

Does the Bible Say Anything About Cremation?

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[0 : 00] Well, the question tonight is about cremation, and I don't know who asked the question.

! Well, I won't even ask who it was. You might be embarrassed to be highlighted. You know, sometimes we ask questions we think they're stupid questions.

And, you know, it's really the question we don't ask that is the stupid one, isn't it? And this is not a stupid question, not at all, because it is an issue, as you might have noticed from the little study notes that I gave you, it is an issue that is apparently becoming more and more important in our culture, in American culture.

And even among, and especially among, Christians in America. And I have given you, well, in fact, let me just do this first before I give you some of the views.

And there are really basically three, and it's just kind of some broad categories that I'm going to give you. And then I will be so bold as to share with you the position that I've come down on.

[1 : 26] And before I do that, I have to admit to you that it was not until I considered the question and did some research and study on my own that I feel comfortable about coming to a position about it.

Because, quite frankly, I've just never considered it, cremation. Although, I would say, in the last few months I have, for a personal reason, not personal, Sherry and I, but our extended family.

Anyway, let me give you some data, some kind of some information on some trends. It's not something you would necessarily want to jot down. It might not even be interesting to you.

But I think it reveals to us that it is, in America, it is an option, an option, a choice of Americans that is becoming more prevalent. That is the choice for cremation over burial.

And just to give you an idea, in 1985, as a percentage of deaths in America, 14.9% of deaths in America were done by cremation. 14.9%. That comes to the total of about 289 cremations in America.

[2 : 52] Now, that's 89. That's as far back as this particular chart goes. And this, by the way, came from, well, I don't have it written down here, but it comes from some organization, cremation organization anyway.

So I don't know if these figures are accurate or not. If I skip on up to, say, 2005, if we go from 1985 to 2005, I know that's a big jump, but the percent was at 32% in 2005.

32% of deaths were done by cremation. That amounts to 785,000 cremations in America. Then when we get to, say, 2007, it didn't change very much. Jumped up to 34% of deaths.

But, and this is, apparently this survey was done in 2007 because they don't have any hard facts after that. But the projections, based upon the trends and I guess some other research that this organization has done, they estimate that by 2015, the percent will be 45%.

45% of deaths in America would be by cremation. Cremation. Now, you know, that's kind of interesting. Maybe it gives you an idea that, if nothing else, that, apparently, more Americans are choosing cremation rather than burial.

[4 : 28] And what does that mean? I don't have any idea other than just to conclude that it's becoming more popular in this country. Well, and we would have to say, and I would say, though I didn't put that on the notes, that, apparently, according to information that I read, that that is the number one reason for choosing that option.

Not the only one, but the number one reason. It's easier, cheaper, and so forth. All right. Well, let's just kind of get into it as I have it displayed for you on those notes.

And you can make some notes. I've given you some space to do that, as well as fill in some blanks if you want to, just because it's fun, isn't it? Fill in blanks.

And, right. Except you don't even have one, do you, Wes? They're all out. Are they all out? My goodness. It's terrible. They brought up 10, so I could fill it out.

Okay. Well, we know that you're the filling out kind of guy, so. All right. Let me give you three views of the wide range. There are Christians still in America who strongly object to cremation.

[5 : 49] Strongly object on a biblical, or from a biblical perspective. And I'm going to mention a few of their arguments as we go on a little bit here.

But so, we need to understand that. And possibly, there's some right here in this room who strongly object on biblical grounds. Not just your feelings and such.

And we all have feelings about it as well. But I mean, from a biblical perspective, there are those Christians who strongly object to it. That would be, you know, the extreme opposition.

Number two, and this isn't, you know, very intelligent, an intelligent way to present the views. But number two, there are a growing number of Christians.

And I might add, as I have studied, most Bible scholars, conservative Bible scholars, who believe it to be basically a non-issue.

[6 : 50] Just a non-issue. That is, biblically speaking. Now, it is an issue. I mean, from a biblical perspective, most Bible scholars that I consulted, who have even given an answer to it, would say that it's just not an issue.

