



## *What the Bible Says About*

### - DEATH AND THE CHRISTIAN FUNERAL -

#### **CARING FOR THE REMAINS OF THE DEAD - BURIAL, CREMATION, OR OTHERS**

There is added comfort for the living when they know all is well for the loved one who died. The overture *requiescat in pace*, (“rest in peace”), is familiar in the Christian community. This closure in peace is tacit ministry to the living. Resting in the Lord, our loved ones rest in that peace of God surpassing all human comprehension, keeping hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil 4:7). The mortal remains in quiet repose await that last trumpet and the unmistakable call of the Lord, “Come out” (cf. John 11:43; 5:28–29). This is peace for us who survive, peace knowing that nothing can snatch the loved one out of the hands of the Good Shepherd and the heavenly Father (John 10:28–29). Everything that God does in His hidden care touches those who mourn and ministers to them (Josh 1:9; Matt 28:20b).

Warneck, Richard H. Pastoral Ministry: Theology and Practice (p. 325). Concordia Publishing House.

**Q: Is it sinful for a Christian to be cremated?**

**A: Why do you ask?**

#### Background & Short Examination:

Years ago cremation was generally unheard of as a practice among Christians and was commonly associated with the deaths of atheists and agnostics. Atheists frequently have opted for cremation as a way of showing their contempt for the Christian belief of life after death and the resurrection of the body. Well-known skeptics have at times scattered their ashes in the wind over the ocean as a mockery to Biblical teachings, or as a testimonial to their nature worship. Obviously, in this context, cremation would never be an option for the Christian, for a bold confession of faith in the bodily resurrection would need to be demonstrated even in the manner of burial. At such a cremation involving any improper motives a Lutheran pastor could not with good conscience officiate.

Cremation today, however, has not always been associated with atheism or unbelief. The scattering of ashes still symbolizes a doubt in the resurrection, but the scattering is not a necessary (and certainly not a preferable) part of cremation. The reasons some Christians today opt for cremation – without the scattering of ashes, of course – are the following: more sanitary, less expensive, ease of transportation of the remains, unwarranted land use, and due to the body possibly being so mutilated at the time of death.

Scripture does not “command” what should be done with our bodies after death. Burial was used almost exclusively in Bible times and among the early Christians. Genesis 23 mentions the first burial ground in Scripture. Our Savior himself was buried. But we cannot draw the conclusion from this that cremation is therefore automatically wrong in every instance.

Practically speaking, cremation merely hastens the process of decay for the body. Genesis 3:19 reminds us that no matter if the body is buried or cremated it will naturally return to dust, “for dust you are and to dust you will return.”

Though it is not absolutely wrong for a Christian to stipulate cremation in his will, he will want to make sure that his reasons and motives for doing so are truly in keeping with our Christian teachings. The Christian will want his survivors to know *even by the way he was placed into the ground* that he was one who by faith in Christ’s atoning blood looked forward to citizenship in heaven – even *bodily* citizenship!

*“But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables Him to bring everything under His control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like His glorious body”* (Phil. 3:20, 21).

After all is said, though, there are still two good reasons why Christians should consider burial as opposed to cremation. The first is the kind of “sermon” the deceased body preaches to those who attend the funeral service. It serves as an ever-present reminder that “the wages of sin is death,” but that Christ gives life and immortality to our mortal, decaying bodies. Somehow the urn full of ashes does not seem to portray this quite as well as the casket. Secondly, there is the matter of offense. Even though, as we said, cremation is not wrong in itself, there will be Christians attending the funeral service who will possibly never understand why the body of that person was cremated, no matter how much the motives of the individual or the family were in keeping with Scripture. The Apostle Paul said, *“Everything is permissible for me – but not everything is beneficial”* (I Cor. 6:12 NIV).

Those Christians facing the death of a loved one or planning their own funerals are always encouraged to consider the opportunity a Christian’s funeral offers to give witness to our faith in Jesus Christ’s victory over death and His promise of the resurrection of our bodies for eternal life (John 6:40, 44, 54).

