God-based systems because their very foundations, as they are presently constituted, are built upon greed, power and control. They are Satanic in nature. Therefore, the only way the systems that order corporate life can be created as Godly systems of justice and the equitable stewardship of life is to be based in relationship with God. And that can only happen by starting all over again – by being new systems upon a new order ("the kingdom of heaven") built upon right relationship with God".

The temptation that Jesus faced, therefore, was to simply seek the reformation of the systems. But that would require allegiance to their Satanic foundations that were built when humanity first chose to disobey God and act to make themselves God, use fruit for their own aggrandizement, and create a new order ruled by a serpent rather than by God. Only radical change, only liberation, only salvation, only starting all over again would bring sufficient and authentic change to the world's systems. So Jesus avoided taking the easy way out and set upon a course to establish the kingdom of heaven, a course that would inevitably mean his marginalization and ostracism from all the centers of Israel's and Rome's power, a course that would create such conflict with the established political, economic and spiritual order that it would result in his execution!

But then there would be an empty tomb!

**Romans 5:12-19** is the primary theological reflection in the Bible on the fall of *'adam* and the saving work of Jesus Christ. As is done in Matthew's telling of the story of Jesus' temptations, Jesus and *'adam* are compared as two "men" or "types" of God's work in society. The action of the two and the consequent results from those respective actions is summarized in the final two verses of Paul's theological reflection on this theme. "Therefore, just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all. For just as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous" (Romans 5:18-19).

Humanity is sinful! Although it is true that God created humanity "very good", just as God created all the universe good, it is also true that humanity is sinful to the core. Human beings and the society they create are "totally depraved". By "totally depraved", theologians who use this term do not mean that human beings are totally or completely corrupt in their thoughts and actions, and have no capacity for good within them. Rather, what they mean is that the totality or whole of a person's and society's being is infected (and consequently, affected) by sin. Like a pernicious virus that can't be stamped out, sin infects and keeps on infecting everything that we do or say. There is no such thing as a pure motive; even the most apparently pure motive (e.g., the love of a mother for her child) is "infected" with selfish or self-centered content (e.g., the unconscious need to preserve or extend one's life that manifests itself in loving the children we produce). And this depravity which is a part of all of us extends not only to every facet of our personality and being, but to every element (the political, economic, social, educational and religious order) of the society which we create or embrace by which we order our life together. Sin touches and corrupts absolutely everything. This is the doctrine of "original sin"<sup>1</sup> – a sin-nature that goes beyond our personal choices, thoughts and actions to an infection of the entire human order, operating at almost an instinctual and certainly unconscious level of both our personal being and the formation of our society. As Pascal put it so well, "The doctrine of original sin seems an offense to reason, but once accepted makes total sense of the human condition". It is about this depth and pervasiveness of sin that Paul the Apostle writes in today's epistle lesson.

"Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, so death spread to all because all have sinned. But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died through the one man's trespass, much more surely have the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, abounded for the many" (5:12, 15).

In this passage, Paul sets up the dichotomy between "Adam" and "Jesus", between the "one man" whose actions bring sin and death into the world (he means spiritual death, not physical death), and the "one man, Jesus Christ" whose actions bring liberation and life into the world.

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to differentiate between the doctrines of "total depravity" and "original sin". The doctrine of original sin is the assertion that sin is inherited; i.e., Adam's and Eve's sin in the Garden of Eden didn't simply alienate them from God, but infected all of the humanity that was not yet born. Thus, the very capacity, ability and willingness to sin is passed from one generation to another, as if the sin-nature is in our very DNA. The doctrine of "total depravity" has a different thrust. It asserts that there is no such thing as a pure motive, but that everything we do, say and think has ulterior motives as well as good and noble motives. "Total depravity" recognizes that sin permeates all of life. Each doctrine needs the other doctrine in order to capture a complete understanding of the very nature of sin in all human beings, the institutions and systems they create to order life, and even the environment. We humans have corrupted everything and, outside of Jesus Christ, will continue to corrupt everything.



To accomplish this, Paul makes the “two men” as two “types” of humanity. A “type”, theologically, is one who represents qualities characteristic of a larger whole. In this case, “Adam” represents the forces that introduced original sin into human society, and “Christ” represents the forces that now introduce release from that sin and the consequent transformation of human society. Paul develops this dichotomy by presenting the inevitable results from the actions of both “men”. The Adam is a type of death (vs. 12), trespass (vs. 15), judgment (vs. 16), condemnation (vs. 16), disobedience (vs. 19), sin (vs. 20) and the Law (vs. 20). Jesus Christ, on the other hand, is the type of life (vs. 17), justification (vs. 16), obedience (vs. 19) and grace (vss. 15, 17, 20-22).

Paul wishes to make it clear in verses 13 through 14 that all have sinned because Adam sinned. That is, all humanity was represented in Adam, so that his action corrupts us all – both individually and societally. He doesn’t explain how all of us were intertwined in Adam’s action, but simply asserts that fact. All have been corrupted by sin because of the actions of Adam.

However, the free gift of salvation for both the individual and society in Christ is not like the death and corruption that comes to humanity by the actions of Adam. Paul is very careful to argue in verses 15-17 in today’s epistle lesson that the action of Christ upon the cross was so powerful that it overwhelmed and continues to overwhelm the corrupting nature of Adam’s sin upon ourselves and upon our societies. The grace of the work of God through Christ is far greater than the sin, condemnation and corruption that came as the result of Adam’s disobedience, for it brings justification and righteousness to those souls that embrace that grace and transformation and justice to the societies which they help shape. As Paul so eloquently puts it later on in this chapter, “where sin abounded, grace did much more abound” (5:20, KJV)!

Paul summarizes the epistle lesson for this First Sunday in Lent with a perfect parallelism of his typology argument. “Therefore just as one man’s trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man’s act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all. For just as by the one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man’s obedience the many will be made righteous” (vss. 18-19). Here, the argument is stated as clearly as it is humanly possible to state it. Through the actions of “the one man” (Adam) corruption has entered into all humans and the societies they create, for he is both the representative head as well as the physical root of their sin. But through the actions of “the one man” (Jesus) and his obedience to God’s call to him to act to transform the world, Jesus Christ has made it possible for all humanity to be set free. For Jesus is the representative head of a new humanity and the society he creates with them. And thus, we are set free from the permeating power of sin that has otherwise corrupted us and the society we seek to mold, a power that is otherwise the inheritance of our corruption “in Adam”!

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