

XL. Timeless Truth for Timely Topics in Biblical Perspective

What Does the Bible Say?

“What About Cremation and Christian Burial?”

Genesis 23

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Let's start by looking at Genesis 23. There are two reasons why I am taking on this subject. One is we have just finished a series built around developing a Christian world and life view where your lifestyle is informed by your life view. That is our behavior betrays our beliefs and our life view. Do we have the mind of Christ or do we have a mind conformed to this world? That is always propelled by the love of Christ but the love of Christ constrains us. So we took time on creation, the fall into sin, redemption, providence and consummation which were the five planks that one draws from to get a right view of God and a right view of life. So we can take those basic principles and apply it to the issue of how the Christians look at the matter of burial in general and cremation in particular.

The second reason why I'm going over this issue is that I get this question so many times that I've lost count. People are always asking me what I think about the matter of cremation. So I thought I would get this on record and that way if I get asked this again I can send them to our website and they can hear or read about what I think on this. That brings me to another thing that is wrapped up in the very title of this study. I want you to grasp something about Christian burial from which you make a judgment call on the issue of cremation.

In other words, I actually think there is something called Christian burial. I don't think burial is an indifferent act. I think it is part of a Christian's statement before this world. The way Christians bury says something about what we view about life, creation, redemption, consummation and the second coming of Christ. Nothing that you do in life as a Christian is indifferent. There are things that are different but nothing that you do is indifferent. That is why the Bible says in I Corinthians 10:31, [31] *So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.* Everything that we do as believers is a statement of what we believe. Our behavior betrays our belief and there is something called burial.

Ever since the proclamation of the Gospel Christians have believed there is something called Christian burial that actually prefigured in the Old Covenant beginning with Abraham, moving up to the fulfillment in the New Covenant and then expounded upon in the New Testament. That theology affects the way we approach everything in life including what we do with the remains of someone who is now absent from the body and present with the Lord. I will walk us through this, make some general statements and then ask you to consider things as you think through this of developing a Christian life view for the action of burial, either for your loved ones or for yourself one day. If you're breathing then you have purpose here. David, after he had served the purpose of God fell asleep and was laid among his fathers. So when your purpose is done you go to be with the Lord, until that is done enjoy serving and glorifying the Lord.

Burial in a Christian's life is making a statement and what should that statement be? There is not much at all about burial in your Bible until we get to the covenant with Abraham where he is promised the land. I want to develop this a little for you. That promise of the Palestinian land or the Beautiful Land or the land that God had marked out for him and his descendants was not the ultimate promise. It was just the down payment. The ultimate promise

was that this whole world would belong to the believer because the Gospel was to go to all the world and not just one land. This world is my Father's world and that promise of that land in Israel was ultimately even in the final analysis was not even about this world but it was about the new heavens and the new earth which we will inherit with a new body. Therefore those two things converged together for Abraham because while he is in the land that God had promised to him, he doesn't own one square inch of it but now his wife Sarah, is dead so what will he do?

Genesis 23:1–20 says [1] *Sarah lived 127 years; these were the years of the life of Sarah.* [2] *And Sarah died at Kiriath-arba (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan, and Abraham went in to mourn for Sarah and to weep for her.* [3] *And Abraham rose up from before his dead and said to the Hittites,* [4] *“I am a sojourner and foreigner among you; give me property among you for a burying place, that I may bury my dead out of my sight.”* [5] *The Hittites answered Abraham,* [6] *“Hear us, my lord; you are a prince of God among us. Bury your dead in the choicest of our tombs. None of us will withhold from you his tomb to hinder you from burying your dead.”* [7] *Abraham rose and bowed to the Hittites, the people of the land.* [8] *And he said to them, “If you are willing that I should bury my dead out of my sight, hear me and entreat for me Ephron the son of Zohar,* [9] *that he may give me the cave of Machpelah, which he owns; it is at the end of his field. For the full price let him give it to me in your presence as property for a burying place.”*

[10] *Now Ephron was sitting among the Hittites, and Ephron the Hittite answered Abraham in the hearing of the Hittites, of all who went in at the gate of his city,* [11] *“No, my lord, hear me: I give you the field, and I give you the cave that is in it. In the sight of the sons of my people I give it to you. Bury your dead.”* [12] *Then Abraham bowed down before the people of the land.* [13] *And he said to Ephron in the hearing of the people of the land, “But if you will, hear me: I give the price of the field. Accept it from me, that I may bury my dead there.”* [14] *Ephron answered Abraham,* [15] *“My lord, listen to me: a piece of land worth four hundred shekels of silver, what is that between you and me? Bury your dead.”* [16] *Abraham listened to Ephron, and Abraham weighed out for Ephron the silver that he had named in the hearing of the Hittites, four hundred shekels of silver, according to the weights current among the merchants.*

