



JUNIOR HIGH GROUP STUDY

LISTENING TO GOD

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General Editor



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How to Use the Uncommon Junior High Group Studies

Each *Uncommon* junior high group study contains 12 sessions, which are divided into 2 stand-alone units of 6 sessions each. You may choose to teach all 12 sessions consecutively, or to use just one unit, or to present each session separately. You know your group, so do what works best for you and your students.

This is your leader's guidebook for teaching your group. Electronic files (in PDF format) for each session's student handouts are available online at www.gospellight.com/uncommon/. The handouts include the "Reflect" section of each study, formatted for easy printing, in addition to any student worksheets for the session. You may print as many copies as you need for your group.

Each individual session begins with a brief overview of the "big idea" of the lesson, the aims of the session, the primary Bible verse and additional verses that tie in to the topic being discussed. Each of the 12 sessions is geared to be 45 to 90 minutes in length and is comprised of two options that you can choose from, based on the type of group that you have. Option 1 tends to be a more active learning experience, while Option 2 tends to be a more discussion-oriented exercise.

The sections in each session are as follows:

Starter

Young people will stay in your youth group longer if they feel comfortable and make friends. This first section helps students get to know each other better and focus on the theme of the lesson in a fun and engaging way.

Message

The Message section enables students to look up to God by relating the words of Scripture to the session topic.

Dig

Unfortunately, many young people are biblically illiterate. In this section, students look inward and discover how God's Word connects with their own world.

Apply

Young people need the opportunity to think through the issues at hand. The apply section leads students out into their world with specific challenges to apply at school, at home and with their friends.

Reflect

This concluding section of the study allows students to reflect on the material presented in the session. You can print these pages from the PDF found at www.gospellight.com/uncommon/jh_listening_to_God.zip and give them to your students as a handout for them to work on throughout the week.

Want More Options?

An additional option for each section, along with accompanying worksheets, is available in PDF format at www.gospellight.com/uncommon/jh_listening_to_God.zip.

UNIT I

Seeking God's Voice

"Practical theology."

These two words leapt from the seminary brochure I was reading.

"Practical theology."

That's it, I thought. That's the concentration I want for my doctoral studies.

Some may think of practical theology as a contradiction in terms. My response is that it's actually redundant. At its core, the field of practical theology is based on the belief that what we think about God (the theology part) influences how we act (the practical part). It's impossible to divorce our beliefs about God from our actions. The way we view other people, our work, our possessions and even things as seemingly mundane as eating and driving are all reflections of who we believe God is and who we believe He wants us to be.

The same is true of the topic of this study. I know few believers who feel satisfied with their dedication and ability to hear God's voice (including myself). I'd like to suggest that any difficulty we have with hearing God's voice ultimately resides in some misperception we have about God.

Maybe we think *God is too busy to talk with us*. After all, He's got seven billion folks on the planet to keep an eye on. How can He have the energy to focus on little ol' you or me? Or perhaps we believe *God doesn't speak anymore*. Times change, communication methods change, and it's logical that somehow God's voice has been muted a bit. Given that He doesn't have an email address, He's a bit out of the loop.

Or maybe it's because deep down we believe *God doesn't speak to someone like us*. Sure, in biblical times He spoke to folks like Isaiah, Jeremiah and Paul, but they were a different kind of people in a different kind of time. I know people today who have heard from Him, either through an audible voice, or more commonly from an impression they knew was divine, but there must be something about those kinds of people that is special and unique. When they were passing out bionic ears, we must have been in the wrong line.

If we take even a few seconds to analyze these perceptions about God, we realize how foolish they are. God can't be "too busy," as He transcends our

sense of time and schedule. Because His nature is constant, He can't have gone mute all of a sudden. And there doesn't seem to be a unique profile of the kind of person to whom God speaks. God seems to have broken through to all sorts of people regardless of their background and personality.

That's why I think it's something even deeper. What is it ultimately that keeps us from hearing from God? We can blame it on our schedule, but if the President of the United States wanted to say something to us every morning, we would certainly make time for it, because we value that person's input and position. So maybe the real question is, *How much do we really value God?* If we really believe that we need God and are helpless without Him, then we would go running to Him for guidance and strength, just as a toddler runs to his or her parents. Maybe we've lost some of that childlike faith and reliance. Maybe we've become more like sullen teenagers who greet our heavenly Father with a "hey, how's it going?" kind of salutation, while our attention quickly returns to the TV show we're watching instead of actually waiting for His answer.

