

The Cremation Question

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How The Practice of Cremation Violates God's Design

Our times are witnessing an increasing acceptance and popularity of the practice of cremation. This is particularly true in metropolitan areas where burial space is diminishing. The question of cremation faces the Christian today as the customs of burial are changing in favor of the practice of cremation.

Cremation comes from the Latin term which means to burn. It refers to the burning of a human corpse. This was the general practice in the ancient world, with the important exceptions of Egypt (where bodies were embalmed and entombed) and Israel (where bodies were buried or entombed).

Modern crematoria are specially constructed buildings erected for the purpose of incinerating human remains, having individual compartments which are heated to a temperature that quickly reduces the body to ashes. The usual committal service is held in the crematorial chapel, after which the friends and loved ones leave and the body is then placed into one of the compartments and the process of cremation begins. When the heat becomes intense, the body appears to be very much alive as it moves about (the result of the expansion and contraction of the muscles and sinews due to the intense heat). This seems a gruesome thing to do with the body of a loved one. To most Christians it is a repulsive thing to consider. The body is reduced to ashes in a white heat of about 2,000 degrees Fahrenheit. It is striking to consider that one of the definitions of "cremator" is that of "an incinerator for garbage or trash."

Advocates of cremation suggest that it is a less expensive means of disposing of the dead and is useful for purposes of sanitation and space, and if interment takes place some distance away, it offers a more convenient method of transporting the remains over long distances.

Christian leaders often give passive, if not tacit, approval to this practice. Some will state that the Bible is silent on the issue, but the Scriptures do address the subject both in letter and spirit, in precept and principle. A careful examination of the practice in light of the bible reveals that cremation clearly violates God's design in several ways.

1 Cremation Violates God's Design for Reverencing the Christian's Body as the Temple of the Holy Spirit.

- **Christian's bodies are members of Christ and belong to Him.**

The Biblical doctrine of the body is sometimes neglected. 1 Corinthians 6:19–20 clearly declares that the spirit as well as the body of a Christian belong to God. God owns us by virtue of creation and by virtue of redemption. Our bodies are deemed to be holy because they have been cleansed by the Blood of Jesus Christ and thus become the dwelling place (temple) of the Holy Spirit of God. The Scriptures further declare in 1 Corinthians 6:15 that our bodies are members of Christ.

“Know ye not that your bodies are the members of Christ?”
—1 Corinthians 6:15a

“Know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost? . . .”
—1 Corinthians 6:19a

*“For ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body
”*
—1 Corinthians 6:20

*“I beseech you . . . present your bodies . . . holy, acceptable unto
God”*
—Romans 12:1

The objection may be voiced that, indeed, the Christian’s body is the dwelling place of God while he is alive, but what difference does it make once he is dead? Isn’t the body of even a believer only an empty shell which will decay after the Christian dies? Romans 8:11 speaks directly to this issue.

“But if the Spirit of him that raised up Jesus from the dead dwell in you, he that raised up Christ from the dead shall also quicken [give life to] your mortal bodies by His Spirit that dwelleth in you.”

The human body has peculiar significance. Man was created by God as an embodied spiritual being (see Genesis 2:7), unlike angels, which ordinarily are spirit beings only. Angels apparently assume bodily form only for the purpose of contact with men. A body is certainly essential for us to be fully human. So much so, that God will raise our bodies and change them for our eternal existence. While the dead believer’s spirit is immediately present with the Lord, the identity of that believer is nevertheless still very much tied to his body. The very fact that the body is such an integral part of our being, and that the indwelling Spirit of God will raise up the body, should be reason enough to avoid the unnatural practice of reducing it to a heap of ashes.

● **The testimony of Scripture and Chris-**

tian history call for dignified, respectful treatment of the bodies of the Godly.

The testimony of Scripture is that the body of one whom God has called into His presence is still to be treated with respect and dignity. Moses and the children of Israel endured the necessities of transporting the bones of Joseph for proper burial as they made their exodus from Egypt. Abraham, to whom God promised the land of Canaan, strangely never owned a foot of ground until the death of his beloved Sarah. Then, he purchased, at significant cost, a burial place for her body. God Himself buried the body of Moses. The body of our Lord was meticulously and lovingly prepared for burial through the use of costly spices and careful wrappings, and was laid in the borrowed tomb of a rich man. The early Christians made ever effort to recover and bury the remains of martyrs. At great peril to health and safety, large numbers of Christians were afforded burial in the catacombs beneath the city of Rome.

2 Cremation violates the design of God for life cycles.

Granted, the body will decay and return to dust. But this is God's design. God has built this process into His creation for specific purposes. It is a process He is very much involved in as the Sustainer of His creation. God created man from the dust of the ground, not from ashes. It is God's stated design that man's body return to dust, and not to ashes (see Genesis 3:19). The human body is analogous to a house (see 2 Corinthians 5:1-2). Therefore, one should no more consider the idea of burning a Christian's body than he would of setting his house on fire after his death.

3 Cremation violates God's design for burning as a severe judgment and dishonor to be decreed only by Himself.

According to the Word of God, it is a supreme dishonor and a curse for a person not to have a burial. Such a curse was pronounced by God Himself against King Jehoiakim because of his pride and willful disobedience to God. Jeremiah said of him, in Jeremiah 22:19, “. . . *He shall be buried with the burial of an ass.*” That meant he was to have no burial at all. According to Josephus, the Jewish historian, Jehoiakim was cast out by the King of Babylon and lay exposed and unburied some distance from the gate of Jerusalem.

