

The Book of 1 Corinthians

1 Corinthians 15:51

Session 70: Cremation

We have been studying 1 Corinthians 15. The form of doctrine runs the entire chapter.

15:1-12 – Reproof

15:13-33 – Correction

15:34-58 – Instruction in Righteousness

We left off in our last session looking at verse 51, which is part of the “instruction in righteousness” section of the doctrine.

1 Corinthians 15:49 And as we have borne the image of the earthy, we shall also bear the image of the heavenly.

We recognize that our heavenly body will be different from our earthly body and we have talked about this in previous sessions.

1 Corinthians 15:51 Behold, I shew you a mystery; We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed,

Now Paul introduces the mystery element of what will happen with our bodies. He begins by saying that we will not all die physically, but every member of the body of Christ will have their body changed.

For those saints who are alive at the Blessed Hope they will have their old body immediately changed into an eternal, glorified body. But what about those who die before the event of the Lord’s return at the end of the dispensation of grace?

Is there a specific way we should prepare the dead bodies of the saints so that when the Lord returns, He can find them and restore them? Is there a “Christian” way to bury our dead? Does the Bible tell us what God prefers? The most obvious ways to deal with the bodies of those who have died is either by direct burial, embalming and burial, or cremation.

We will not take the time to go into all the gory details of these but here are the important facts to have in mind when answering the question of how to deal with the dead.

1. Direct Burial: The body is buried shortly after death, within 24-72 hours after death, usually in a simple container. No viewing or visitation is involved, so no embalming is necessary. A memorial service may be held at the graveside or later. Direct burial usually costs less than the "traditional" full-service funeral. Direct burial dates back to the earliest of human burials. These burials may, or may not have involved complex rituals or elaborate ceremonies. Direct burial is generally legal in the United States, but there are some important considerations. While no federal law mandates the use of a casket for burial, state and local regulations, as well as cemetery rules, may apply. Orthodox Jews typically do not use the embalming process. Jewish law and tradition generally prohibit embalming, as it is seen as a desecration of the body and interferes with the natural process of returning to dust. The belief is that the body should return to the earth as it was created, according to the verse in Genesis 3:19. Judaism does not embalm and does not have an open casket or wake. In other religions, an open casket or viewing of the body may be important to give a sense of closure to the mourners. In Judaism it is considered to violate the modesty of the deceased.
2. Embalming: The most famous example of embalming comes from ancient Egypt, around 2600 B.C. Driven by a strong belief in the afterlife and the necessity of the body for the soul's resurrection, Egyptians developed a complex mummification process. In Europe, embalming wasn't practiced for religious purposes during the Middle Ages, but only for preserving bodies for dissection and study. Modern embalming began in the U.S. during the Civil War, driven by the need to transport fallen soldiers' bodies home. This rise in embalming led to the development of the funeral industry with licensed embalmers and funeral directors. Formaldehyde replaced arsenic-based fluids in the 19th century.

3. Cremation: Examples found in Europe date to around 3,000 B.C. In ancient Greece, cremation was a way to honor soldiers who had fallen in battle. Early Rome adopted cremation and enacted the first laws regarding the practice. With Constantine's Christianization of the Romans Empire, burial practices largely replaced cremation except for times when the spread of disease was a concern. Early societies practiced cremation because they believed that without a body, the dead could no longer hurt the living. About 1900 B.C. Hinduism and Buddhism practiced cremation based on the belief that the god of fire received sacrificial offerings on behalf of all the gods. Cremation puts the body to fire at about 1800 degrees F. where only bone pieces are left, which are ground to a powder; these are the "ashes."

My point is that the ancient history of either embalming or cremation indicates they were not done for godly reasons. The Bible does not tell us which way to handle the body of those who die. And what do we know when the Bible does not tell us what to do? It is a sonship decision.

Different cultures dispose of their dead in different ways. Even though the first cremation in this country was in 1876, it wasn't until the 1970s that cremation began to be a popular alternative to embalming and burial. This was true for a couple of reasons.

Firstly, the culture in this country has dictated that we embalm and bury our dead. But, in the last five decades, people have begun to question certain things in the culture. A second reason for the interest in cremation is the cost of traditional funerals has gone sky high, especially when compared to cremation. While costs vary around the country, the median cost for a burial funeral is just under \$10,000, while cremation is around \$1,000 - \$3,000. My step mother's total cost for her cremation funeral which included the burial plot in a cemetery was \$1,111.00, but that was some years ago.