It is therefore beneficial, as we face such occasions and the decisions they involve, to seek our pastor’s support, advice, and counsel regarding the entirety of the funeral, including the question of cremation.

However, this is a matter of Christian freedom and no Christian who chooses to have a loved one cremated rather than buried should be led to think that such a decision is sinful or in opposition to the Word of God.

**Look up 1 Corinthians 6:19-20.** *What does this mean?*

Longer Consideration: (from a Pastoral Theology text)

### **Burial—The Christian Way**

A corollary to peaceful closure is Christian burial. This assertion appears at first to merely project sentiment. After all, disposing of the remains by other means is increasingly commonplace. There is cryogenic preservation, depositing the remains with laboratories in medical schools, and burial at sea. Increasing numbers of Christians choose cremation instead of burial. The number of clergy and professors in the Lutheran Church choosing cremation is on the rise. While many affirm that the Scriptures do not forbid the practice of cremation, can it be said that the Scriptures make no judgment about cremation when the practice was resoundingly dismissed among God's people?

The long-standing preference in the Judeo-Christian tradition is burial in the earth or in tombs hewn from the stone of the hills. Burial is in view when the traditional Christian committal says, "earth to earth, dust to dust" (cf. Gen 3:19). The Bible reports numerous accounts of burial. "Abraham buried Sarah, his wife" (Gen 23:19). "Then he [Jacob] commanded them and said to them, 'I am to be gathered to my people; bury me with my fathers in the cave that is in the field of Ephron the Hittite'" (Gen 49:29). This was done as Jacob requested. "So Joseph went up to bury his father" (Gen 50:7). The Lord God administered burial for His servant, Moses (Deut 34:5–6). Later is the account of Solomon's burial, "And Solomon slept with his fathers and was buried in the city of David his father" (2 Chr 9:31). The body of our Lord was buried. He had commented about the woman who anointed Him with precious and costly ointment, "In pouring this ointment on My body, she has done it to prepare Me for burial" (Matt 26:12; cf. Matt 27:58–58). In the apostolic church, observe that the women prepared the remains of Dorcas for burial (Acts 9:36–37; cf. John 19:39–42; 20:5–6; Mark 16:1; Luke 7:12; John 11:38, 44).

### **Burial vs. Cremation**

While not prescriptive, the scenes referenced above demonstrate that among God's people, burial was the preferred disposal of the remains. This ancient practice connotes respect and honor for the body. Does cremation accord the remains of deceased Christians such dignity? Burial conveys a sense of the body intact awaiting the day of resurrection, even though decay occurs in the interim. By contrast, surrendering the body to flames and residual components to pulverization unwittingly conveys a sense of fatal and lasting extinction. This violence King David would not inflict on the bones of Saul and Jonathan (2 Sam 21:13–14).

Admittedly, these are mere sensitivities, and cremation is an adiaphoron. This is the fixed opinion of clergy and church bodies who assert that the Scriptures do not forbid the practice of cremation. The motives, however, for choosing cremation are suspect. For instance, it has been a long-standing suspicion in the Church that elective cremation expressed defiance of the notion of the resurrection and restoration of the body. Yet some Christians may choose cremation in order to ostensibly confess their faith in the resurrection of the body, that the resurrection shall indeed override this radical end of the body by means of fiery extinction. These considerations aside, the Church's principle argument for interment versus cremation is consistency with the ancient tradition whereby God's people chose to bury the remains of fellow believers.

