

Preparing to Die Well – Lesson 6

Eternal Life, Eternal Death, Burial vs. Cremation

What it Means to “Die Well

J.I. Packer says, “What shall we do in heaven? Not lounge around! – but worship, work, think, communicate, enjoying activity, beauty, people, and God. First and foremost, we shall see and love Jesus, our Savior, Master, and Friend. I have been writing with enthusiasm, for this everlasting life is something to which I look forward. Why? Not because I am out of love with life here – just the reverse! My life is full of joy, from four sources – knowing God, and people, and the good and pleasant things that God and men under God have created, and doing things which are worthwhile for God or others or for myself as God’s man. As I get older, I find that I appreciate God, and people, and good and lovely and noble things more and more intensely; so it is pure delight to think that this enjoyment will continue and increase in some form, literally forever.” (“Growing in Christ”, Crossway, Wheaton, Ill, 1994, pp 88-89.)

Eternal Life in Heaven

What will happen to those who are judged righteous?

Westminster Larger Catechism Q&A 90

Q. What shall be done to the righteous at the day of judgment?

A. At the day of judgment, the righteous, being caught up to Christ in the clouds, shall be set on his right hand, and there openly acknowledged and acquitted, shall join with him in the judging of reprobate angels and men, and shall be received into heaven, where they shall be fully and forever freed from all sin and misery; filled with inconceivable joys, made perfectly holy and happy both in body and soul, in the company of innumerable saints and holy angels, but especially in the immediate vision and fruition of God the Father, of our Lord Jesus Christ, and of the Holy Spirit, to all eternity. And this is the perfect and full communion, which the members of the invisible church shall enjoy with Christ in glory, at the resurrection and day of judgment.

Matthew 25:34-40

³⁴ “Then the King will say to those on His right, ‘Come, you who are blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. ³⁵ For I was hungry, and you gave Me something to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me something to drink; I was a stranger, and you invited Me in; ³⁶ naked, and you clothed Me; I was sick, and you visited Me; I was in prison, and you came to Me.’ ³⁷ Then the righteous will answer Him, ‘Lord, when did we see You hungry, and feed You, or thirsty, and give You something to drink? ³⁸ And when did we see You a stranger, and invite You in, or naked, and clothe You? ³⁹ When did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?’ ⁴⁰ The King will answer and say to them, ‘Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me.’”

Eternal Death in Hell

What will happen to those who are judged wicked?

Westminster Larger Catechism Q&A 29

Q. What are the punishments of sin in the world to come?

A. The punishments of sin in the world to come, are everlasting separation from the comfortable presence of God, and most grievous torments in soul and body, without intermission, in hell-fire forever.

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Westminster Larger Catechism Q&A 89

Q. What shall be done to the wicked at the day of judgment?

A. At the day of judgment, the wicked shall be set on Christ's left hand, and, upon clear evidence, and full conviction of their own consciences, shall have the fearful but just sentence of condemnation pronounced against them; and thereupon shall be cast out from the favourable presence of God, and the glorious fellowship with Christ, his saints, and all his holy angels, into hell, to be punished with unspeakable torments, both of body and soul, with the devil and his angels forever.

Matthew 25:41:46

⁴¹ "Then He will also say to those on His left, 'Depart from Me, accursed ones, into the eternal fire which has been prepared for the devil and his angels; ⁴² for I was hungry, and you gave Me nothing to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me nothing to drink; ⁴³ I was a stranger, and you did not invite Me in; naked, and you did not clothe Me; sick, and in prison, and you did not visit Me.' ⁴⁴ Then they themselves also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry, or thirsty, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not take care of You?' ⁴⁵ Then He will answer them, 'Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me.' ⁴⁶ These will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

Revelation 20:10 -15

¹⁰ And the devil who deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and brimstone, where the beast and the false prophet are also; and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever. ¹¹ Then I saw a great white throne and Him who sat upon it, from whose presence earth and heaven fled away, and no place was found for them. ¹² And I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne, and books were opened; and another book was opened, which is the book of life; and the dead were judged from the things which were written in the books, according to their deeds. ¹³ And the sea gave up the dead which were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead which were in them; and they were judged, every one of them according to their deeds. ¹⁴ Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. ¹⁵ And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.

Burial and Cremation

Should Christians consider cremation as an alternative to burial?

There is a lot of discussion these days around the so-called advantages of cremation over burial. But are these advantages really that beneficial? The short answer to this question is, "Probably not."

