

WHAT on EARTH is HEAVEN? Class #2:
The Hope of Eternity in the Old Testament

REVIEW: KEY THEME

In the Bible, the goal of God’s saving work for humanity is not about His *rescuing up the immortal souls of His people*, away from this doomed creation and dead bodies, into heaven (i.e., believe, die and go to *heaven* [the disembodied, post-mortem spiritual existence in a place different from earth]).

Rather, God’s saving work in the Bible, beginning with the promises of Genesis 3:15 and 21 until their ultimate fulfillment in Revelation 21 and 22, is about the movement of God downward—of God coming back to rescue us and His earth.

The Bible is an unfolding story of the *in-breaking of God from His realm to ours*, of God coming down from heaven to earth at various times and in various ways to bring His judgment upon evil and salvation for His people. God’s dual and often-stated purpose for re-entering His broken creation is:

- To *rescue, renew and restore* the earth as His “*very good*” creation to its original beauty (Isaiah 49:8, 13; 55:12-13; cf. Romans 8:19-26); and:
- To restore His Presence on earth among His people. God acts in our history [His Story] to *rescue us from all slavery, to renew us as His image-bearers and ultimately to restore us to the fullness of eternal life through His glorious return* [the Day of the Lord] *and our resurrection from the dead*. Then, once again, we will assume our original role (see Genesis 1:26-28) as His co-rulers and the stewards of His renewed creation (Revelation 21).

The Hope of Eternity in the Old Testament:

For decades, Old Testament scholars pointed out *accurately* that any explicit mention of eternal life for humanity—of the hope of life after death—is sparse in the Old Testament after Genesis 3. The clearest statements in the OT about the gift of eternal life are found most often in the *later prophets*.

Instead, if His people continue to trust in Him/turn to Him, the great hope God holds out in much of the Old Testament is that *He will gather His people to*

Himself and give them peace in His promised land. There their needs will be met and they will be blessed with long life. His promises and hope center in their life in the physical and visible land of Israel as promised to Abraham (Genesis 12:1-5; 15:7, 18; 17:8; Deuteronomy 28:1-68; 2 Chronicles 7:14).

This led some scholars to say the idea of eternal life in/with God is only a later, intertestamental evolution of belief among the Jews and then, later the Christians. But this assessment leaves out several crucial OT themes that speak of a greater redemption than just life in the promise land [especially *the Lamb* and *the Temple*]; and multiple clear Old Testament statements that do in fact promise the resurrection of the dead into eternal life:

I know that my Redeemer lives, and that **in the end He will stand on the earth.**
And after my skin has been destroyed, yet **in my flesh I will see God**; I myself will see Him
with my own eyes—I, and not another. How my heart yearns within me!

Job 23:23-27 (see Psalm 23:6)

On this mountain He will destroy the shroud that enfolds all peoples, the sheet that covers all nations; **He will swallow up death forever.** The Sovereign Lord will wipe away the tears from all faces; He will remove His people's disgrace from all the earth. The Lord has spoken.

On that day they will say: "Surely this is our God; we trusted in Him, and He saved us.

This is the Lord, we trusted in Him; let us rejoice and be glad in His salvation."

Isaiah 25:6-9

But **Your dead will live, Lord; their bodies will rise**—let those who dwell in the dust wake up and shout for joy—your dew is like the dew of the morning; the earth will give birth to her dead.

Isaiah 26:19-21 (see Isaiah 57:1-2)

Multitudes who **sleep in the dust of the earth will awake**: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt. Those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever. As for you, go your way until the end. You will rest, and then **at the end of the days you will rise to receive your allotted inheritance.**

Daniel 12:2-4, 13

Surely the day is coming; it will burn like a furnace. All the arrogant and every evildoer will be stubble, and the day that is coming will set them on fire," says the Lord Almighty. "Not a root or a branch will be left to them. But for you who revere My name, the Sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its rays. And you will go out and frolic like well-fed calves.

Then you will trample on the wicked; they will be ashes under the soles of your feet on the day when I act," says the Lord Almighty. **Malachi 4:1-4**