And since the Bible doesn't speak to it, then we're free, and we can decide whichever way we want to go, and so forth. The third view would be what I would call the middle ground.

The middle ground, which essentially would say, it would be essentially saying, that though the Bible contains no prohibition against cremation, and I'll, you know, bump that a little bit more in the next section, but since the Bible contains no prohibition against cremation, there are some sound reasons why Christians should decide against it.

There are some reasons why Christians should decide against it, or should at least be counseled to consider some of these important issues.

And we'll get to those a little bit later, and I must admit to you that I think I fall on this third position. Now, before we go any further, let me say this.

[8 : 19] In fact, no, I'm not going to say it. We'll go on, and then I'll say it, because I'm basically going to, you know, kind of jump ahead. But some basic assumptions.

Let's just consider some basic assumptions that really, though there are those who would argue at some point here, these basic assumptions, in my opinion, from a biblical perspective, there's no point of argument here.

The first one is that the Bible contains no instructions, no prescriptions, no commands regarding how Christians should deal with the bodies of their dead loved ones after they die.

There's just nothing in the Bible. The Bible contains no word of blessing for those who bury their dead. The Bible contains no word of judgment for those who choose cremation.

And I'm fine with that. I'm just settled. I cannot find any place in the Bible that's specific. Now, let me just, well, in short, as to any explicit, I mean explicit, very plain, direct to the point, specific, explicit word on the subject of cremation or burial, the Bible is just simply silent.

[9 : 46] Now, what I'm doing is just laying out some basic assumptions. Okay? That is, if you want to go to the Bible and prove your case, one way or the other, I don't believe you'll find it.

Now, you can come up to me afterward and say, but preacher, I have found it. So here it is. So I welcome that if you found it. But I'm not talking about some implications. We'll get to those.

There's a difference between something stated explicitly and something implied or some implications or some conclusions you might draw from not prescriptions but descriptions in the Bible.

There's a difference between those two. And since there are no prescriptions, then I think Christians are free to decide on that.

After prayer, obviously, you want to pray about any decision you make. All right? The second basic assumption, ultimately, the outcome will be the same for every dead body, whether buried in the ground or a tomb or cremated.

[10 : 55] And what is that ultimate outcome? No. That's a trick question. No, because you're trying to think.

You know, you're kind of like the Sunday school class little kid Sunday school class thinks Jesus is the answer to every question. No, the answer there is decomposition. I mean, ultimately, the outcome is the same.

Outcome is the same. Decomposition. Cremation may speed up the process, but it will not change it. You know, you know, just consider those who have been dead now since, you know, since Moses walked the earth.

They died, and many of them may be buried, some of them eaten up by some wild animal or burned up or whatever. However it happened, you can be sure you're not going to find their body anywhere.

It is decomposed unless it's been preserved in some way, you know, like in some ice cap or something like that. And every time, you know, occasionally we'll find, archaeologists will find things like that.

[12:03] But the ultimate end is the same, whether you choose cremation or burial, and that is decomposition of the body. All right, we're just talking about some assumptions. As a matter of fact, we have some corroboration from Ecclesiastes 12.7, which says, Then the dust will return to the earth as it was, and the spirit will return to God who gave it.

Dust to dust, ashes to ashes. I mean, it's just, that's just what's going to happen to this body, this earthen vessel that we call our bodies.

All right, that's the basic assumption. Now, we're just kind of walking through this in some logical way. And the third assumption, and it's an assumption based upon a belief, a doctrinal belief, and that doctrinal belief is grounded in Scripture, and that is that at the resurrection, all Christians will receive a new body, like the Lord's glorious body.

That is, our bodies will be changed. 1 Corinthians 15, 42 to 54, So also is the resurrection of the dead. It is sown a perishable body.

It is raised an imperishable body. Some change, a change takes place. It is sown in dishonor. It is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness. It is raised in power.

