

# Cremation or Burial?

John R. Ecob D.D.

**S**hould a Christian allow their body to be cremated or should they insist on burial?

What others do must never be the sole guide to what we do. Each believer is answerable to the Lord and we should seek an answer from His Word concerning cremation. Since I am now over 80 years I have thought of this question and have asked, What would glorify God? and, What does the Bible say on the subject?

Throughout Scripture I search in vain for even one example of a believer, Old Testament or New Testament, who was cremated. Everyone was buried in a sepulchre or tomb. Concerning the kings of Israel, the phrase is repeated again and again, "*He slept with his fathers*" indicating that the body was resting and one day expected to be awakened. In the New Testament the saints "*sleep in Jesus*" which indicates an awakening is anticipated. The New Testament also describes believers as "*sown*" and "*planted*" (1Cor.15:42-44) with a view to resurrection from the dead. Paul likens the death of believers to **a grain of seed placed in the ground** which one day will spring forth into new life. He certainly did not teach reincarnation but he did teach a glorious resurrection!

Pastor John Farr once told me he has conducted hundreds of funerals but has never buried a believer in the Lord Jesus - **he planted them** in the sure and certain hope of a glorious resurrection.

Abraham bought a parcel of land to bury Sarah and Joseph's tomb is at Shechem. Jacob left instructions that his bones were to be taken from Egypt and buried in Shechem.

In contrast, I find that heathen nations build funeral piles and burn their deceased while children were burned to heathen gods in Old Testament times. Some still put the dead bodies out for vultures to pick the bones bare. During the hundreds of years of Romish domination true believers were burned at the stake.

In western countries it is becoming common to do away with cemeteries and save the space by scattering the ashes in a garden or

at sea. Councils don't want the expense of maintaining cemeteries yet cemeteries are a treasure of history. If there were no tombs archaeologists would be much the poorer. Every grave is a testimony to a life and tells a story. I must answer the question, **What kind of testimony do I want to leave behind?** Ashes, or a Tomb stone with a message inscribed for all to read?

The late Pastor Reuben Costley from Perth once took me through a cemetery to show me the graves of people he had led to Christ and had later buried. Each grave was a testimony. *"He being dead yet speaketh"* (Heb.11:4). The words on our gravestone will be an enduring testimony to all who pass by and when the graves are opened at the Rapture, they will be a powerful warning to those left behind.

Isaiah 26:19 suggests that the graves will be opened at the resurrection:

*"Thy dead men shall live, together with my dead body shall they arise. Awake and sing, ye that dwell in dust: for thy dew is as the dew of herbs, and the earth shall cast out the dead."*

Christ and all the Old Testament saints in Jerusalem had their graves **opened** when they rose (Matt.27:52-53) and the above promise is given to the suffering Tribulation saints who will be raised when Christ returns (Rev.20:4).

In the prophecy of Amos he pronounces the judgment of God on the nations surrounding Israel and gives the reason for that judgment. The reason for the judgment on the land of Moab is stated:

*"because he burned the bones of the king of Edom into lime"* (Amos 2:1).

If it was wrong for the Moabites to burn the remains of their enemy surely it must be wrong for us to have our bodies cremated.

Obviously, believers who are cremated will still be raised just as the martyrs who were burned at the stake will be raised, but the martyrs did not **choose** to have their mortal remains turned to ashes; that decision was made by people whose hearts were filled with hatred for God and His servants. Many have died at sea in shipwrecks and swimming accidents; these will all be raised but they didn't choose to drown.

It is clear from Scripture therefore, that whether a person is cremated or buried will not prevent or influence the resurrection of the body, and the issue must be decided on the basis of whether the believer wants to leave a testimony behind with the possibility of a grand finale of an open grave at the Rapture.

Throughout Scripture, when the saints had a choice they always opted for burial so why not follow their example? The example of heathen nations through history is not a good alternative.

There is just another thought worth considering. When God made man he made him in His own image. That image was marred by sin but will be restored in resurrection. Should I follow the heathen practice of burning the body which was made in God's image or should I follow the example of the saints through Bible times and have my body sown until the resurrection morning? I don't think the Lord had cremation in mind when He said:

*"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"* (Gen.3:19).

### *A Personal Testimony*

On the 29 December 2013 the writer lost his beloved wife after a long illness and a headstone was erected at her grave. When confronted with the challenge of what wording should be engraved in the stone I wanted to place on record my wife's faithfulness to Christ in whom she trusted, as well as an expression of my love, and the love of the family for her. After 58 years of loving service that she rendered to us we all deeply felt the loss.

Above all else however, we were comforted by the realization that she was with Christ and that she would be raised in resurrection power at the Rapture.

We were conscious that many would pass by her grave and read the inscription and we wanted others to realise that she belonged to Christ and that they too should seek the Lord while he may be found. When the Rapture occurred and her grave was opened, we wanted people to realise why she had been caught up.

After prayer it was decided to place the following wording on the headstone, not only as comfort to us, but as a testimony to the unsaved.

*In Loving Memory Of*

*Joan Faith Escob*

Departed to be with  
Christ in whom she trusted.

29.5.1933 ~ 29.12.2013

A faithful servant of Jesus Christ.  
Greatly missed by her  
loving husband John  
and all the family.

*"Till we meet again"*

*"The dead in Christ shall rise first: then we which are alive  
and remain shall be caught up together with them..."*