

Christians and Cremation

In a recent conversation with a local funeral director, I learned that the rate of cremation has risen dramatically in the past few decades, with 70-80% of individuals in our area choosing cremation.

This rapid acceptance of the practice of cremation has prompted many thoughtful Christians to ask quite sincerely: What are the implications for Christians, especially given the historical tradition of burying those who have died? Is it wrong to cremate a body? Does cremation prevent resurrection? Does burial symbolize something that cremation doesn't? I'll unpack the latter three questions to answer the first one.

Is it wrong to cremate a body?

There is nowhere in the Bible where God forbids the burning of a body.

There are instances of cremation in the Old Testament (Joshua 7:25, 1 Samuel 31:12, Amos 2:1) but they are descriptive rather than prescriptive (the passages simply record that it happened without passing any moral judgment).

Burial has tended to be the norm for Jewish and Christian people but God's Word does not expressly prohibit cremation, so believers may in good conscience choose to be cremated.

Does cremation prevent resurrection?

Assured that cremation is not sin, a believer may ask a second question – does cremation pose an obstacle to resurrection? After all, our hope is that God will raise us into resurrected bodies, just as He did Jesus, and cremation reduces a body to ash.

Even so, it must be admitted that all bodies, even those that have been buried, will be eventually decompose (Ecclesiastes 3:20, 12:7) and given that God formed our original bodies from the dust (Genesis 2:7), He will have no problem raising our heavenly bodies regardless of how our remains were put to rest.

Does burial symbolize something that cremation doesn't?

To this point, I'm sure you'll recognize that I can find no moral reason to object to cremation. Christians may in good conscience choose to go in that direction.

My personal feeling though is that burial allows a believer to make one final profession of faith: Just as Jesus died, was buried and was raised to life - on the basis of His atoning death, which I have trusted - I too will rise again.

The seed picture that Paul uses in 1 Corinthians is a moving pastoral image -

42 So will it be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; 43 it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; 44 it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body... 49 And just as we have borne the likeness of the earthly man, so shall we bear the likeness of the man from heaven (1 Corinthians 15:42-49 NIV).

Burial enables us to point specifically to Jesus' death and resurrection and say 'I'm gonna be like that.' This 'seed' will become something glorious.

Now, that being said, burying cremated remains allows the same symbolism, so it is possible to symbolically point to the resurrection through cremation, as through burial.

And again, cultural and financial issues may be at play, and since God has not forbidden cremation, a believer can freely choose that option.

My pastoral counsel would be this – whatever you choose, help your friends and family to see the hope found in the death and resurrection of Jesus and together we will say:

54 "Death has been swallowed up in victory."

55 "Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?"

56 The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law.

57 But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 15:57 NIV).

- Graham Gladstone (pastor), for Langford Community Church, 2017

Much of what I have said here has already been said by other Christian thinkers. I commend these articles to you as helpful reading for further reflection.

"Cremation confusion" <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2002/may21/27.66.html>

"When a Christian dies is it all right to cremate the body?" <https://billygraham.org/answer/when-a-christian-dies-is-it-all-right-to-cremate-the-body/>

"To bury or burn" <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/to-bury-or-to-burn-cremation-in-christian-perspective>

"Does the Bible prohibit cremation?" <https://www.gty.org/library/questions/QA177/does-the-bible-prohibit-cremation>

"Should Christians cremate their loved ones?" <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/should-christians-cremate-their-loved-ones>