



# ***Bible & Life***

## ***Bible Teaching Newsletter***

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### ***Cremation or Burial?***

By David Dunlap

When making decisions on funeral arrangements, more Christians than ever before are choosing cremation instead of burial. Others have very strong opinions in favor of Christian burial. Is it proper for a Christian to be cremated? Is Christian burial the only option in caring for the remains of departed loved ones? Is one method more biblical than the other? The ancient world had three methods of disposing of the bodies of the dead. Cremation was the normal practice of Greeks and Romans. Many of them believed in the immortality of the soul and saw no reason to give special attention to the body. Hindus, with their doctrine of reincarnation, for many centuries have practiced cremation. At the other extreme were the Egyptians, who mummified their dead, preserving the corpse indefinitely. However, as the catacombs in Rome attest, the early Christians insisted on burying their dead. Christian gravesites were called *coemeteria* (cemeteries), which literally means "sleeping places," setting forth their steadfast belief in a future resurrection of the body.

#### **Cremation Today?**

But what about today? While Christian tradition clearly favors burial, nowhere explicitly does the Bible condemn cremation. The first cremation in America took place in 1876, accompanied by readings from Charles Darwin and the Hindu scriptures. For many years, relatively few persons (mostly liberals and freethinkers) chose cremation. But that has changed dramatically. Only 5% percent of deceased Americans were cremated in 1962. In 1975, 7% percent of the people who died were cremated. In 1985, it was 15% percent. In 1992, it was 18.5% percent. In 2002, the rate in the U.S. rose to 21% percent and it is projected to be 34% percent by 2014. In the United States, the average funeral home performs 27 cremations and 115 burials each year. In Japan, where burial is sometimes illegal, the cremation rate is 98% percent. What was once unpopular, even distasteful, is now a quick, inexpensive way to dispose of the dead. Christians have always believed and taught that cremation cannot prevent an omnipotent God from calling forth the dead at the end of time. Admittedly, several examples of cremation are in the Old Testament (Achan, Josh. 7:25; Saul, 1 Sam. 31:12; the King of Edom, Amos 2:1), but they involved God's judgment and curse.

When Paul offered his body to be burned (1 Cor. 13:3), he was speaking of martyrdom, not cremation. Of course, many martyrs were burned to death, but Christians believe God will bring them forth unhindered at the resurrection. In the context of the early Church, when cremation was

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associated with pagan rituals and unbiblical beliefs, burial seemed to be the more loving and reverent way to bear witness to God's ultimate victory over death.

## **Christian Burial**

Why are Christians so concerned about a reverent and honorable disposal of the body? Three overarching principles exist on why Christians traditionally have treated departed loved ones with great care. First, the body of every person is created by God, bears His image, and therefore, deserves to be treated with respect. Secondly, the Holy Spirit indwells the bodies of believers, making them vessels of honor. Thirdly, as Jesus Himself was buried and raised bodily from the dead, so Christians believe that their burial is a witness to the resurrection yet to come.

In addition to these principles; there are seven biblical reasons supporting the practice of Christian burial. Each will be briefly stated. Taken together they offer good evidence for preserving the Christian practice of burial.

### **1. Burial Follows the Example of Christ**

The burial of Jesus was not coincidence or accident. The Lord Jesus Christ was buried because the Jewish people took great care in the disposal of the departed, and because it was God's will. Jesus Christ's burial was according to prophecy (Isaiah 53:9). Jesus' interment and burial is described in great detail (Matt. 27:57-61; John 19:38-42). The fact that Jesus was resurrected three days later (according to Jewish dating), in the same body in which He died, gives assurance to the believer (John 20:1-30). Burial not only shows respect for the body but it also anticipates its future—in the resurrection. "...who shall change our vile body, that it may be fashioned like unto His glorious body, according to the working whereby He is able even to subdue all things unto Himself" (Phil. 3:21).

### **2. Jesus' Burial Was According to the Gospel**

Paul used Jesus' burial as part of the gospel message in 1 Corinthians 15:3-4: "That Christ died for our sins, according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures." Burial is an essential part of the gospel, since Paul defined the *gospel* as involving death, burial, and resurrection appearances. Burial is the seal of death, and resurrection is proof that death is not final (Rom. 4:25; 2 Tim. 1:10). Hence, burial is significant since it portrays a crucial part of the gospel.

### **3. Burial Preserves the Christian Belief in the Sanctity of the Body**

The Bible teaches that God created man in His own image (Gen. 1:26-27). According to Genesis 9:6, to kill another person is wrong because God created man in the image of God: "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made man." If the image of God is perfectly represented in man, then the body is to be held in high regard in life and in death. The body is the temple of the Holy Spirit. "Ye are not your own. For ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God's" (1 Corinthians 6:19-20). The body of every Christian belongs not to himself but to God. This body of flesh and blood, as well as the future resurrection body, equally belong to God, first because of creation and secondly because of redemption.

