

## Questions You Have Asked

# WHAT ABOUT CREMATION?

We received a question regarding cremation through our web-site. The person asking did not want opinion, but scripture. "What does the Bible say about cremation? May we have our remains cremated, or allow the remains of our loved ones to be cremated? Or is burial the only proper option?"

The Bible does not speak directly to the matter. There is no passage of scripture that either directly condemns or directly upholds cremation. We can only try to reason from certain examples and certain principles which are taught in scripture. Under these circumstances we need to be charitable to others who may have come to a different conclusion than we reach.

It is true that burial, rather than cremation, was the common way of disposing of a body among God's people in the Bible. On the other hand, some of the nations that surrounded Israel practiced cremation (although not in the form we experience it today) from a fairly early date.

Some people take this as an indication that cremation is wrong and only burial is right. But this involves questionable reasoning, especially since there are some exceptions.

The Bible never says why the Jews buried and rarely cremated. It could have been because (in their situation) burial was a much safer and easier method of dealing with the remains. If cremation is inherently disrespectful for humans, and therefore indirectly disrespectful to God (since we are his image), it would seem that the Bible would have said so. But it does not.

**Principle one:** We are all going to return to dust. God told Adam, "By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust and to dust you shall return." (Gen 3:19)

Since God's word has said that we must all return to dust, some have concluded that cremation, which speeds up the process of returning us to the dust, must not be a sin. This passage has even been used as an

argument against embalming -- since embalming seeks to resist the inevitable decay back to dust. But on the other hand, Joseph was embalmed (Gen 50:26), so it must not be a sin to have a loved one embalmed. I do sometimes question the wisdom of going into debt for embalming and an elaborate funeral. In Africa I have seen children starving because the family sold their farm land to pay for a funeral.

The main thing we must realize about our dust, which we will all return to either quickly or slowly, is that God can raise us up no matter how scattered our dust may be. He who numbers the hairs of our head, who knows where each sparrow falls, will not be frustrated if a believer's remains are torn by animals, lost at sea, or cremated. Nor will he be helped by embalming a body and placing it in a metal casket in a concrete vault. He will raise us up when he wills and as he wills.

**Principle two:** Just because the spirit has departed does not make how we treat the remaining body irrelevant. We should show respect for a dead body. Treating human remains with respect helps us to retain respect for live human beings. Those who fail to show respect for a dead body are almost always those who have ceased to view their fellow man as the image of God. Even the body of a guilty criminal was not to be left exposed overnight (Deut 21:22-23).

Thus, the people of Jabesh-Gilead showed respect to King Saul by cremating his body (as best they could) instead of leaving it to be mocked by humans and possibly torn by animals. The bones of his body, which they could not burn up using their methods of cremation, they then buried (1 Sam 31:8-13). They did this to show their respect, and King David thanked them for showing respect in this way (2 Sam 2:4-7).

From these two principles, it seems that cremation is not inherently wrong. But it would be wrong to cremate if in doing so we were being disrespectful. Those who feel that it is disrespectful, and I know some who do, should not do it. If we know that a given loved one requested burial rather than cremation, then, out of respect, we should comply with those wishes. But if some Christians choose cremation, other Christians have no right to condemn them. Done in a proper manner and with proper motives, cremation returns the body to dust in a rapid

and respectful manner. Properly done, burial returns the body to dust in a slow and respectful manner. Either is acceptable, under most circumstances.

**Principle three:** There is one more biblical principle that must be taken into account. In arguing in favor of cremation, some Christians reason that we are not going to have bodies in heaven – just spirits – so it does not matter what is done with the body. This reasoning is wrong because it begins with a false premise.

Not only our spirits but our bodies will be raised at the last day. The body of Jesus was raised from the tomb. It was no longer there (Mt 28:6). His raised body was transformed; it was no longer limited by the laws of physics as it had been before his death. Now he could enter locked rooms, appear and disappear at will (Jn 20:19ff; Lk 24:13-36). Yet he still had a physical body (Lk 24:39). The disciples did not always recognize him instantly, but the body that had been put in the tomb was in the tomb no longer, and this raised body was recognizable (once they calmed down) as the body of Jesus.

Our resurrection will be like his (Rom 6:5). That would mean that, just as his tomb was found empty, some day our grave will be emptied as well. Our bodies will be transformed. They will not have the same limitations that they have on earth. But the body beyond the grave will be recognizable as that of the person as he lived on earth. People maintain their identity beyond death. Abraham is still Abraham, Isaac is still Isaac, Jacob is still Jacob (Mt 22:23-33), Moses is Moses and Elijah is Elijah (Mt 17:1-4). And the dead are raised whole persons, both body and spirit. The body is transformed, but it is not eternally cast off.

Scripture does state that “flesh and blood do not inherit the kingdom” (1 Cor 15:50). The statement is a denial of the idea that we can, by any fleshly means, earn our place in eternity. It is a denial that our bodies will maintain their earthly limitations. But it is not a denial that our bodies will be raised. Just as the body of Jesus was raised and transformed, so our bodies will be raised, transformed, and made fit for eternity.

So, while it may be acceptable to cremate if one can do so as a respectful way of returning the body to dust, it must also be done in

trust that the Lord's power is capable of raising that dust. We must believe that he will raise the cremated just as he will raise those dead thousands of years, whose bodies are now nothing but dust. We must believe that he will raise the cremated just as he will raise those lost at sea, although their bodies may now be scattered all over the ocean.

But one should not claim that the body will not be raised. To do so is to deny a fundamental teaching of scripture. "For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his" (Romans 6:5, ESV).

God bless,  
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