We've planned this book with one major hope: that it will remind you and your students of *why* you need to hear God and *how* you can be more receptive to His voice. But ultimately, even the most creative game or best case study will not produce a change in behavior without a change in you and your students' basic beliefs. So we're back to where we started: our practical theology.

Is God really the source of strength for your life that you claim Him to be? Are you really convinced that you need—really need—God to guide you? Let me leave you with one last question: If someone was to peer into your life and answer those two questions by looking at the time you set aside to listen to God, what kinds of answers would that person come up with? Hmmm . . .

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SESSION I

SEEKING GOD'S VOICE IN HIS WORD

THE BIG IDEA

As we seek and obey what God has told us in His Word, we will experience greater long-term benefits.

SESSION AIMS

In this session, you will guide students to (1) understand that obeying God's Word leads to both tangible and intangible blessings; (2) feel motivated to make hard choices now, knowing that they will experience greater long-term benefits later; and (3) act by choosing at least one of the Ten Commandments they need to obey in a greater way this week.

THE BIGGEST VERSE

"Be strong and very courageous. Be careful to obey all the law my servant Moses gave you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, that you may be successful wherever you go" (Joshua 1:7).

OTHER IMPORTANT VERSES

Exodus 20:1-17; Joshua 1:1-9; 3:17; Jeremiah 29:13; Romans 6:1-2; Ephesians 6:2-3; James 1:23-24

Note: Additional options and worksheets in 8¹/₂" x 11" format for this session are available for download at www.gospellight.com/uncommon/jh_listening_to_God.zip.

STARTER

Option 1: Hit the Mute Button. For this option, you will need a way to record or download TV shows and a way to play them for your group. You will also need a few adult volunteers, so if you don't have any handy, make sure to invite a few parents who can really ham it up to join you for this lesson.

Ahead of time, record or download at least two of your students' favorite TV shows. If you don't know what those favorite shows are, just ask them! They're sure to have lots of opinions. Watch the shows ahead of time to find a two- to three-minute clip that is full of dialogue and action, but where it's tough to tell without listening to the actors' lines what is actually happening (for instance, what they're mad about, what they're excited about, and so forth). Also ahead of time, meet with a few volunteers to let them know they will be acting out some TV scenes, but that they will not know what is actually happening in these scenes. Encourage them to be as outlandish as possible, even if their lines hardly make sense (in fact, the less they make sense, the better!). Make sure that they haven't seen the shows already and that they are pretty good at spontaneously acting things out.

Greet your students when they arrive and ask them to list some of their favorite TV shows. After they have yelled out their favorites, explain how you have taped some of last week's episodes of a few popular shows. However, they are going to be watching these scenes with the sound off, and they need to figure out what is going on. Play the first TV show clip with the volume muted or turned all the way down, making sure that students who have seen the show already don't yell out what is taking place.

Call up the adult volunteers you chose before the meeting. Ask the volunteers to act out what they just saw to the best of their abilities. Tell them that because they didn't hear anything, they will have to make up the actors' lines, motivations and any relevant background information. They can't talk to each other to come up with a plot ahead of time, so they will just have to wing it.

After the adult volunteers are finished, ask if any of the students have seen the actual episode of the TV show. Choose a few of these students to come forward and act out what actually happened in the scene. If you have time, repeat this with one or two scenes from other TV shows. When you're done, ask the group what they think the difference was between what the adult volunteers acted out and what the students acted out. (The answer should be that the adults had no idea what was going on, as they couldn't hear the show, but the students were familiar with the scenes so they could act out the lines and the scenes more accurately.)

Explain to the group members that we will be starting a new series on seeking God's voice. Many people think it is difficult to hear God's voice or that He doesn't speak at all to people today. However, God has already spoken to us in His Word, and we don't have to wonder what He is saying to us as if we were watching Him on TV with the mute button on. He's already given us tons of instructions and great stories about Himself. As we will see today, the more we obey what He's already told us, the better the long-term benefits will be.