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***"So Moses,  
the servant  
of the Lord  
died there in  
the land of  
Moab,  
according to  
the Word of  
the Lord. And  
He (Lord)  
buried  
him...no man  
knows his  
burial place  
to this day."***

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***Deuteronomy  
34:5,6***

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#### **4. Burial Symbolizes the Hope of Resurrection**

The Apostle Paul wrote, that the body that is “sown perishable is raised an imperishable body” (1 Cor. 15:42). The phrase “sown perishable” refers to the burial of a loved one after death. Yet this same body, Paul reminds us, is “raised imperishable body”, that is, the promise of a resurrection body. Professor Lewis Sperry Chafer(1871-1952), the founder of Dallas Seminary, writes, “A thing may be buried to dispose of it or to the end that it may be forgotten, but that which is sown is done with the expectation that something will rise where the seed is placed. Thus, the believer’s body will be raised at the coming of Christ” (1 Thess. 4:13-18).<sup>1</sup>

#### **5. Early Christian Practice Supports Burial**

Believers in the New Testament, such as Ananias, Sapphira, and Stephen, were buried and not cremated (Acts 5:6; 8:1-2). Whenever possible, early Christians were buried, and cremation was looked upon with great disdain because fire was often used to kill Christian martyrs.

From the second to the fifth century, the early Church in Rome went underground because of bitter persecution. Under the city of Rome, in catacombs, deceased believers were carefully laid away in the rock-hewn tombs, sealed, and marked to identify them. It is estimated that about three million believers were buried in those subterranean passages. This maze of corridors and burial vaults, if strung together, is estimated to stretch out some 600 miles. Although the unbelieving Romans practiced cremation at that time, the Christians looked upon it with disfavor because it was an ungodly, heathen custom.<sup>2</sup>

#### **6. Burial Allows Proper Memory of the Dead**

Burial displays a reverence and high regard for the memory of the dead and is a witness of the doctrines of creation and redemption. Regardless of whether the body is present or absent at a funeral service, the knowledge of person’s burial puts one’s life in proper perspective. When we lay away the body in the grave, it returns to earth in the natural way, as an act of God. God said, “Out of it [the ground] wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return” (Genesis 3:19). Christian burial reminds us of man’s creation and redemption. In the creation of man, Moses tells us, “The Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life...”(Gen. 2:7). In redemption, Scripture emphasizes our Lord Jesus Christ’s death, burial, and resurrection. Thus, burial becomes a fitting way for Christians to care for their loved ones.

#### **7. Burning Was Symbolic of the Judgment of God**

In God’s sight, burning was reserved for disposing of dishonorable objects like idols and bodies of the disgraced. According to the commandment of God, whenever the gods/idols of the heathen nations fell into the hands of the Israelites, they were to be burned immediately (Deuteronomy 7:5). When David and his men came to Baal-perazim, they burned the idols of the Philistines immediately(1 Chronicles 14:12). Later, King Jehu of the Northern Kingdom broke down and burned the temple of Baal with its sacred pillars in Samaria (2 Kings 10:26).

When Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the tables of the law and upon seeing how the nation and its leaders had fallen into idolatry, he took their god, burned it in the fire, and ground it to dust. Why did he burn the idolatrous golden calf? Because this was God’s sentence of judgment against

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**Dr. E. M. Blaiklock**  
Bible Scholar  
(1903-1983)

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this detestable idol.

In Joshua chapter 7, we have the sad record of Achan's rebellion against God's Word, His people, and Himself. In this incident, we see that cremation was to be used in the disposal of Achan's body, his family, and his possessions in the valley of Achor. Cremation was the divine sentence of judgment for wrongdoing! To be burned instead of buried was only for the person who had been guilty of special and aggravated sin. It was God's curse upon Achan and his family. Pagan idols and rebellion to God's Word came under the severe judgment of cremation or burning. Does it seem right, therefore, that the body of a Christian loved one should be treated like that of a heathen idol?

### Final Thought

Usually, when there is genuine affection, no man will dispose of a loved one, simply because the method is the cheapest. We are reminded of Abraham when Sarah died in the book of Genesis. He could have buried her somewhere in the wide open spaces of the land of Israel, and it would have cost him nothing. Rather, he chose to bury her in a fashion that displayed his love for her. The whole of Genesis chapter 23 is occupied with the death and burial of Sarah. There is an important lesson in this for us. Abraham, throughout his life, never owned a foot of land; but, when his wife died, he bought a piece of land that would serve as a cemetery. He would not accept it as a gift; he paid 400 pieces of silver for it. To him, the loving burial of his wife was a sacred matter. Later Isaac and Jacob and their wives were also buried there. This became consecrated ground and was kept solely for the purpose of a cemetery.

### Endnotes

1. L. S. Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 7 (Dallas, TX: Seminary Press, 1978), p. 64
2. E.M. Blaiklock, *The Archeology of the New Testament*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1970), p. 159

### Resources:

*Cremation: Is it Christian?* James W. Fraser, (ECS Ministries: Dubuque, IA, 2005)