



QUESTION: Is cremation wrong for a Christian?



A few weeks ago a very dear friend called me to inform me that Corby was in the national news of the day. The newspapers were reporting that Corby's local authorities are considering a newly-devised method of disposing of dead bodies, currently being used in at least one Scandinavian country.

The new procedure, said to be a viable alternative to cremation, involves *freezing* corpses so intensely that they are quickly dehydrated and reduced to a fine ash. It is claimed that this is more hygienic and more 'eco-friendly' than either traditional burial or cremation. The report also stated that the reason why the Corby Borough Council is investigating this process is because Corby is running out of ground for burials, and within a few years will have no space left.

Now remember, this new idea is only at the 'consideration' stage, and there is no guarantee that it will gain public acceptance, therefore we need say no more about it for the moment. But the mention of cremation raised again questions with which a great many Christians have struggled, and by which they have been troubled, namely:

- "Where do Christians stand with regards to Cremation?"
- "Do the scriptures contain instruction about the treatment of the bodies of those who have died – our relatives and friends?"

In other words, "*Is cremation wrong for a Christian?*"

Similar questions are usually asked with passages such as 1st Cor. 15 in mind. You will no doubt recall that *that* is the great chapter, which declares the glorious news of the resurrection and transformation of the believer's body.

In verse 35 Paul refers to a question being asked by some of the Corinthians, "**How are the dead raised?**" and in verse 52 he declares, "**...the dead shall be raised incorruptible**", and later, in v.55; "**O grave, where is thy victory?**" So there is no doubt that he is thinking of burial. We must also consider the words of the Lord Jesus Himself, concerning His return. "**The hour is coming when all that are in the grave shall hear His voice and come forth, those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those that have done evil, to the resurrection of judgment**" (John 5:28).

The Question

The question now arises; does this mean that believers must be buried? Is cremation therefore ruled out for Christians?

Well, there is no doubt that cremation is a relatively new method of disposing of dead bodies. Nor can it be doubted that, in Roman times, the first Christians invariably buried their dead. In this they were following the Hebrew traditional practice that had endured for centuries, because the ancient people of God actually considered burial to be mandatory, on the basis of His words in Gen. 3:19, "**You are dust, and to dust you shall return**".

Added to this must be the fact that they considered burial to be the appropriate, reverent manner in which to treat the bodies of their loved ones. Even though, throughout almost the entire period of Old Testament history, the Hebrews had no

clear belief in resurrection and eternal life, they nevertheless regarded burial to be a more appropriate manner in which to part with the physical remains of their loved ones, considered in contrast with the burning of corpses, which was the widespread practice of pagans who regarded death as final. The notable exceptions were such people as the Egyptians, who had some sort of belief in an existence after death, and who therefore sought to preserve the bodies of their dead, as is proved by the Pyramids and Tombs outside of Cairo.

But, read the fascinating account, in Gen. 23, of the great concern shown by Abraham, when he sought a resting place for the body of Sarah. (This, incidentally, is probably the oldest and most complete record of a sale and purchase transaction yet discovered.) And, I might also mention, that in the Old Testament scriptures there is only one account of Israelites burning the bodies of their people, and this is found in 1st Samuel chapter 31, and a reading of that chapter reveals that this happened in very unusual circumstances, with the bodies first being burned and the bones then buried.

The Witness of the Catacombs.

Some years ago Isobel and I were able to visit to Catacombs, in Rome, and I assure you that it is impossible to describe the feeling one has when walking along those narrow, underground corridors, between the rows of shelf-like recesses in the earthen walls in which the dead bodies of Christians had once lain. The very size of the Catacomb system is staggering, for these corridors exist on five levels, one below the other, and they are so extensive that one could very easily get lost in them. It is reliably claimed that, at one time, they contained the bodies of some 500,000 believers.

But, why were these underground corridors excavated? You may have heard it said that the Catacombs served as hiding-places for Christians in a time of persecution by pagan Rome, but that is far from being the true story. At a time when pagan Romans built funeral pyres and consigned the bodies of their dead to the flames because they believed they had ceased to exist, the Christians looked forward to the day when their dead would be raised and changed, at the return of Christ.

