

Burial or cremation for Christians?

*'Devout men buried Stephen
and made great lamentation over him'
(Acts 8:2).*

Burial or cremation for Christians?

A biblical pattern for funerals

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Quotations from Holy Scripture are shown in *italics*.

*To those Christians who seek to do the Lord's will
in both life and death.*

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Preface

There appears to be a dearth of clear biblical teaching at the present time on the subject of whether Christians should be buried or cremated. Whether this is because death and its surrounding issues are off-limit subjects, or to avoid unsettling those who have already made (unalterable) choices about the burial or cremation of their loved ones, is unclear. Nevertheless the fact remains that when decisions have to be made, many folk are unsure of what is right. Hurried decisions are not always the same as those that would have been made if the matter had been considered under less stressful circumstances.

That being the case, it seemed prudent to address the issue by examining what the Bible has to say, in order that funerals are conducted in the most scriptural manner. Let it be said at the outset that, as a result of my studies, I have become convinced that burial is the correct option for believers.

The standpoint from which this work has been written is that the Bible is God's inspired Word; it is infallible and without error in its entirety; and its commands need to be obeyed, its good examples followed and its bad ones shunned. The

relevant Bible references have been quoted throughout and it is strongly recommended that they are referred to in order to gain the fullest historical and cultural understanding.

In this short volume the author has endeavoured to be as balanced as possible, although it is difficult to be impartial when one holds firm convictions on any subject. It is hoped that it will help those who wish to have a clearer understanding of the issues; crystalize the thoughts of those who have already chosen burial but not fully thought through their reasons why; and prompt those who have not considered the subject previously to give the matter the thought it warrants.

By setting out the issues systematically, it is the author's sincere desire that this short volume will be of help to those engaged in pastoral ministry; firstly to assist them as they seek to gain a better understanding of the topic, and secondly in order that they can address the matter logically when they are called upon to offer advice on the burial/cremation issue.

It is also hoped that it will be of assistance when the question arises of how we ought to respond when relatives are considering whether to have a loved one or close friend cremated, and we are called upon to reason the facts sympathetically with them.

As with all things in the Christian life, the submissions offered here should be considered prayerfully and Scripture, taken in context, should *always* be the final arbiter.

Adrian V W Freer

The body and soul and their ultimate destination

Believers who have come to a saving faith in Jesus Christ as a result of God's sovereign, elective grace have the assurance of the Bible's promise that, once they die, their immortal soul is at once translated to heaven to be forever with their Lord and Saviour. There is no warrant anywhere in Scripture for erroneous views such as soul-sleep, annihilation, purgatory or penance (see 2 Corinthians 5:8).

Whilst the fact that our immortal soul is at once received into glory is a great comfort at a time of bereavement, there does come the point when a decision has to be made about what to do with our earthly body. Should it be buried or cremated — and does it really matter anyway?

As we shall see, there are many pointers to the fact that burial should be the favoured option among Christians; although it should be stated that the Bible does not give any absolute *command* in the matter. Nevertheless, as we shall discover later,

some of the patriarchs did give very precise instructions that they were to be buried.

Let it be made clear at the outset that, although neither of the practices is in itself *sinful*, that does not negate the fact that careful and sympathetic thought should be given to decide how and where our loved ones' final remains should be laid to rest.

The serious issues of life and death

More than anyone else, Christians do consider carefully the serious issues of life and death. The whole focus of the gospel is bound up with our eventual and final destination after death — whether we end up in heaven or hell! That being so, it is surely wise for believers to do a little practical preparation for their demise beforehand. Unless our Lord returns in the meantime, it is an undisputable fact that we shall all die at some point.

Bereavement is always a traumatic time for those left behind, and Christians are *not* immune to that grief and sorrow. After all, death is a constant reminder of the outworking of sin in the world. It is only right that we mourn and lament over the loss of a loved one, but we do not grieve in the same way as unbelievers who have no hope whatsoever (see 1 Thessalonians 4:13-14). We have on record that our Lord was moved to weep at the grave of his friend Lazarus (John 11:35).

The wisdom of planning ahead

To alleviate the anguish for our families as much as possible, a little forward planning can spare those left behind some of



Tranquillity of an English churchyard

the stress. The provision of a funeral plan, prior purchase of a burial plot, choice of venue and minister for the thanksgiving service, and the selection of hymns and readings are all things that can be done in advance. As time progresses there is no reason why amendments cannot be made as circumstances change.

By making arrangements beforehand, the deceased has the comfort of knowing that things will proceed in accordance with their wishes and that decisions do not have to be made at the last moment. That must surely ease the burden in some measure.

A funeral plan purchased in advance enables many practical choices to be made and once death occurs, a telephone call is all that is required to set things in motion.

If time is taken to select a burial plot it can be in the graveyard of choice and located in a position that is appropriate; if desired, adjacent to loved ones. By so doing it is likely that, when the time comes for the plot to be used, most of the surrounding plots will have been utilized and the area will have matured and mellowed. It is comforting to know in advance precisely where one's final resting place will be.

Making arrangements for the funeral service is not a morbid affair, but rather making our wishes known in order that the service will be conducted in accordance with the deceased's requests.

In the passage referred to later on concerning Joseph, it will be noted that he gave strict instructions about what was to happen to his remains after his death. That must surely be a prudent example to follow.

