



CREMATION OR BURIAL? WHICH IS PROPER FOR A CHRISTIAN?



By Pastor Gene Keith

Should Christians bury their dead or should they burn them? This is a question that is facing more and more people today. With the escalating cost of a traditional funeral, plus the scarcity of burial space, especially in large cities, more and more Christians are opting for cremation. It is convenient and it is far less expensive. But is it right? This is the question.

There is not much information "out there" on this question in Christian bookstores today. Neither are there many sermons preached on it.

This present writer has never heard one sermon on cremation in his entire life, except the ones he has preached. He has searched for written material as well, as has found nothing. What he did find was very questionable. Is it right or is it wrong? Does it really matter or does it? This is the focus of this report.

Shocking Article

One of the only articles this writer has ever read by a Christian author on the subject of cremation was very questionable. In fact, it was downright offensive. The article was written by a well-known author. The writer asked the right questions but he came to the wrong conclusions.

Two Questions

The two questions he asked were:

1) Is it right for Christians to cremate their dead?

2) "Is a extravagant funeral in a fancy cemetery in keeping with the Word of God?"

Those are good questions. Is cremation right or wrong for Christians? Are extravagant funerals in keeping with the Word of God?

Wrong Conclusions

The writer acknowledged that, all through history, God's people always buried their dead and the heathens burned theirs. Then, with nothing on which to base his bizarre conclusion, he stated: "Today it is the pagans who are bury....and it is almost more Christian to cremate."

Decision Time

It's time we addressed this issue. If it is right - we ought to do it. If it is wrong - we shouldn't. If it doesn't matter - it doesn't matter. This present writer thinks it matters. It matters a lot. In his opinion, cremation is a heathen custom and should be rejected by God's people who are enlightened by the Word of God. Cremation is for those who don't know God and who are either ignorant of His Word, or don't care.

DID THE OLD TESTAMENT SAINTS BURY OR CREMATE?

Does the Bible shed any light on this subject? What does it say? Where is the information found? A serious study of the Bible will reveal that all of God's people, in both Testaments, buried their dead. The only

ones who were burned, were burned because they were under the Judgement of God. There is not a shred of evidence in either Testament to support cremation. Read it for yourself and you will see.

1. Sarah

When Sarah, the wife of Abraham died, her husband bought a burial place for her from a pagan. He wept over her body and carefully buried her (Genesis 23:1-20).

2. Abraham

When Abraham died at the age of 175, his sons, Isaac and Ishmael, buried him alongside his wife in the same place (Genesis 25:7-11).

3. Deborah

When Jacob's mother's old nurse named Deborah died, they gave her a "proper" burial under an oak tree at Bethel (Genesis 35:8-9).

4. Isaac

When Isaac died, his sons Jacob and Esau got together and buried him next to his father in Hebron (Genesis 35:27-29).

5. Jacob

Jacob died in the land Egypt. His family carried his body (not his ashes) back to the old home place for burial. In fact, most of the last chapter of Genesis is devoted to his death, his funeral, and his burial (Genesis 50:1-13). Those verses should serve as a pattern for what this writer calls a "proper burial."

6. Joseph

Joseph was buried first in Egypt, but he made his family promise that when they departed Egypt, they would dig up his body (not his ashes) and carry it back home for his final resting place .

7. Aaron

When Aaron died, they buried him on Mount Hor and then mourned for him thirty days.

8. Moses

God had to take Moses to heaven ahead of time. God killed Moses and God buried him. Michael and Satan may have attended that funeral. For some reason, they had an argument about Moses' body (Deut. 34 and Jude 9).

DID THE NEW TESTAMENT SAINTS BURY OR CREMATE THEIR DEAD?

1. Lazarus was buried (John 11).

2. Stephen was buried (Acts 8:2). "Devout men carried Stephen to his burial and made great lamentation over him."

3. Jesus was buried. Joseph and Nicodemus paid for His funeral and gave him a cemetery plot . The Scriptures specifically mention that Nicodemus personally bought one hundred pounds of myrrh and spices to be used in preparing Jesus' body for burial (John 19:38-39).

