

What about Cremation?

International Standard Bible Encyclopedia CREMATION

kre-ma'-shun (compare saraph, [Jos 7:15](#), etc., "shall be burnt with fire"; kaio, [1Co 13:3](#), "If I give my body to be burned," etc.): Cremation, while the customary practice of the ancient Greeks, and not unknown among the Romans, was certainly not the ordinary mode of disposing of the dead among the Hebrews or other oriental peoples. Even among the Greeks, bodies were often buried without being burned (Thuc. i. 134,6; Plato Phaedo 115 E; Plut. Lyc. xxvii). Cicero thought that burial was the more ancient practice, though among the Romans both methods were in use in his day (De leg. ii.22,56). Lucian (De luctu xxi) expressly says that, while the Greeks burned their dead, the Persians buried them (see [BURIAL](#), and compare [2Sa 21:12-14](#)). In the case supposed by Amos ([2Sa 6:10](#)), when it is predicted that Yahweh, in abhorrence of "the excellency of Jacob," shall "deliver up the city," and, "if there remain ten men in one house, that they shall die," and "a man's kinsman (ARVm) shall take him up, even he that burneth him," etc., the suggestion seems to be that of pestilence with accompanying infection, and that this, or the special judgment of Yahweh, is why burning is preferred. When Paul ([1Co 13:3](#)) speaks of giving his body to be burned, he is simply accommodating his language to the customs of Corinth. (But see Plutarch on Zarmanochegas, and C. Beard, The Universal Christ.)

How far religious, or sanitary, or practical reasons were influential in deciding between the different methods, it is impossible to say. That bodies were burned in times of pestilence in the Valley of Hinnom at Jerusalem is without support (see [Eze 39:11-16](#)). The "very great burning" at the burial of Asa ([2Ch 16:14](#)) is not a case of cremation, but of burning spices and furniture in the king's honor (compare [Jer 34:5](#)). Nor is [1Ki 13:2](#) a case in point; it is simply a prophecy of a king who shall take the bones of men previously buried, and the priests of the high places that burn incense in false worship, and cause them to be burned on the defiled altar to further pollute it and render it abominable.

There is in the New Testament no instance of cremation, Jewish, heathen or Christian, and clearly the early Christians followed the Jewish practice of burying the dead (see Tert., Apol., xlii; Minuc. Felix, Octav., xxxix; Aug., De civ. Dei, i.12,13). Indeed, cremation has never been popular among Christians, owing largely, doubtless, to the natural influence of the example of the Jews, the indisputable fact that Christ was buried, the vivid hope of the resurrection and the more or less material views concerning it prevalent here and there at this time or that.

While there is nothing anti-Christian in it, and much in sanitary considerations to call for it in an age of science, it is not likely that it will ever become the prevailing practice of Christendom.

George B. Eager

CREMATION: Burning of the dead. The following are the reasons we are convinced that cremation should not be practiced by Christians:

Cremation has a heathen origin and purpose. Why do the Hindus and those of other heathen religions cremate? They do it in the belief that the dead are not raised again, whereas the Bible says there **is** a resurrection of the just and the unjust. The heathen practice cremation in the belief that the dead will be reincarnated; to destroy the body is sometimes considered a way of releasing the spirit of the deceased. Again, some practice cremation with the heathen idea that by destroying the body of the deceased the fear of that individual staying in the vicinity and haunting the loved ones is diminished. There is nothing Christian about cremation.

God's people have always practiced burial. Abraham (Ge. 25:8-10), Sarah (Ge. 23:1-4), Rachel (Ge. 35:19-20), Isaac (Ge. 35:29), Jacob (Ge. 49:33; 50:1-13), Joseph (Ge. 50:26), Joshua (Jos.

24:29-30), Eleazar (Jos. 24:33), Samuel (1 Sa. 25:1), David (1 Ki. 2:10), John the Baptist (Ma. 14:10-12), Ananias and Sapphira (Ac. 5:5-10), Stephen (Ac. 8:2). In Ro. 15:4 and 1 Co. 10:11 God tells us that we are to follow the Bible's examples as well as its direct instructions.

