

Burial or Cremation?

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All Scriptures are from the New King James translation unless otherwise noted.

For the first time ever, cremation rates have reached 50% in the United States. Though the reasons for this dramatic change can vary, many choose cremation because a traditional coffin and burial can cost nearly twice as much. The more affordable alternative allows for people to place the ashes of their loved one in an urn, a columbarium, or sprinkle the remains in a river, lake, ocean, forest, or across an open field. Cremation has become so common that some Christians wonder if this practice is ethical according to God's standards.

The apprehension may stem from comments Christ made about those who refuse to overcome sin. While instructing the disciples, Christ advised sinners to do something that may sound unthinkable. At the same time, He indicated that the future would be bleak for those who do not accept His advice:

If your hand or foot causes you to sin, cut it off and cast *it* from you. It is better for you to enter into life lame or maimed, rather than having two hands or two feet, to be cast into the everlasting fire. And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast *it* from you. It is better for you to enter into life with one eye, rather than having two eyes, to be cast into hell fire (Matthew 18:8-9).

Most realize that His suggestion for overcoming sin is a figure of speech. The Savior did not intend for people to mutilate their own bodies while attempting to eradicate sin from their lives. His words relate the importance of learning to remove sin from our life by plucking it out of our minds, and cutting off behaviors carried out by any of our limbs that might lead us to continue sinning that would result in a horrible final judgment.

Nonetheless, what some wonder about is Jesus' reference to the "everlasting fire" and "hell." Many have been misled to believe that there currently exists a place of eternal fire where unrepentant sinners are tortured without end. A study of the term "hell" in the Bible reveals that there is currently no location of ever-burning fire for the purpose of continual punishment. For more about this subject please read our booklet that will soon be released—*The Truth about Hell*. Nonetheless, the concept of God eventually destroying the incorrigible by fire is real and this is a reason why some question the practice of cremation.

A fiery death was once a means to worship the false god Molech (2Kin. 23:10). Incineration will also be a final judgment for the wicked (Rev. 20:15). These negative situations cause some to be concerned that burning a dead body might be offensive God. Others have thought that cremation may not allow for God to resurrect that person from the dead. What does the Bible say about burial and cremation?

While these topics are not specifically addressed in the Scriptures, the Bible does present an answer to virtually every moral question that we might have. Whether in the law, prophets, proverbs, psalms, or by what is implied in any of these categories, God has given us all that we need to know for our salvation (2Tim. 3:16). When considering burial as opposed to cremation,

the Eternal Church of God does not teach that cremation is a wrong. Our conclusion is based on several biblical facts.

First, no matter what condition a body is in after death it is not humanly possible to prevent God from resurrecting an individual from the dead with a new body. For example, those chosen for the first resurrection will no longer have a physical body. They will be raised with a glorious body that will be like the risen Christ. The Apostles John and Paul spoke of this transformation when they wrote:

Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, **we shall be like Him**, for we shall see Him as He is (1 John 3:2).

For our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will **transform our lowly body that it may be conformed to His glorious body**, according to the working by which He is able even to subdue all things to Himself (Philippians 3:20-21).

Solomon understood that the unique spirit of every individual who dies returns to God after the body perishes (Ecc. 12:7). It is this spirit that God will use to resurrect the dead. Therefore, the condition of our physical body after death is unimportant.

Consider that faithful Sabbath keepers were accused of heresy by the Catholic Church. Many were tortured, beheaded, or burned at the stake during the inquisition and the crusades. Some were torn limb from limb and had their body parts thrown into a fire. Would such atrocities make it impossible for God to raise them from the dead? Of course not, as Christ indicated:

The things which are impossible with men are possible with God (Luke 18:27).

God also promised to raise the rest of the dead 1,000 years after Christ's return in what will be a massive second resurrection (Rev. 20:5). Unlike the first resurrection, those raised later will live a second time as human beings. Theirs will be a second state of a mortal existence, and yet many of them will have previously died from explosions in war, fiery car accidents, air plane crashes, and other conflagrations that cremated their flesh and bones. Nonetheless, this will not prevent God from raising them up to a state of vitality far superior to their previous lives. Notice what the book of Acts relates:

Repent therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that He may send Jesus Christ, who was preached to you before, whom heaven must receive until the times of restoration of all things, which God has spoken by the mouth of all His holy prophets since the world began (Acts 3:19-21).