The Scriptures speak for themselves. God's people always buried their dead. It was the heathen nations that practiced cremation (burning).

CREMATION WAS PRACTICED ONLY ON CERTAIN OCCASIONS

But what about cremation? Was it ever practiced Yes! Not only did the heathen burn their dead - occasionally, God's people were told to burn certain objects and certain individuals.

1. Golden Calf

Moses burned the gold calf. While Moses was away on the mountain receiving the Ten Commandments, Aaron took jewelry from the congregation and built a golden calf. The people bowed down to it and worshiped it. When Moses returned from the mountain, he broke the idol, burned (cremated) it with fire; ground it into powder and sprinkled it into their drinking water. The idol was cursed (Exodus 32).

2. Heathen Idols

God's people were instructed to burn all of the idols of the heathen nations they were sent to destroy (Deut. 7:25).

3. Burned a Man

On one occasion, God's people did cremate (burn) the body of a man. The man's name was Achan and he had caused the needless death of a great number of innocent people. He was also a thief (Joshua 7:15).

4. God Will Burn the Tares

Tares are the children of "The Wicked One." They live in the same neighborhoods with God's people. They go to the same schools and attend the same churches. However, when Jesus returns, He will send His angels to gather those people together and they will be cremated (Matthew 13:30, 40).

5. God Will Burn Lost Sinners

There is a heaven to gain and a hell to shun. Don't listen to any preacher who doesn't preach about the fire in hell. Jesus said more about hell than anyone else in the Bible. He even told a true story of a man who went there (Luke 16: 19-31).

Five times in one chapter, Jesus warned that the fire in hell shall never be quenched (Mark 9:43, 44, 45, 46, 48).

WHY THIS PASTOR OPPOSES CREMATION

Every individual is free to make up his or her own mind about this. But please allow this present writer to share a few reasons why he believes Christians should bury their dead and not practice cremation.

1. Example of God's People

First, we have the good example of God's people down through history. They always buried their dead. The heathen nations usually burned theirs. There is not one example of any of God's great leaders cremating the bodies of any of their loved ones.

2. Cremation is a Heathen Practice

Cremation has always been a heathen custom. It was learned from the heathens and introduced into England and then into America in the eighteen hundreds.

This writer is aware than some readers will be offended by the label "heathen." It is for this reason that we turn to the 1828 edition of Webster's Dictionary, where the word "heathen" is defined in this way.

"A pagan; a Gentile; One who worships idols, or is unacquainted with the One True God. In the Scriptures the word seems to comprehend all nations except the Jews or Israelites, as they were all strangers to the true religion, and addicted to idolatry. The word may now be applied perhaps to all nations, except to Christians and Muhammadans." (Page 98)

God's people are to be different. God has made us different (Exodus 11:7). God's people are warned "Learn not the ways of the heathen." (Jeremiah 10:2).

The practice of cremation was not practiced in England or America until the

1800s, and it only becoming popular in America today because we have a generation of people who don't know the Lord or His Word.

The fact that there are pastors now promoting cremation, is simply more evidence that the church is becoming more pagan every day.

3. Cremation Sends Wrong Message

When a Christian practices cremation, it sends the wrong message to the world that is looking on. Let me explain.

- **The Gospel:** People are saved by believing in the death, THE BURIAL, and the resurrection of Christ (1 Cor. 15:1-5)
- **Our Baptism:** Our baptism in water shows, not only that we believe in the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ, it also shows we believe that, one day we will die, we will be buried (not cremated), and that we will be raised from the grave by Christ at His return (1 Thess. 4:13-18).

