

Cremation Versus Burial

The only difference between natural decomposition and fire is speed. Both are forms of oxidation, where the core elements are broken down into “dust.” Fire is just quicker and more efficient.

That said, should a Christian be cremated? Since there is no scripture that either condones or condemns the practice, the debate becomes a matter of personal conviction. Unlike the hype one reads on the Internet, God’s word is relatively silent on the issue. Having talked to people about cremation, I get the distinct impression they don’t believe God can resurrect someone who has been cremated. Superstition and fear are stronger than faith in God’s power.

According to some, cremation should be avoided because it has been a centuries-old pagan practice. Others point to Jewish tradition, where the Luz bone, located in the neck, is what God uses to resurrect each person. They believe that if this bone is destroyed through cremation, God cannot resurrect that person. The Apostle Paul said to avoid Jewish fables (Titus 1:14). Others cite the Old Testament as “proof” that burial is the right choice.

In 1886, the Roman Catholic Church officially banned cremations. Church members were excommunicated as recently as World War II for arranging them. The Eastern Orthodox ecumenical patriarch of Constantinople stated in 1961, *“There is no formal Orthodox rule against cremation, but there is a heavy weight of custom and sentiment in favor of Christian burial.”*

Internet articles are written in a strident and emotional language from both sides of the issue. Those who oppose cremation have as many bible verses supporting their view as do those who endorse it. Each side claim it’s a matter of faith.

Abraham and Isaac

If cremation were against the scriptures, God would not have told Abraham to offer up Isaac as a burnt offering:

“Take now your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I will tell you.” (Gen 22:2) NAS

The argument that God had no intention of Abraham going through with the act implies that God was deceitful. The point is, burnt offerings later became a part of the ceremonial law, and pointed to Christ’s death. The importance was placed on the sacrificial *death*, not its mode.

Daniel's Friends and the Fiery Furnace

Daniel's friends, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah, apparently did not worry about being burned to a crisp. When they defied the king's orders to worship an image and faced being tossed into a furnace, their reply was:

"If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire; and He will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But even if He does not, let it be known to you, O king, that we are not going to serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up." (Dan 3:17-18)

Being thrown into vats of molten metal or being burned alive in various horrible ways was popular for centuries. Paul wrote, "if I surrender my body to be burned, but do not have love, it profits me nothing." (1 Cor 13:3) His words reflect what was taking place at that time. In *The Decline of Fall of the Roman Empire*, Edward Gibbons writes of Christians dying under Nero's persecution:

Some were nailed to crosses; others sewed up in the skins of wild beasts and exposed to the fury of dogs; others again, **smearred over with combustible materials, were used as torches** to illuminate the darkness of the night. The gardens of Nero were destined for melancholy spectacle¹

It grieves me to read articles by so-called bible scholars affirming that "the bible shows time and again that fire is reserved for the wicked." Then what about the many Christian martyrs who were were thrown into vats of molten metal or furnaces?

When my wife died, her relatives were upset when they discovered I had had her cremated. However, I simply didn't have the criminal amount of money the funeral parlor demanded for a burial.

Some Christians believe that physical burial must take place for a future resurrection. They base this on what Paul wrote to the church at Corinth:

So also is the resurrection of the dead. It is sown a perishable body, it is raised an imperishable body; it is sown in dishonor, 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. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body. (1 Cor 15:42-44)

Based on that last sentence, Christians reason that there must be a natural body before there can be a spiritual one, and cremation prevents that from taking place. But notice it doesn't say, "if the natural body is *buried*..." He merely says, "if you possess a fleshly body, you will also have a

¹. (Volume One, Chapter XVI, P. 617) Tree pitch was generously applied to naked men and women, after which they were bound to a post anchored in the ground. These human torches were positioned around the periphery of Nero's garden parties, where they provided light for the "festivities."

spiritual one.” Paul isn’t describing a recipe for resurrection but is comparing the differences between the resurrected state as opposed to our earthly existence.

The Testimony of a Christian’s Burial

Many preachers argue that cremation is a poor testimony to the world of a Christian’s belief in a bodily resurrection. In other words, if a Christian gets cremated, they are telling the world that they didn’t believe in a bodily resurrection since they “disposed” of their body via fire. This sounds pious but lays a guilt trip on a family who just can’t afford an expensive funeral. It also misrepresents the deceased’s convictions. As far as providing a “testimony” to the world, that should have been carried out when the person was alive, not after they’re dead. My God can resurrect me from *any* state, even if my ashes were spread into outer space.

The Bottom Line

As North American society becomes progressively more secular (i.e., godless), it is expected that cremation will gain in favor and become the standard method for disposing of bodies.² A second factor is ecological sensitivity: some don’t want their remains using up badly needed real estate.

Regardless of the emotional hoopla, cremation versus burial is a matter of personal choice. No one should be putting on the judge’s robes and telling you it’s a sin. Nor is it the church’s job to dictate such a decision, especially when the Bible makes no such attempt.

The next time your pastor tells you it’s wrong to cremate, hand him the funeral bill and the cost for annual cemetery maintenance. Then give him a wink when you see him at the resurrection.

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² According to the *Cremation Association of North America* (CANA), by the year 2010, 40% of all deaths in the U.S. and Canada will use cremation.