Several in the Bible were thus cursed for their disobedience to God. The Lord directed Joshua to burn with fire the dead remains of the wicked Achan and his household (see Joshua 7:15). His blatant rebellion against God cost numerous lives and was a direct affront to God's authority. It earned him the dubious distinction of having God's superlative curse—burning. Others who received this sentence were: Jezebel (2 Kings 9:30–37); and Ahab's offspring (1 Kings 21:17–24).

God gave the same decree concerning the heathen idol-gods. They were to be burnt with fire (Deuteronomy 7:5, 25).

If we dishonor loved ones and friends in this way, God will cause us to give an account to Him for it. It is a supreme curse not to have your body buried.

Had Moses and the children of Israel cremated the remains of Joseph, transporting them in that heavy, bulky Egyptian coffin over their long journey would have been greatly simplified. But no! The heathen practice of cremation was not to be practiced among God's people. For them, there was but one way to dispose of their

dead, and that was by the sacred custom of burial or entombment. The writer of Scripture devotes nearly half a chapter to the death and burial of Jacob. Deuteronomy 34:5–8 indicate that God Himself buried the body of Moses.

In Amos 2:1 we find the clearest indication of God's mind concerning cremation. Amos is a book which closely parallels our day in many ways. From Amos 2:1 we see clearly that God disapproves of the burning of a human body (unless He directs it as judgment). God plagued Moab for this sin. It is evident from this passage that God notes even the actions of the unsaved in the matter. Thus, we may oppose cremation because it violates the traditions of Scripture and Christian history.

4 Cremation violates the principle of God's ownership of the human body.

- **As Creator, God has the rights of defining limitations.**

As Creator, God is the owner of the body of every human being. He has the right to declare what people may and may not do with their bodies. The practice of cremation is a rejection of God's ownership. It is based on the humanistic assumption that man is free to do with himself as he wishes. Thus, the practice falls into the same category with abortion, suicide, and population control as evidences of a rejection of God's ownership and absolute authority. This rebellious attitude is revealed in men's treating the human body as they would garbage and trash.

- **Historically, cremation has been the practice of God-hating peoples.**

The practice of cremation, according to the historical record, originated in ancient heathen lands. Rome was among the nations which used cremation. The Hindus in India today use it as a standard practice. Christians in India do not utilize this practice, as they deem it to be heathen. Burial is Christian; there is nothing Christian about cremation. The most barbarous of peoples around the world have used cremation as a standard practice.

Many communists request to be cremated because they consider it an insult to Christian burial. Joseph Stalin requested cremation; however, they refused to cremate him and he was buried. The first cremation in the United States was in December, 1876 at the crematorium in Washington, Pennsylvania.

- **Cremation is a foolish attempt by some to thwart God's right of judgment.**

Some have even requested cremation in an attempt to escape the final resurrection and judgment to come. How utterly foolish and ignorant for anyone to think he could escape facing God in this way. The Scriptures are precise in their teaching that every human being will be raised to give an account to God and face His eternal wrath if their faith is not solidly in the Lord Jesus Christ (see Revelation 20:11-15). We may oppose cremation based on its pagan origins which deny and decry God's ownership and authority.

5 Cremation may violate God's design for the punishment of evildoers by civil authorities.

Once a body has been cremated, it is impossible to obtain proper

analysis in the event of a possible criminal poisoning or other unusual death. Thus, cremation may be a positive aid to crime and the avoidance of appropriate prosecution by God's ministers appointed for the punishment of evildoers. Criminologists typically oppose cremation for this reason.

6 Cremation violates God's analogy of the buried seed and the resurrection harvest.

Christianity not only concerns the spirit and soul, but also the body. Our salvation includes the redemption of the body.

The tender, dignified burial of the body of a departed Christian is, in a very real sense, the sowing of a seed in anticipation of a future harvest in resurrection. The apostle Paul employs this very analogy in 1 Corinthians 15:42–49 as he writes about the resurrection of believers.

“So also is the resurrection of the dead. It is sown in corruption; it is raised in incorruption: It is sown in dishonour; 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. And so it is written, The first man Adam was made a living soul; the last Adam was made a quickening spirit. Howbeit that was not first which is spiritual, but that which is natural; and afterward that which is spiritual. The first man is of the earth, earthy; the second man is the Lord from heaven. As is the earthy, such are they also that are earthy; and as is the heavenly, such are they also that are heavenly. And as we have borne the image of the earthy, we shall also bear the

image of the heavenly.”

In the Old Testament, the Feast of Firstfruits depicted the same resurrection harvest. Christ is spoken of as the firstfruits of the resurrection (see 1 Corinthians 15:20). Burning the body of a believer destroys this beautiful picture and breaks the symbolism God designed to describe and illustrate the glory of the resurrection of the redeemed. The burial of a Christian is the sowing of a seed in the sure and certain hope that one day, when a trumpet sounds and the voice of the archangel is heard, the dead in Christ will rise to receive a glorified body like unto that of Jesus, and those who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them on clouds to meet our Blessed Lord in the air.

Summary

While cremation is touted as beneficial in terms of expense, sanitation, space, and convenience, it is a demonstration of man's wisdom and must be rejected by the sincere Christian in favor of honoring and living in harmony with the ways of God.