An inscription found on a monument to a dead pagan of that period reads, "*I was not. I was. I am not. I do not care*". But when the Catacombs were opened in 1856, very different message were revealed. The first is found near the entrance. It reads: "*Sophronia lives in peace*". Then, near the place where a dozen Popes were buried side by side, the same hand had written a second inscription. "*Sophronia lives in the Lord.*" And finally, deep in the Catacombs was the message; "*Dear Sophronia lives for ever in the Lord.*"

Indeed, so confident were those early Roman Christians that death is not the end, that our guide was able to show the small rooms, deep in the Catacombs, where Christians came to celebrate the Lord's Supper, because they believed that a spiritual bond united them with those who had gone before to be with their Lord. They were so convinced that the distance separating living saints from those who have died is so small that they did not speak of 'death'. "**Sophronia *lives***", is what those statements declare.

So what can we say about cremation?

I have already said that it is relatively new in our country. The practice was brought back to England in 1874 by Queen Victoria's surgeon, after having witnessing a cremation in Italy. But it was not immediately accepted by the general population. In fact, there was widespread opposition to it, and in was ten years later, in 1884, that

the controversy that it created actually came to a head.

That year, a rather odd Welsh doctor, William Price, cremated the body of his five months old son on a Welsh hillside, and was subsequently prosecuted for his action. Dr. Price was undoubtedly eccentric, because he regarded himself as the Arch Druid of a lost Welsh tribe, and had named his son 'Jesus Christ'! The doctor was eventually acquitted, and it was this verdict that virtually made cremation legal. The practice then gradually became socially acceptable as well-known public figures opted to be cremated at death, but it was only when the Archbishop of Canterbury, William Temple, who died in 1944, and his immediate successor, Lord Lang, who also died the following year, both chose cremation, that it gained acceptance by the Anglican communion,

The Roman Catholic Church continued to disapprove of the practice, but changed its stance in 1962, when the Pope, John Paul 1st, declared it no longer illegal for Roman Catholics to be cremated, and the next step followed in 1966, when the Church of Rome announced that its priests were permitted to officiate at a Crematorium ceremony.

Today, it is claimed that over 70% of funerals involve cremation. There are many reasons why so many choose it. Some believe cremation to be more hygienic and more ecologically responsible than interment. Others choose it for financial reasons. Some because they are 'not religious', and therefore have no faith in a resurrection to future life. And some, like the Corby councillors, see the land available for burials rapidly being taken up.

But! Does it really matter to a Christian?

Must it be burial? I think not. I suggest that, ultimately, what we decide is a matter of perception, emotions or sentiment. I know of nothing in the Scriptures that legislates either way. In fact, in 1 Cor. 13, Paul makes this interesting statement: **"Though I give my body to be burned..."**, and the context suggests the surrendering of one's body as an act of one's faith.

Our God is Able!

After all, we believe that our God, the Creator Who formed *'the first Adam'* from the dust and Who raised *'the second Adam'* from the dead after three days, is quite capable of giving us a body as it pleases Him (see 1 Cor. 15:42-55).

Not all His children have received a reverent, respectful burial. Think of those who, for their faith, have been burnt at the stake, or, in the Roman Coliseum, were thrown to wild beasts, or fed by mad Nero to the lamprey in his fishponds. Think of the missionaries who, for their faith, have taken tremendous risks and even become the victims of cannibals. Think of Christians who have been blown apart in time of war or in accidents, or who have been lost at sea. Think of those who have died in natural disasters, whose bodies may never be found.

Do we think that such situations render our God helpless? *"Is anything too hard for YHVH?"* This was the God's own question put to Abraham, and it needs no answer!

What really matters when we die is not the manner of our death, or the manner of the disposal of our feeble and imperfect body, but the disposition of our soul. If we die in the Faith, our eternal destiny is assured. We shall not only **'receive a body like His glorious body'** (Phil. 3; 21), but also, **'we shall be like him, for we shall see Him as He is'** (1st John: 3:2). But, please, *do* read the next verse!

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