

A Look at Burial or Burning (Cremation)

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Needless to say, the topic of cremation is controversial. Why? It is another evidence of how the culture has seeped into and pervaded Christian thinking. Even to say this is highly controversial. Let me try to explain.

A. A Biblical Argument for Burial

1. The Bible favors burial of our dead rather than burning their bodies. The patriarchs of old took great care to bury their dead. Genesis 25:9-10; 35:28-29; 50:11-14. We deem burial with a spouse important today.
2. We even have the example of God Himself burying Moses. Deuteronomy 34:5-6. We set aside one day a week for worship because of God's example. We should take the example of God seriously.
3. From our perspective, the Old Testament saints also went to great extreme to properly bury their dead. Israel carried the body of Joseph for decades to bury him in the Promised Land. Genesis 50:25-26; Exodus 13: 19; Joshua 24:32. We often expend extraordinary effort to bury our war dead or loved ones lost in a fire or other catastrophe.
4. The ancients held to a close unity between the body and soul. This unity was expressed in belief in the bodily resurrection. Abraham believed in the bodily resurrection as did Job and David. Hebrews 11: 17-19; Job 19:26-27; Psalm 16:9 (See the interpretation of Psalm 16:9-10 in Acts 2:31-32). The idea that release from the body is the great and ultimate blessing comes from Plato not the Bible.
5. The bodily resurrection is central to the gospel and central to the Christian faith. Romans 10:9-10; 1 Corinthians 15:3-19. When Christ came into the world, He took on human flesh. He took bodily form. Philippians 2:7-8. Christ died, in the body. Death is the separation of soul and body. Luke 23:46. Christ was raised bodily. See Matthew 28, Mark 16, Luke 24, and John 20. Christ ascended into heaven bodily. Acts 1:6-9. Christ sits at the right hand of the Father as King of kings, in bodily form. Hebrews 8:1. Christ will return in the body. Revelation 1:7.
6. The disembodied soul is in an abnormal state. Paul speaks of the soul without the body as naked. 2 Corinthians 5:1-4. The body in the grave is still united to Christ. Believers "fall asleep" in Jesus, that is, united to Him. 1 Thessalonians 4:14. There is continuity between the body we have in this life and the new body. The dead in their graves will hear the voice of the Son of God. John 5:24-26.
7. Christ died and rose again to overcome death and the devil. Hebrews 2:14-15. The redemption of the body as well as the soul is central to the Christian faith. Romans 8:23. The bodies of believers await complete healing from all the maladies of this life including the pain of death. 1 Peter 2:24. There will be no death in heaven, no separation of body and soul. Revelation 21:3-4.

8. Christ rose again in His body. His body was fully recognizable. Believers are promised a resurrection in His likeness. Romans 6:5. Believers are raised from the dead with new and glorious bodies fit for the heavenly realm. 1 Corinthians 15:35-46. We will recognize one another in the body. 1 Thessalonians 4:17.

9. Christian burial attests to and is a witness for our faith in the bodily resurrection. Because the body as well as the soul is important to God and is redeemed by God, we should refrain from desecration of the body.

B. A Biblical Argument Against Cremation

1. The terms "burnt" and "burning" in the Bible is used predominantly with reference to three things. There are burnt offerings and burning incense (See Exodus 29:38-46, Numbers 28:1-10, Exodus 30:7-8). There is the burning judgment of God (Isaiah 4:4, Revelation 18:9 and 18) and the burning anger of God (Psalm 78:49 among many other references). These terms are not used with reference to believers burning their bodies. The sacrifices prescribed by God were a sweet savor.

2. The burning of humans is condemned. God links it with divination and other abominations. Deuteronomy 18:10, 2 Kings 16:3, 17:17. A popular place of burning, of human sacrifice, in Israel was Topheth (Jeremiah 7:31-32), or the Valley of Hinnom. Jesus calls this place Gehenna and likens it to Hell. Matthew 5:22. Fire in Scripture often points to evil practices, God's anger, and judgment.

3. Specifically, God also judged a nation for burning the bones of a dead person. Amos 2:1. See the various commentaries on this text.

4. In addition, lack of burial reflects judgement and a lack of hope. Jeremiah 16:1-9.

5. From a biblical perspective, burning of bodies reflects the judgment of God and the accompanying lack of hope in judgment.