Option 2: Guessing Game. For this option, you will need copies of the "Guessing Game" cards (found on the next page). Greet students and have them get into groups of 8 to 10 students each. Have each group pick one volunteer, and then ask the volunteers to leave the room. Distribute one "Guessing Game" card to each group, and have each group read the instruction on the card. Everyone in that group will answer his or her volunteer's questions according to what the card says.

Have the volunteers return to the room and join their groups. Explain to the volunteers that they need to ask questions of the group members. By listening to the answers, they will be able to figure out what the group is doing. Some examples of questions would be, "Liz, what is your favorite color?" or "Jason, if you could have any car, what would you have?"

When all volunteers have guessed what their group is doing, you can repeat this game with a new group of volunteers. After playing this game a few times, ask the volunteers the following questions:

- How did it make you feel when you had to guess what your other group members were doing but had no idea what was going on?
- How would it make you feel if all of your conversations with others were this hard?
- How would it make you feel if this were the only way you had to communicate with God—by always guessing what He was trying to say?

Explain to the group that we don't have to guess what God is trying to say to us. Today, you will be starting a series on how we can seek God's voice and hear what He has to say to us. During today's lesson, they will learn that God has already communicated to us through His Word, and that the more we follow and obey what He has already told us to do, the better the long-term benefits will be.

Guessing Game



Answer as if you were the person sitting on your left.

Answer as if you were the person sitting on your right.

If any part of your body is crossed (your legs are crossed, your arms are crossed in front of you), you should lie.

If you're a boy, answer like you're 4 years younger.

If you're a girl, answer like you're 10 years older.

Only use your left hand when you're talking, but use it a lot.

When you answer, make sure you touch some part of your face.

Answer as if you were the person asking you the question.



MESSAGE

Option 1: Clues. For this option, you will need a Bible, a prize, adult volunteers and a variety of rooms. Your adult volunteers will be hiding in the rooms, so ahead of time, find out where they plan to conceal themselves so you can give your students hints as to where they are located. You might want to try to darken all of the rooms to make the game a bit harder. Also, make sure you have some way of letting everyone know the game is over (a bullhorn, a whistle, or even a loud yell) so that adults don't stay in hiding and miss the rest of the lesson. (*Note:* If you don't have enough adults or access to a variety of rooms, you can use your own meeting room and hide a few stuffed animals or dollar bills instead. Change the directions of the game to fit your situation.)

Have the adult volunteers leave the room. Divide the students into groups of five to seven people. Explain that they will be playing a game where they will need to search as a team for the adult volunteers who are hidden throughout the house/building/church campus (whatever fits your setting). If they find one of the adults, they have to carry—yes, *carry*—him or her back to the meeting room. (Make sure to advise them to be careful when they are doing this so you don't have any injuries.) When they achieve this task, you will give that team 1,000 points. They can then run back out to try to find another adult and carry him or her to the meeting room as well. The winning team gets a prize.

Begin the game. When a team arrives with an adult volunteer, award them their points and then whisper the location of where they can find the next hidden adult. In other words, tell them where to go to find an adult. They will not know this ahead of time.

End the game by using your preferred method of noise after 10 to 15 minutes, or when all of the adults have been found. Bring your students back together and ask what they think the difference was between the first time they ran out to find an adult and the second, third and fourth times. (The answer should be that you gave them hints on the second, third and fourth times.)



Youth Leader Tip

Always try to build relationships with parents and make them your allies. Invite them to observe the group and participate in some meetings. After all, they are more influential in your students' lives than you are!

State that in the same way, it is easier to know what we are supposed to do in life when we are given the answers. Fortunately for us, we have been given all kinds of clues and answers about what we are supposed to do. We just have to know what they are and then follow them.

Explain that in the Bible a man named Joshua learned this lesson. When Moses died, God chose Joshua to lead the Israelites. Joshua had been second in command, but now he was the head honcho. He had some pretty big shoes to fill. However, as we'll see, God had a special plan for Joshua. He gave Joshua three major jobs: (1) conquer the land that He had promised to give the Israelites (Joshua 1–12); (2) distribute the land among the people (Joshua 13–19); and (3) obey the law (Joshua 20–24).

