

Cremation, Burial, and the Christian Hope

Text: 1 Corinthians 15:35–44

As cremation has become increasingly common, Christians sometimes wonder whether it is appropriate for a believer. Does the Bible require burial? Is cremation somehow disrespectful to the body? And perhaps most importantly, **does cremation conflict with our belief in the resurrection?**

These are good questions because Christianity takes **both death and the human body seriously**. Yet we need to **distinguish between what Scripture shows us as a pattern and what Scripture commands as a requirement**. **The Bible overwhelmingly shows God's people burying their dead, but nowhere does Scripture say that cremation itself is sinful.**

Paul gives us the larger perspective in 1 Corinthians 15. He asks, **“How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?”** His answer shifts our attention from the condition of the corpse to the power of God. The body is **“sown”** perishable, but it is raised imperishable. It is sown in weakness, but it is raised in power.

So as we consider burial and cremation, I believe Scripture gives us some interesting insights as we think through this together.

1. Burial Is the Biblical Pattern

When we read the Bible, burial is clearly the normal practice of God's people.

Abraham purchased a burial place for Sarah in Genesis 23. Jacob gave careful instructions concerning where he wanted to be buried. Joseph made Israel promise that when God brought them out of Egypt, they would carry his bones with them. Hebrews 11:22 actually remembers that request as an expression of Joseph's faith.

Even the bodies of Saul and Jonathan, after being shamefully displayed by the Philistines, were recovered by courageous men from Jabesh-gilead and given honorable treatment. Interestingly, 1 Samuel 31:12–13 tells us that **the men burned the bodies and then buried their bones**. That was certainly not Israel's normal burial practice, and the circumstances were extraordinary, but it is still

significant. Scripture here **does** record a case in which burning the remains was part of a respectful response to bodies that had been mutilated and exposed. That alone should make us cautious about declaring that every act of cremation is inherently sinful.

One particularly moving example of respect for the body appears in **2 Samuel 21**. **Rizpah** remained beside the bodies of her sons and the others who had died, spreading sackcloth upon the rock and refusing to allow “**the birds of the air**” to come upon them by day or the wild animals by night. She guarded those bodies until they could **receive proper burial**. It is a heartbreaking scene, but it reveals something important: **Scripture does not treat a dead human body as garbage to be discarded.**

And, of course, **Jesus Himself** was buried. Joseph of Arimathea took His body, wrapped it in a clean linen shroud, and placed it in a tomb.

Burial therefore carries rich **Christian symbolism**. Paul even uses the language of planting: “**What you sow does not come to life unless it dies.**” A **Christian burial pictures the body being placed into the earth like a seed awaiting the resurrection.**

Someone might object to cremation and say that burning bodies elsewhere in Scripture is sometimes connected with judgment or disgrace. That is true. Certain passages associate burning with punishment, desecration, or shame. But the problem in those texts is not simply that fire touched a human body. **The context is judgment and dishonor.** We should not take a symbol of disgrace in one setting and turn it into a universal prohibition in every setting.

A biblical pattern is not necessarily a divine prohibition of every other practice. Scripture never says, “**You shall not cremate.**” Now, I realize that **our own hermeneutical tradition** has often placed particular weight on **biblical example, pattern, and even silence**, and those things should not simply be dismissed. But we have to be very discerning **about how authority is actually established from the text.** An example becomes **binding only when there is good reason to believe the biblical author intends it to function normatively, not merely because it is the only practice mentioned.** As good and well-trained students of biblical hermeneutics, we should ask: **Did the biblical author’s**

communicative act intend to exclude the unmentioned alternative? That is the crucial question. **Silence can matter, but silence does not automatically equal prohibition,** and **pattern does not automatically equal command.** In the case of burial, Scripture gives us a strong and meaningful pattern, but it never tells us that burial is the only faithful way a body may be handled after death.

2. The Human Body Has God-Given Value

Sometimes people speak as though the body were **merely a container for the soul:** the real person escapes at death, and the shell that remains no longer matters.

That is **not at all** the biblical view. Genesis 2:7 says that God formed man “**of dust from the ground**” and breathed into him the breath of life, and “**the man became a living creature.**” Human beings were created by God as **embodied creatures.** The body is part of God’s good creation.

Paul says in 1 Corinthians 6:19–20, “**Your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you**” and therefore, “**glorify God in your body.**” Romans 12:1 tells us to present our “**bodies as a living sacrifice.**”

And then there is the **incarnation!** John 1:14 says, “**The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.**” The Son of God did not merely borrow a human appearance. He took upon Himself a real human body. He suffered bodily, died bodily, was buried bodily, and rose bodily. That tells us something tremendous about our own bodies.

Christianity does not teach that salvation ultimately means escaping physical existence. Philippians 3:21 says that Christ “**will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body.**” Our final hope is not merely the survival of the soul. Our hope is the resurrection of the **whole person.**

And when Paul speaks in 1 Corinthians 15 about a “**spiritual body,**” he is not describing a ghost or an immaterial existence. “**Spiritual**” does not mean “**nonphysical.**” Jesus rose bodily. In Luke 24:39 He told His disciples, “**Touch me, and see. For a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.**” The resurrection body is a real body, but a transformed body: no longer subject to corruption, weakness, sickness, or death.

The body is not everything we are, **but neither is it something incidental to who we are**. So Christians should treat the body with dignity in life and with reverence in death.

3. Resurrection Depends Upon God, Not the Condition of the Body

This brings us to the question of **cremation**. A buried body eventually returns to dust. Ecclesiastes 12:7 says, “**the dust returns to the earth as it was.**” Cremation simply accelerates a physical process that ultimately happens anyway.

Throughout history Christians have died in fires, at sea, in warfare, and in circumstances where their bodies could never be recovered. Some have been consumed by animals, destroyed in explosions, or lost entirely to human view. None of them are beyond the reach of resurrection.

Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15:42–43: “**It is sown perishable; it is raised imperishable. It is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness; it is raised in power.**”

The resurrection does not depend upon whether God can locate and reassemble every molecule of our present bodies. The God who formed Adam from the dust does not need an intact corpse in order to raise the dead.

Resurrection is an act of divine power, not a matter of preserving enough physical material for God to work with.

That is why **I do not believe** Scripture permits us to call cremation sinful.

Now... if someone chose cremation specifically because he rejected bodily resurrection or believed the body was worthless, then **the belief behind the decision would certainly be contrary to Christianity**. But choosing cremation because of cost, simplicity, family circumstances, or personal preference is another matter entirely.

CONCLUSION:

I think that burial remains the stronger biblical pattern and perhaps the richer Christian symbol. But cremation falls within the realm of Christian liberty.

Ultimately, our hope is not in embalming. It is not in a coffin. It is not in a cemetery plot. And neither is our hope threatened by cremation.

Our hope is in the promise of Jesus Christ:

The body is sown in weakness.

It will be raised in power.

The body is laid down perishable.

It will be raised imperishable.

Our confidence is not in how well the body is preserved. Our confidence is in the God who raises the dead.