

## Burial Or Cremation?

### How Should We Care For The Body After Death?

It is increasingly popular, upon the death of loved ones, for relatives to have them cremated rather than buried. Perhaps our deceased loved ones have even requested cremation.

Because this can be a very pressing personal issue I think it good that we seek to examine something of what the Bible has to say on this practical subject.

At the outset we should remember that cremation was widely practiced in the pagan ancient world. It was common in ancient Europe, including Greece and Rome. The Greeks and Romans because of their pagan beliefs for example, belittled matter, including the body, so it meant little to them to burn it. It was simply a convenient means of disposal. The body was seen in a way as simply "rubbish"

Many pagans also resorted to cremation "the burning of the body, out of fear of the dead.

With the coming of the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ a different view of man was realized. The body was seen in a different light. The gospel of God's Word taught how Christ died to ransom our body as well as our soul. It reassured us of the sure and certain promise of the resurrection of the body. With the coming of this understanding and truth, cremation fell into disuse.

It was not until the 1870's that cremation began once again to be practiced in the western world, and has become increasingly common since that time.

The question then is, what should we as Christians, committed to the Word of God as our only rule of faith and practice, think of cremation and burial?

It is very important to note that the early Christians did not believe that if your body was burnt it was the end of you, and you could never be resurrected. They did not fear martyrdom by burning. Nor should we fear cremation, or for that matter any other form which may dissolve the body. The great truth of God's Word is that nothing can prevent the resurrection of the body by Almighty God in Christ Jesus! Though the body be burnt or bombed into atoms and scattered in the atmosphere; though it be buried in the depths of the sea or earth, it is all the same to the living, sovereign power of the Lord Jesus. Revelation 20:11-13,

"And I saw a great white throne, and Him that sat on it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away: and there was found no place for them. And I saw the dead, small and great stand before God; and the books were opened, and the dead were judged out of those things, which were written in the books, according to their works. And the sea gave up the dead which were in it; and death and the graves delivered up the dead which were in them:

When He comes again all that have ever lived, shall have their bodies reconstituted, and appear before His throne. Cremation does not stop the resurrection of the body. We do not fear it.

However, there are still important Biblical reasons, when it is in our power to reject cremation, for choosing burial.

The Bible teaches us both by principles and by examples that cremation is pagan and contrary to the whole concept of what God teaches us about our bodies.

Consider the following points:

- The Importance Of The Body In The Bible

The body is as really and eternally a part of man as is his spirit. From the Genesis record of creation we see our physical, earthy body as a necessary part of our being. Note Genesis 1:26 & 2:7; "And God said, Let us make man in Our image, after our likeness"

"And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul."

The dignity and wonder of man's creation in God's image was not limited to his spiritual being only, for man has never been simply a spiritual being. He is both spirit and flesh, and it is the union of these two parts that make the one whole. It is only as the spirit and body unite that man "became a living soul".

Scripture teaches us we shall all have our bodies reunited to our spirits when Christ comes again at the last day to judge

all men. (Matthew 25:31-46; Acts 24:15 etc) We thus, as body and spirit, either in heaven or hell, shall have an unending existence. For those whose lives are in the care and keeping of Christ Jesus, our body is thus an indispensable part of the salvation Christ has won for us by His life, death and resurrection. The body of believers is then very precious to Christ Jesus. He loved it and gave Himself for itâ€™s redemption, as much as for our spirit or soul.

The Holy Spirit by Paul also teaches us how precious are the bodies of Christâ€™s people and as such they are to be treasured, honoured and for which care must be exercised. â€œKnow ye not that your bodies are members of Christ?â€• (1 Corinthians 6:15)

â€œKnow ye not that ye are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you? â€¦ for the temple of God is holy, which temple ye are.â€• (1 Corinthians 3:16-17)

â€œFor ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are Godâ€™s. (1 Corinthians 6:20)

Our Shorter Catechism number 37 beautifully teaches us this truth of Godâ€™s Word when it confesses, â€œThe souls of believers are at their death made perfect in holiness, and do immediately pass into glory; and their bodies, being still united to Christ, do rest in their graves till the resurrection.â€•

Larger Catechism number 86 speaks the living faith of Jesus Christ and of the Bible when it proclaims, â€œâ€¦ immediately after death â€¦ their souls are made perfect in holiness, and received into the highest heavens, where they behold the face of God in light and glory, waiting for the full redemption of their bodies, which even in death continue united to Christ, and rest in their graves as in their beds, till at the last day they be again united to their souls. â€¦â€•

The Heidelberg Catechism number 1 also begins with this Biblical concept when it confesses, â€œThat I, with body and soul, both in life and death, am not my own, but belong unto my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ; who with His precious blood has fully satisfied for all my sins â€¦â€•

If we belong to Christ Jesus, and He is our great Prophet, Priest and King, our bodies are not our own. They belong to Christ. Therefore we should seek to conform our ways to His ways, which is burial not cremation.

Violence to the body, so inherent in cremation is completely at variance to the whole concept God teaches us of the importance of the body. So too, as we shall note, is burning. There is profound symbolism to burning in Scripture.