So, the question in the minds of many is: Is it a sin to cremate the dead? Some people think it is a sin, while other people are not sure, and still others think it is okay to cremate the dead. Well, to answer the question biblically, we need to

answer a couple of questions. The first is: What really happens to us when we die?

To see this answered from the Bible, let's turn to Genesis where we are told something about what happened to Rachel (Jacob's wife) when she died.

Genesis 35:18 And it came to pass, **as her soul was in departing**, (for she died) that she called his name Ben-oni: but his father called him Benjamin.

When Rachel's body died, her soul "departed." This is a common way to talk about death in the Bible.

Philippians 1:23 For I am in a strait betwixt two, having a desire **to depart**, and to be with Christ; which is far better:

Paul is saying he has a desire for his inner man, his soul, to leave his body and be with Christ.

James 2:26 For **as the body without the spirit is dead**, so faith without works is dead also.

According to the Bible, two things happen when our physical body dies: 1) our inward man (our soul and spirit) exits out of our physical body. But there is a second thing that happens when our body dies.

Job 14:10 But man dieth, and wasteth away: yea, man giveth up the ghost, and where *is* he?

This is talking about the physical body, not the soul. Job 14 says that when a man's body dies, it "wasteth away."

Genesis 3:19 In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, **till thou return unto the ground**; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou *art*, and **unto dust shalt thou return**.

When our physical body dies, it will dissolve back to dust. It will waste away, even the bones. Several factors influence the rate of bone decay such as moisture, acidity, oxygen exposure, scavengers and bone type. Bones can take a few weeks, up to centuries to decay.

This decaying action is the second thing that takes place at death. When a body dies, it begins a process of decomposition that will culminate in returning to dust. That process begins immediately, but it will take some time for it to complete the process.

Let's turn to a verse we looked at in a previous session studying 1 Corinthians 15.

Job 19:25 For I know *that* my redeemer liveth, and *that* he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth: ²⁶ And *though after my skin worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God:*

What are the “worms” that Job says will destroy his physical body? He is talking about maggots, which will eat away at the rotting flesh. But Job says, that even though the maggots will destroy his body, he will still be resurrected to have a body of flesh, in which he will see God.

Think about this: if maggots eat our flesh, then as we turn to dust, we first turn mostly to worm flesh. Then, if a bird eats the worm, what happens then? The point here is to say, when the Bible says that our body will return to dust it is not describing how that happens, but what the end result will be.

1 Corinthians 15:42 So also *is* the resurrection of the dead. **It is sown in corruption;** it is raised in incorruption:

1 Corinthians 15:52 In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. ⁵³ For **this corruptible** must put on incorruption, and this mortal *must* put on immortality.

The point is that when we die, our body begins to decay and corrupt. Embalming does not prevent this process, but only slows it. Some forms of that decay happen faster than others. But eventually, everyone's flesh decays.

It is interesting that Peter talks about the process whereby God will bring in a new heaven and a new earth by an act very similar to cremation.

2 Peter 3:10 But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night; in the which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and **the elements**

shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up.¹¹ *Seeing then that all these things shall be dissolved*, what manner of persons ought ye to be in *all* holy conversation and godliness,

At the day of the Lord, as the Lord is going to renovate the old heavens and earth by fire, to make a new heavens and earth; this describes a heat that is so great that it will literally melt the very elements of the universe and dissolve them.

This is a description of the cremation of the heavens and earth. The temperature at which the cremation of a person's body takes place is somewhere around 1400 to 2100 degrees F. After about 2 hours, the body mass is reduced to about 5% of your original weight. The "ashes" are usually around 5-9 lbs. for an adult.

If a body is embalmed, all that does is slow down the decomposition process. A body that is embalmed will take years to decompose. A body by itself will decay in days. A body cremated only takes hours. It is described in the literature: "Cremation is a hastening of the natural decaying process."

The issue in the Bible is not how you return to dust, but that you will return to dust. What is important is not what is happening to your body, but that your soul exits your body.

Up until 1966, the Roman Catholic Church banned cremation because they believed that cremation somehow destroyed the soul and prevented a person from being resurrected. This is why the Roman church burned heretics at the stake. They believed that if they burned your body, then you can't be resurrected. This is why they dug up John Wycliffe from "consecrated ground" and burned his body and spread the ashes in the River Swift.