[17] *So the field of Ephron in Machpelah, which was to the east of Mamre, the field with the cave that was in it and all the trees that were in the field, throughout its whole area, was made over* [18] *to Abraham as a possession in the presence of the Hittites, before all who went in at the gate of his city.* [19] *After this, Abraham buried Sarah his wife in the cave of the field of Machpelah east of Mamre (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan.* [20] *The field and the cave that is in it were made over to Abraham as property for a burying place by the Hittites.*

I think there is a story here we need to see. We who are in the fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant look back to Abraham and there comes the death of his wife. In the context of most of the known world at that time, up until that point, basically the majority report says there was one of two ways you dealt with a dead body. The Barbarians, pagans and including the Greeks and the Romans, all burned the bodies. All pagan religions lend itself to that even as it does today. They have a pagan world and life view that says the spiritual is good and the physical is bad but you have a Christian world and life view and we know the physical is not bad. In fact, when God created everything He said “Behold it is good.” We believe the physical has the curse of sin upon it, just like the spiritual does but we don't believe it was created bad. We don't believe there was a lower story of life where the lower physical is bad and the upper spiritual is good. So pagans would burn the physical in order to escape to the spiritual thus cremation became the accepted and embraced practice among paganism. The Hindu religion

embraces cremation not because of the spiritual good and physical bad but because of their view of reincarnation. So they have funeral fires as well.

The second view of burial is one that kind of hangs onto life here. This way was embraced by the Egyptians. They would embalm the dead and go visit them periodically. They wouldn't put them out of sight as Abraham said in this passage in Genesis 23, but that they would actually go and view them. They would then be there "forever." That was their view of life.

The third view which has become the majority report throughout the world because of the influence of Christianity became the notion of burying or setting aside – in the ground or in the cave, ashes to ashes, dust to dust. It developed over a period of time for when the Israelites would bury the body they would come back over a period of months because of the bacteria and deterioration of the body. Then they would take what was left, the bones, consecrate them and put them in a small box to put up over the cave or to the side and put the skull on top of the box so that you have room on that platform to lay the next body that would be there. It was both honoring the principle of burying the dead but it was also economical because you could get a lot more bodies in that cave when you did it that way. That was the practice also in the days of Jesus. This all develops and is promoted by the descendants of Abraham and continues. I want you to see it in one more case because I want you to something that adds to it. Let's look at Genesis 50.

Abraham's people are taken into captivity and Jacob is taken down with them into captivity. Jacob's son Joseph then becomes this great ruler and the people live on in captivity until God raises up Moses to lead them out of the bondage of Egypt back to the Promised Land. Before any of that is done notice what Joseph says in Genesis 50. Genesis 50:22–26 says [22] *So Joseph remained in Egypt, he and his father's house. Joseph lived 110 years. [23] And Joseph saw Ephraim's children of the third generation. The children also of Machir the son of Manasseh were counted as Joseph's own. [24] And Joseph said to his brothers, "I am about to die, but God will visit you and bring you up out of this land to the land that he swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob." [25] Then Joseph made the sons of Israel swear, saying, "God will surely visit you, and you shall carry up my bones from here." [26] So Joseph died, being 110 years old. They embalmed him, and he was put in a coffin in Egypt.* Now let's look at Hebrews 11.

Hebrews 11:22 says [22] *By faith Joseph, at the end of his life, made mention of the exodus of the Israelites and gave directions concerning his bones.* In the trajectory of God's Word, God taking Israel out of the land of bondage to the Promised Land becomes a picture of what will be done in One greater than Moses, Jesus, who will take us from the bondage of sin and will deliver us from sin's penalty, power and presence. He will bring us into eternal life and ultimately deposit us in the new heavens and the new earth. Joseph knows from the vision that God gave to Abraham that God will visit them and bring them out at the fullness of time. He then says 'you take my bones and set them aside and when He visits you then you carry me up.' He will visit you to deliver you up into the land of promise. Then Joseph wants them to bury him in a manner that expresses his faith that God will visit them and raise them up. So they set him aside in a manner that would allow them to accomplish what he wanted to happen which was his bones being taken up with them all the way to the land of promise.

There are two things to see here. One is the obvious parallel of Joseph being taken up to the land of promise and believers being taken up out of the grave given a new body for the new heavens and the new earth. More specifically is that Joseph did not see his burial as an indifferent act. He saw his burial as a part of his life of faith. His burial was a statement of what

he believed concerning what God had promised and what God would do. Let's go a step further and look now at I Thessalonians 4. We know that we will be carried up.

