

# **CREMATION**

**Isak Burger**

## **Introduction**

While Scripture does not leave us in the dark as to what happens to man's soul/spirit after death, the question as to what happens (or should happen) to the body is being asked more and more lately. Of course, the Bible is clear as to what happens to the body at the resurrection. Irrespective of the condition of the body, whether it is still living or whether it is in a state of decay in a grave, whether it has returned to dust or is cremated or has been torn up by wild animals or whether it is in the depths of the sea – that which remains of the body wherever it may be, will be resurrected as a glorified body by which the believer will forever be in heaven with Christ. (1 Cor.15:51-54 and 1 Thes. 4:15-17)

## **Considerations in favour of cremation**

The following are advantages of cremation rather than a traditional interment (funeral):

1) The increasing problem of space.

In cities, with a rapidly growing population, less ground available at higher cost, and the necessity of building houses and other buildings while precious agricultural ground is being taken up, cremation is a practical alternative. The problem of space is rapidly getting worse, especially in the light of the increased number of deaths by AIDS-related illnesses.

2) The cost factor

As a rule, cremation is less expensive than a conventional interment.

3) The sentimental aspect.

In cremation, the ashes can be kept in a special place as a memorial or spread over a specific area, even though they represent only a portion of the body of the deceased.

4) The result is essentially the same.

It can be argued that the ashes that remain are the same as the eventual decomposition of a traditional funeral and that cremation is simply a quicker process to the same end, namely dust.

5) The psychological argument.

One school of thought is that cremation assists the bereaved to realise the finality and irrevocability of death. This enables them to come to grips with the emotional trauma and they are thus better able to deal with it.

6) The security aspect.

This is certainly a very practical consideration in South Africa. It happens that criminals with no respect for the dead have attacked visitors to the graves.

### **What does the Bible say?**

I would like to give you a short survey of what the Bible says about the remains of the dead. One can come to one's own decision in the light thereof.

### **The Old Testament.**

Since the earliest times the Jews buried their dead. Although the cremation of bodies does appear in the Old Testament, it is always an exception and has to do with the judgements of God as in the case of Achan and his family. (Josh 7: 15 + 21) as well as in the case of serious moral sins. (Lev. 20:14 and 21:9) In all these cases it can be understood as a sign of and as part of God's judgement of those persons.

Then there is the case of king Saul. We read that, after the defeat of Israel, the decapitated bodies of Saul and his sons were displayed on the hills of Gilboa and hung against the walls of the city of Beth-shan. (1 Sam. 31:12-14 and 1 Chron.10:8-13) We then read that the valiant men of Jabes-Gilead removed their bodies at night and burned them. They did, however, bury the bones afterwards and David re-buried them in the grave of his father Kish.

The cremation of Saul's body was probably to prevent the Philistines from further making a spectacle of him and using it for propaganda. They had already made a show of his head by displaying it in the country and then placing it in the temple of their god Dagon. At the same time, in these acts we see God's abandonment of Saul and His judgement of him for his disobedience and for the fact that he consulted a spirit-medium, the witch of Endor. (1 Chron.10:13+14).

The belief in the Old Testament in life after death resulted in them seeing the grave as a resting place for the body while the soul was waiting in paradise. This belief discouraged the idea of cremation.

Fire and cremation is often the symbol of judgement and of punishment by God. This explains why God used “fire and brimstone” to destroy the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorra because of their iniquity. The same applies to Nadab and Abihu in Lev. 10:2. There are many texts in the Old Testament that affirm this point. Thus it is not strange that the place of God’s judgement after death (Hell) is described as a place of fire and flame.

It is also interesting that one of the well known heathen gods in the Bible was Moloch. He was the god of fire. One of the perverse practices that the Israelites came across in Caanan was the practice of offering humans, and especially children, to this god by burning them. This was strongly condemned by God and yet this practice surfaced in Israel from time to time at times of apostasy. There are many references to the fact that this was displeasing to God. e.g.(Lev.18:21)

Summing up, one could say that cremation in the Old Testament almost exclusively is linked to one of two things: The judgement of God or unsavoury heathen customs.

### **The New Testament.**

All indications are that the Jewish practices regarding the dead are maintained in the New Testament. There are almost 50 references to graves or funerals in the New Testament. Most of them refer to that of Jesus. However, there is not the slightest reference to anyone having been cremated after death.

The words of Paul in 1 Cor.13:3 “If I surrender my body to the flames....” clearly refers to the flames of martyrdom, (a death which many Christians suffered in the early church) and not to cremation.

In this connection it is important to look at the example of Christ. There are indications that those who were crucified at that time because of their crimes, were not buried but were thrown on to the rubbish dumps of the city in the valley of Hinnom, next to Jerusalem (Deut.21:23 and Gal. 3:13) to be consumed in the burning rubbish. It was also here in Hinnom where Israel offered their children to Moloch in times of apostasy. (Jer. 7:31) The word “Hinnom” is the Hebrew word for the Greek word “Gehenna” which in English is translated hell. The association and word-play is clear – the rubbish

dump which is traditionally associated with smouldering fire and smoke and where the bodies of criminals were left to burn.

This makes the burial of Jesus all the more remarkable; the fact that His body could have been burned - but God provided an unexpected grave for Him.

### **The early church.**

All indications are that the early church continued with the Biblical pattern of burial. Certainly we know of the catacombs wherein many people were buried over a long period. It was always done with great piety bearing in mind that the body of such a person would eventually be resurrected.

What did happen in the early church, (apart from the fact that many Christians under Roman rule were burned at the stake) is that some Roman Emperors commanded that the bodies of Christians be burned.

A typical example is that of the Emperor Severus who was frustrated by the Christians because they did not succumb to tortures and persecutions. When he threatened them with banning, they said they could never be banned from before the face of God. When he threatened them with death, they said that he could only kill the body which would in any case be resurrected on the resurrection day.

From sheer frustration and malice he commanded that the bodies of Christians who were martyred be burned and the ashes thrown into the rivers so that they would be carried out to sea and never resurrected. It is thus understandable that the early Christians had negative feelings about cremation.

A further factor that strengthened the negative sentiment of the early Christians towards cremation was the fact that it was customary among the heathen nations. The Christians, who regarded the body as having been created by and belonging to God, saw it as the temple of the Holy Spirit and thus revered it and respected the sanctity thereof.

### **General remarks.**

Aside from the fact that there were negative connotations to cremation in Bible times, the practice of burning a body never became customary in Christianity. The reasons may have simply been sentimentality or the result

of Jewish tradition or a reaction to heathen practises. It may have been because Jesus himself was buried or because Christians were martyred by burning, or because they were thinking of the resurrection of the body.

The fact is, however, that today many Christians think differently about these matters for practical reasons which I mentioned in the beginning. What conclusion can we come to? Is it right or is it wrong?

The practice in Bible times is very clear. The question can be asked whether the usage in Biblical times can be seen as dogmatic and prescriptive or whether it should be seen as a Jewish cultural practice such as the wearing of a head covering in the time of Paul and which is no longer a problem of our time.

There is certainly a case to be made here.

The sentimental aspect is a personal one but is definitely important to many people. A colleague once told me that he was present when a funeral undertaker came to fetch his mother's body from the house. The unceremonial and unfeeling manner in which they treated the body distressed him. Even though it was a dead, unfeeling body, it was still the body of his mother by which he knew and loved her for many years. To him it was unthinkable and unacceptable that her body should be cremated.

In the final analysis I think this is a personal decision that every believer should make in the light of the above information. We should respect one another's convictions in this regard and should not judge one another.