They followed this ancient practice in the confession that God had created this body, redeemed this body, and keeps this body until the day of resurrection to eternal life through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Furthermore, arguments favoring cremation have little standing in the light of the Old Testament. The Pentateuch legislated burning of bodies as a disgraceful event and a punishment imposed for reason of heinous sins committed in ancient Israel (Lev 20:14; 21:9). Though Judah was no example of virtue, he ordered the burning of Tamar's body as testimony to her sin of whoredom (Gen 38:24). Fierce judgment befell the king of Moab who burned the king of Edom's bones to lime (Amos 2:1–3). Therefore, the question presses, shall the Church accompany the bodies of Christians to the fire that was a means of judgment and punishment exercised by God's people (cf. Josh 7:10–15, 25)? There are exceptional circumstances that warrant cremation—plague, epidemics such as cholera or Ebola, or even a shortage of burial grounds. Such exceptions, however, do not commend the practice of cremation under normal circumstances. Cremation is advertised as an inexpensive alternative to burial, but economic advantage does not make cremation a dignified way to dispose of the body. Incinerating the remains is what it is, a violent action!

The term “Christian cremation” has entered the Church's vocabulary. Is this designation valid? Where does cremation fit in a theology that signals treating the bodies of deceased Christians with dignity, respect, and honor. Consider four factors:

1. *Creation*—Of the body, the Scriptures say, “*The Lord God formed man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being*” (Gen 2:7). Was not the body inherent in man as a “being” created in the image of God? “*So God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them*” (Gen 1:27).
2. *Redemption*—The person, body and soul, were redeemed by our Lord's atoning work on the cross. This assertion finds support in the passage “*Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body*” (1 Cor 6:19–20). “*Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ?*” (1 Cor 6:15a; cf. Rom 12:1).
3. *Resurrection*—The future resurrection of the body is the powerful reality governing the treatment of the bodies of Christians. Jesus said, “*Do not marvel at this, for an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear His voice and come out*” (John 5:28–29). “*For this is the will of My Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in Him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the Last Day*” (John 6:40; cf. John 6:44b, 54b). “*For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first*” (1 Thess 4:16).
4. *Translation (Glorification)*—This body resurrected by the Lord is a candidate for inexpressible glory (cf. Rom 8:18, 23b). “*In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed*” (1 Cor 15:52; cf. Phil 3:21; Eph 1:20–21).

Respect and care for the body are actions driven by this theology. This is so in life. Why should it not be so in death? Consider that health care is not for comfort and longevity alone, but for the reason that God has placed us in our bodies. Thus, careless risks to bodily safety are discouraged, as are deleterious habits such as smoking, overeating, and the like. Mutilation of the body may be viewed as desecration of what is sacred. Disfigurement, piercings, tattoos, and other unseemly alterations are impositions detracting from the body that God has created. In death, is not cremation—consuming the body in flame—the ultimate abuse of the body?

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**Principle:** The body of the Christian—created, redeemed, slated for resurrection and glorification—bespeaks the work of God throughout. As such, the body of a Christian who has died deserves disposal in a manner that is respectful, dignified, and honorable.

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Warneck, Richard H. Pastoral Ministry: Theology and Practice (pp. 325-328). Concordia Publishing House.

**“This Body in the Grave We Lay” (LSB 759-TLH 596)**

- 1 This body in the grave we lay  
There to await that solemn day  
When God Himself shall bid it rise  
To mount triumphant to the skies.
- 2 And so to earth we now entrust  
What came from dust and turns to dust  
And from the dust shall rise that day  
In glorious triumph o’er decay.
- 3 The soul forever lives with God,  
Who freely hath His grace bestowed  
And through His Son redeemed it here  
From ev’ry sin, from ev’ry fear.
- 4 All trials and all griefs are past,  
A blessèd end has come at last.  
Christ’s yoke was borne with ready will;  
Who dieth thus is living still.
- 5 We have no cause to mourn or weep;  
Securely shall this body sleep  
Till Christ Himself shall death destroy  
And raise the blessèd dead to joy.
- 6 Then let us leave this place of rest  
And homeward turn, for they are blest  
Who heed God’s warning and prepare  
Lest death should find them unaware.
- 7 So help us, Jesus, ground of faith;  
Thou hast redeemed us by Thy death  
From endless death and set us free.  
We laud and praise and worship Thee