I Thessalonians 4:13–14 says *[13] But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. [14] For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep.* He is teaching that the body is laid aside as if it is asleep awaiting its resurrection for it is not the soul that is asleep because absent from the body means you're present with the Lord. He will not use the word for death about a believer's death which is a radical separation, because the believer is not radically separated from God at death. On the contrary the believer goes to be with the Lord in their intermediate state. What is the intermediate state? It is not the final state. I will handle the intermediate state in a future study so stay tuned. Let's look further in this text.

I Thessalonians 4:15–18 says *[15] For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. [16] 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. [17] Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. [18] Therefore encourage one another with these words.*

So the Lord has another exodus in His plan. The next exodus is in Christ where the One who saved us from the bondage of our sin will carry us up into the land of promise which is a new heavens and a new earth. We will be given a new body in that new heavens and new earth. Just as Joseph was making a statement by faith in what God had promised, he wanted it to be clear he believed Him. Then we in burial make a statement of faith where we want the world to know by our burial what we believe the Lord has promised us.

Christian burial is not an indifferent act for it is a statement of your faith. It is as much as statement of your faith as when you were walking and breathing. The way you are buried is making a statement about what you believed to the world and therefore you need to think your way through it. Is there any command in the Bible to put me in the ground or in a cave? The answer is no. In the Bible is precept and principle by the practice of believers that have gone before us. In the Bible is also an affirmation that your burial is a statement of what you believe. By faith Joseph was buried in the manner that he desired in order that he would be carried up when the Lord visited his people so he was buried in a manner that affirmed what he believed.

To speak to cremation, the first evidence we have of it in archeology is about 4,000 to 5,000 years before Christ. It could be as far back as 6,000 years before Christ. It was a dominate act throughout the Barbarian tribes of Europe, in the near East, parts of Africa and in the paganism of Greece and then later Rome. The embalming was out of Egypt and it had its own life view attached to it. Wherever Christianity spread cremation began to wane so much so that it is completely absent from the Christianized world in Europe and North America until 1870. In 1870 a crematorium was opened in Italy and it has spread in its acceptance and engagement since that time.

For instance, the first one was in 1870 that we know of after it had disappeared through the spread of Christianity which says something in and of itself. It not only says cremation disappeared with the spread of Christianity but how do you change a culture? The way you change a culture is the consistency of the informed life styles of God's people. It was God's people that turned the landscape of funeral pyres to cemeteries which are actually two Latin

words put together meaning commemoration. It is the laying aside of a death to commemorate something. There is a lesson here.

Are you concerned about marriage or Biblical sexuality in your culture? It will not be by edict that our culture will be reclaimed to its sensibilities. It will be with the consistency of God's people in marriage, family and sexuality. When God's people live consistently that is salt and light which changes the culture around it. It even changed how a pagan world did burials. In fact, the archeologists will tell you that in their study of areas they will date Christianity's arrival. One of the markers they look for is when funeral pyres cease and cemeteries begin, particularly throughout Europe.

Jesus doesn't give any direct command in this matter. We see Him at the tomb of Lazarus and His anger is not at the method of burial but His anger is toward death itself. Some think Jesus didn't care for burial because of what He said in Luke 20 when He said 'to let the dead bury the dead.' Let's put that in context. He is talking about the fact that our life should not be consumed for making arrangements for dead and it doesn't mean it's an indifferent part of your life but what is interesting is that He didn't say 'let the dead cremate the dead.' He simply affirmed the practice of the day. He was dealing with His people needing to be consumed with the message of life. We also see when Jesus is dealing with these matters He has a concern about the fact that one of these days the graves will be opened. How was Jesus buried? He was laid aside in a tomb and it was prophesied in the book of Isaiah of His method of burial. Isaiah said He would be buried with rich men for with the rich man He will have His tomb (Isaiah 53:9). That prophecy is fulfilled in Jesus.

So what about cremation in the Old Testament? It is not there except for two cases. Cremation, that is the burning of bodies, is there only at times of judgment, i.e. Sodom and Gomorrah and Jericho. In other words, burning, like the ultimate judgement of the Lake of Fire, is always seen as an act of judgment or as an act of stating the dire heinousness of a crime. For instance, in the Bible, it says if a priest's daughter becomes a prostitute she is to be burned. So the only time cremation is in the Bible is when it makes a statement of Divine judgment or Divine penalties upon a heinous crime. Otherwise, by practice, precept and affirmation in the ceremonial law it is always by burial. That is how it is done – being set aside in burial.