[13:25] It is sown a natural body. It is raised a spiritual body. Behold, I tell you a mystery, Paul wrote. We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed.

In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump, for the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For this perishable must put on imperishable, and this mortal must put on immortality.

Alright? So, here is the assumption. At the resurrection, all Christians, all Christians, will receive a changed body, glorified by, like the Lord's glorious body.

And this will happen, by the way, and you know it to be true, I am sure, it will happen regardless of what takes place after the body dies.

Whether it is burned, dismembered, eaten by some wild animal, or just allowed the process of decay in the grave, or in some tomb, or wherever, or whatever, or whether it is cremated.

[14:29] That is, it is not going to change the reality that one day, our bodies will be resurrected. Job 19, verse 25 to 27, As for me, Job said, I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last, He will take His stand on the earth, even after my skin is destroyed, that is, even after the body is totally gone, decomposed, destroyed, in whatever fashion, yet from my flesh, I will, I shall see God, whom I myself shall behold, and whom my eyes will see, and not another, my faint, my heart faints within me.

So, this is the assumption. Based upon Scripture, and regardless of the choice, of what is done with that dead body, or whatever choice you make, in regard to how you want your body, taken care of after you die, regardless of the choice, you will be raised.

Be raised, and have a new body, like the Lord's glorious body. Okay? By the way, just to give you a, kind of a, clue as to, where we might be going, in our conclusions about cremation, this is, the basic, really the basic foundational argument, for burial, rather than cremation, because it's consistent with, the body, the importance of the body resurrection.

Alright, we'll get to that later. Some historic considerations. From secular history, burial of the body, as opposed to cremation, was, and still is, today, distinctively, a Judeo-Christian practice.

Now, I say distinctively, I don't mean exclusively. But, it is a distinctive, of, of Jewish, of the Jewish religion, distinctive, of Christian religion, Judeo-Christian practices, over the years.

[16:43] And, so that's, that's a, a, a, historic conclusion. I might add, just a few things. In the ancient Greek, and later Roman worlds, cremation was the normal practice, because, you see, in those cultures, and according to their religion, or lack thereof, the emphasis, well, not the lack thereof, but, the emphasis was, on the immortality of the soul.

And, the body, was inconsequential. No, who cares about the body? So, there was no, reason to have any attachment, to that body. It could be burned.

You know, it could, whatever. It was the soul, that was important. And, it is to Christians as well. But, we have, within our understanding, the resurrection, just as Jesus' body was raised, that, Christians too, will be, and will experience, the bodily, a bodily resurrection.

So, there, there is a difference of emphasis, in theology. See, the Hindus believed in reincarnation, or do believe in that. Therefore, cremation was, and still is, except to practice there, when I, and Buddhists as well.

And, many other, the eastern religions, when I traveled to China, and, our translator pointed out, some of the, places, where, you know, the, where, body, where, they didn't have funeral homes, you know, like we do here, but they had crematoriums, they had, that's where, and all deaths were, handled by cremation, all dead bodies.

[18:18] Ancient Egyptians, you go to the opposite extreme, the, the opposite extreme, they mummified, they're dead. And, you know, with the idea of preserving, the corpse, indefinitely, Joseph was mummified, as a matter of fact, I believe.

And, we may mention him too, a little bit later. This is an interesting fact, that I found in Christianity today, written by Timothy George, the article was, and I recommend the article, you, you might want to read it, you can get it on the internet.

The first cremation in America, took place in 1876, accompanied by readings from Charles Darwin, and the Hindu scriptures. Isn't that a rather interesting fact, we're talking about the first cremation. Alright, from biblical history, so we've been talking about, kind of, some secular history there. From biblical history, burial is the pattern, overwhelmingly. And, it's, you can't argue this, it's just clear in scripture.

Now, is this an argument, for burial over cremation, you'll have to decide that. But clearly, throughout, all the way back to the patriarchs, and moving all the way up, through the Old Testament, and you see the list there, Sarah, Abraham, Deborah, Rachel, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Joseph was embalmed, or mummified in Egypt, later buried, in Shechem.