Read Joshua 1:1-9 aloud, placing special emphasis on verses 6-9. When you are finished, ask the group the following questions:

- What did God mean when He told the Israelites to obey “all the law my servant Moses gave you”? (*God was referring to the Ten Commandments and other laws that He had given to Moses and the priests. These laws already had been written down for them. This would have made it easier for the Israelites to remember and to apply them to their lives.*)
- What does the Bible say would happen to Joshua if he obeyed the laws that God had already given to Moses? (*Things would go well with him.*)
- How is this like the adult scavenger hunt we just played? (*When we had hints about where to go, things went much better.*)
- What laws has God given us to obey? (*He has given us many more than just the Ten Commandments. We are blessed to have both the Old and New Testaments in the Bible that tell us exactly what God wants us to do.*)
- But isn't the whole Bible a lot to obey? (*Yes it is, but once you understand the basic principles of who God is and how Jesus lived here on earth, it gets easier to figure out what God wants you to do.*)¹

If you have time, you might want to flip ahead in Joshua and summarize some of the things that happened when Joshua and the Israelites obeyed God. For example, in Joshua 3:1-17, after 40 long years of wandering, they were able to cross the Jordan River and enter the Promised Land. The Jordan River was no little stream—it was a real river, and certain parts of it were very wide and hard to cross. In Joshua 3:17, the priests carried the Ark of the Covenant into the middle of the river, and a path opened up.

Encourage the group to begin to read God's Word daily to discover what an awesome future God has for them. The same promise that God made to Joshua in 1:7 is also true for them. They can know for certain that when they seek out God's voice in His Word and follow what He says, He will bless them and be with them.

Option 2: Fortune Cookies. For this option, you will need a Bible, fortune cookies, and an adult volunteer who will share childhood pictures of himself or herself. Ahead of time, meet with the adult volunteer. Have this person choose pictures of himself or herself that represent a glimpse of God's blessings (such as family relationships, chances to go to school, good friendships). The volunteer should be ready to share the pictures as the meeting begins.

Begin by asking someone to share a time when he or she had to follow a presentation by someone who really did a great job. How did it make him or her feel? Chances are it made the person feel anxious, because following a great presentation sets a high standard that he or she would want to meet. Well, the same was true of a man in the Bible named Joshua. Joshua was the right-hand man of Moses, a great leader whom God had used to take the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt. God had been very close to Moses, and he had used him to do some miraculous things. When Moses died, God chose Joshua to be his successor—which were some pretty big shoes to fill. God also gave Joshua three very big goals to meet: (1) conquer all of the people living in Canaan, which God had promised to give to His people (Joshua 1–12); (2) distribute the land among the people (Joshua 13–19); and (3) instill in the people the need to obey the law (Joshua 20–24).

Read Joshua 1:1-9, and explain that when Joshua did what God told him to do, things went well for him. In the same way, when we do the things that God tells us to do in His Word, things will go better—*much* better—for us. However, obeying God will only be possible if we trust Him. If we don't think God will come through for us when we need Him, we probably won't follow what He says. Fortunately, this passage shows us that God has a history of keeping His promises.

At this point, ask your volunteer adult to share his or her pictures with the group and how those pictures are symbols of God's faithfulness. When the volunteer is finished, explain to the group how most of us probably have pictures of ourselves that show how God blessed us when we were growing up. The same is true with Joshua. As he followed Moses around, he would have witnessed firsthand the ways that God rescued the people again and again. So

when God told him, “As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will never leave you nor forsake you” (verse 5), it would have really hit home. Based on this past history, Joshua could trust God when He revealed what would happen in the future: He would be with Joshua and help him lead the people into the Promised Land.

Distribute the fortune cookies and watch as your students dig into them and eagerly read their fortunes. Ask students to think about whether or not they open their Bibles and read it to find out about their futures in the same way they opened their fortune cookies. Encourage them to begin to read God’s Word daily to discover what an awesome future God has for them. Conclude by stating that the same promise God made to Joshua is true for them. They can know that when they seek out God’s voice through the Bible, God will bring blessings into their lives.

DIG

Option 1: The Ultimate Price. For this option, you will need a whiteboard and a whiteboard marker. Ahead of time, make three columns on the whiteboard.