1 Corinthians 13:1 Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become *as* sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal.

² And though I have *the gift of prophecy*, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing.³ And though I bestow all

my goods to feed *the poor*, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing.

Even though Paul is talking about martyrdom, the process of what is happening to the body is the same as cremation. If he gave his body to be burned out of charity, then it would be profitable. Notice, Paul didn't say, "if I commit adultery out of charity, it will be profitable." You cannot do sinful things out of charity. So, evidently, having your body burned, Paul does not think it is a sin. Otherwise, many great men who worked to give us a bible in English, would have committed sin by being burned at the stake.

One last thing, if you recall the story of how Saul and his sons died as they were fighting against the Philistines, you know that when the Philistines found Saul's dead body, they cut his head off. They carried his body and head and the bodies of his sons and nailed them in the temple of Dagon.

1 Samuel 31:11 And when the inhabitants of Jabesh-gilead heard of that which the Philistines had done to Saul; ¹² All the valiant men arose, and went all night, and took the body of Saul and the bodies of his sons from the wall of Beth-shan, and came to Jabesh, and burnt them there. ¹³ And they took their bones, and buried *them* under a tree at Jabesh, and fasted seven days.

Evidently, they thought it was disrespectful to have Saul's body treated this way. So, they took his head and body, and burned them, and then buried the bones. They wanted to bury the remains, but they had no problem with burning the body.

I think we make too much of what happens to our body once it is dead; the important part is what happens to our soul. People die in fires; get eaten by crocodiles, lions or sharks. People have died and even been vaporized in explosions, but none of this will prevent God from changing their body and raising it up.

The real question, the most important question, is this: are you in Christ? If you are watching this video and you are not sure if you died today, where you would

spend eternity, then we encourage you to reach out to us and let us send you a video that will walk you through this very important decision. You can reach us at (888) 605-3202 or staff@mbiworldwide.org and ask for the video, *The Most Important Decision*.

I have listened to quite a number of prominent preachers and teachers talk about this issue and I have especially listened to those who disagree with me on cremation. Let me show you their major arguments. But look, I think you have the liberty in Christ to choose how you deal with the dead body of a loved one, as none of these are labeled in the Bible as a sin. We need to stop being everyone's tutor and governor on these things where the Bible makes no direct comment, one way or another.

Often, cremation is said to be a sin because of what happened to Achan, who was stoned to death and then burned with fire. Achan knew the command about taking a spoil and he took a chance anyway. The spoil was declared to be "accursed" and whomever took was to be burned with fire. He was executed and burned according to the prescription given to all Israel.

Joshua 7:15 And it shall be, *that* he that is taken with the accursed thing shall be burnt with fire, he and all that he hath: because he hath transgressed the covenant of the LORD, and because he hath wrought folly in Israel.

The thief and the goods were all burned with fire to send a message to the nation. Why the death penalty for stealing? Because that act costs 36 Israelite soldiers their lives in the battle of Ai.

But burning was not the common way of burial for someone who had been executed for some sin against God.

Deuteronomy 21:18 If a man have a stubborn and rebellious son, which will not obey the voice of his father, or the voice of his mother, and *that*, when they have chastened him, will not hearken unto them:¹⁹ Then shall his father and his mother lay hold on him, and bring him out unto the elders of his city, and unto the gate of his place;²⁰ And they shall say unto the elders

of his city, This our son *is* stubborn and rebellious, he will not obey our voice; *he is* a glutton, and a drunkard. ²¹ And **all the men of his city shall stone him with stones, that he die**: so shalt thou put evil away from among you; and all Israel shall hear, and fear. ²² **And if a man have committed a sin worthy of death, and he be to be put to death, and thou hang him on a tree:** ²³ **His body shall not remain all night upon the tree, but thou shalt in any wise bury him that day; (for he that is hanged *is* accursed of God;)** **that thy land be not defiled**, which the LORD thy God giveth thee *for* an inheritance.

Verse 23: in other words, bury him that same day lest the decomposition of the body present disease to the living, which would “defile the land.”

There were four methods of execution among the ancient Jews; stoning, burning, sword and strangulation by hanging, which were considered to be the means of death when no other method is expressed in the Scripture.