

Burying Bones

Gen 50.22-26 & Josh 24.29-32 ~ June 27, 2010

➤ Joseph's Body Buried in Canaan

- We can read the Bible through every year and yet miss so much
 - Understanding requires more than reading ~ reflection & study
- Our texts for today point to something amazing
 - Joseph's body was placed in a coffin in Egypt
 - That coffin was buried centuries later in Canaan
- "Where was Joseph's coffin stored all this time?"
 - Initially Joseph was revered ~ Where was it stored?
 - "Then there arose a Pharaoh that knew not Joseph" ~ Where then?
 - Was it hidden? ~ Joseph's coffin was kept safe in Egypt for centuries
- It then travelled in the wilderness for 40 years
- "Who kept it during that time?" Descendants of Ephraim or Manasseh

➤ "Why is Joseph's Burial Mentioned with Joshua's?"

- Note the similarities
 - Both lived to be 110 years old
 - Both buried in Ephraim ~ Joshua (mountains) ~ Joseph (Shechem)
- Joshua was a great-great-great...-grandson of Joseph's son Ephraim
- Deduction: Joshua brought Joseph's body up from Egypt

➤ The Message Today is Simple

- Normally I like to keep people guessing in a sermon
 - People are intrigued by mysteries . . .
 - But today's message is simple . . .
 - My premise: "Christians should be buried – not burned"
 - But I do promise you a surprise at the end . . . 😊
- Many Christians defend cremation as being in the realm of Christian liberty
 - I believe this defense to be weak
 - I believe God clearly wants his faithful children to practice burial
 - Perhaps I'll convince you of this view ~ perhaps not . . .
 - But I believe the argument for burial to be overwhelming

Xition: Let's review the outline . . .

➤ **Message Outline**

1. Why is cremation increasing in popularity?
2. Why is burial declining in popularity?
3. What are the arguments for cremation?
4. What are the arguments against cremation?
5. What are the arguments against burial?
6. What are the arguments for burial?
7. The Surprise ending . . .

➤ **Why is Cremation Increasing in Popularity?**

- **Popularity:** 15% in 1965 ~ 35% in 2007 ~ over 50% by 2025

1. **Costs**

- A typical funeral and burial costs over \$6,000
 - A gravesite and tombstone will cost another \$3,000
- A cremation without services costs an average of \$1,000

2. **Environmentally friendlier**

- No land, less wood, no metal, concrete or formaldehyde in ground

3. People consider it **sentimental and nostalgic** ~ even romantic

- "Burn what is left of me and scatter the ashes to the wind to help the flowers grow. If you must bury something, let it be my faults, my weaknesses, and all my prejudice against my fellow man. Give my soul to God. If by chance you wish to remember me, do it with a kind deed or word to someone who needs you. If you do all I have asked, I will live forever." - Author Unknown
- Scattering ashes popular ~ Remains are converted into jewelry, placed in sports equipment, shot into space, scattered in places they loved

4. **Convenient**

- Far fewer decisions to be made
- Casket used to burn is heavy cardboard ~ viewing coffin can be rented
- No cemetery or burial plot needs to be selected

➤ **Why is Burial Declining in Popularity?**

- Opposite of what was just said about cremation
 - A traditional funeral is much more costly
 - Greater environmental impact
 - No spreading of ashes ~ reality is tied to the unmoving body
 - Less convenient ~ many decisions to be made
- We live in a transient world ~ Anchors to the land are diminishing
 - Even in Omaha ties to the land are quickly evaporating . . .

➤ **What are the arguments for cremation?**

- All earlier practical considerations
 - Cost, environmental concerns, sentimentality and convenience
- “*What about Biblical considerations?*”
 - Obviously this applies only to Christians . . .
 - Non-Christians don’t ask the question, “*What does God say?*”
 - They implicitly live out the phrase: “*I don’t care what God says*”
 - Many who call themselves believers also oppose God
 - God will oppose both in this world ~ God rules in the affairs of men
 - God’s Word and Truth will prevail – over unbelief & rebellion

➤ **Are there Biblical arguments for cremation?**

- God burned many people alive in the Bible –This was a form of execution
 - Sodom & Gomorrah, Nadab & Abihu, soldiers & Elijah, Job’s servants
- Humans burned dead bodies in two instances in the Bible
 - **Joshua 7.15ff** ~ Achan’s family stoned, burned then buried
 - **1 Samuel 31.11ff** ~ Saul and sons burned, then bones buried (*twice*)
 - But these two examples are far from normative
 - Achan was a thief ~ Saul was a rebel king that committed suicide
- The strongest biblical argument for cremation is that of Christian liberty
 - “*If God did not prescribe burial then cremation should be allowed*”

➤ **The Limits of Christian Liberty**

- But note what the Westminster Confession says in **Chapter 1.6**:
 - “*The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man’s salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture...*”
 - Also an article on the “Free Church of Scotland” website says this, “*that which may be derived by good and necessary consequence from the express statements of Scripture is no less binding than an express command itself.*”
 - The question then is, “*Does Scripture portray burial as normative?*”

➤ **What are the arguments against cremation?**

- Nations that practice cremation often do so for religious reasons
 - They are setting the spirit free from the body
- The first cremation in America occurred in 1876
 - It was accompanied by readings from Darwin and Hindu Scriptures
 - Cremations remained under 5% into the 1950’s

