

RIGHT or WRONG? Cremation

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Our family cannot decide whether cremation is biblically acceptable. Can you provide some biblical reference points or standards?

Cremation is an increasingly popular alternative to burial. Since it isn't a traditional Christian form, believers can struggle with its biblical acceptability.

The earliest reference to burial in the Bible is Genesis 23:19. Sarah died, and Abraham needed a place to bury her. He purchased a field in Machpelah that had a cave and interred Sarah there. Archeological evidence shows people often used caves as tombs. These tombs often had a shelf and a box for bones. When people died, their families placed their bodies on the shelf and closed the tomb's entrance.

When the next member of the family died, the family opened the tomb, placed the bones of the previously deceased in the box and placed the recently deceased on the shelf. This custom lasted at least until Jesus' time, because Jesus was buried in this fashion, although his followers placed his body in a tomb no one had used (Matthew 27:57-60).

While Greeks and Romans sometimes practiced cremation, Jews and early Christians did not. A few Bible passages describe burning a person in fire as a form of punishment (Leviticus 20:14; 21:9; Joshua 7:25). It's uncertain what bearing this would have on cremation, since these punishments were for living people. The people of Jabesh-Gilead removed the bodies of Saul and his sons from a city wall and burned them (1 Samuel 31:12), but they did this to remove the shame of the bodies being exposed to the elements.

While some use these passages to question the acceptability of cremation for believers, doing so puts more weight on them than they can bear. No

New Testament passage prescribes a particular form of disposal of a dead body. Passages like 1 Corinthians 15 and Revelation 20:11-15 suggest the disposal of our bodies has no bearing on our resurrections.

The Jewish Mishna forbids cremation. Jewish burials took place on the day of death. Some argue that since this was the way Jews handled dead bodies and Jesus was buried in this way, then the Christian dead should be buried, not cremated. Some also argue that since cremation came from pagan religions, it's inappropriate for Christians. However, Christian practices diverge from the Mishna at many points, and Bible passages about burial are descriptive, not prescriptive.

Furthermore, while cremation isn't consistent with biblical descriptions of burial and has pagan origins, one could say the same things about funeral homes, expensive caskets and embalming. Since the Bible neither affirms nor condemns any particular form of disposing of dead bodies, and since what happens to them has no bearing on their resurrection, we must make our decision on the bases of what most honors God and what's most important to our families.

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Right or Wrong? is sponsored by the T.B. Maston Chair of Christian Ethics at Hardin-Simmons University's Logsdon School of Theology. Send your questions about how to apply your faith to btillman@hsutx.edu.