Q: Why did God not reveal the reward of eternal life in the Old Testament?

His plan unfolds according to His purpose.

Before we go hunting for answers, we need to make one thing clear. Nowhere in Scripture is a full explanation provided.

While there are inferences to “forever” and mentions of “everlasting things” in the Old Testament, Scripture never directly reveals why God withheld so much of His plan for eternal life from the earliest people of faith.

"For the living know that they shall die: but the dead know not any thing, neither have they any more a reward; for the memory of them is forgotten."
ECCLESIASTES 9:5

From the very early days of my own religious upbringing, one claim was perfectly clear – a life beyond the present is both accessible and undeniable.

Do these things, go to heaven.

And while I have learned that the path to “heaven” was a tad more complex and a bit more nuanced, the concept was an integral part of belief. An uncontested fact.

And yet, for nearly 2000 years, after many direct encounters between humans and God, the hereafter was not the reward for faith for those living in the days of the Old Testament.

Why?

Were the people of biblical times less spiritually mature?

Were they not yet advanced enough to grasp the concept intellectually?

And if Jesus was the only way, how could those who died before knowing Him be granted eternal life?

Could Abraham, Noah, Job, or Moses ever be considered spiritually immature? Hardly.

While their faith may have experienced moments of profound uncertainty, these men endured extraordinary tests of obedience, and in several cases, excruciating suffering for their faith.

Each repeatedly demonstrated an extraordinary trust in God, even when His purpose and plan remained hidden.

“Thus did Noah; according to all that God commanded him, so did he.”
GENESIS 6:22

God spoke to these men of faith directly on multiple occasions. At any time during their conversations, God could have revealed the glory that awaited them.

But He did not. Why?

The ancient people of the Old Testament had a mixed understanding about life after death. The prevailing understanding was not heaven or hell, but Sheol - a shadowy realm of the dead where the deceased

dwelt among their forefathers.

"Abraham breathed his last and died in a good old age, an old man and full of years, and was gathered to his people."
GENESIS 25:8

Resurrection was considered one of many afterlife possibilities but was not widely regarded. According to ancient historian Josephus, the learned scribes known as the Pharisees affirmed their belief in resurrection, while the priestly aristocracy, including the Sadducees - rejected it.

Abraham must have held a conviction about resurrection if he was willing to take his beloved son Isaac up to the mountain to be sacrificed according to God's command.

But by the later stages Old Testament period, resurrection begins to emerge as a higher probability.

"And many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt."
DANIEL 12:2

A WORD ON THE WORD

The ancient Hebrew word, olam (oh-LAHM) meant long duration, remote time, antiquity, perpetuity, or eternity. It was not a promise of everlasting personal life but more in line with God's promise of an everlasting covenant with a nation. Interestingly, the concept of olam includes the capacity to reach backward into the immeasurable past as well as forward into an indefinite future. In the Book of Daniel the Hebrew noun appears in the expression ḥayyê ʿolam: everlasting life. The core meaning of olam speaks of an enduring relationship between God and Abraham's nation of descendants; the expansive definition expressly refers to individual life beyond the grave.

If not personal resurrection, what did God promise those in the Old Testament who demonstrated faith in Him? While spiritual blessings such as forgiveness, mercy, and wisdom were often bestowed, rewards typically involved material gains – land, cattle, children, descendants, security, and a prosperous tribe or nation.

In the New Testament, one reference reflects on Abraham's future expectations of a "City of God". But nothing specific about an eternal life in the presence of His Creator.

"For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God."
HEBREWS 11:10

Following the death of Moses, ancient Israelites became well-versed in the teachings of the five books of the Torah (The Law). Given that the very first story of the book portrays a lush garden of tranquility, flowing water, and limitless abundance, one would think a return to this garden paradise would be a major biblical theme.

Oddly, Old Testament Scripture speaks little of the pursuit of a "New Eden" – a rediscovery of a land similar to the one found in Revelation in which no crying, sorrow, pain, or death exists, and the old order is swept away.

"On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations."
REVELATION 22:2

Several major prophets of the Old Testament allude to a return but only in vague terms without any instruction or guidance on how to actually get there.

"For the LORD shall comfort Zion: he will comfort all her waste places; and he will make her wilderness like Eden, and her desert like the garden of the LORD; joy and gladness shall be found therein, thanksgiving, and the voice of melody."
ISAIAH 51:3

This place where everything was good, life was abundant, and God walked among humanity was almost forgotten.

Certain explanations seem plausible concerning the lack of disclosure about eternal life in the Old Testament.

1. It wasn't time. God's purposeful plan would unfold only according to His time and direction.

2. It would make no sense. God's grand story of salvation was designed to resonate across human history and every epoch's role was critical to fulfill the glorious telling.

