

What is the Most Appropriate Way to Treat a Deceased Christian's Body in View of the Biblical Themes of Creation and Redemption?

WSC. 37. What benefits do believers receive from Christ at death?

A. The souls of believers are at their death made perfect in holiness, and do immediately pass into glory; and their bodies, being still united to Christ, do rest in their graves till the resurrection.

Introductory

1. What are the choices?
 - a. Burial (inhumation or entombment): With or without embalming, the body is placed intact into a grave, tomb, or crypt.
 - b. Cremation:

According to the promotional literature, "Cremation is the reduction of a dead corpse to ash and bone fragments through rapid oxidation caused by intense heat." Historically (and still in many places where it is practiced) cremation is accomplished outdoors on an open pyre. Technological cremation takes place in a crematory, where much higher levels of heat can be applied. The process takes several hours (depending on the size of the body) and leaves behind 5-7 pounds of bone fragments that are then processed through a mechanical grinder, shredder, or tumbler to reduce the bone fragments to a small size. The "remains" (of the consistency of sand, rather than wood ash) are deposited in a box or an urn purchased for that purpose.
 - c. Other?
2. What the discussion is *not* about.
 - a. Providentially, peoples' bodies are destroyed by various means, including incineration
 - b. All human bodies will, given time, decompose into atoms, unless artificial steps are taken to prevent it (embalming); even while alive the cells of our body recycle every seven years
 - c. None of these factors will in any way prevent the Lord from raising both the bodies of believers and unbelievers "from the dust" — to face final judgment, and then experience the final, embodied state of either blessedness ("the new heavens and the new earth") or condemnation ("the lake of fire which is the second death")
3. The question we are posing reflects a choice: "*What is the most appropriate way to treat a deceased Christian's body in view of the biblical themes of creation and redemption?*"
4. There is *no explicit answer* in the Bible to our question. No text directly addresses the question of the propriety of either burial or incineration as a means of dealing with the human body after death. We must attempt an *inferential conclusion*, a "good and necessary consequence" from what Scripture does teach.

WCF 1.6. The whole counsel of God concerning *all things necessary* for his own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either *expressly set down* in Scripture, or by *good and necessary consequence* may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men.

This means (among other things) that we must be more careful about making moral judgments based on our conclusions about others' choices in this regard. To *condemn* an action as "sin" requires clear biblical warrant, lest we be guilty of "adding to" the requirements of Scripture in a legalistic fashion.

Our purpose rather, is to *educate ourselves* (and others) so that we might make choices that are *wise*, and reflect our biblical commitments and values in the most *faithful* way possible.

What does the Bible say?

1. *Explicit references to the burning of human bodies:*

1 Samuel 31:11 But when the inhabitants of Jabesh-gilead heard what the Philistines had done to Saul, 12 all the valiant men arose and went all night and took the body of Saul and the bodies of his sons from the wall of Beth-shan, and they came to Jabesh *and burned them* there.

Amos 2:1 Thus says the LORD: "For three transgressions of Moab, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment, *because he burned to lime* the bones of the king of Edom. 2 So I will send a fire upon Moab, and it shall devour the strongholds of Kerioth, and Moab shall die amid uproar, amid shouting and the sound of the trumpet; 3 I will cut off the ruler from its midst, and will kill all its princes with him," says the LORD.

Amos 6:8 The Lord GOD has sworn by himself, declares the LORD, the God of hosts: "I abhor the pride of Jacob and hate his strongholds, and I will deliver up the city and all that is in it." 9 And if ten men remain in one house, they shall die. 10 And when one's relative, *the one who anoints him for burning [ESV, burial]*, shall take him up to bring the bones out of the house, and shall say to him who is in the innermost parts of the house, "Is there still anyone with you?" he shall say, "No"; and he shall say, "Silence! We must not mention the name of the LORD."

2. *Fire as a means of God's judgment:*

Lev. 10:1 Now Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, each took his censer and put fire in it and laid incense on it and offered unauthorized fire before the LORD, which he had not commanded them. 2 *And fire came out from before the LORD and consumed them, and they died before the LORD.*

Num. 16:19 Then Korah assembled all the congregation against [Moses and Aaron] at the entrance of the tent of meeting. And the glory of the LORD appeared to all the congregation.

20 And the LORD spoke to Moses and to Aaron, saying, 21 "Separate yourselves from among this congregation, that I may consume them in a moment."

