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# To Bury or to Burn?

*The last way an Old Testament believer would want to be treated after dying is to be cremated*

When a loved one dies, is it proper for a Christian to arrange for his or her cremation, rather than burial? If preplanning a funeral, is cremation an option? Is the question of whether to bury or burn simply a matter of preference, determined by factors such as cost? These and related questions arise more and more, also in our circles, as evidenced by the fact that *Clarion* received a request to address this topic.

## The normal way

There is no doubt that Scripture presents the burial of the deceased in a grave as the normal way. Examples abound. Let me only mention the following. The first and only piece of real estate that Abraham owned was the grave for his wife and later for himself (Gen 23; 25:9-10). The other patriarchs were buried there as well (Gen 49:29-33; 50:13). When Moses died on Mount Nebo, it was the Lord Himself who buried him, showing that this is the way to take care of the dead (Deut 34:6). Indeed, in his law, the Lord mandated that even those guilty of a capital offence be given a proper burial (Deut 21:22-23). Moving to the New Testament, when Lazarus died, he was buried (John 11:17), not cremated, even though this was the preferred Roman and Greek way of dealing with a corpse in those days. Finally, it is significant that after the Lord Jesus died, He was buried (Matt 27:59-60). This was according to his own expectation. When a woman anointed Him with expensive perfume in Bethany, then He met objections by saying: "She has done a beautiful thing to me. . . when she poured this perfume on my body, she did it to prepare me for burial" (Matt 26:10, 12).

So burial was the normal way. This is not surprising when one remembers that the Lord God had formed the first man from the dust of the ground

(Gen 2:7) and after the fall into sin had decreed that "by the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return" (Gen 3:19). This is the pattern until the return of Christ. Burial is an integral part of this pattern.

## Burning as punishment

Although burying the dead is the norm, yet we do also read in Scripture of the Lord mandating the burning of humans in certain situations. We read in God's law that "if a man marries both a woman and her mother, it is wicked. Both he and they must be burned in the fire, so that no wickedness will be among you" (Lev 20:14). Similarly, "If a priest's daughter defiles herself by becoming a prostitute, she disgraces her father; she must be burned in the fire" (Lev 21:9; cf. Gen 38:24). It is obvious that the burning and reducing to ashes was an extreme punishment for a heinous offence. It meant that the body could not be given a proper burial. It marked the person involved as one accursed by God. Similarly, after the defeat of Israel at Ai, God commanded that "he who is caught with the devoted things shall be destroyed by fire, along with all that belongs to him. He has violated the covenant of the Lord and has done a disgraceful thing in Israel!" (Josh 7:15). Achan had stolen from the spoils of Jericho which God had claimed for Himself and so he and his family were burned with fire (Josh 7:26). Again, this extreme penalty shows God's curse resting on them.

There is another example of burning but this case is exceptional due to circumstances and not mandated by God. I am referring to the burning of King Saul and his sons to prevent further abuse by the Philistines (1 Sam 31:10-12). This was a specific act in

an exceptional circumstance. It is also noteworthy that "they took their bones and buried them" (1 Sam 31:13). There was a burial, for the bones were buried.

In certain cases, God also directly punished with burning people to death, thereby depriving them of a normal burial. Thus when Nadab and Abihu offered "unauthorized fire before the Lord, contrary to his command, fire came out from the presence of the Lord and consumed them, and they died before the Lord" (Lev 10:1-2). The Lord also punished with fire Korah, Dathan, and Abiram and their followers who were grasping for the priesthood: "And fire came out from the Lord and consumed the 250 men who were offering the incense" (Num 16:35).

In view of the above, it is clear that the last way an Old Testament believer would want to be treated after dying is to be cremated. Not burning but burial was the honourable way. Why was that? In addition to what has been noted above, we need to briefly consider the place of the body in burial.

### **The body in burial**

A burial is no small thing. A corpse is not just a nameless piece of matter that is put into the ground, as materialists suggest. Rather, it is the body of a particular person which is interred. Indeed, at a funeral, one has buried a loved one. Although the soul is with Christ (Phil 1:23), the body is still the body of the person who is buried. When our Saviour raised Lazarus from the dead, He did not say to the dead body, "Corpse arise," but He called out "Lazarus, come out!" (John 11:43). When the Lord Jesus died, it was not just his body, but He Himself who was buried. It was not just a corpse that came to life, but Christ Himself rose to life (Matt 28:6; 1 Cor 15:4).

The body is a very important part of our identity. When God made the first person, then "the Lord God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being" (Gen 2:7). First the body was made and then life was given. Body and soul belong together. It is not normal for a soul to be without the body. In heaven, the souls are in a sense naked, awaiting the day when the heavenly glorified body will be given to them (2 Cor 5:1-10). But this glorified body is the resurrection body that will be raised from the grave, just as Christ, the first fruits of those who are alive, was raised from the grave (1 Cor 15:1-34).

As those who confess the resurrection of the body, we dispose of the body carefully in burial. Unless the Lord returns soon, the body will turn to dust. But we sow it for the day of the resurrection! To cremate and utterly destroy the body is not consistent with the hope of the resurrection. Death has been overcome. A new body will be raised incorruptible!

## Cremation

The mindset that informs cremation is totally different. Historically cremation is rooted in pagan thinking. The idea is that burning of the body aids in the release of the soul. It is not by chance that as Christianity spread in the Roman Empire, the common practice of cremation ceased to be the prevailing choice. In the eighth century, Charlemagne forbade cremation in the Holy Roman Empire.

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In subsequent history, cremation was only practised in extraordinary circumstances such as during the time of the deadly plagues that devastated much of Europe in the Middle Ages.

Today as Christian influence on our society is waning and secularist and neo-pagan thinking affects more and more people, cremation is steadily gaining in popularity. Indeed, trends suggest that about fifty

percent of deaths in Canada are now cremated. In urban areas the rate goes up to about sixty to eighty percent. We need to be careful that we are not influenced by worldly thinking when deciding on how a funeral should be conducted.

## On that great day

On the great day of Jesus Christ, all those who have died will appear before the throne of God. Even the sea will give up its dead and so will death (Rev 20:13). Those raised will also include the martyrs who perished in the flames of persecution while tied to a stake. It will also include those children of God who expired in fiery accidents and whose remains were incinerated. The believers will all be raised incorruptible in a glorified body on that great day. Our God is not hindered by the manner of death or of the deposition of the body.

The Bible does not specifically mandate a certain method of burial, nor does Scripture condemn cremation as a sin. Yet it is clear from what the Bible does tell us that the burial of the body, and not cremation, is consistent with the biblical perspective. The body once carefully made by God from the dust of the earth, now redeemed by Christ, and used by Him as a temple of the Holy Spirit is not something to be destroyed. Rather it is to be carefully laid to rest with respect and dignity for the day of the resurrection. As Scripture so beautifully teaches us: "The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonour, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body" (1 Cor 15:42-44).

