

CONSIDERING CREMATION? - part 1

In this world nothing can be said to be certain except death and taxes. So said Ben Franklin. Jesus healed many people, but not everyone, and even those healed would one day die. Why? And what are we to do with the bodies of the deceased? What will preserve dignity and God's purpose?

John 11 provides a context for such questions. *"Now when Jesus came, He found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. Bethany was near Jerusalem, about 2 miles off, and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them concerning their brother."* Death is a natural part of life, and it's human nature to mourn the loss of a loved one, friend or relative. But why did Lazarus die? Not because Jesus didn't heal him, since he would have died sometime of something.

#1 - Why is death inevitable? Romans 5:12 *"sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned."* Romans 6:23 *"the wages of sin is death."* Genesis 2-3 records what happened thousands of years ago in the garden of Eden when mankind rebelled against the Creator. God had told Adam the consequences would be *"you shall surely die."* And because of sin, physical death began the moment he sinned. Sin and death passes to all people, the curse and consequence of sin. God said *"you are dust and to dust you shall return."*

Throughout history, mankind has returned to a garden with remains of the deceased. And so the body of Lazarus was prepared and placed in a tomb, the traditional practice of Jews since Abraham. His *"tomb of the patriarchs"* spanned the generations of Genesis 23-50, and contains Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Rebecca, Jacob, Leah - and is still revered after thousands of years.

#2 - What to do with the body? Amidst a great variety of death rituals, most ancient cultures believed human beings consist of a body and a soul which lives on after death. Bodies were either exposed, or burned, or buried. These three forms all appear in the ancient Middle East. Different peoples, times and places also had and have different religious significance associated with their practices.

Exposure - in the Bible, this was a denial of burial, left for dogs and birds as judgment against the wicked. Examples include Sisera and Jabin (Psalm 83:9-10), Ahab's offspring (1Kings 21:23-24), Jezebel, (2Kings 9:30-37), Jehoikim (Jeremiah 22:19). Today for example, exposure "sky burials" are still practiced in Tibet, cutting up the body into pieces for the animals and the elements.

Cremation - scholars debate if this is in the Bible. Some point to 1Samuel 31 where Saul and his sons were killed, decapitated and mutilated by the Philistines: *"Valiant men took the bodies to Jabesh and burned them there and buried their bones."* Was decaying flesh burned from the bones which were then buried? Or was burning divine judgment for Saul's apostasy? Or was a fire burned in their honor, or incense burned over their bodies, not uncommon? Parallel passages 2Samuel 2:4-5 and 1Chronicles 10:12 lack any reference to burning. At any rate, this does not seem to be an actual cremation.

In Amos 2:1-3 God was not pleased that Moab had burned the bones of the king of Edom. If Amos 6:8-10 is cremation, perhaps it is judgment or a necessity due to the vast carnage of war. Genesis 38:24, Leviticus 20:14 and 21:9 speak of burning with fire as capital punishment for sexual immorality (which 1Corinthians 6:18 says is *sin against your own body*, because it bears God's image). Other references to burning of bodies are related to war, judgment, and destruction, or as Psalm 106:37 for example, the offering of human sacrifices in fire to pagan idols and demons, a recurring sin in the Old Testament.

Today cremation accounts for about half of funerals nationwide, mostly in the NW, NE, Florida, etc which reflect the increasing post-Christian character of our culture. Cremation puts the deceased body in a cardboard or inexpensive casket, at temperatures around 2,000 degrees for about two hours. Then workers remove metals (such as prosthetic parts), and a blender crushes the remaining fragments and pieces of bone into a fine powder. This consumes great quantities of energy, so controversial "green" trends include "wet" cremation. Washington state even allows composting of remains.

Inhumation - there are some 200 Biblical references to interment. Examples include Genesis 15:15, 25:9 (Abraham), 1Kings 13:29-30 (prophet), Mark 6:29 (John the Baptist). Isaiah 53:9 specifically prophesies the burial of Christ. Burial was the normal practice since Abraham for Jews, and then Christians, up to the present time. Francis Schaeffer notes historians trace the spread of Christianity through the Roman Empire by where and when cremation was replaced by burial.

Throughout church history, cremation was often vehemently prohibited. Punishment for heretics was burning at the stake, to deny a proper Christian burial by the church. Today, as Christians trend toward cremation, some people say, *it doesn't conflict with my beliefs.* But it's not a question of whether God can raise the dead from ashes or any imaginable disposition of remains, or whether it conflicts with anyone's beliefs. As with all things, it is a question of, *what does the Bible say?* Just because the Bible doesn't specifically prohibit something doesn't make it a thing you should do. Next time, we'll explore why the Bible emphasizes burial, and what is a "Christian" funeral. Pray for God's wisdom! ☐.