

The term cremation comes from the Latin word *cremo* which means “to burn.” Cremation is the practice of burning the body of a deceased person with fire until it is reduced to ashes. Commonly it is done by placing the body in a furnace, in other situations it is done in an open-air environment

The views on cremation among people of faith are greatly varied. For instance, Judaism and Islam prohibit cremation. Protestant churches have a variety of views on cremation from prohibition, to taking a neutral stance, to leaving it up to saying that it is permissible.

According to one source, “Most archaeologists believe that cremation was invented during the stone age, about 3000 BCE. It was most likely first used in Europe or the Near East. It became the most common method of disposing of bodies by 800 BCE in Greece, and 600 BCE in Rome.”¹ As Christianity spread, “cremation was frowned upon and disappeared for the most part in Europe by the fifth century A.D., except in unusual cases such as epidemics or war.”²

CREMATION VERSES BURIAL— NON-BIBLICAL SUPPORT

While there seems to be no definitive

¹Cremation vs. Burial: Jewish and Christian Beliefs,” Religious Tolerance, www.religioustolerance.org. [Accessed on September 14, 2010].

²“History of Cremation,” Discovery Health, www.health.howstuffworks.com. [Accessed on September 14, 2010].

verses in the Bible that says cremation is prohibited on permitted, many have said that there is support from the Scriptures for burial while others have said that there are verses that support cremation. Before we look at what the Bible says about this matter, let’s look at some non-Biblical support for cremation and burial.

Non-Biblical Support for Cremation

1. Cremation is more economically practical than burial.
2. Cremation can be more meaningful to the deceased because it affords them the opportunity to choose where their ashes can be placed after their death.
3. Cremation can be more convenient for family members in planning how to celebrate the life of the deceased.
4. Cremation does not use land space.
5. Cremation is more environmentally friendly.

Non-Biblical Support for Burial

1. Burial can aid the legal process because the body can be unearthed and examined.
2. Cremation has roots in pagan beliefs concerning the dead.
3. The early church rejected cremation because it was practiced by pagans.³
4. Throughout history, where there has been a strong Christian presence, there

³ Ibid., “Cremation vs. Burial: Jewish and Christian Beliefs.”

has been little or no evidence of cremation.⁴

CREMATION VERSES BURIAL— BIBLICAL SUPPORT

Biblical Support for Cremation

1. According several passages in the Bible (Gen. 3:19; Job 10:9; 34:15; Ps. 90:3), man was created out of the dust of the ground and he is going to return to dust. Since the body will eventually turn to dust, cremation is a way to expedite the process.
2. Saul and his sons were cremated (1 Sam. 31:12-13).
3. The Apostle Paul makes reference to giving his body to be burned (1 Cor. 13:3).

Biblical Support for Burial

1. Cremation has been around for a long time yet it was not practiced by any of the Biblical saints. Note the long list of God’s people whose bodies’ were buried: Sarah (Gen. 23:1-4); Rachel (Gen. 35:19-20); Isaac (Gen. 35:29); Jacob (Gen. 49:33); Moses (Deut. 34:5-6); Joshua (Josh. 24:29-30); David (1 Kings 2:10).

⁴ The New Encyclopedia Britannica, Vol. 3, Micropaedia “Cremation” (Encyclopaedia Brintannica, Inc.: Chicago) p 726. and Rev. Richard D. Phillips, “Is Cremation Appropriate for Christians?” <http://www.tenth.org> [Accessed on September 14, 2010].

2. The Jewish practice was to honor the body at death by dressing it with spices (2 Chron. 16:14; Lk. 23:56).
3. For a person not to receive a proper burial was considered a disgrace (1 Kings 18:22; Jer. 22:19).
4. The body of Jesus was buried not cremated (Matt. 27:57-59, 60-66; Jn. 19:38-42).
5. Burial was practiced by the early church (Acts 5:6, 10; 8:1-2).
6. Burial is very symbolic for the Christian:
 - It is a symbolic anticipation of a future resurrection for the body of a deceased believer (1 Cor. 15:35-45).
 - It symbolizes the heart of the Gospel (1 Cor. 15:3-4).
 - Even though we know that the soul of a person lives on after death, burial symbolizes that the body is at peace and rest (Job 3:17; Ps. 16:9; Jn. 11:11-12; 1 Thes. 4:13-18).
7. Cremation is a poor symbol and it is often associated with negative concepts:
 - It was the judgment for harlots (Gen. 38:24; Lev. 21:9).
 - It was the judgment of an improper relationship between a man, his wife and his mother-in-law (Lev. 20:14).
 - It was God's judgment upon a complaining and rebellious group of people (Num. 11:1-3; 16:35)

8. The Bible says that God will glorify our resurrected bodies (1 Cor. 15:51-57), and that will be impossible to do if they have been cremated.

CONCLUSION

The Bible does not speak directly about the issue of cremation. However, it does seem to present strong evidence, along with substantial confirmation from the history of Christianity concerning this subject, that burial is the preferred method for handling the body after death. With that said, it should be pointed out the Bible does not prohibit the practice of cremation. As we have seen, there are times in which an individual can have strong conviction regarding choosing cremation. It is therefore concluded, this is an issue believers should give prayerful consideration and unless there is a legitimate reason for cremation, burial should be the option of choice.

THE BIBLE AND CREMATION



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