Ask the group to think of ways that people their age often disobey what God has told them to do in the Bible. As the group members give you their answers, write their ideas in the first of the three columns on the whiteboard. You and your students will probably come up with quite a list, ranging from cheating and swearing to vandalism to premarital sex. Next, go on to column two. In this column, have the group members come up with at least one benefit for each activity in column one. For example, when they cheat, they might get better grades; when they swear, they are more like the other students at school; when they vandalize property, they look cool; when they are willing to have sex, they get more attention from the opposite sex.

In the third column, again go through each of the activities in column one, but this time have the group members come up with negative consequences they might experience from doing these things. For example, when they cheat, they don’t learn; when they swear, they develop a habit that becomes hard to stop; when they vandalize, they destroy things that are valuable to other people; when they have sex, they risk catching a disease or getting pregnant (in addition to many other emotional consequences). If possible, try to steer the negative consequences away from “you might get caught,” and go to the deeper issues. If students get stuck, prod them to think about long-term consequences they could experience months or even years later.

Explain to the group that while disobeying God might seem to bring short-term benefits, in the long run, the person who sins always pays the price. In fact, it's been said that when a person breaks God's laws, God's laws break that person! Transition to the next step by explaining that each group member will have a chance today to choose one of God's Ten Commandments to obey more fully this week.

Option 2: Short-term Benefits. For this option, you will only need this book. Read the following story to the students:

Alex was new to Jefferson Middle School and wanted desperately to fit in. In her old school, she had been one of the most popular seventh-graders. But now that she had to move across town for her stepdad's job, she had to start all over making friends at her new school.

People didn't pay much attention to Alex at first. In fact, they would have entire conversations in front of her as if she were invisible. They would talk about other kids at school, usually saying mean things about how dumb or ugly those other kids were.

One day at lunch, a group of cheerleaders were talking in front of Alex about the girls involved with drama. They said they couldn't believe what geeks the drama girls were and that they wished they would transfer to another school. The next day at lunch, Alex happened to be in line at the cafeteria with a bunch of the drama girls. One of them mentioned one of the cheerleaders' names and said she wondered what she thought of their group. Alex piped in, "Oh, I know. I heard her yesterday. She and all her other cheerleader friends think you guys are geeks and wish you would transfer to another school."

All of the drama girls turned toward Alex. "Really?" one of them said. "What else did you hear?" Alex couldn't believe it. People were finally paying attention to her! She told them about how other groups, such as the dance team and the newspaper staff, also thought the drama group was a bunch of losers.

Ask your group members what Alex has gained by spreading this news. (Some answers would include acceptance and friends. Alex might have also felt that she had finally found a way to be acknowledged and accepted by telling the drama group what she had overheard other people say.) Now ask the students to think of what Alex will be facing a few months down the road. Sure,

she's made friends, but once she runs out of information for the drama group, they'll get sick of her, or they'll get tired of hearing negative stuff from her all the time. They might even start to mistrust her, because if she shared information *with* them, she might be sharing information *about* them.

Summarize by explaining that while it often seems in the short run that there are some benefits to disobeying God's laws, if we look weeks or months down the line, our disobedience catches up with us. We pay a heavy price for just a few minutes of fame. On the other hand, while obeying God's voice and doing what He tells us to do in His Word won't make our life 100 percent smooth and easy, it will ultimately bring us a better life. Transition to the next step by explaining that each of the group members will have a chance today to choose one of God's Ten Commandments to obey more fully this week.

APPLY

Option 1: Dental Artists. For this option, you need tape, pens and paper. Ahead of time, tape the pieces of paper to one of the walls of the meeting room. You will need the same amount of paper as the number of volunteers that you are going to choose. Make sure that there is space between the papers.

Explain to the group members that the laws from Moses that Joshua obeyed were the Ten Commandments. Choose 10 volunteers, give each volunteer a pen, and have him or her stand in front of one of the pieces of paper on the wall. Explain that you are going to whisper one of the Ten Commandments into each person's ear, and when you do this, the volunteer needs to draw a picture of this commandment on his or her piece of paper. Here is the catch: the volunteer will have to hold the pen in his or her teeth. Allow the remaining students to gather around these "dental artists."

