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Daniel 12:1–3, ESV.

12 “At that time shall arise Michael, the great prince who has charge of your people. And there shall be a time of trouble, such as never has been since there was a nation till that time. But at that time your people shall be delivered, everyone whose name shall be found written in the book. ² And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. ³ And those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky above; and those who turn many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever.

The Afterlife.

The people of the Old Testament, the Hebrews, as they are called when they are described in Exodus as residing in Egypt, and the Israelites of Canaan, as well as the Jews as they became known in Israel, were so-so about the issue of life after death. The only clear statement about judgement and an afterlife at the End Times is in the Book of Daniel. Daniel was a prophet: he spoke for God; he was an intermediary between God and God’s Chosen People. He was an exile in Babylon after the Babylonians forcibly moved several thousand people 700 miles east, by foot. Daniel is written in both Hebrew and Jesus’ native language, Aramaic; the two languages descend from a common root but they are significantly different. Daniel

had powerful, colorful, apocalyptic visions. His visions illustrate that God's power is greater than any earthly king. Daniel 12:1-3 says:

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With this passage, a great vision and the Book of Daniel are coming to an end. Chapter 12 guarantees a life after death for Daniel and for all those who remain loyal to God. Daniel predicts a time of great chaos and conflict when those who have followed God will live a brilliant everlasting life, and others will spend eternity in emptiness and with a lack of any redemptive value. The great angel Michael will protect the People of God during the conflict where the good are separated from the bad. This passage refers to *“those who sleep in the dust of the earth”*, who will come alive and be judged, and so this passage clearly states that those who have died in the past will be judged.

As a whole, though, in the Old Testament, the Hebrew Bible, the People of God don't talk about the afterlife much. In the 14th chapter of Isaiah, we get a hint of why. Here is a brief passage from a long lament against a tyrant who is identified as the King of Babylon, and this would mean Nebuchadnezzar. The prophet is

taunting the king. Nebuchadnezzar was a vicious ruler who had conquered many nations. Isaiah declares that this king believes he will become a god after taking control of the world. Isaiah says that instead, he will be destroyed, along with his descendants. When the king dies, Babylon will pass away.

*²¹ Prepare slaughter for his sons
because of the guilt of their fathers,
lest they rise and possess the earth,
and fill the face of the world with cities."*

This belief that a powerful king would become godlike after he dies was a common concept in the pagan ancient Near East. Scholars talk of the "cult of the dead" to describe the widespread worshipping of dead people. Kings in particular were thought to be powerful after death. It was also believed that the dead were a threat to the living. This might be the reason why the ancient followers of God were reluctant to talk and write much about the afterlife, why they tended to simply state that all people who died went to a place called Shoal, which was where all dead went when they passed away. The ancient Israelites did not want to be associated with pagan death cults. They worshipped God, not dead kings. They were threatened by evil people, not dead people.

At the time of Jesus, Jewish thinkers around him had begun to believe in more than just Shoal. They were widely adopting an extended version of what we

read about in Daniel. Many believed that there would be a resurrection of the dead at the end of time, and that those who were righteous would live for eternity, and evil people would be destroyed completely and pass out of existence. Righteousness was judged by how people followed the complex system of strict Jewish laws that involved praying, sacrificing grain and animals to God, doing nothing that could be considered work on the Sabbath, and observing the several major Holy Days, including making pilgrimages to the Temple in Jerusalem. Jesus came along and made a major change to this philosophy. He simplified the rules for being judged as good. Jesus said that we must dedicate our lives to God, and we must work for the welfare of others. This includes people who are outcasts, poor, or even our mortal enemies. That's why in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus is quoted as saying that the great Ten Commandments and Jewish law are both completely subsumed by two commandments:

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. ³⁸This is the great and first commandment. ³⁹And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. ⁴⁰On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets."

Jesus himself did not preach about the details of what happens to those who do not follow these two commandments in life. We tend today to simplify things: you either go to Heaven or Hell. You either live in joy for eternity or you live forever separated from God and tormented by regret. Many Christians,

perhaps most, also believe that Hell involves nonstop torture. But consider this from Matthew Chapter 13 where Jesus tells a parable that compares good fish to good people and bad fish to bad people:

⁴⁷ “Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and gathered fish of every kind. ⁴⁸ When it was full, men drew it ashore and sat down and sorted the good into containers but threw away the bad. ⁴⁹ So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous ⁵⁰ and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

The unrighteous are thrown into a fiery furnace. We, as modern people, tend to map this concept to Hell, a place where you suffer forever. But if you throw a bunch of fish or people into a furnace, they will simply be destroyed. Consider a similar parable, also in Chapter 13, where a man keeps the good grain and destroys the weeds:

“The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man. ³⁸ The field is the world, and the good seed is the sons of the kingdom. The weeds are the sons of the evil one, ³⁹ and the enemy who sowed them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. ⁴⁰ Just as the weeds are gathered and burned with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. ⁴¹ The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all law-breakers, ⁴² and throw them into the fiery furnace.