This has nothing to do with whether or not God will be able to find the ashes of one who has been cremated and to raise that person up in the resurrection. If God can create a man from dust, he can certainly create one from their cremation remains. The point is, to follow a heathen custom and fail to bury it properly, destroys the symbolism. It sends a confusing message.

4. The Body is God's Temple

The Christian's body is the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 6:19-20). The church is not the temple of God - your body is! Your body belongs to God - not to you. Your body is God's property. You have no right to abuse it. You have no right to damage it. Neither do you have a right to burn it or to

destroy it. In the opinion of this writer, to burn the body of a Christian is like burning down a church building. A Christian's body is more sacred than a church building. It should be properly cared for.

5. Do Bones Burn?

Here is some food for thought. Because this is such a sensitive issue, we will ask the questions and let the readers provide his/her own answers.

- The question is: "Do bones burn?" When a person is cremated, what burns and what doesn't?
- We know that clothes burn; caskets burn; flowers burn; but what about a person's bones? How are the "cremains" prepared?
- Perhaps it won't make any difference when you find out. On the other hand, the least it will do is qualify you to make an intelligent decision.

6. Cremation May be Appropriate in Some Cases

This entire article has been focused entirely on what is proper for a Christian. In the opinion of this writer, if the person is not a believer, perhaps to have a traditional funeral, with a minister officiating, and a traditional burial, may not be appropriate. In those cases, cremation could be more appropriate. The important thing is to follow the deceased person's wishes.

MAY WE SUGGEST A "PROPER" BURIAL?

The book of Genesis is the "Book of Beginnings." In the very first book of God's Holy Word, we have the beginning of nearly everything in life. In Genesis we learn of the origin of life and death; the origin of marriage

and the family; the first temptation; the first sin; the first promise of redemption; the beginning of human government; the origin of the different languages, and etc. Is it not reasonable to assume that God had a good reason for including the accounts of the first funerals in history as well?

In the opinion of this present writer, the stories of those first funerals held by God's people, when God first called them out from among the heathen nations and began to deal with, have been preserved to be used as a pattern for future generations to follow. If they are not patterns for us to follow, why did the Holy Spirit devote so much space to them?

WHAT IS A PROPER FUNERAL?

The death, funeral, and burial of Jacob takes up nearly an entire chapter. Why would Moses do this if it wasn't important? This present writer believes that Moses did this to provide a pattern for us to follow. Let's consider the natural outline that appears there.

1. Jacob Had a Will

In Genesis 49:1, Jacob called his family together to give them his Last Will and Testament. He began by giving a prophecy for each of his sons, then in verses 29-32, he turned his attention to his approaching death. He was not vague. He gave specific instructions.

- First, he told his family that he was going to die very soon. "I am about to be gathered to my people" (Genesis 49:29a).
- Next, he told them exactly where he wanted to be buried. "Bury me in with my fathers in the cave that is in the field of Ephron the Hittite...in the land of Canaan...which Abraham bought..." (Genesis 49:b-30).

2. Jacob Had a Burial Plot

Jacob spared his family the pain, effort, and expense of having to secure a cemetery plot after their father died. He took care of that in advance. In fact, Jacob's father Abraham had already taken care of that need for him. Jacob said: "Bury me with my fathers...in the cave that is in the field of Ephron the Hittite....which is before Mamre in the land of Canaan, which Abraham bought...for a burial site" (Genesis 49:29b-30). They had a "family plot" where many of their relatives had already been buried (Gen. 49:31).

3. Jacob's Family Expressed Grief

When Jacob died, Joseph wept over his dead body. Joseph loved his aged father much and his expression of sorrow is quite natural. In fact, sorrow over the death of a loved one is proper.

It is important to mention at this point, that Joseph is an excellent role model for Christians of every age. Joseph is one of two men in the entire Bible (apart from Jesus Christ) who were above reproach. Although no mortal man is perfect, Joseph and Daniel are closer to being "perfect tens" than any men in history.

