

Should Christians be Cremated

By Dr. Robert Barnett

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I Is Cremation Christian?

BIBLICAL SUMMATION OF "BURIAL"

In the Bible God honors burial as His method of disposing of the human body. The entire 23rd chapter of Genesis shows us the importance of the burial of Sarah by Abraham. Even the bones of Joseph were carried up out of Egypt to the Promised Land. The journey took 40 years, and took place 300 years after Joseph's death. God personally buried His servant Moses in a sepulcher in a valley in Moab. (*Deuteronomy 34:5-8*) Jesus Christ, our example, was buried following His death. Even the gospel of Jesus Christ includes His burial. (*I Corinthians 15: 1-3*) Our baptism as Christians is symbolic of the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ for our sins. (*Romans 6:3-5*)

CREMATION: A CURSE OF GOD IN THE SCRIPTURES

Cremation is in the Bible, but it is identified with a curse of God and not an honorable burial. In Deuteronomy 7:25 God commanded that idols or images of false gods be burned or cremated. "The graven images of their gods shall ye burn with fire..." Because of disobedience, God commanded that Achan be burned or cremated. "And it shall be, that he that is taken with the accursed thing shall be burnt with fire, he and all that he hath: because he hath transgressed the covenant of the Lord and because he hath wrought folly in Israel" (*Joshua 7:15*) Not to have a proper burial in the Bible was a dishonor. God pronounced a curse upon King Jehoiakim in which he was to have no burial. "He shall be burned with the burial of an ass." (*Jeremiah 22:19*) God compares cremation to animal burials. God also disapproved of the burning of human bodies, even of enemies. (*Amos 2:1*) Cremation in the Bible is identified with a divine curse.

POSITIVE REASONS FOR CHRISTIAN BURIAL

Christians have positive reasons to desire a Christian burial.

- (1) Our bodies are the temples of the Holy Ghost. (*I Corinthians 6: 19*) (2)
- (2) Our bodies are members of Christ. (*1 Corinthians 6:15*) (3) Our bodies are the seed of the resurrection bodies. (*I Corinthians 15:38*) (4) The Holy Spirit indwells our bodies until the time of the resurrection. (*Romans 8:11*) In light of the fact that salvation includes our body, both in this life and throughout eternity, it is most fitting that we respect the body in burial. Unsaved people may consider cremation a very practical, sanitary and economical way to dispose of the body. One rejecting the fear of eternal Hell and dying without faith in Jesus Christ may feel consistent cremating the body. Cremation will not prevent God's future resurrection and/or judgment of the body. More important than your body is the relationship of your soul to Jesus Christ. "For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?" (*Mark 8:36*)

II Cremation History

ANCIENT HEATHEN

Cremation goes back in history to the customs and practices of the ancient heathen world. Aryan folklore implies they were one of the first cultures to venerate fire. They disposed of their dead as they gathered around their camp fires. Nomadic tribes practiced cremation and carried cinerary urns containing the ashes of their loved ones with them in their wanderings. The Viking dead were placed in their boats, which were set on fire and pushed out to sea. Cinerary urns have been found in the rugged country of Russia and Scandinavia. Cremation is still widely practiced in India among the Hindus as part of their religion. However, the British government in 1829 stopped widows in India from throwing themselves on the funeral pyres of their dead husbands while they burned.

THE ROMAN EMPIRE

Cremation was practically the universal custom in the last days of the Roman Empire. The Romans were greatly influenced by the Greek idea that in the rite of cremation, fire crested every living thing and that to free the soul from the bonds of matter; the body must be reduced to its original elements by flame.

WHY CREMATION CEASED IN THE WESTERN WORLD

It was Christianity and the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead which ended cremation as a custom in the western world. The Roman Catholic Church issued an edict which caused Charlemagne to outlaw cremation around A.D. 800. Because, the custom was so deeply rooted among the Saxons. The death penalty was instituted to suppress its practice. The Encyclopedia Britannica says that there can be no doubt that the practice of cremation in Europe was at the first stopped, and then prevented, in great measure, by the Christian doctrine of the resurrection of the body, partly also by the notion that the Christian body was redeemed and purified."

SECULAR HUMANISM:

THE REASON FOR CREMATION'S REVIVAL

The revival of cremation goes back to 1869, when Italian scientist, Brunetti, devised a modern type of cremation which has been greatly improved and currently operating in hundreds of crematoriums in America. There are many Christians who remain ignorant of both the Bible teaching and the historical roots of cremation. A society which is without conscience about the practice of abortion, suicide, and euthanasia will find little reason to question the cremation of that which remains. The influence of secular humanism has created a "throwaway" society. This has resulted also in a general disrespect for the human body created in God's image. Is it any wonder little public respect is paid both to the dead and the bereaved during funeral possessions today? The revival of cremation is another step in our return to our pagan roots.

III Is Cremation Practical?

Many of us in our younger years may have expressed our desires that at death we wanted to be buried in a simple way in some isolated area dear to us. Today, people still express the same desires. This may be why they choose cremation and the distribution of their ashes in some favorite location. Few people consider when they talk this way they may be ignoring the welfare of the rest of their family and friends.

SOCIOLOGICAL REASONS FOR BURIAL

Economy and simplicity are common reasons given for desiring cremation. Yet, the comparative costs between direct cremation and immediate burial are very little. And there are serious factors which may be ignored by the choice. The viewing, funeral, and procession to the cemetery for burial, are all part of meeting the sociological needs of the family, friends, and neighbors at the time of a death.

Death brings family members together in reunion without regard to time, money or distance. Neighbors are motivated to show concern and compassion. All of us are drawn a little closer together as human beings when touched by the death of another. As John Doane, the English poet wrote: "...any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind; and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee."

SPIRITUAL REASONS FOR BURIAL

Since we identify each individual with their own unique body during life, it is essential for many people to view the body to accept the reality of their death. Serious psychological problems often develop when a person does not fully accept the death of a loved one.

Preparing the body and placing it in beautiful surroundings, makes this needed experience more bearable. Realization of death and a proper expression of grief are essential for the healing of the living. Proper burial of the body gives the loved ones a sense of comfort knowing the place and condition of the body of the loved one is at rest until Jesus comes.

THE MOST IMPORTANT FACT TO REMEMBER

Again, the most important part of an individual is not the body, but the soul and spirit. It is far more important to meet the needs of the soul and spirit while we are here than to care for the body. "For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus, will God bring with him." (1 *Thessalonians 4:14*)

It is far more important to know that the spirit and soul are alive with Christ, than to know how or where the body remains awaiting His return. "For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? Or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?" (Matt. 16:26) The thousands of dollars spent or saved on a funeral will do nothing to save a soul or spirit separated from God for all eternity.

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