3. It was not knowledge but relationship. Communion with God was first about trust, not complete foreknowledge of how it would be rewarded.

Scripture is clear; God's purpose and plan existed before creation. And Jesus, present before creation, was always part of the plan.

"He was chosen before the creation of the world, but was revealed in these last times for your sake."
1 PETER 1:20

The long arc of the human story would roll out according to a master plan preordained by God in conjunction with the Son and the Spirit. What began in the garden when sin and death separated man from God, would ultimately be reversed through the death of Jesus on the cross and His ensuing resurrection.

Through Christ's sacrifice, the spirit realm and the earthly realm would be reunited.

"Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life."
JOHN 5:24

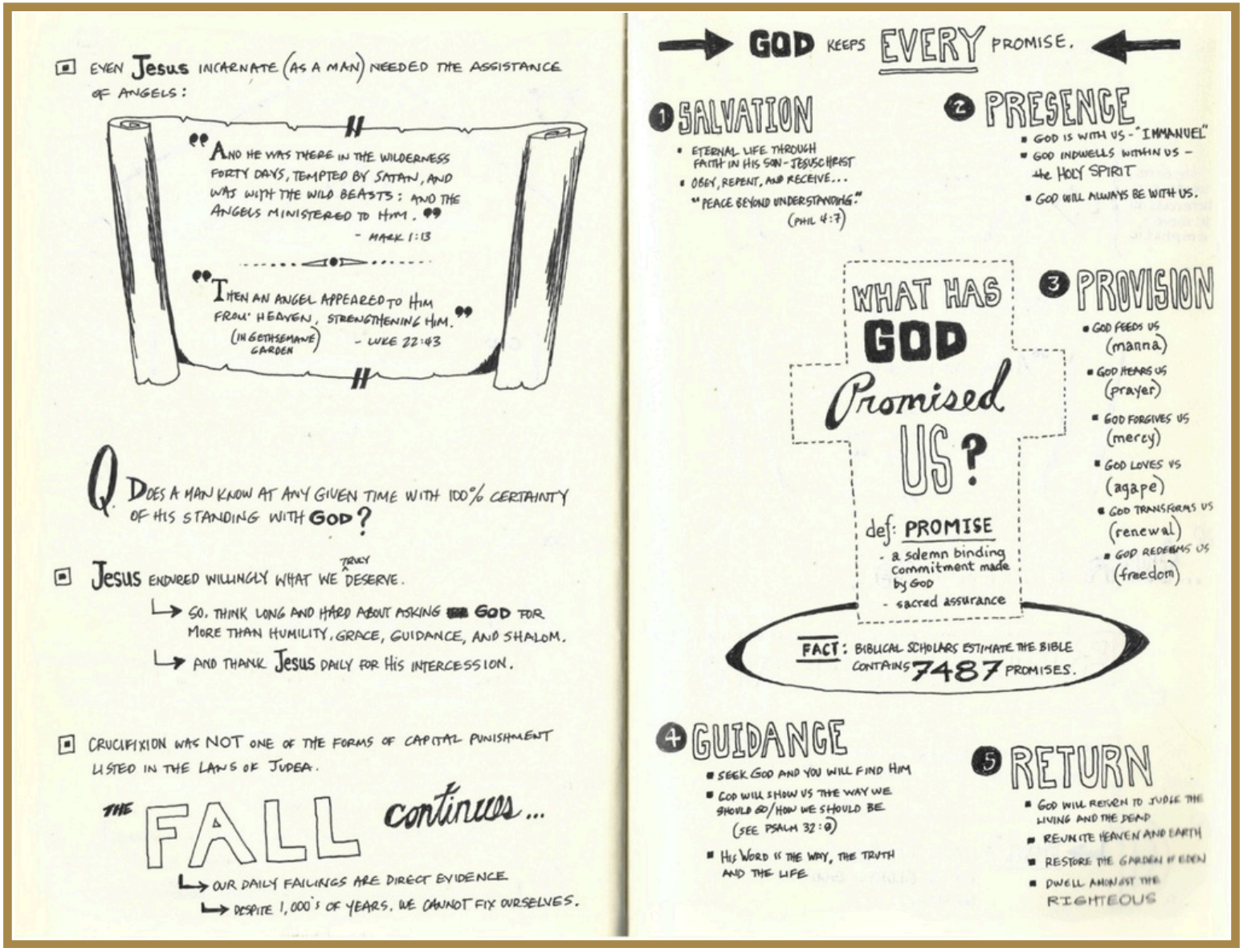
But how would those who had never known of the reward of eternal life, much less the life and death of Jesus Christ, ever be included in the final reunited realm?

Olam.

Biblical eternity operates with a memory that reaches back into the past and forever into the future.

"That in the dispensation of the fulness of times he might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth; even in him."
EPHESIANS 1:10





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