Joseph was a man of impeccable character. His weeping was not a sign of emotional or spiritual weakness. It was very proper. Not only did Joseph express his grief, his friends did as well. In (Genesis 50:3) we see that Joseph's Egyptian friends wept with him (and for him) over the death of his father. In fact, Joseph, his family and their Egyptian friends wept for seventy (70) days (Genesis 50:3).

Their grieving continued as they made their way to the cemetery in the land for Canaan. When they had the actual funeral, they wept seven (7) more days. In fact, there was so much weeping that the local citizens named the place "Abel-miz-raim" which meant, "Weeping in the ears," (Genesis

50:11).

We mention this to stress the fact that crying over the death of a loved one is not a sign of spiritual weakness. It is a natural expression of our emotions. Laughter is good. It is healthy (Proverbs 17:22). So is the crying. Both laughter and crying have therapeutic value.

4. Friends and Family Took "Time Off"

When Joseph's father died, Pharaoh gave Joseph a leave of absence so that he could carry out his father's last will and testament.

"And when the days of his mourning were past, Joseph spoke to the household of Pharaoh, saying, "If now I have found favor in your eyes, please speak in the hearing of Pharaoh, saying, "My father made me swear, saying, Behold, I am dying; in my grave which I dug for myself in Canaan, there shall you bury me." Now therefore, please let me go up and bury my father, and I will come back." So Pharaoh said, "Go up and bury your father, as he made you swear." (Genesis 50:4-6)

5. Friends Helped Them

When Jacob died, all of Joseph's friends, even the servants of Pharaoh, dropped what they were doing, took some time off and went to the funeral. Joseph's friends became his "support group." Everybody went with him to the funeral. The text says,

"So Joseph went up to bury his father; and with him went up all the servants of Pharaoh, the elders of his house, and all the elders of the land of Egypt, as well as the house of Joseph, his brothers, and his father's house. Only their little ones, their flocks, and their herds left they in the land of Goshen." (Genesis 50:8-9).

The text suggests that Pharaoh even provided transportation and an armed escort,

so that Joseph and his family could make the long trip back to their home land for the funeral. "There also went up with him, both chariots and horsemen, and it was a very great gathering." (Genesis 50:9)

6. The Family Carried Out His Will

Jacob's family did their very best to carry out his last will and testament.

"So his sons did for him as he had commanded them. For his sons carried him to the land of Canaan and buried him in the field of Machpelah, before Mamre, which Abraham had bought with the field from Ephron the Hittite as property for a burial place." (Genesis 50:12-13).

7. Then Life Returned to Normal

When the funeral was over; when the mourning was over; when they had carried out the last will and testament of their deceased father; everybody went back to Egypt; back to work; and life returned to Normal. This is, in our opinion, the way it should be. This is what we call, a "proper" funeral.

PRACTICAL APPLICATION

God gave us this pattern. We will be wise to follow it. Here are our suggestions.

1. Prepare a Written Will

Prepare a written will. Tell your family what you would like said or sung at your funeral and where you would like to be buried.

2. Purchase a Cemetery Lot

Purchase a cemetery lot somewhere. The cost is getting higher every day. The sooner you buy one the better off you will be. It's not a matter of "if" you are going to need one. It is a matter of "when" you are going to need it.

3. Put Money Aside

Put some money aside to cover the cost of your funeral. If you are unable to save enough, take out an insurance policy to cover this. We suggest a minimum of \$10,000. It's better to have some money left over than not have enough.

4. Be Sure of Salvation

The most important part of all is to be sure you are saved. It doesn't matter how much money you have or how expensive your funeral is if you die without God and go to hell. The Bible asks a real good question. "For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses his own soul? (Mark 8:36). That's a good question.

If you need information on how to make these arrangements, call or write to the Countryside Baptist Church, 10926 NW 30th Avenue, Gainesville, Florida, 32606. You may call the church at (352) 332-1493 and 332-9731. Email: gk122532@bellsouth.net

May God Bless You!