Two important principles used to study what Scripture has to say about a subject include: (1) where the subject is first used and (2) how many times it is used.

Cremation

Sociologically, the burning of human bodies has long been a practice of pagan cultures. To God's people, burning has usually been the extreme expression of punishment and displeasure. Burnings at the stake in the Roman church from the 1300's through the 1500's are examples along this line of reasoning.

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What references to the burning of human bodies appear in Scripture?

Aside from God's testing Abraham by telling him to offer up his son Isaac as a burnt offering (Genesis 22), there are not many references to the burning of human bodies in Scripture. In general, it is forbidden.

Deuteronomy 12:31

³¹ You shall not behave [as foreigners] toward the Lord your God, for every abominable act which the Lord hates they have done for their gods; for they even burn their sons and daughters in the fire to their gods.

The first reference is Judah's ordering his daughter-in-law Tamar to be burned as punishment for her adultery. But he relented after discovering that her adultery had been with him (Genesis 38:14-19).

Genesis 38:24-26

²⁴ Now it was about three months later that Judah was informed, "Your daughter-in-law Tamar has played the harlot, and behold, she is also with child by harlotry." Then Judah said, "Bring her out and let her be burned!" ²⁵ It was while she was being brought out that she sent to her father-in-law, saying, "I am with child by the man to whom these things belong." And she said, "Please examine and see, whose signet ring and cords and staff are these?" ²⁶ Judah recognized them, and said, "She is more righteous than I, inasmuch as I did not give her to my son Shelah." And he did not have relations with her again.

Another reference to burning as punishment for sin was that of Achan and his family for taking and hiding some items from Jericho. These items were "under the ban." The gold and silver should have been put into the Lord's treasury, and the scarf should have been destroyed. But even Achan and his family were "buried" under a heap of stones after they had been burned.

Joshua 7:15, 25-26

¹⁵ [God said to Joshua,] It shall be that the one who is taken with the things under the ban shall be burned with fire, he and all that belongs to him, because he has transgressed the covenant of the Lord, and because he has committed a disgraceful thing in Israel...

²⁵ Joshua said [to Achan], "Why have you troubled us? The Lord will trouble you this day." And all Israel stoned them with stones; and they burned them with fire after they had stoned them with stones. ²⁶ They raised over him a great heap of stones that stands to this day, and the Lord turned from the fierceness of His anger.

To desecrate a human body was shameful in Israel. King Saul and his sons were mutilated after being killed in battle. But their bodies were rescued by their countrymen and were then burned and buried.

1 Samuel 31:8-13

⁸ It came about on the next day when the Philistines came to strip the slain, that they found Saul and his three sons fallen on Mount Gilboa. ⁹ They cut off his head and stripped off his weapons, and sent them throughout the land of the Philistines, to carry the good news to the house of their idols and to the people. ¹⁰ They put his weapons in the temple of Ashtaroth, and they fastened his body to the wall of Beth-shan. ¹¹ Now when the inhabitants of Jabesh-gilead heard what the Philistines had done to Saul, ¹² all the valiant men rose and walked all night, and took the body of Saul and the bodies of

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his sons from the wall of Beth-shan, and they came to Jabesh and burned them there. ¹³ They took their bones and buried them under the tamarisk tree at Jabesh and fasted seven days.

Perhaps the bodies had begun to decompose from being exposed on the wall.

To remain in a field unburied was a great offence. The account of Rizpah, one of Saul's concubines, records a particularly gruesome event in King David's life. The land had been under a famine, and the Lord revealed to King David that it was because King Saul had killed some Gibeonites (2 Samuel 21:1), whom Joshua had sworn an oath not to harm. In order to make things right, David asked for and granted a request from the Gibeonites to have seven men from the House of Saul hanged, including two of Rizpah's sons. Afterward, the bodies were left out in the open until Rizpah's vigilance over them compelled David to bury them.

2 Samuel 21:10-11,13-14

¹⁰ And Rizpah the daughter of Aiah took sackcloth and spread it for herself on the rock, from the beginning of harvest until it rained on [the bones of the hanged men] from the sky; and she allowed neither the birds of the sky to rest on them by day nor the beasts of the field by night. ¹¹ When it was told David what Rizpah the daughter of Aiah, the concubine of Saul, had done, ... ¹³ [David] brought up the bones of Saul and the bones of Jonathan his son from [Jabesh], and they gathered the bones of those who had been hanged. ¹⁴ They buried the bones of Saul and Jonathan his son in the country of Benjamin in Zela, in the grave of Kish [Saul's] father; thus they did all that the king commanded, and after that God was moved by prayer for the land.