...28 And Moses said, "Hereby you shall know that the LORD has sent me to do all these works, and that it has not been of my own accord. 29 If these men die as all men die, or if they are visited by the fate of all mankind, then the LORD has not sent me. 30 But if the LORD creates something new, and the ground opens its mouth and swallows them up with all that belongs to them, and they go down alive into Sheol, then you shall know that these men have despised the LORD."

31 And as soon as he had finished speaking all these words, the ground under them split apart. 32 And the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up, with their households and all the people who belonged to Korah and all their goods. 33 So they and all that belonged to them went down alive into Sheol, and the earth closed over them, and they perished from the midst of the assembly. 34 And all Israel who were around them fled at their cry, for they said, "Lest the earth swallow us up!" 35 *And fire came out from the LORD and consumed the 250 men offering the incense.*

Josh. 7:10 The LORD said to Joshua, "Get up! Why have you fallen on your face? 11 Israel has sinned; they have transgressed my covenant that I commanded them; they have taken some of the devoted things; they have stolen and lied and put them among their own belongings.... 15 And he who is taken with the devoted things *shall be burned with fire*, he and all

that he has, because he has transgressed the covenant of the LORD, and because he has done an outrageous thing in Israel.”

25 And Joshua said, “Why did you bring trouble on us? The LORD brings trouble on you today.” And all Israel stoned him with stones. *They burned them with fire* and stoned them with stones. 26 And they raised over him a great heap of stones that remains to this day. Then the LORD turned from his burning anger. Therefore, to this day the name of that place is called the Valley of Achor.

Lev. 20:14 If a man takes a woman and her mother also, it is depravity; he and *they shall be burned with fire*, that there may be no depravity among you.

Lev. 21:9 And the daughter of any priest, if she profanes herself by whoring, profanes her father; *she shall be burned with fire*.

3. Fire as a symbol of *divine judgment* (e.g., Isa 10:16–17; 30:27–28; 30:33; Jer. 4:4; cf. Lam 2:3–4; Zeph 1:18; 3:8; Mal. 4:1; Matt 3:10,11,12; 7:19; 13:40,42,50; 18:8; 22:7; 25:41; 1 Cor 3:13,15; 2 Thess 1:7; Heb 10:27; 12:18,29; 2 Pet 3:7; Jude 7; Rev 8:5,7,8; 9:18; 11:5; 14:10; 16:8; 18:8; 19:20).
4. Fire as an instrument of *pagan human sacrifice* (2 Kings 17:17; Jer. 7:30–31). This practice is roundly condemned by the Law of God (Deut 12:31; Lev 18:21).
5. What may we *conclude* from our examination of Scripture thus far?
 - a. While the Scripture (which rarely mentions the practice) does not expressly forbid (elective) cremation of a deceased’s body, neither does it command or commend the practice. There is no example of a faithful believer in the Old or New Testaments being cremated after death.
 - b. It does not comment positively or negatively upon those providential situations (e.g., war, plague) when disposal of a body by fire may seem expedient.
 - c. Overwhelmingly, the burning of bodies is portrayed in a decidedly negative light — indeed, most often as a (direct or indirect) judgment of God. In the case of the penal sanctions of the Law, and the stories of Korah and Achan, the burning of the bodies of the offenders underscores the heinousness of their sins.
 - d. While biblical narratives alone are not necessarily normative, nevertheless when they reflect a uniformity of practice in a wide variety of situations, they help establish a moral presumption. As we will see, this presumption is supported by other, theological considerations.
6. The *practice of burial* as reflected in Scripture: There are so many references in Scripture to the burial of the faithful, that we can only mention a few of the most significant.
 - a. The *death and burial of the Patriarchs*, especially Jacob and Joseph, who died in Egypt, but who understood the burial of their bodies to had great covenantal significance.

Gen. 49:28 All these are the twelve tribes of Israel. This is what their father said to them as he blessed them, blessing each with the blessing suitable to him. 29 Then he commanded them and said to them, “I am to be gathered to my people; bury me with my fathers in the cave that is in the field of Ephron the Hittite, 30 in the cave that is in the field at Machpelah, to the east of Mamre, in the land of Canaan, which Abraham bought with the field from Ephron the Hittite to possess as a burying place. 31 There they buried Abraham and Sarah his wife. There they buried Isaac and Rebekah his wife, and there I buried Leah— 32 the field and the cave that is in it were bought from the Hittites.” 33 When Jacob finished commanding his sons, he drew up his feet into the bed and breathed his last and was gathered to his people.

