

What Does the Bible Say About Cremation? Part 2

California's Governor Gavin Newsom recently signed green legislation that will allow the "Natural Organic Reduction" of human remains to be used as garden soil! And more states have now approved human "composting" and alkaline hydrolysis (also known as water cremation), which causes "the deceased human bodies to be 'completely disintegrated' and disposed of in fields or sewers. Many will rightfully see these humanistic methods as incompatible with the ethical teaching of man's inherent dignity and worth.

'In Lieu of Flowers'

At the same time, we must face the realities and circumstances of modern urban living, with its "concrete jungles," McMansions and homeless encampments. Inflation itself has driven up the costs of the goods and services required for traditional Christian burials. Caskets, concrete vaults, markers or headstones, embalming, mortuary fees, hearses, flowers and more all inflate and complicate the costs of dying.

All of this has caused many to consider cremation as the preferred choice in disposing of the body of the loved one, while a meaningful memorial event honors the life of the individual. A higher goal of Christian stewardship may prevail for others over our culture's elaborate and expensive farewells. "In lieu of flowers" or costly funerals, the money might be better used for eternal values and present ministries.

Fire Is Destructive and Often Shows Dishonor

Pastor John Piper, the chancellor of Bethlehem College and Seminary and founder of the website www.desiringgod.org, believes burial is to be

preferred over cremation for those who are Christians. He has written, "The use of fire to consume the human body on earth was seen as a sign of contempt. It was not a glorious treatment of the body but a contemptuous one."

Christian author Eric Metaxas summarizes the words of Chuck Colson, founder of Prison Fellowship and Breakpoint Radio, regarding burial versus cremation: "'In contrast ... Christians buried their dead. Christian teachings about Jesus' incarnation and resurrection led them to treat the human body with respect,' unlike the many pagans who cremated their dead."

Cremation for Casualties of War?

However, for some, cremation chooses them rather than they choose it. The realities of war can cloud the best intentions of man to honor the slain. We are seeing this tragically repeated again in the current Russian invasion of Ukraine, where Russia is said to have mobilized portable crematoriums to help process the multiplied thousands of deaths of their soldiers and even to hide war crimes against Ukrainian civilian casualties.

In the Old Testament, the tragic end of Israel's King Saul and his sons (1 Sam. 31) concluded a major battle with the Philistines. Saul, his three sons, his armor-bearer and all his men died together on Mt. Gilboa on the same day (v. 6). The Philistines showed contempt for the king by mutilating his body, cutting off his head and fastening his desecrated body to the wall of the nearby town of Beth Shan in the Jordan Valley area south of Galilee. This showed great contempt and made a spectacle of them (vv. 6-10).

The Brave Men of Jabesh

Gilead traveled all night to get to the bodies, take them down from the wall and remove the dishonored from public ridicule. They took the bodies back to their town and protectively

burned them there so they could not be subjected to future mutilation and contempt by the Philistines (vv. 11-13). Then, they took the bones and buried them in a temporary place before they fasted for seven days because of the religious defilement of touching dead men's bones. Later, King David exhumed the bones and took them to Saul's family tomb at Zela in his homeland of Benjamin.

This event shows that fire can be used to dishonor as well as to show honor. As with a lot of ethical decisions, the intent of the heart is the key. The spirit of the individual returns to its Creator at death, while resurrection and judgment will eventually follow for both the righteous and the unrighteous (2 Cor. 5:6-10; Heb. 9:27-28; Rev. 20:5-6,10-15).

Ethical and Eternal Decisions

In this brief two-part series, we have reviewed Scriptures from creation to cremation. We have found that the Bible seems unclear about any divine direction for processing our human bodies at our deaths. Whether you or I choose burial or an alternative means to reverently dispose of our earthly remains at our deaths is an ethical but not an eternal decision. The latter is most important.

What the Bible does clearly teach is we must all repent of our sins, turning *from* them and *to* God, in full-headed and full-hearted submission to His designs and desires for us, through Jesus Christ our Lord. "For with the heart one believes unto righteousness and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation" (Rom. 10:10, NKJV). As author Jim Denison writes, "Only Jesus can forgive our sins, save our souls, and transform our lives. Only he can make fallen people holy."

Paul taught believers: "To be absent from the body [is] to be present with the Lord" (2 Cor. 5:8). When our time for death arrives, our human spirits transition immediately from our earthly bodies to our Creator, who gave them (Eccl. 12: 7).

Meanwhile, we wait for Jesus' promised return (Acts 1:9-11; Rev. 22:7, 12, 20), our new, glorified bodies (John 14:2-3; 1 Cor. 15:35-57; 1 Thess. 4:13-18), and everlasting life (John 3:13-18, 6:47-58; 1 Tim.1:15-17, 6:13-16).

I look forward to celebrating with you and our resurrected Lord, in our celestial bodies and eternal homes, in the new heaven and new earth (Rev. 21:1-4).

This is part two of a two-part article. For part one, click [here](#).

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