➤ **What are Biblical arguments against cremation?**

- The main Biblical argument against cremation is that fire is judgment
 - Fire falls from Heaven in judgment upon people
 - There's not one instance of burning a body as opposed to burying it
 - In Saul's case he was burned then buried (diseased...)
 - In **Amos 2.1** God judged Moab for having "*burned the bones of the king of Edom to lime*"
 - God considered it reprehensible (and this was an Edomite king)

➤ **What are arguments against burial?**

- All of the earlier arguments c/declining popularity
 - Cost of funerals and burial plots
 - Plots in some cities are not even available ~ no room for cemeteries
 - Christians in India don't want to cremate but burying is difficult
 - People less attached to land – more transient

➤ **What are Biblical arguments against burial?**

- I don't see any . . . Instances where burial not performed are judgmental
 - **Jer 16.4** ~ "*they shall not be buried . . . they shall be like refuse*"
 - **2 Kings 9** ~ Body of Jezebel eaten before Jehu could have her buried
 - **1 Kings 13.22** ~ Prophet punished by not being buried with fathers
 - Anyone of Jeroboam, Baasha and Ahab "*dogs shall eat*"

➤ **What are Biblical arguments for burial?**

- Burial is definitely the Biblical norm
 - **Gen 23.19** ~ "*Abraham buried his wife Sarah*"
 - **Gen 25.10** ~ "*Abraham was buried with his wife Sarah*"
 - **Gen 35.8** ~ "*Deborah, Rebekah's nurse, died and was buried*"
 - **Gen 35.19** ~ "*Rachel died and was buried*"
 - **Gen 35.29** ~ "*Isaac's sons Esau and Jacob buried him*"
 - **Gen 47.30** ~ Jacob tells Joseph - "*carry me out of Egypt and bury me*"
 - Many, many more examples: Miriam, Aaron, Moses, Eleazar, Gideon and other judges, Samuel, Saul, Asahel, Abner, Ish-Bosheth and David
 - **Mat 14.12** ~ John the Baptist buried
 - **Mat 27.57** ~ Jesus buried in Joseph's Tomb
 - **Acts 5.5-10** ~ Ananias and Sapphira buried

- Burial is a Biblical honor
 - **1 Kings 14** ~ Abijah, son of King Jeroboam falls ill
 - Jeroboam's wife goes to prophet Ahijah in disguise
 - Read **1 Kings 14.6-13** ~ Burial of Jeroboam's son an honor . . .

- **What are other arguments for burial? ~ Historical practice**
 - Jews practiced burial for millennia – from Abraham to Jesus
 - Their practices are still very simple
 - no embalming, burial within 24 hours, no fancy viewings or caskets
 - Christians practiced burial from Jesus to the mid-20th century
 - Julian the Apostate (*hated Christians*) lived in 4th century
 - He said the popularity of Christianity was due to:
 - ◆ 1) love for one another, 2) truthfulness, and 3) care for the dead
 - The catacombs were extensive Christian burial grounds
 - Early Christians faced persecution because of their burial practices
 - Pagans killed Christians and burned them to deny them burial
 - **!-!** - God can resurrect ashes! ~ Silly strawman argument you'll find all over

- **What are other arguments for burial? ~ Symbolic significance**
 - Meaning of the terms
 - cremation (from Latin cremare "to burn, or consume with fire")
 - cemetery (from Latin coemeterium "sleeping place")
 - Jesus referred to the dead as asleep
 - **Read Mt 9.23-25** ~ "the girl is not dead, but sleeping"
 - **Read John 11.11-14** ~ "Our friend Lazarus sleeps"
 - Jesus introduced this euphemism for death
 - John Murray wrote this about death and burial:
 - *"Believers are dead in Christ, they sleep through Jesus. So what is laid in the grave is still integral to the person who died. In and during death, the person is identified with the dissolved material entity."*
 - Jesus in **John 12** spoke of His body being sown in the ground
 - Paul in **1 Cor 15.44** says "It is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body"
 - **Mat 8.22** "let the dead bury their own dead" is not prescriptive
 - The story is not about burying people
 - It's also not about not caring whether people are buried or not
 - The point Jesus made was just one of priorities

➤ **Cultural Practices and Norms**

- Ceremonies related to death are **social activities**
 - How we deal with the dead is a reflection of our societal values
- **!!!: Taking Chance** (Fallen soldier escorted from Dover, DE to Wyoming town)
 - Honors are rendered all along the way (slow-motion salutes)
 - He's told to remove his Marine Corps jacket (security) and he refuses
 - He declines a hotel room and sleeps next to the coffin in a hangar
- Such ritual is not long for our military services
- Soon soldiers KIA may be cremated and shipped home in smaller boxes

➤ **Surprise**

- More could be said about this topic ~ I'm going very quickly
 - And perhaps you're not convinced
 - Perhaps you still believe it's an aspect of Christian liberty
- To you I would say:
 - **"If cremation is a valid option for a corpse then so is cannibalism."**
- The Bible nowhere prohibits us from eating people
 - We're not allowed to kill people to eat them
 - But we're not commanded to not eat people
 - And there are Biblical examples of it that are not condemned
 - I won't develop that further . . .
 - But I stand by the truth of the comparison
- Where Christianity took hold in a society, cremation declined
- Where Christianity took hold in a society, cannibalism declined

➤ **Our bodies belong to God**

- Our bodies belong to God in death just as they do in life
- Is it your right to burn another's body?
 - to have their bones ground down into a sand-like texture?
 - and turned into jewelry or sprinkled in a park (however pretty)?
 - People consistently poll lower in choosing cremation for others
- I don't believe the Bible allows for cremation . . .
- If God does it, so be it, I'm just saying we shouldn't

➤ **Let us pray . . .**