Gen. 50:4 And when the days of weeping for him were past, Joseph spoke to the household of Pharaoh, saying, "If now I have found favor in your eyes, please speak in the ears of Pharaoh, saying, 5 'My father made me swear, saying, "I am about to die: in my tomb that I hewed out for myself in the land of Canaan, there shall you bury me." Now therefore, let me please go up and bury my father. Then I will return.'" 6 And Pharaoh answered, "Go up, and bury your father, as he made you swear." 7 So Joseph went up to bury his father... 12 Thus his sons did for him as he had commanded them, 13 for his sons carried him to the land of Canaan and buried him in the cave of the field at Machpelah, to the east of Mamre, which Abraham bought with the field from Ephron the Hittite to possess as a burying place. 14 After he had buried his father, Joseph returned to Egypt with his brothers and all who had gone up with him to bury his father.

Gen. 50:22 So Joseph remained in Egypt, he and his father's house. Joseph lived 110 years. 23 And Joseph saw Ephraim's children of the third generation. The children also of Machir the son of Manasseh were counted as Joseph's own. 24 And Joseph said to his brothers, "I am about to die, but God will visit you and bring you up out of this land to the land that he swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob." 25 Then Joseph made the sons of Israel swear, saying, "God will surely visit you, and you shall carry up my bones from here." 26 So Joseph died, being 110 years old. They embalmed him, and he was put in a coffin in Egypt.

Exod. 13:19 Moses took the bones of Joseph with him, for Joseph had made the sons of Israel solemnly swear, saying, "God will surely visit you, and you shall carry up my bones with you from here."

b. The *burial of Moses* — by God himself!

Deut 34:1 Then Moses went up from the plains of Moab to Mount Nebo, to the top of Pisgah, which is opposite Jericho. And the LORD showed him all the land, Gilead as far as Dan, 2 all Naphtali, the land of Ephraim and Manasseh, all the land of Judah as far as the western sea, 3 the Negeb, and the Plain, that is, the Valley of Jericho the city of palm trees, as far as Zoar. 4 And the LORD said to him, "This is the land of which I swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, 'I will give it to your offspring.' I have let you see it with your eyes, but you shall not go over there." 5 So Moses the servant of the LORD died there in the land of Moab, according to the word of the LORD, 6 and he buried him in the valley in the land of Moab opposite Beth-peor; but no one knows the place of his burial to this day.

c. The details surrounding the *burial of the Lord Jesus* — even amid the hurry of preparations for the Passover Sabbath — indicate the way in which the preparation of the body of Jesus for burial reflects the appropriate affection and devotion of Jesus' friends and followers to his person. The "body of Jesus" is "Jesus."

John 19:38 After these things Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly for fear of the Jews, asked Pilate that he might take away *the body of Jesus*, and Pilate gave him permission. So he came and took away *his body*. 39 Nicodemus also, who earlier had come to Jesus by night, came bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds in weight. 40 So they took *the body of Jesus* and bound it in linen cloths with the spices, as is the burial custom of the Jews. 41 Now in the place where he was crucified there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb in which no one had yet been laid. 42 So because of the Jewish day of Preparation, since the tomb was close at hand, *they laid Jesus there*.

Matt. 27:57 When it was evening, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who also was a disciple of Jesus. 58 He went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then Pilate ordered it to be given to him. 59 And Joseph took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen shroud 60 and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had cut in the rock. And he rolled a great stone to the entrance of the tomb and went away. 61 Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were there, sitting opposite the tomb.

Luke 23:55 The women who had come with him from Galilee followed and saw the tomb and how his body was laid. 56 Then they returned and prepared spices and ointments.

On the Sabbath they rested according to the commandment.

24:1 But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they went to the tomb, taking the spices they had prepared.

d. Conversely, to refuse burial is always a sign of reproach — often as a result of divine judgment (Deut 28:26; 2 Sam 21:6, 9; 1 Kgs 14:10-13; 2 Kgs 9:10; Ps 79:1-4; Jer 8:2; 14:16; 16:4, 6; 25:33; Rev 11:9).

7. *Interim conclusion:* Though many civilizations in the ancient world disposed of the dead by means of cremation, the Bible reflects the uniform practice of the burial of the faithful dead. At least in practice, it has divine sanction — God buried his servant Moses and his beloved Son Jesus. This has been the uniform practice throughout Christian history, and thus establishes a very strong presumption in favor of the practice for Christians today. Next time we will consider the theological considerations — creation and bodily resurrection — that support the normativity of the practice.