Once decisions have been made and set down on paper, they can be signed and sealed in an envelope and passed on to one or more trusted relatives or friends for safe keeping until our demise.¹ Lodging instructions solely in our will may not necessarily be the wisest move as it may not be consulted until after the funeral has taken place. Probably the best course of action is to record our instructions both separately with relatives or friends, *and* in our will, to be absolutely sure.

Including a list of the significant events, dates and places in one's life will considerably assist whoever is left with the task of composing the eulogy. It is sometimes amazing how little succeeding generations know about the early life of the deceased.

Made in the image of God

In the account of creation we are told that man is a special creation and totally unlike any other animals or creatures. Man was specifically created in the image of God (see Genesis 1:27) and therefore, if we are made in his image, we surely cannot treat that image, once life has departed from it, like a mere piece of garbage and dispose of it irreverently; but rather we should give it respect.

Scripture teaches us that the bodies of believers are temples of the Holy Spirit, and as such they need to be treated with dignity. We do not belong to ourselves anymore because we have been purchased at great cost by God who has redeemed us. In 1 Corinthians 6:19-20 we are reminded: *'Or 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.'* To treat such a temple to burning to cinders is disrespectful to something set apart as holy by the precious blood of Christ.

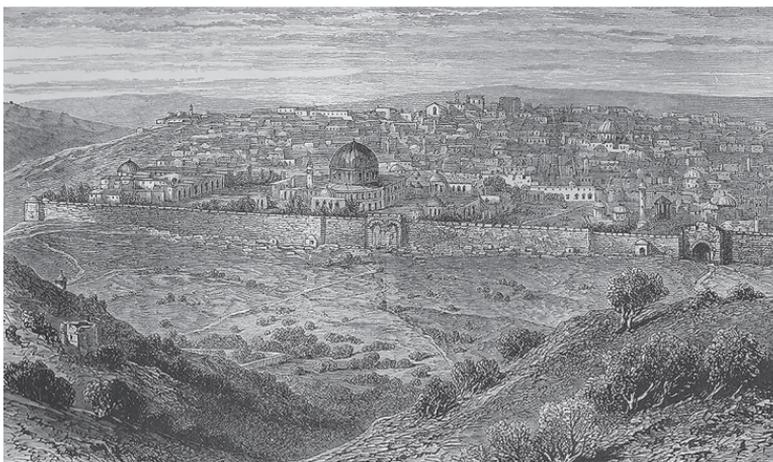
Burial or cremation?

To aid us in our study, it is appropriate to look at examples from Scripture to guide us when we come to decide whether we should be buried or cremated. There are numerous precedents and these all confirm that burial has always been the preferred method of laying the corpse to rest for God's people from the very earliest times. It is pertinent to note that nowhere in the Bible is there any example of the body of a believer being burned. There is the account of disobedient King Saul whose

disfigured body was burned after his death at the hands of the Philistines; but even then his remains were eventually given a proper burial once his bones had been recovered (see 1 Samuel 31:8-13; and 2 Samuel 21:12-14).

Many of the biblical terms that are used for death such as '*... slept with his fathers*' (this phrase is actually used on thirty-six occasions in Scripture; for example, King Ahaz in 2 Kings 16:20); '*he died and was buried in the tombs of his fathers*' (King Josiah in 2 Chronicles 35:24); and '*fallen asleep*' (New Testament believers who have died but have seen the risen Christ, in 1 Corinthians 15:6), all imply that the body of the deceased is left to lie in peace and slowly return to dust, rather than being rapidly consumed by fire.

When King Hezekiah was laid to rest in the same tombs as King David, in Jerusalem, his ancestor had already been resting there for almost three hundred years. We read in 2 Chronicles



The Mount of Olives and Jerusalem

32:33: *'And Hezekiah slept with his fathers, and they buried him in the upper part of the tombs of the sons of David, and all Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem did him honour at his death. And Manasseh his son reigned in his place.'*

At the time when Simon Peter delivered his sermon at Pentecost he referred to the fact that King David's tomb was still there: "Brothers, I may say to you with confidence about the patriarch David that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day" (Acts 2:29). When Peter was speaking, David had already been buried for over one thousand years.

In some way even the commonplace acrostic 'RIP', Rest in Peace, just does not seem to fit in with cremation. It is nigh impossible to correlate 'resting in peace' with the mental image which is visualized when a body is consigned to the flames of a crematorium furnace.

Bodies have to be treated with dignity

There is something inherently grounded into the human conscience that demands that bodies are recovered and treated with dignity, sometimes at a great deal of cost and effort. That is the reason why relatives take the trouble to ensure that bodies are recovered from accident sites, or repatriated from foreign countries, and laid to rest among familiar surroundings.

When people go missing, long searches are made for them, extending long after there is any chance of them being found alive, and that is not just because we want to know what happened to them, it is also in order that a funeral can take place.

Once bodies have been buried they are invariably left to lie undisturbed over the centuries and it is only in very extreme situations that they are ever moved. If circumstances dictate that this has to happen, then great care and sensitivity are always exerted over their removal and preservation.

During the construction of Rutland Water, St Matthew's Church at Normanton (built in 1764) would have been submerged as the church is located forty yards within the perimeter and below the level of the reservoir. It was therefore deconsecrated in 1970 and the coffins interred in the church were removed from the vaults and reburied, either at Edith Weston or Edenham.



Normanton Church, Rutland Water

Since then the floor of the church has been raised above the water line and an embankment and causeway constructed. Today, with its distinctive tower designed by Robert Cundy, Normanton Church remains a memorial to the county's historic and aristocratic past and is the most notable landmark in the area.