Scripture thus points to how the body is to be respectfully and lovingly cared for and laid to rest as in a bed in burial. Note how the Bible speaks of believers as â€œasleepâ€•, and resting. (Acts 7:60; 1 Cor 15: 6 & 18; 1 Thess 4:13 & 15 etc). This is so contrary to the violence of cremation.&

- To Bury Is To Confess Our Belief In The Resurrection.

When we bury our loved one and/or brethren in the Lord Jesus Christ, we powerfully witness to the Biblical belief of the sure and certain hope of the resurrection of the body one great and wonderful day.

This is very much the opposite to the beliefs of most, if not all, advocates of cremation. They generally hold to a faith that is hostile to, and against Biblical and Christian beliefs of the body and of a future state. Such advocates generally hold to a faith that is humanist, evolutionary and denies the real and actual resurrection of the body and/or life after death. They do not have a Christian view of the body.

Cremation as practised today historically was introduced and supported by humanists and those opposed to Biblical Christianity. It came into vogue when evolutionary concepts of man as another mere animal and simply matter, first began to take hold in countries where previously the Christian ethic and view of man prevailed. So often those who lived and died in the beliefs of humanism and evolution and its dreadful denial of God and His truth, actually wish their bodies to be cremated as an affirmation of their beliefs that they are merely animals after all. They thus fail to see the great truth of Godâ€™s Word that the earthly house of man constitutes part of the image of God in man, and that we are, body and spirit, eternal creatures. (Genesis 1:26; Matthew 25:46 Revelation 20:11-15 etc)

For a believer, we thus where possible lay our loved onesâ€™ physical remains to rest in burial, as asleep, cared for and watched over in the love of Jesus, waiting for the sure and certain hope of the resurrection of the body. Our practice of burial is a witness to these great truths.

- The Covenant People Of God, Both In The Old & New Administrations Of It, Always Buried Their Dead.

There are many, many references in the Bible as to how the mortal remains of believers were treated after death. Time after time, without exception, they were buried. Consider the following examples among many.

Scripture records how Abraham went to the trouble of purchasing a cave, in which to lay his beloved Sarah, and in which he also would be buried. (Genesis 23:9-10)

We read how Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Rachael and Leah were buried. (Genesis 35:19, 29; 49:31 7 50:1-13)

Deborah, Rebecca's dear old, believing and faithful nurse was buried. (Genesis 35:8)

In faith, Joseph was buried, after his body was preserved and kept for many years. (Joshua 24:32)

Miriam and Aaron were buried on their way to the Promised Land. (Numbers 20:1 & Deuteronomy 10:6)

God Himself, giving a divine example, buried Moses. (Deuteronomy 34:6)

Joshua was buried. (Joshua 24:29)

David, Solomon and the other kings were buried. (1 Kings 2:10 and 11:43 etc)

John the Baptist was buried. (Matthew 14:12)

Lazarus was buried. (John 11:17)

Devout men carried Stephen to his burial place. (Acts 8:2)

Above all, and after many other example, Jesus Christ our Saviour and forerunner of our salvation was buried, after his death, as the gospels record.

His then lifeless body was thoughtfully and carefully taken from the cross and reverentially prepared for burial. After being anointed with precious oils the body of Jesus was buried in a tomb. In this way, our Saviour sanctified the grave and burial for all of His people.

Surely the divine example of Jesus Himself should alone decide the question for Christians, who are follows after all of Christ and His ways, that burial is the Christian way to lay the body to rest in death until the resurrection?

But, some may say, are there not exceptions. What about King Saul and his sons who were burnt? (1 Samuel 31:12-13) When one reads this passage, it is clear that it was an abnormal, desperate action in a time of war, probably to prevent the enemy from further insulting their bodies. It does not teach this was the normal practice.

- We Must Remember The Burning Of A Body In Scripture Was A Sign Of The Curse Of God & Of His Justice

An examination of Scriptural data will show that fire is a picture or symbol in Scripture. It is a picture of destruction and of punishment due for sin. This can be illustrated.

Animals in the Old Testament sacrificial sin offerings were regarded as bearing the sins of the person offering them, and thus the animal was viewed as condemned to punishment for sin. Note their end "they were consumed by fire.

In some Old Testament cases the bodies of criminals were burnt to clearly indicate the curse of God and the greatness of their sin. (Leviticus 20:14; 21:9; Joshua 7:25-26; Amos 2:1; & 6:10; 2 Kings 22:16).

Thus too, Achan, who sinned against God and so brought defeat upon Israel, was burnt. (Joshua 7:25-26)

We cannot avoid the fact that no matter with what refinement cremation is carried out, it still definitely carries the idea of sudden, violent destruction. It is a picture of hell and of the end of the world under Christ Jesus' just judgement.

- The Language And Teaching Of Scripture Points To Burial Not Cremation.

