

What Does the Bible Say About Cremation?

I don't know about you, but it seems my wife and I are attending more funerals and memorials than ever before. I guess that is to be expected since most of our relatives, friends and acquaintances are around our own age.

We all are not getting any younger, and our life expectancies are catching up with each of us.

This reality suggests we all may need to have a serious conversation with our families about any plans, hopes or arrangements we have made for the disposal of our bodies upon death. Unless you have had to arrange for a burial site or funeral recently, you may have no idea of how expensive even an expected burial process may be, in our inflationary society. Everything from gravesites, caskets, embalming and flowers are all more expensive than we could have imagined just a few years ago!

Can we even afford to die?

Nothing, Nada, Zilch

I began to explore this sensitive subject by looking to the Bible for specific guidance. Does the Bible require the burial of human remains or deny alternative methods? Guess what I found. Nothing! *As best as I can tell, it seems the final disposition of human bodies at death is not a biblical issue or mandate. The Bible neither commends nor condemns cremation for the final disposition of committed believers' bodies.*

However, that is not to say that there are no illustrations or examples in the Scriptures we can draw from to form opinions or develop principles to guide us about this subject. This is how we should approach any ethical issue or personal decision.

First, find any facts of biblical directives and then pursue biblical principles to assume and apply.

'In the Beginning'

We can begin at the very beginning ("a very good place to start"), where mankind is said to be made in the "image of God" (Gen. 1:27). Adam was formed from the dust of the ground, and God breathed into him "the breath of life, and man became a living being" (2:7). Accordingly, theologians then impute an inherent dignity and worth to the human body. We are told in the New Testament to "glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God's" (1 Cor. 6:20). So how we dispose of our human bodies at death should seek to bring glory (honor and respect) to God (Phil. 1:20).

The Scriptures decry the duplicity of demons (Mark 5:1-20), the sacrifice of children to pagan gods (Lev. 20:2) and the deliberate mutilation of human beings (1 Sam. 31:8-13; Mark 5:5). Yet, no matter which burial practices we may follow, the end results are "Dust to dust, ashes to ashes" (Eccl. 12:7). Like the flowers of the field which rise in the morning and are gone by evening, our lives are also brief and uncertain (Ps. 103:15-16, Matt. 6:26-30). Our "God-likeness" is related to our inbred eternal spirit, which—at death— "returns to God who gave it" (Eccl. 12:7), for His final evaluation and disposition.

The Patriarchs' Preferences

Jesus implied it was the practice of Jews to bury their dead (Luke 9:60-61). This may refer back to the book of Genesis, where we observe the three ancient patriarchs of the Jewish nation (Abraham, Isaac and Jacob/Israel; Matt. 1:2) and their wives were each buried in the cave in the field of Machpelah, on a plot of ground Abraham purchased to bury his wife Sarah (Gen. 23). This was near Hebron, southwest of the Jebusite enclave on Mt. Zion, known as Jerusalem (Gen. 49:29-32).

Jacob/Israel actually died in Egypt but instructed his sons to carry his embalmed body back to the family sepulcher (Gen. 50:1-14).

The Example of Jesus' Burial

Christ's death, burial and Resurrection are collectively declared by the apostle Paul as the very essence of the "gospel" (1 Cor. 15:1-5). Each element has far-reaching implications. The "three days and three nights" He was buried "in the heart of the earth" (Matt. 12:40) was a fulfillment of prophecy and illustrated that death's firm grip was broken by His dramatic Resurrection to life.

It was not a natural resuscitation of a supposed dead body in a cool tomb, but a supernatural restoration of divine life and glorified body. He is risen "indeed." And, all who are in Christ at His coming will be raised and transformed to receive their new "celestial bodies," which will "bear the image of the man in heaven" (1 Cor. 15:35-49).

The Pattern Maker

Are these future realities and celestial bodies precluded by how our natural bodies are disposed of at death? Does the original pattern maker still have the designated form and DNA formula to make our new spiritual bodies from even a "seed" of the old (1 Cor. 15:35-42) or a re-created order?

Even if the old, natural body is "sown in dishonor" by fire, disease or other destruction, "it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power" (15:42-44, NKJV) "in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed" (v. 52; see also 1 Thess. 4:16-17).

It seems this spiritual transformation is not limited by how our terrestrial bodies are disposed of. Our present physical

bodies potentially contain the future resurrection body that shall be: "What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. When you sow, you do not plant the body that will be, but just a seed, perhaps of wheat or of something else. But God gives it a body as he has determined, and to each kind of seed he gives its own body." (1 Cor. 15:36b-38; NIV).

This is part one of a two-part article. Stay tuned to for part 2 of "What Does the Bible Say About Cremation?"

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