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Burial or Cremation?

The end of life is a sad time for all those left behind.

But – what should be done with our body?

by James McBride

All faiths have their rituals for disposing of the physical body, often reflecting deep-held beliefs as to what happens 'beyond the grave'. For the Christian there is the hope of resurrection—the restoration of the individual to share in the reward for a life well-lived. But there is a dilemma: burial, or cremation?

For some it's a matter of practicality. Cost may be a factor. Or maintenance of a distant burial plot. Even a fear of being buried alive. There may, too, have been the wishes of the deceased, or a necessary delay in the funeral service. But for many Christians the decision may be influenced by their understanding of 'theology'.

The disposal of the dead in ancient times was almost universally by burial, reflecting the general understanding that '*...dust you are, to dust you shall return*' (Genesis 3:19). In later times various culturally driven methods and rituals developed - embalming, for example, among the Egyptians.

An extension of burial in the ground was the use of some form of family tomb—as with Abraham and his descendants (Genesis 25:9). (Joseph had his father Jacob embalmed and then interred in a cave.) Burial is also seen as a mark of respect (II Kings 9:34). It was the norm, and not only among Israelites. An exception to burial is from necessity as in a plague when the victims are, wisely, burned (Amos 6:10). King Saul and his sons' dead bodies were beheaded by the Philistines who made an exhibition of them. Loyal Israelites burned the remains and buried the bones to protect them from marauders (I Samuel 31:8-12).

Cremation

There were occasions among the Israelites when burning (cremation) took place. Burning was the legal response to heinous criminal behaviour: '*... a man takes a wife and her mother, it is wickedness. They shall be burned with fire*'

(Leviticus 20:14, also 21:9). The cremation, of course, followed judicial execution by stoning *etc* (Joshua 7:25). It was a sign, during those times, of disgrace. In the New Testament cremation isn't noted. Paul's analogy is that the body is 'sown', as in the ground: '*... it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body*' (I Corinthians 15:44). An example of Christian disposal of the dead is of Ananias and Sapphira—both buried (Acts 5:6, 9).

It is a not uncommon belief by Christians, however, that cremation is a reflection of the mythical 'hell fire' and is therefore avoided. But consider. Since the flesh and even bones disintegrate over time—turn to 'dust'—how the body is disposed of is irrelevant (but very personal).

After the Millennium

Those who die not having the indwelling Spirit of God will be resurrected after the end of the thousand-year reign of Christ (Revelation 20:5). Upon death their spirit is preserved until then—to be re-formed in flesh according to the 'template' of their human spirit. They will live in the flesh and be presented with the same Gospel message as mankind today—the opportunity to become a part of the divine Family of God.

Any who reject the offer of salvation will die a second death, their dead body and spirit consumed by fire. both destroyed—only God's Spirit is immortal—in the final conflagration that cleanses planet Earth (Revelation 20:14-15).

Christians have died in fires—their resurrection is no less secure!

Burial or Cremation?

When We Die

Death may overtake in bed at home or in a hospital or care home. Or result from a violent act, or an accident. On the other hand the body may be consumed in fire or devoured at sea—even destroyed in space—with no remains to dispose of. In the latter cases—how can the individual be resurrected?

Man is more than the billions of sophisticated cells that make us, for every creature, including, mankind, is driven by an indwelling ‘spirit’. It is what makes a fly or an elephant do what it does. In human-kind it is what the Scriptures term the ‘*spirit in man*’ (Job 32:8). To be basic, the spirit is a ‘recording device’ on which is encoded our DNA, even our thoughts and our character. Upon death the spirit ‘...returns to God who gave it’ (Ecclesiastes 12:7). In His care the human spirit is reserved until re-united with the spirit body at the return of Jesus: ‘...it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. There is a natural body, and there is a spiritual body’ (I Corinthians 15:44).

At our resurrection all our characteristics, encoded on our preserved human spirit—and accrued during our physical lifespan—are enabled in our new spirit body. Notice how Jesus, appearing in his spirit body on the Mount of Transfiguration, the disciples recognized and communicated with him (Matthew 17:2-4).

In sum, the last ‘resting place’ of the body is a cultural matter, the mode of disposal subject to change in different societies. The norm in Israel was for burial, and still is for most societies. Burning was an expression of revulsion. Other faiths attach great religious significance to cremation—in Hinduism it is (except for ‘holy men’) mandatory, the dead body being an offering to Agni, the god of fire. Islam forbids cremation as does the Greek Orthodox church. But in the modern Christian world there is no stigma or idolatry attached to cremation—it is the simple disposal of the body, and is a matter of personal choice and not a Biblical requirement.

We can be assured that however our body is disposed of when life ends, as Christians we remain in the care of our loving Father, our spirit preserved until the glorious resurrection at the return of the Saviour.

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