In our Saviour's teaching on earth, whenever He discusses the matter of the care and treatment of the body after death, He refers to burial. The presumption is that burial is the normal way that bodies are to be cared for after physical life has departed. Consider for example his words in such passages as Matthew 8:22; 23:29 and John 5:28-29. In the last passage we read: "Marvel not at this: for the hour is coming, in the which all that are in the graves shall hear His voice, and shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of damnation."

The Spirit of God speaking by the Apostle Paul, of the death of believers and the future resurrection of their bodies in 1 Corinthians 15, presumes burial of the body after death. It is likened to sowing a seed in the earth, which in time will spring up to new, glorious life. In verses 35 ff we may read in part: "And that which thou sowest, thou sowest not that body that shall be, but bare grain, it may chance of wheat, or of some other grain: but God giveth it a body as it has pleased Him, and to every seed his own body. So also is the resurrection of the dead. It is sown in corruption; it is raised in incorruption: it is sown in dishonour; it is raised in glory: it is sown in weakness; it is raised in power: it is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body. O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? But thanks be to God

which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.â€•

Genesis 3:19 speaking of death, speaks of a â€œreturning to the groundâ€• intimating burial, not cremation or other generally violent forms of disposal of the body.

- It Is A Matter Of Historical Record That The Early Church Condemned Cremation as Pagan.

The early church and its teachers followed the Biblical and Jewish custom of burial, with all of its rich significance. They especially saw the example of the Lord Jesus as crucial for their own burials. To quote the historian Dr. W. Robinson; â€œFollowing the Jewish custom, the Christians washed the bodies of the dead, wrapped them in linen cloths, sometimes embalmed them, and then, in the presence of ministers, relatives and friends, with prayer and the singing of psalms, committed their deceased bodies as seeds of the resurrection bodies to the bosom of the earth. â€! The Christian catacombs, as visible witness to the hope of the resurrection, carried their weight with the Roman people. Indeed, even Julian the Apostate traced the rapid spread and power of Christianity to three causes: benevolence, care of the dead, and honesty.â€•

- Objections

There are of course arguments for cremation, such as sanitation and the practical question of land accommodation.

With regard to the question of sanitation, it is simply a matter of historical record that over the centuries burial has never caused a health problem. There have been burials in churches, but no record of disease arising from these burials has ever been noted. There is no instance of pollution of water causing epidemic or other diseases because of burial. There is no instance of diseases in people arising because of their living in close proximity to cemeteries.

The objection of not having sufficient land to accommodate burial could have some validity, however it should be noted that cemeteries holding the remains of thousands and millions of people take up very little space. In most countries this is not a problem, but in those where it may be we should look for other methods of burial such as in wall crypts, and multi story crypts underground etc.

The practical objections raised by opponents of burial, when closely considered are really no problem at all. Even those who wish cremation in the main wish memorial gardens etc where the ashes of their loved ones can be â€œinterredâ€• in the ground, a wall etc. Conclusion

Cremation, while increasingly common in the western world, is historically associated with paganism and is anti-Christian in concept and practice.

If a loved one desires it, explain the reason Christians give against cremation, if then if they still desire it, we cannot force it. The matter rests with God. But it should be understood that many faithful ministers of the Word of God will not on principle conduct a crematorium service.

An examination of Scripture shows that there is no Scriptural support for cremation. In fact the whole spirit of Biblical faith is against it. (See too such writers as Boettner page 50 ff).

Christians, in the light of Godâ€™s teaching about the body and our care of it, are to treat it with great dignity, respect and care. The bodies of the saints are especially precious in Christâ€™s sight. They are holy!

I believe we should see cremation as the early Church did, a pagan and unbelieving violation of the body after death. Remember Jeremiah 10:2-3: â€œThus saith the Lord, Learn not the way of the heathen â€! for the customs of the people are vain â€!â€•

In the light of this, but more importantly, in the light of what is symbolized in our care of the dead and Christâ€™s burial and resurrection, believers should not agree to cremation if it can be avoided.

Though a somber subject, it is a very practical and relevant subject for us all. Which raises the further very practical and vital subject of our death and our eternal destiny? It is a reminder to us how in this life we must seek the Saviour and be found belonging to Him, in His care and keeping, if we would die in peace and the sure and certain hope of the resurrection of the body to eternal life. Is Jesus Christ our Saviour? Have we repented of our sins and believed on Him. Have we confessed Him before men?

Let us so live that we are ready to die.

How wonderfully comforting to know that Jesus has sanctified our grave for us already. To know that when our bodies are laid to rest, He with His loving care is present in a wonderful way. We can say with Job, â€œFor I know that my Redeemer liveth, and that He shall stand at the latter day upon the earth: and though after my skin worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God: whom I shall see for myself, and mine eyes shall behold, and not another; though my reins be consumed within me.â€• (Job 19:25-27)

We confess the faith of the early Church, including that of our Saviour's death, burial and resurrection, and of our own certainty of the resurrection in the Apostles' Creed, "I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ His only Son our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried; He descended into hell; the third day He rose again from the dead; He ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead. I believe in the Holy Ghost; the holy catholic church; the communion of saints; the forgiveness of sins; the resurrection of the body; and the life everlasting.

Chris Coleborn  
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