We need to be careful about concluding that Jesus taught our modern notion of Hell. If you get tossed into a fiery furnace, and you are the weeds, you will be destroyed, not tortured. Yes, Jesus does preach that the good, those who follow the two great commandments, will live in joy with God forever, and that those

who do not will be punished. But that punishment might be destruction, not torture. Another approach is to simply define Hell as an eternal separation from God. Perhaps Jesus meant that Hell is a complete lack of the presence of God, but not eternal torment. Certainly, if you are destroyed, you are not with God.

Let's put ourselves in the position of the very first Christians, the ones to whom Paul wrote his letters. It's believed that Paul's letters predate the writing of the Gospels, that the four Gospels were written at least twenty years after the writing of Paul's letters. Those believers thought that Jesus would return very soon. They expected to be alive on Earth when the final judgement happened. In

1st Thessalonians, we read:

¹⁵ For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. ¹⁶ For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷ Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. ¹⁸ Therefore encourage one another with these words.

Paul feels compelled to correct what must be a major concern among these people. They want to know what will happen to those who are not alive at the End Times, when Jesus comes again. He assures them that first, all those who have died in the past will rise and be judged. Only then will those who are currently living be judged. The believers, those who follow the teachings of Jesus,

will be with God. The faithful in Thessalonica are to encourage each other with this news. In the earliest days of the church, the followers of Christ were concerned not with the notion of Hell, of people being tortured forever if they are bad. Rather, they were concerned about the good people who have already passed away. There is obviously something hidden here, something unspoken.

If time had ended during the lives of the first believers, what would have happened to people who lived and died before Jesus walked the Earth? Were they all condemned to be destroyed in a fire, along with the weeds and the bad fish? What theologians and probably most Christians today believe is based on a notion called “progressive revelation”. We are responsible for knowing Jesus and following the two great commandments to the letter. Those who lived before us are only responsible for what God had revealed up until that time. We don’t know precisely what those who came before Jesus believed. But when we read the works of the ancient pre-Christian philosophers, it is clear that they recognized the need to live good, constructive, kind and empathetic lives, and they often expressed a belief that our spirits continue to live after we die.

Today, as followers of Christ, we know that we cannot sit back and tell ourselves that we believe in God and we go to church, and so we are good for eternity. We know that since God introduced himself to the Hebrew people,

since they entered the Promised Land - or perhaps simply emerged from the population in Canaan, rather than having emigrated from Egypt and conquered the Canaanites - they believed that there was an afterlife for those who followed the laws of God. They probably were nervous about being vocal about this because of the negative association with death cults that were common among pagan populations at the time. Even Roman Emperors were worshipped as gods, and the Romans conquered the People of God. Jesus came along and revealed more of what God wants us to know, in particular that the laws of the Jewish people did not serve to separate good from evil. Paul said in the Book of Romans, his great theological treatise: *For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.* We are bound by the two great commandments, and that is simply to love God and to love all people, no matter who they are.

I would like to ask you to think about the afterlife. Not what it will be like, because quite frankly, the Bible only uses very general, poetic, and often parable-like language for telling us what sort of eternity awaits us. But I do want to dispel one idea that is common among modern Christians. There is some conflict between Paul's apparent teaching about salvation and Jesus' teaching. Jesus seems to say that we must follow his two commandments. Paul seems to say that we are simply saved "through faith" alone. However, there is no true conflict.

The point is that intellectual or academic faith is not enough. I know that I read a lot of Bible passages to you. But my job is to teach you about Scripture, about the teachings of God and Christ, not about my opinion. So, please bear with me as I read another passage to you. This was written by James, the brother of Jesus.

He, along with Peter, led the Jerusalem Church, the center of the early faith:

¹⁴ What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? ¹⁵ If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, ¹⁶ and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled," without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? ¹⁷ So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.

Our job is to live our faith. That is the ticket to the afterlife. That is what God wants at this point in his revelation to us. We were born too late to be ignorant. We want the best for all people, and we act on that belief. We do not pat ourselves on the back for obeying God. It is simply our responsibility to do so. Please pray with me.

God, we thank you for incrementally revealing your will for us. We thank you for giving us life during a time when we know more about your goals for us and your plans for us after we have lived this temporary life on Earth. We know that what you want is for us to love and follow you, and to love and serve those around us. We do not fully know what happens to those who do not live this way, and we do not fully know what a life with you for eternity will be like. But we do know that you want us with you, and so you have told us how to do this. Amen.