[19:45] And, you can check it out, we've got all the scriptures, here for you. Miriam, Moses, was buried, of course he was buried by God himself, but God didn't cremate him, he buried him.

And, Joshua, was buried, Samuel. And, you know, maybe it was just, obviously a lot cheaper in those days, to do burials, than to do cremations, I guess, I don't know, but, anyway.

Alright, now, some problematic objections. That is, this, this is the voice of those, or coming from the voice, of those who are diametrically opposed to cremation.

And, some of their arguments, we need to, we need to consider, and admit that there's some problems with them. Because, see, their attempt here is, those who are against cremation, on a biblical basis, their attempt is, of course, to say, well, the Bible clearly teaches against it, and here is what it says.

And so, number one, here's one of their objections, to cremation, Israel's unusual commitment, to the proper burial, of Joseph's body, proves cremation, to be unscriptural.

[21:00] Now, you remember, how the Bible describes this, as they were coming out of Egypt, they carried Joseph's bones with them. His body, literally, his, his, his mummy, not his mommy, his, I think she was, well, anyway.

But, and so, here, here is the, the rationale, rationale for this, that, since they were so meticulous, about making sure that his body, was carried out of Egypt, and buried, in the promised land, that that is, proof, that cremation, is unscriptural.

Well, obviously, there's problems with that. For one thing, Joseph's body, as I've already said, was mummified, according to Egyptian practices, of the day. And that was their practice, that was their culture, that was their, their way of dealing with it.

Joseph was, at one point, anyway, highly revered, among the Egyptians, a ruler in Egypt. And, and so, you know, his body was, honored, in that way, an Egyptian way, and was mummified.

No indication from Scripture, that God's people, carried out of Egypt, all of their dead loved ones.

We just have Joseph. All right, now, if they were so, concerned, about a proper burial, of their dead loved one, then, they would have carried, everybody else out.

[22:22] You know, and maybe they did. The Scripture's silent on that. Somebody might argue that point. But, obvious from Scripture, in the context, that their commitment, was not to anything, concerning the burial, of Joseph, but their commitment, was to the memory, to the memory of

Joseph.

And, to honor him, and their desire, that he would be, buried in the promised land. And so, they carried his, his body out. So, you know, that, that's a pretty, pretty weak argument.

I don't think it's an argument, at all, against cremation. Now, you might be thinking, at this point, that the pastor, is kind of going back, and forth. Maybe it sounds like, he's against cremation, and then it sounds like, well, maybe, maybe he would be for it.

I'm just kind of, laying it all out here, for you to consider. Number two, another problematic objection, according to Amos 2.1, God declares, is what they say, God declares cremation, to be a sinful practice.

Now, what does Amos 2.1 say? Well, let me read it to you. Thus saith the Lord, for three transgressions of Moab, and for four, I will not turn away the punishment thereof, because he, that is, Moab, or the Moabites, burned the bones of the king of Edom, into lime.

[23 : 43] And, so, the idea here is that, because God judged, the Moabites, for doing this to the Edomite king, that, obviously, then God, you know, is angry, because of this cremation, that they performed.

But, you know, it's pretty clear. Number one, you know, Moab's crime, or sin, was not the sin of cremation, but rather, the desecration of Edomite king's grave, or remains.

And, I mean, they, you know, they were at war with one another, and they burned, the guy was already dead, by the way. And, they just burned his body, in a fire so hot, that it turned his bones to dust, immediately, to lime.

And, so, I think it's pretty clear. God, you know, we can find examples in scripture, and I think we can in history, that God does punish nations, even, even unbelieving nations, does punish them, for crimes against humanity.

And, that's what this, this was about. We're not talking about God punishing, his chosen people here, for burning. These, these are two, two, not, not necessarily, out now, pagan nations, but they're, they're not, God's people, and one has, has performed an atrocity, against another, and that's basically all there, there is to that.