Even in difficult circumstances God's people in olden days practiced burial. For example, Joseph's body was kept for over 400 years in Egypt and then carried through the 40 years of wilderness wanderings before being buried in the Promised Land. We read of this in Ge. 50:24-25; Ex. 13:19 and Jos. 24:32. How much simpler it would have been for the Israelites to have cremated Joseph, then carried his ashes with them in a tiny container! But this they refused to do. Joseph, a follower of the one true God, a man who looked forward to the bodily resurrection, was given an honorable burial. From this important example, we learn that even if cremation is less expensive or easier than burial, it is still to be rejected, as the Israelites rejected the economical and simpler way to transport Joseph's body.

Burial looks forward to resurrection. The reason God's people have always been careful to practice burial is not difficult to understand. We believe in a bodily resurrection (Ro. 8:22-23; 1 Co. 15:20-23; 2 Co. 5:1; 1 Co. 15:51-57). Yes, the buried body will decompose in time. Yes, there are occasions in which Christians die in ways which render burial impossible--in the sinking of ships, in fires, etc. But when at all possible we bury. Why the trouble? Because it is our certain hope that the same individual will be raised in the same body, only changed. The physical body is called the seed for the resurrection body. When planted, a seed decomposes, and the new plant comes forth. The Bible uses this to illustrate resurrection.

In 1 Co. 15:35-44 the Apostle answers those who would ask how it is possible for God to raise again a decomposed body. The terminology used by the Holy Spirit in this passage is that of husbandry--planting seed. The farmer does not destroy his seed; he plants it, then from the decaying seed comes forth the new life. Such is burial and the resurrection. When we bury a Christian loved one, we are planting the seed for the resurrection body! It is a powerful testimony of our unwavering faith in God's Word regarding the promise of bodily resurrection.

Contrast heathenism. They have no such knowledge or hope. The Hindus and Buddhists, for example, believe in reincarnation. Though they believe in a human soul which is distinct from the body, they do not believe that soul, once departed from the body at death, will be resurrected in any relation whatsoever to the first body. Rather they believe the soul will be reincarnated in another entirely unrelated body, or into a non-physical sphere of existence.

God's people have always buried their dead with this magnificent hope burning in their hearts. "We will see that brother or sister again in that same body, only changed, glorified!" Hallelujah! Only through the death and shed blood of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ can we have this certain hope. He has taken upon Himself on the cross the punishment for our sins, carried our sins into the grave, and rose again in eternal triumph three days later. When an individual thoroughly acknowledges his sinfulness before God, repents of his sin, and receives Jesus Christ as his or her Lord and Savior, the sin debt is paid, and eternal life and glory is promised from God the Father. Part of this heritage in Christ is the glorified resurrection body.

God practices burial (De. 34:5, 6).

For a person not to have a proper burial was considered a dishonor (1 Ki. 21:23-24; Ps. 83:9-10).

The Christian's body belongs to God. The body is not ours to destroy by fire or by any other means (Ro. 14:8; 1 Co. 6:19-20).

God has expressed His displeasure concerning cremation (Am. 2:1).

The Lord Jesus Christ was buried, and He is our great example (Jn. 19:38-42).

Just as the Lord Jesus Christ was buried in certainty that He would rise again on the third day according to the Scriptures, even so is the Christian said to rest at death. To be absent from the

body is to be present with the Lord, as the Apostle Paul testified (2 Co. 5:9 and Ph. 1:21-23). The body without the spirit is dead (Jam. 2:26). The dead body sleeps in the grave while the redeemed soul waits in glory for the great resurrection day.

Of course we cannot force people either to bury or not to bury. We also know that the manner of one's burial does not affect one's salvation or resurrection, but we do believe these things are important, and we are convinced that Christians should take their stand upon the examples of the Word of God.