

Is Cremation Biblical?

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Amos 2:1-2

What was the result of dishonoring the dead by cremation of the bones (Amos 2:1-2)? This as we see is a serious crime in the estimation of Jehovah God. The way John Wycliffe (1320-1384) was treated is reminiscent of the event in Amos. It was 1428 when the pope commanded the following event. It involved digging in a graveyard to remove the body of a man declared to be a heretic by the Roman Catholic Church. Men were digging at a regimented pace under the command of a religious icon. The body being exhumed had been buried in 1384 some 44 years before. Why disinter this body? This man's crime of heresy demanded it, and he must be as depersonalized as possible. What was this crime? It was among other things the translation of the Bible into English from the Latin so the common people might be able to read God's Word. His bones were dug up and burned to ashes and were cast into the brook Swift. Now they thought they were forever rid of one John Wycliffe a man whose name has been embalmed in Church history since that time to this day, and those who opposed him are only mentioned today because of their connection to his life!

Someone may be asking what happens to people who are burned up in house fires, incinerated in war, incinerated as a result of abortion clean up, vaporized in the explosion of bombs, devoured by beasts, lost in the oceans, swallowed by fish, burned at the stake or dissolved in acid. God is unlimited in His power to resurrect (Job 19:26). So, what is wrong with cremation? God's power to resurrect does not mean there is no difference between Christian burial and cremation. Alfred Levell remarked, "The arguments against cremation are thus not in any way centered on the scope of God's ability to raise the dead. Whatever may have happened to the body, the Scriptures nowhere place any limit upon God's resurrection power. (See, for example, Matthew 25:31-33, and Revelation 20:12, 13)" [*Cremation Not for Christians*].

Under normal circumstances there is a way of showing respect for the human body. And God who is the creator prescribes that way. The soul has been emphasized as most important because it is eternal. However, should the soul be singled out by itself? "And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul" (Gen. 2:7). Man was made of dust and shall return to dust (Eccl. 3:20). God created a whole man, and God resurrects a whole man. Redemption and re-creation are of the whole man. Paul wrote, "I pray God your whole spirit and soul and body be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Thess. 5:23). Paul's prayer emphasized the entire being of regenerate man. The human body is not to be worshipped but it is to be respected not for itself but because God made it. Dr. Loraine Boettner in his book *Immortality* remarked, "The body is as really and

eternally a part of man as is his spirit, and the resurrection of the body is an indispensable part of his salvation.”

It appears that **cremation** had its rise in and among heathen mankind during ancient times. It always seems to have preference during apostate times. Where Christianity predominates in a culture **cremation** disappears. The modern emphasis on it took rise among the English-speaking people during the last part of the nineteenth century. The first crematorium was not built in this country until 1876. It was not until 1884 that cremation was declared legal in England.

The arguments often used in these times to endorse **cremation** are very pragmatic and materialistic. [1] It conserves land, [2] it keeps the environment uncluttered, [3] it is more sanitary or hygienic, [4] it is more economical, and [5] it is more dignified. However, in the Word of God fire is symbolical of judgment or condemnation which is without remedy (Deut. 32:22; 28:26; Psalm 79:1-4; Jer. 21:10; Mal. 4:1). Even in the Old Testament sacrifices the fire consumed the sacrifices which in symbol bore the condemnation of the sins of the people which were upon them.

The judgment of God was by fire upon Sodom and Gomorrah. Achan was responsible for robbing God, the death of many Israelites and a military defeat brought Achan and his family to be burned with fire (Joshua 7:25-26). Jesus spoke of the burning of the tares (Matt. 13:30; Luke 3:17). Our Lord said, “If a man abide not in me, he is cast forth as a branch and is withered; and men gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned” (John 15:6).

The Old Testament gave examples of burial instead of cremation. The Patriarchs are an example (Gen. 25:8-10; 35:29; 47:29-31; 50:24-26; Ex. 13:19; Gen. 49:31). God buried Moses (Deut. 34:5-6). And the New Testament gave examples of burial instead of cremation (Matt. 14:12; 8:22-23; 23:29; John 5:28; Acts 8:2; 5:1-10; 1 Cor. 15:35 ff.). The greatest example is our Lord Jesus’ burial (Mark 14:8; John 19:40-42; Matt. 26:12). Burial is part of the great meaning of the ordinance of baptism (Col. 2:12; Rom. 6:4). Burial is also a part of sowing of which Paul compares the burial of our bodies and then pictures their resurrection (1 Cor. 15:35-39, 42-44).

Man being created by God and in the image of God warrants care at death (Gen. 1:26-28; 1 Cor. 11:7). The body of the believer being the temple of the Holy Spirit requires respect in burial (1 Cor. 6:19-20). Dr. William C. Robinson urged, “Brethren, weigh these texts, before you exchange the Christian custom of burying or entombing the bodies that are temples of the Holy Ghost for a custom which primitive Christianity universally rejected. The graves of the saints are sanctified by Christ’s rest in the tomb; and the bodies of believers being still united to Christ do rest in their graves until the resurrection.” The

history of Christianity verifies the practice of burial. Tertullian¹ remarked that cremation was a symbol of hell.

The example of God who became flesh and dwelt among us was burial before His victorious resurrection from the dead. The four Gospels all recount the burial of Jesus. The picture presented by the inspired epistle of 1 Corinthians 15 pictures a body that is sown (not burned) and then raised.

Dr. Loraine Boettner concluded that “the practice of cremation, which in our day seems to be becoming more common particularly in the larger city mortuaries, is anti-Christian and should have no place in the practice of the believer. It has no support in Scripture.” Since Dr. Boettner wrote that this practice has become common everywhere. The question is, “What does the Lord have to say on the subject?” And “Are we willing to follow revealed truth?”

¹ Quintus Septimius Florens Tertullianus was born about 150 AD in Carthage, North Africa. His father was the captain of a Roman legion and provided Tertullian with the education and training to become a lawyer. When he was about 40, Tertullian was converted to Christianity. He exuberantly embraced the gospel and ably used his legal skills to defend Christianity from pagan attackers.