Start the game. When the volunteers are finished drawing, read the Ten Commandments found in Exodus 20:1-17 aloud. Have the group guess which of the Ten Commandments is represented in each picture. Next, have the stu-



Youth Leader Tip

When using materials such as markers and tape, paint or food, protect walls, floors, carpet and clothing by using drop cloths, pens that wash off and surface-friendly tape. Good supervision and ground rules can also keep the fun, fun (and the custodian happy).

dents stand by the piece of paper that best represents the commandment they need to work on the most in their own lives. Close in prayer, asking God to help the group members as they try to work on the commandment they chose. Also, thank God for the blessings that will come as they do this.

Option 2: Are You Off or On? For this option, you need a digital camera or recorder and a way to show what you have shot to the group. Ahead of time, record a water faucet running for 30 seconds, then show a hand turning it off so that no water can come out of it, and then record the water faucet doing nothing for 30 seconds.

As you start to show the clip to your group, explain that the more they obey what God has told them to do in the Bible, the more they are like this water faucet. God can work through them in the same way He did through Joshua. He also can bless people through them. God might even use them to share about their relationship with Jesus and invite others to have a relationship with Him as well. When the clip shows the hand turning off the water faucet, explain that when they disobey what God has told them to do, He can't work through them as well. Not only will they feel drier spiritually, but also others around them will not be able to experience God's blessings in the same way.

Give the group members a chance to examine their own hearts. Ask them to think about whether they are like the water faucet that has been turned on or the faucet that has been turned off. In other words, is their disobedience preventing God from working through them in the way that He wants to work? Give students a chance to confess any sins with which they may be struggling, and then thank God for His forgiveness.

REFLECT

The following short devotions are for the students to reflect on and answer during the week. You can make a copy of these pages and distribute to your class or download and print from www.gospellight.com/uncommon/jh_listening_to_God.zip.

1—THE LIVING WORD

Some people would say that a poem is nothing but black marks on white paper. And, if you look at a poem under a microscope, you will see that this is

true—there is only paper and ink. But those who read the words of the poem and are moved by it find it to be more than just words on a page.

In the same way, you can pick up a Bible and just see it as scratches of ink on paper. If you don't read the words and think about what they say, you won't be able to hear God speaking to you through those words. If you don't apply what the Bible says to your life, it will not change you in any way.

Think about this for a moment. Have you ever read a verse of the Bible and felt as if God were speaking to you? Describe the situation.

James 1:23-24 says, "Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like." What do you think the author means?

Today, ask God to speak to you through His Word. He will!

2—HOW TO BE SUCCESSFUL

Want to be successful? Read Joshua 1:7. What did God tell the people to do to be successful wherever they went?

To be successful, the people had to obey God's "law," which were the words He had given to Moses (we find these in the books of Genesis, Exodus, Leviti-

cus, Numbers and Deuteronomy). To do that, they first had to know what the law said. How do we know what God wants us to do?

God has spoken to us in His Word, the Bible, and the more we obey what He says, the better off we will be. Reading His Word will teach us what to do! Write a short prayer asking God to help you read the Bible and follow what it says.

3—HEARING GOD SPEAK

As we discussed in this session, God has already spoken to us in His Word, the Bible, and we don’t have to wonder what He is trying to say to us. Yet God speaks to us in other ways as well. If you could pick any way you wanted to communicate with God, what would it be?

Why do some people find it hard to talk with God and hear from Him?

To talk with our friends, we have to spend time with them. We have to pick up the phone, or text them, or go visit them. How is this the same with God?

Today, spend some time reading the Bible, and as you do, remember that you are building a friendship with God. Then listen for Him to speak to you!

4—FINDING GOD

Looking for something? Read Jeremiah 29:13. According to this verse, we will find God when we:

- Spend time in church
- Spend time with Christian friends
- Seek Him with all our heart
- Write to Him on Facebook

What do you think it means to seek God with all your heart?

Imagine that a friend has something to tell you that you have been dying to hear, and you know that this friend will be home at 7 PM. Will you wait until 9 PM to call? No! You will get on your cell phone and call or text that person right away. You will *seek* out that person so you can hear what he or she has to say. The same is true of God. So . . . what will you do this week to spend time regularly seeking God by reading the Bible?

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