[25 : 14] Number three, throughout the Bible, the destruction of the human body, by fire, is used as an indication, of God's wrath. And, so, they cite examples, of Sodom and Gomorrah, in, in what Peter said, in 2nd Peter 2, 6, how God condemned the cities, of Sodom and Gomorrah, to destruction, reducing them to ashes.

So, I guess the idea is, that God performed cremation here, you know. Well, and then they cite, Nadab and Abihu, in Leviticus, chapter 10, and, and then also, the men who rebelled, with Korah, numbers 16, and verse 35.

In all three cases, bodies were destroyed, by fire. But, the problem is, the fire, was what ended their lives. Not, the fire, used to, decompose, their bodies, after they did.

It's not an example of cremation, it's an example of, God's judgment, and I think, precursor to the final judgment, of hell. The only exception you could find, in the Bible, and I'm surprised, that everywhere I look, they did not use, this objection, but, the case of Achan, and his family, because they were stoned to death, and then after they were dead, they were cremated.

And so, maybe you could draw, an argument there, from Joshua 7, 25, that, you know, maybe there, here's God's act, of cremation. Alright, some intrinsic conclusions, very quickly, cutting in on the choir time here.

[26 : 47] Hallelujah. Though the Bible does not, overtly, implicitly, condemn, or explicitly, condemn cremation, there are some natural conclusions, that Christians should come to, about, about the issue.

There is, what I would call, a customary issue. Customary issue, that is, what is customary, for biblical Christians. And I think, this ought to enter into our decision.

Alright? I really do. The early Christians, insisted on burying their dead. There is no doubt about that. In fact, the very word, cemetery, is, is of Christian origin.

The word, the root word, means, sleeping place. And the idea was, sleeping place, for those waiting, for the resurrection, of the body.

I'm not trying to interject, soul sleep, or anything like that. It's just, that's just the meaning of the word. And, by the way, sleeping, and we find this in scripture, a number of places, sleeping in the grave, is the language of the Bible.

[27 : 51] And so, I'm talking about, a customary, a customary issue, we ought to consider. 1 Thessalonians 5.10, whether we awake, or sleep, we will live together, with him. So, whether we awake, or, or, asleep, or awake, or asleep, that is, that is coming.

So, sleeping, suggests, a body, laid to rest, in a grave, not a body, that's burned up, in a crematory. So, talking about, the custom here.

Cremation is, not a custom, of the New Testament, that, that you and I, would naturally, come to. Alright?

I think, at least this is my position. Not a natural conclusion, to come to, based upon, the language, and the customs, of the Bible, and the early Christians.

A continuity issue. That is, continuity, with our Christian belief, in resurrection. And, that is, you know, it is, consistent with that.

[28 : 54] There is, continuity here. Jesus, died, and his body, was buried, and raised. And, the bearing, of our loved ones, is symbolic, of our belief, in the resurrection, of the body.

And, so it's a continuity issue, that you ought to consider. And then, thirdly, a caring issue. That is, caring, caring consideration, for our living loved ones, after we die.

I think, is something, we ought to consider. And, this one, it probably, affects me more than any other, because of some, that I know, very close to me, who have chosen, to be cremated, when they die.

And, they ought to, really ought to consider, their loved ones, who are still living. And, I liked, I included this, quote from Piper. The body is precious, and it is going to be raised, from the dead, he said.

And, I know it decomposes, I know it's no more, there, in a hundred years, than if it had been burned, if you had burned it. But, we're talking about, the symbolic significance, of a body, stretched out in a coffin, looked at, and lovingly kissed, and buried, rather than, what is to me, the horrible prospect, of my wife, or child, or dad, being burned, or incinerated.

[30 : 12] So, these are just some things, that maybe you might want to consider. And, there isn't any, biblical mandate on that. It's not a heathen practice, not according to scripture. But, you might just consider, some of the intrinsic, considerations here.