C. There is a secular and pagan tie to Cremation.

1. Secularism sees no place for a doctrine of eternal life and of resurrection. Evolution holds human beings are animals of a higher order and do not possess eternal souls. Our bodies therefore do not have value either. When we breathe our last, life is over, period. We had just as well let the body return to the dust from which it came. If we can help the process along, so much the better. Some take the step of scattering ashes to allow a person to go back to nature. From this perspective, cremation is a logical pagan idea. It is tied to pagan thought.

2. The most graphic example of the tie between paganism and cremation is Nazi Germany. The bodies of millions of Jewish people were placed in crematories in Germany during World War II. Here we saw the outworking of pagan philosophy in raw form. I raise this issue, not to condemn

anyone who might favor cremation over burial. I raise the issue to show, in a stark way, the connection between paganism and cremation.

D. There are certain arguments raised in favor of cremation that are pragmatic and not biblical. I answer these questions in light of the points already made.

1. What difference does it make? God can reconstitute a body lost in a fire, He can surely do the same with a cremated body. Answer: Yes, God can bring back a body lost at sea or lost in a fire. In burial we allow the hand of God to do His work. We do not do it for Him as in cremation. We may say the same about those lost at sea. God has His way. God's example with Moses was burial.

2. The soul is the important thing. What does it matter what is done with the body? Answer: God is just as concerned with the redemption of the body as He is with the redemption of the soul. The bodily resurrection is central to Christianity. We are bodily creatures and will be so after the resurrection for all eternity. At the resurrection, there will be a reuniting of body and soul. Our bodies will be completely healed of all disease, even the pain of death, in eternity. Our bodies are important. They too belong to God. We are not to desecrate them.

3. Cremation is a lot less expensive than burial. Answer: This is quite true in many places. Tax laws in America also make it less expensive for people to remain unmarried and live together. Is this a reason to act contrary to Scripture? Obviously not.

4. There is so little space in the world. Cremation makes sense. I'm told all the population in the world could be placed in the state of Texas with room for families to have plots to raise food. The world is not overpopulated. In some places space is at a premium. Is Christian burial and the testimony to the resurrection important enough to take reasonable steps to maintain the testimony?

5. You must believe those who want cremation are in sin. Answer: I'm calling to our attention a biblical perspective on death and the life to come. I'm chagrined that so many people do not seem to understand the importance of our bodies to God. I think many folk would alter their views if they understood the biblical perspective better. We all sin in various ways as we fail to understand and follow Scripture. I argue for burial. I certainly do not place people in Hell because of cremation.

6. You must think those who believe in cremation have no hope. Answer: Many folks who think cremation is perfectly acceptable have great hope in Christ. I do not deny this. My point is that cremation reflects a philosophy of life and death that has no hope. It's the philosophy that is hopeless. Christians easily and thoughtlessly often buy into the outworking of a pagan philosophy. The prevalence of situational ethics in Christian circles is an example. Christian burial reflects a biblical view of life and death tied to the bodily resurrection.

7. What about organ donations? Answer: I think organ donations are perfectly acceptable. Our identity is not tied to our individual organs but our bodies and souls make up the person. We

may lose a limb but we remain the same person. So it will be in the resurrection. I would vie for burial after the organ removal or after medical research.

8. What about the use of mass graves in times of plague, etc? Answer: History is full of examples where particular situations demanded drastic actions. Abnormal circumstances do not justify normalizing the exceptional. Christian burial is the biblical standard. We do well to follow the biblical standard as faithfully as possible.

9. What about the time between death and resurrection? Answer the term “sleep” is a metaphor for death in Scripture. Death is the separation of body and spirit (Luke 23:46). Death is an unnatural state (2 Corinthians 5:1-5). Christ was in this state for a short time with His body in the tomb and His spirit with the Father; He was raised on the third day (1 Corinthians 15:3-4). The souls of believers pass immediately into the presence of the Lord at death (Philippians 1:25, 2 Corinthians 5:8). This time between death and resurrection when souls are with Christ but disembodied is called by some the intermediate state. The final state comes with resurrection. Souls and bodies are reunited. This seems to be the implication of 1 Thessalonians 4:14-17. This resurrection is the great Christian hope (Acts 24:24-25). In the end, there is no more death, separation of body and spirit (Revelation 21:4).