Here, the Apostle Peter also prophesied of the earth being restored to a state of vitality not experienced since the days of Adam and Eve. His gospel message mentions "times of refreshing" as well as a "restoration of all things." The reestablishment of vibrant health will not be limited to the earth's ecosystems. Mankind will also experience miraculous healing (Isa. 35:5-7). Moreover, divine restoration during the Millennium will not be limited to those who are alive when Christ returns. After 1,000 years, the Bible explains that God will raise billions to a state

health that most had never experienced. Those once elderly will be able to fulfill their days. Children who died during infancy, or were torn from their mother's womb through abortion, will be raised and able to live a healthful life (Isa. 65:20-21). Cremation will not restrict God from raising people from the dead physically, and it will also not limit God's ability to raise anyone spiritually. As Paul indicated:

For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things *done* in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad (2 Corinthians 5:10).

Cremation does not violate the Scriptures. Nonetheless, there is the consideration of God's preference. Even though some behaviors do not violate God's written word, the Bible appears to indicate that God's did not intend for people to choose cremation. The examples of faithful people in the Bible are burial:

- Sarah and Abraham were buried in a cave (Gen. 23:19; 25:8-10).
- Rachel was buried and Jacob placed a stone on her grave (Gen. 35:19-20).
- Isaac and Jacob were buried in a cave (Gen. 35:29; 49:29-30; 50:13).
- Joseph was embalmed and placed in a coffin (Gen. 50:26).
- Joshua and Eleazar were buried (Jos. 24:29-30, 33).
- The Prophet Samuel and King David were buried (1Sam. 25:1; 1Kin. 2:10).
- John the Baptist was buried (Mat. 14:10-12).
- Christ's body was placed in a tomb (Mat. 27:59-60).

The Scriptures appear to demonstrate that God's people of old practiced burial. However, their practice did not always include using a coffin, digging a pit, and placing the body in the dirt. It was common to wrap the body with cloth and lay it in a cave or tomb. For example, Joseph's bones were interred for hundreds of years before being removed. They were then carried for decades in the wilderness, and eventually buried in Shechem (Gen. 50:24-26; Exo. 13:19; Jos. 24:32).

A reason God's people may have preferred the traditional methods of burial could be the symbolism of planting a seed in the earth, watering it, and eventually it will grow to bear flowers or fruit. It seems that God designed this process as an act of nature displaying His plan for mankind (Rom. 1:20). Notice the explanation given by the Apostle Paul:

But someone will say, "How are the dead raised up? And with what body do they come?" Foolish one, what you sow is not made alive unless it dies. And what you sow, you do not sow that body that shall be, but mere grain—perhaps wheat or some other *grain*. But God gives it a body as He pleases, and to each seed its own body... So also *is* the resurrection of the dead. *The body* is sown in corruption, it is raised in incorruption. It is sown in dishonor, 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. There is a natural body, and there is a spiritual body (1 Corinthians 15:35-38, 42-44).

The physical body of a human being is pictured by a seed planted for the purpose of generating a new form of life. When planted, a seed goes through a transformation process

before a new plant rises up out of the ground. The planting of a seed portrays our interment in the grave that will one day result in a resurrection from the dead. This is powerful symbolism!

While it is not command from God, burial is a symbolic demonstration of faith in a future resurrection. Nonetheless, when it comes to biblical examples, there is none better than the work of God Himself who told Adam and Eve:

In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for dust you *are*, and to dust you shall return (Gen. 3:19).

The expression “ashes to ashes and dust to dust” is based on this scripture, but the term “ash” referring to cremation is absent. In addition, God buried the Prophet Moses. As the scriptures state:

So Moses the servant of the LORD died there in the land of Moab, according to the word of the LORD. And He buried him in a valley in the land of Moab, opposite Beth Peor; but no one knows his grave to this day (Deuteronomy 34:5-6).

It may also be helpful to consider some negative examples of death by fire as a sign of divine wrath:

- Sodom and Gomorrah were reduced to ash by brimstone and fire (Gen. 19:24; 2Pet. 2:6).
- Nadab and Abihu were consumed by fire (Leviticus 10:1-2).
- 250 men who rebelled against God’s anointed were burned up (Num. 16:35).
- Satan, demons, and the unsaved will be cast into a lake of fire (Mat. 25:41; Rev. 20:15).

All of the verses we have studied regarding this subject lean toward God preferring burial over cremation. This may help those who are able to choose one or the other when it does not cause a financial hardship. Nonetheless, the Bible does not prohibit cremation. There is no verse stating, “Thus says the LORD” regarding how a body is to be disposed of. Therefore, our conclusion is that it is not a sin to be cremated. God’s issue is how we live—not how we die.