So why has cremation gained such a foothold? I think it is because it is a lot more economically feasible for a lot of people. This matter of burial has become such an industry and in some cases, not all cases, the funeral enterprises have taken advantage of the sensibilities and sensitivities of people at the moment of death that it becomes a money making enterprise, whereas it seems as cremation offers a much more economical approach. Some argue for it on the basis of ecology where we can't keep setting aside all these cemeteries so the green movement has an invested interest in it. Then there is the matter of expediency when choosing cremation. A friend of mine whose mother died in January wanted me to do the funeral and I said I would and I asked where the burial was going to be. He said 'you can't bury in the ground in January in Michigan so we will be cremating her and then doing the funeral.'

So the bottom line here is how do I see Christian burial and cremation? Here is the basic principle. Burial is an act of faith where you are making a statement about what you believe. I have the great privilege of this as a pastor every time I stand beside a grave. As I place my hand on the casket and say 'ashes to ashes and dust to dust in the sure and certain hope of the resurrection' we know that person is not there. Absent from the body is to be present with the Lord but that body was made good. I get to tell people that God isn't finished yet. Christians don't just dispose of a body for this is a sacred moment for us. This is a time of praise to God for

He has brought this one to be with Himself in the intermediate state but not the final state. I believe in the resurrection of the body.

Pastor, do you mean that if we don't set the body aside in a casket, in a vault, Jesus won't be able to raise that body? No! As soon as that body goes in there bacteria and all kinds of things go to work on that decaying body. The Lord is not dependent upon us. Anyone who had been burned in a house or building fire or drowned at sea – everything will give up the dead and God will raise it and reform it into an eternal body to stand before Him. When we have funerals we are making a statement before people of what we believe and we believe God is not finished yet.

The same God who brought to us the Holy Spirit and the Word of God and were born again spiritually, when Jesus comes back this body will be raised as well. They will be given a new spiritual body for a new heavens and a new earth because this flesh and blood cannot inherit the earth. A spiritual body does not mean an immaterial body. It means a transformed body, a real material body like Christ's. Christ had a material body but it was transformed. His physical body that hung on that cross is now transformed and that's why when Lazarus comes out from the tomb in the old body, he still has grave clothes clinging to him. When Jesus is raised the grave clothes fall off. It is a spiritual and different body but it is a material body.

So we are declaring, just as He is going to transform this heavens and earth to a new heavens and new earth, He will raise our bodies and transform them into an eternal body. That body is a declaration of God's saving grace and at that funeral side I am able to share that with people that the Lord is not finished with our brother or sister for they will be raised up. This mortal shall put on immortality. So history affirms that burial is an act of faith. It was an act of faith for Abraham, Joseph, Jesus and all believers as Christianity spread.

I think we need to put people who make money on this stuff out of business. How? In Charlotte, we were able to set aside some acreage for a cemetery for the members of our church. We were able to work a good Scottish Presbyterian deal with the funeral home for the cost so that our members would not be faced with these cost breaking enterprises. Churches not only used to provide that before we got sanitized, we actually used to bury them all over the place around the church. Every time you would walk into that worship center you would know two things. One this is life and death and two we have the message of hope. There is coming a great gettin' up morning. It was an audio visual lesson every single day for God's people.

So I've given you some history. Here is Christ who never gave direction concerning burial and I only give you His inferences and His reference for He clearly refers it. Then there is the history of the church that was so committed to a Christian world and life view that archeologists could even then mark out the spread of Christianity by the spread of cemeteries and the annihilation of the funeral pyres. If I'm cremated am I sinning? No. You are only sinning when you transgress a direct commandment of the Lord. There is no direct command of the Lord as to how to be buried. This applies to any loved ones that were cremated. They didn't sin. This will not present a problem for the Lord either if you're cremated.

I would ask you to pray through this though because your burial is not just an expedient act or an economic act, although I think ministries of the church ought to take this back on some day, it is a statement of faith concerning the God that you worship. So may God guide you as you apply a Christian life view to life, death and the age to come. Let's pray.

Prayer:

Father, thank You for the moments we could be together in Your Word. Thank You for the Lord Jesus our Redeemer. We thank You for the privilege to lift up praise to Him on this Lord's Day. Praise God from whom all blessing flow. Father there are two things I would ask. One would You allow all those reading this to think through, certainly with matters of economy and expediency, with clarity how we can glorify God even as Paul said 'whether by life or by death, it is my earnest expectation that Christ will not be put to shame in anything.' We are in a culture that will not change until we get back to the business of evangelism and discipleship and producing statesmen, but Father would You allow us to also understand when we live, even in our imperfections, with a loving, intentional commitment to obey Jesus Christ in every arena of life, that will effect everything around us in life. It even effected how pagans would bury their dead because of how believers lived and died. We give You praise because You give us the ability to be salt and light, in Jesus' Name, Amen.