

Death & Cremation: Does God Advocate Only One Burial Method?

Burial of the Un-cremated Body Was the Usual Biblical Custom

God does not prescribe a mode of burial for His people either in the Old Testament or the New Testament. We could say that the vast majority of all deaths mentioned with any details, go on to say burial; and that burial not cremation was standard procedure in the Old & New Testament.

The cultural practice of the Jews we can see reflected in the Scriptures: bodies were lovingly washed, anointed, wrapped, and then buried in a family tomb. The neck was usually left uncovered, and after a year the bones were gathered and placed in an ossuary, or bone box. These ossuaries were stacked in family burial caves.

From the Start God Said Dust to Dust

What God did say is at the first time death entered humanity He tells us:

Gen. 3:19 (NKJV) In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread
For out of it you were taken;
For **dust** you *are*,
And to **dust** you shall return.”

Daniel 12:2 (NKJV) And many of those who **sleep in the dust** of the earth shall awake, Some to everlasting life, Some to shame *and* everlasting contempt.

Biblical Cremation Accounts Aren't Positive Accounts

The cremation accounts are not positive, and seem to be the exceptions:

- Achan was cremated after being stoned for his sin (Josh. 7:25);
- Saul & Jonathan were cremated in I Sam. 31:12-13 because their bodies were cut up and hung on a wall by the Philistines;
- Zimri cremated himself in his home (I Kings 16:18);

So the accounts of cremation are never given as a positive example to follow, in God's Word.

Christ's Example is Burial

The doctrines of Christ's death are followed by the burial of His body, so the picture from His life is burial not cremation. Some believers want to be buried as Christ was, and not cremated as He wasn't. Although Jesus was actually laid on a shelf in a family tomb not buried in the ground, but that still is burial and not cremation.

Rom. 6:3-5 (NKJV) 3 Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? 4 Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. 5 For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection,

I Cor. 15:3-4 For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, ⁴ and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures,

Cremation is Only Rapid Decomposition

Bodies buried return to dust and the spirit goes into God's care.

Job 19:25-26 (NKJV) For I know that my Redeemer lives, And He shall stand at last on the earth; 26 And after my skin is destroyed, this I know, That in my flesh I shall see God,

Ecclesiastes 12:7 (NKJV) Then the dust will return to the earth as it was, And the spirit will return to God who gave it.

I Cor. 15:42-49 (NKJV) So also is the resurrection of the dead. The body is sown in corruption, it is raised in incorruption. 43 It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. 44 It is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. There is a natural body, and there is a spiritual body. 45 And so it is written, "The first man Adam became a living being." The last Adam became a life-giving spirit. 46 However, the spiritual is not first, but the natural, and afterward the spiritual. 47 The first man was of the earth, made of dust; the second Man is the Lord from heaven. 48 As was the man of dust, so also are those who are made of dust; and as is the heavenly Man, so also are those who are

heavenly. 49 And as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the heavenly Man.

Conclusion: It doesn't ultimately matter whether buried bodily or cremated. Both fulfill God's Word that we return to dust. Burial may reflect more of the Biblical pattern, but since there are no commands, it is our choice.

Principles to Help us Decide

1. **Settle Why You do what You do:** One thing we need to consider is the way that God looks at how and why we do things. It is possible to bury a Christian like they were a pagan, with no hope, with showy monuments, and not like a pilgrim and stranger, on Earth, headed towards Heaven. It also is possible to carefully cremate a loved one and honor God all the way through and display humility and

Rom. 14:5b (NKJV) Let each be fully convinced in his own mind.

I Cor. 10:31 Whether therefore ye eat or drink...do all to the glory of God.

2. **Always Reflect Heaven:** Whatever we do should reflect our citizenship being in Heaven.

Phil 3:20-21 (NKJV) For our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, 21 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.

3. **Rest in the Liberty we have in Christ.** Our Christian Liberty allows us to have freedom within anything God has left no clear condemnation against, and cremation is only guilty by association, not by command.

In Romans 14 Paul explains how to co-exist with believers who have all different degrees of convictions that extend beyond what the Scriptures plainly say. Here is his explanation:

- Romans 14:1-13 ***In Christ we are under the Law of Liberty.*** Don't Judge the Convictions of Others, instead receive them with Understanding.
 - v. 1: We as brothers & sisters will differ.
 - v. 4: We each will stand before God to answer for ourselves, not others. Therefore, don't judge those whose convictions differ from yours.

- v. 5: We must each be fully convinced in our own minds of what God has directed us to do.
- v. 6: We each serve God in what we do.
- v. 10: We must trust in Christ's judgment, not our own.
- Romans 14:14-23 ***In Christ we are under the Law of Love.*** We are to intentionally build up one another and not intentionally grieve each other.
- Romans 15:1-7 ***In Christ we are to Bear Each other's burdens, following Christ's Example.***

4. **Follow the Pattern laid down for Questionable things:** In deciding about whether or not to participate in any behavior that is doubtful, the following principles make a good checklist to follow.

- **Expediency: Is this activity one that profits me for eternity or just for a moment?** "All things are lawful for me," Paul says, "but not all things are profitable," or expedient (1 Cor. 6:12). Is what I want to do helpful and useful, or only desirable?
- **Edification: Will this activity strengthen or weaken my spiritual life?** Will I be built up and matured in Christ; will I become spiritually stronger? "All things are lawful, but not all things edify" (1 Cor. 10:23).
- **Exaltation: Is this activity clearly described as a pathway to magnifying God?** Will the Lord be lifted up and glorified in what I do? God's glory and exaltation should be the supreme purpose behind everything we do. "Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God" (1 Cor. 10:31).
- **Evangelism: Will this activity increase my evangelistic ability or decrease it?** Is my testimony going to be helped or hindered? Will unbelievers be drawn to Christ or turned away from Him by what I am doing? Will it help me conduct myself "with wisdom toward outsiders, making the most of the opportunity" (Col. 4:5)?
- **Example: Will others who seek to follow my example be helped or hindered by this activity?** Are we setting the right example for others, especially for weaker brothers and sisters? If we emulate Christ, others will be able to emulate us, to follow our example (1 Tim. 4:12).
- **Excess: Is this activity a weight that can trip me up that needs to be laid aside?** Is the activity or habit necessary, or is it merely an extra that is not really important? Is it perhaps only an encumbrance that we should willingly give up (Heb. 12:1)?

- **Emulation: Is this activity something that Jesus would do or not do?** “The one who says he abides in Him ought himself to walk in the same manner as He walked” (1 John 2:6). If we are doing what Christ would do, our action not only is permissible but good and right. 1

1 MacArthur, John F., *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary*, (Chicago: Moody Press) 1983, First Corinthians 8:13.