

“Cremation and the Bible”

Commentary for May 22, 2008 — by Dr. Ernest L. Martin

NOTE: Dr. Martin wrote and published this short article in 1990. *David Sielaff, Director*

Cremation

Many Christians have asked advice on whether cremation is biblically proper. Some have considered the possibility of cremation because of the exorbitant price of an ordinary burial. The question we must ask ourselves is: Is cremation biblically in order?

Most normal humans do not like the thought of death, yet there is a time to die (Ecclesiastes 3:2). While a Christian realizes that death is merely a transition into a glorious celestial existence (1 Corinthians 15:38–45), there is still the inevitable corruption of the body which must occur. It is often a horror for many to accept. But still, all of us are destined to return to the dust from whence we came (Genesis 3:19). Death will result in our body becoming a part of this material earth once again.¹

In the Bible, the normal way people allowed the body to return to dust, especially if the person was righteous, was by burial in the ground (Joshua 24:32), in caves (Genesis 23:19), sepulchers (Matthew 27:61), etc. The fact of burning a body into ashes was not looked on with favor by the Hebrews. Such an act was often reckoned as a means of judgment against the wicked (Leviticus 21:9; Matthew 5:29). Other nations, however, had opposite feelings about the matter. The ancient Romans considered cremation the only reasonable way of honoring the bodies of the dead.

Still, not in all cases was cremation abhorred even among the Hebrews. When King Saul and his sons had been slain by the Philistines, some of the valiant men took their bodies to an Israelite city and burned them (1 Samuel 31:12–13). This was reckoned as a pious act because they no doubt wished to disguise the mutilation of the headless corpses and to exempt them from any future insult by their enemies.

Righteous human beings were often compared to the burnt offering of the Old Testament (Leviticus 1:1–17). Paul said:

“I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service.”

• *Romans 12:1*

Paul's reference was to the Burnt Offering because the Sin and Trespass Offerings were not “acceptable” to God in the sense of being a savory to Him. The fact that the animal was totally burnt was a sign that God was accepting the total being, the whole person of the offerer. Thus, there were some burnt items which were most acceptable to God. The ashes of the Red Heifer were considered most efficacious in dealing with the purification of unclean persons (Numbers 19:1–22).

We also have evidence that the burning of a body into ashes does not keep one from the resurrection or an inheritance of the celestial glories in Christ. This was attested by Paul

1. See Dr. Martin's perspective on death and dying in his presentation [“To Preach Your Own Funeral.”](#)
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himself. The variant textual reading of 1 Corinthians 13:3 speaks of a burning in martyrdom without the slightest indication that it would render the person unfit for glory.

But let us look at cremation. What does it accomplish? It is simply a quick way for the body to return to the dust of the earth. In fact, it may surprise some of our readers to learn that the word “dust” in the phrase **“for dust you are, and unto dust shall you return”** (Genesis 3:19) is the same Hebrew word *laphari* which is rendered “ashes” in Numbers 19:17 and 2 Kings 23:4. **“Take the ashes of the burnt heifer”** and **“carried the ashes of them unto Bethel.”**

Really, to God the word “dust” and “ashes” means virtually the same thing. Cremation is a quicker way of becoming dust. There is not the slightest difference to God whether one is cremated or buried. It is all the same as far as outcome is concerned. It is a person's prerogative to choose either cremation or burial. We know that God will make all the dead to be alive by a resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:22). Whether the person has been buried, cremated, devoured by animals, or vaporized by atomic bombs makes no difference to God.

Some may want to know my own personal preference concerning cremation. The background in which I was reared was one in which cremation was not considered as a proper way for disposing of the dead. This feeling remains with me, but I must admit that it is just my feeling. There is no biblical difference whether one returns to dust (ashes) quickly or over a period of months. God can, and will, rescue all the dead no matter how they return to dust.

Ernest L. Martin, 1990

Addendum by David Sielaff

Dr. Martin mentions 1 Corinthians 13:3. The King James Version is somewhat difficult to understand, while the Revised Standard Version of makes this verse clearer:

“If I give away all I have, and if I deliver my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.”

In this verse Paul equates the act of delivering his body to be burned in martyrdom with the charitable act of giving away all worldly goods to the poor. Love is the key that makes such acts useful for good works. Read the rest of 1 Corinthians chapter 13 about the role of love in such matters.

Furthermore, the apostle Paul in this passage was writing to the *ekklesia* at Corinth, for whom the concept of cremation was the normal custom of dealing with dead bodies, although burial was also known to be practiced among the Greeks.²

The conclusion to be made on this subject is that the Bible has little to say about the disposition of the body of a dead human being, just so the body is dealt with respect and dignity — whatever cultural norms might be customary. The manner of disposition of bodies varies from culture to culture. The elaborate preparation of Joseph's body was very different from the necessary handling of Saul's and Jonathan's bodies (1 Samuel 31:8–13; 1 Chronicles 10:8–12), which were in turn different from the preparation of Jesus' body.

Likewise, there is no right or wrong on how people grieve after the death of a loved one. Some cultures allow and expect a great show of emotion. Other cultures (like my Western culture) generally are more subdued in their personal and private grieving process. It shows that we have a loving Father who allows His nations of the world to handle such matters as their emotional makeups dictate, giving great freedom among and between peoples of the world.

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2. See the article “Cremation” in the *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, 1915. DWS