

**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! ☐.

**BURN OR BURY? - part 2**

Three ancient death rituals are still practiced today in some form. Exposure leaves a body for animals and elements. Cremation burns and crushes remains into an ash, and is becoming more popular. But burial is the traditional practice and teaching of Jews and Christians. In Genesis 2-3, man goes from dust to dust, but scholars note it doesn't follow logically or theologically to hasten decomposition.

**#3 - Why does the Bible emphasize burial?** John 19:38-42, *Nicodemus and Joseph took the body of Jesus from the cross, bound it with linen cloths and spices according to the burial custom of the Jews, and placed it in a new tomb in a garden near where Jesus was crucified.* This was not embalming or mummification, but a Biblical expression of care, and expectation of a future. Our Creator cares about our bodies, and has plans for them. God promised Abraham, *"you shall go to your fathers in peace, you shall be buried in a good old age"* (Genesis 15:15). The Lord Himself buried Moses (Deuteronomy 34:6). Joseph instructed that his bones be taken from Egypt to the promised land (Hebrews 11:22).

It is often said that a person is a soul with a body, but theologians note it is more complicated than that. God regards our bodies with dignity. L. Boettner says *"the body is as really and eternally part of man as is his spirit."* And J. Stott explains, *"this is the form in which God became flesh"* (John 1:14), to redeem human beings created to bear the image of God. In 1Corinthians 6:19, believers are told *your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit; you are not your own, you were bought with a price, so glorify God in your body.* In life and in death. Baptism of the believer pictures union with Christ in His death, burial, and resurrection (Romans 6:1-14). It's the Biblical pattern of new life in Christ, beyond womb to tomb.

**#4 - What will God do with your body?** Back to John 11 for the rest of the story. *"Jesus said to her, your brother will rise again. Martha said to Him, I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day. Jesus said to her, I am the resurrection and the life, whoever believes in Me though he die yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in Me shall never die. Do you believe this? She said to Him, yes Lord, I believe that You are the Christ, the Son of God who is coming into the world."* Do YOU believe this? It's what Christians believe, the promise of God in the Lord Jesus Christ. He goes on to demonstrate His power and authority: *"Jesus cried out with a loud voice, Lazarus, come out, and the man who had died came out."* It portends the miracle of resurrection, which awaits all believers.

The most common term in the New Testament for death is "sleep" and in the gospels dead bodies are referred to as persons, not corpses. To rise from the dead to new life is God's hope throughout the Bible. Job 19:25-27 *"I know my Redeemer lives, and at the last He will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God."* This culminates in Revelation 1 with Jesus Christ, *the firstborn of the dead, like a son of man, the living one,* who declares, *I died and behold I am alive forevermore."* In Revelation 21-22 believers will forever behold Jesus Christ in His glorified body in the new heavens and earth. In accordance with Scripture, the Word was made flesh, died for our sins, was buried, and rose from the dead, as the firstfruits of resurrection (1Corinthians 15). The apostle likens this to *a natural seed transformed from earthly form to heavenly form,* and says, *"just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall bear the image of the man of heaven."*

**#5- What's a Christian to do?** In John 12 Jesus affirmed Mary anointing Him with expensive ointment *"for the day of My burial."* Dignity comes at a cost. Some Christian advisers say go for whatever is cheapest. Others are more careful about Biblical patterns. Save money with funeral packages, grave liner instead vault, buy your own casket, or build it from plans or kit. There's a cloth shroud embedded with mushroom sprouts. Research "direct burial." Embalming is not required unless the death is from a communicable disease. But within 72 hours of death, Iowa law requires embalming or interment. Memorials are for the living, so don't spend money out of guilt. Research life insurance. If you choose cremation, inter the remains. Those who don't, often regret not having a "place" for the deceased. Urns are lost. Contents are forgotten. An angry man flushed the ashes of his mother's treasured relative.

Theologian and ethicist DW Jones reached three conclusions after a deep review of key historical, Biblical, and theological considerations: "1, church history witnesses considerable opposition toward cremation, with burial as the normative practice of the church. 2, no specific instructions are given in Scripture for treatment of the deceased, but the example of Biblical characters and the trajectory of Scripture is pro-burial. 3, the body is theologically significant, thus both the act of and the imagery conveyed by the treatment of the deceased ought to be weighed carefully. Because in the Christian tradition, funerals are not simply ways of disposing dead bodies nor are they solely about remembering the departed or expressing grief; rather for believers, funerals are Christ-centered events, testifying to the hope and message of the Gospel." Believers are destined for eternal life in a glorified body.

1Corinthians 15 says: *the earthly body is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. When the mortal puts on immortality, death is swallowed up in victory! Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!* ☐