Burning is reserved for the punishment of sin that the wicked will suffer forever in hell.

Isaiah 66:24

²⁴ "Then they will go forth and look on the corpses of the men who have transgressed against Me. For their worm will not die and their fire will not be quenched; and they will be an abhorrence to all mankind."

Jesus refers to this verse when He talks about the future life of torment for the wicked.

Mark 9:43-48

⁴³ [Jesus said,] If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life crippled, than, having your two hands, to go into hell, into the unquenchable fire, ⁴⁴ [where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.] ⁴⁵ If your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame, than, having your two feet, to be cast into hell, ⁴⁶ [where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.] ⁴⁷ If your eye causes you to stumble, throw it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye, than, having two eyes, to be cast into hell, ⁴⁸ where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.

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Burial

BibleGateway.com shows a word count shows that the words “bury,” “buried,” or “burial” occur in 163 verses in the NASB.

The word “buried” is first used with reference to God’s covenant promise to Abraham.

Genesis 15:15

¹⁵ As for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you will be buried at a good old age.

Some people whom the Bible explicitly mentions were buried include:

- Abraham (Genesis 25:9)
- Sarah (Genesis 29:19)
- Isaac (Genesis 35:29)
- Rebekah and Leah (Genesis 49:31)
- Rachel (Genesis 35:19)
- Jacob (Genesis 50:13)
- Joseph (Joshua 24:32)
- Miriam (Numbers 20:1)
- Aaron (Deuteronomy 10:6)
- Moses (Deuteronomy 34:5-6)
- All the judges, including Samuel (1 Samuel 25:1)
- All the kings of Judah and Israel, including King David (1 Kings 2:10)

A normal practice with crucifixion was to leave the body hanging. The Lord Jesus Christ was taken down from the cross and buried before the Sabbath began so as not to be left exposed in this manner.

Matthew 27:57-61

⁵⁷ When it was evening, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who himself had also become a disciple of Jesus. ⁵⁸ This man went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then Pilate ordered it to be given to him. ⁵⁹ And Joseph took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen cloth, ⁶⁰ and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had hewn out in the rock; and he rolled a large stone against the entrance of the tomb and went away. ⁶¹ And Mary Magdalene was there, and the other Mary, sitting opposite the grave.

John’s gospel tells us that burial and care for the body was the custom of the Jews.

John 19:40

⁴⁰ So they took the body of Jesus and bound it in linen wrappings with the spices, as is the burial custom of the Jews.

The Greek word translated as “custom” can also be translated as “manner” or “prescription by law.”

What can we conclude from this discussion?

We can summarize this discussion by saying that burial matters. There is too much precedent in the Bible for that not to be true. But recognize that funeral burial practices and memorial tombs can become idols. John Calvin insisted on being buried in an unmarked grave.

The Bible promises that we will be raised again. Burial best preserves the promises of the resurrection. As Christians, we ought to want and seek to be buried. But our entrance into heaven does not ultimately depend upon whether our bodies receive a proper burial. It does ultimately and only depend upon our relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ. Christians who are lost at sea, devoured by wild animals, or destroyed in wars will still enter heaven and receive their new and glorified resurrected bodies.

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Also, cremation is not so much cheaper than burial. One does not save that much money because of all the additional state and federal regulations around cremation. Is it not worth something to obey Scripture's pattern rather than the world's?

An Example of Dying Well

The following story of the death of Augustine is from *The Life of St. Augustine* by the 5th century Bishop Possidius, who was a friend of Augustine and an attendant at his death.

Now the holy man in his long life given of God for the benefit and happiness of the holy Church (for he lived seventy-six years, almost forty of which he spent as a priest or bishop), in private conversations frequently told us that even after baptism had been received, exemplary Christians and priests ought not depart from this life without fitting and appropriate repentance. And this he himself did in his last illness of which he died. For he commanded that the shortest penitential Psalms of David should be copied for him, and during the days of his sickness as he lay in bed he would look at these sheets as they hung upon the wall and read them; and he wept freely and constantly. And that his attention might not be interrupted by anyone, about ten days before he departed from the body he asked of us who were present that no one should come in to him, except only at the hours in which the physicians came to examine him or when nourishment was brought to him. This, accordingly, was observed and done, and he had all that time free for prayer. Up to the very moment of his last illness he preached the Word of God in the church incessantly, vigorously and powerfully, with a clear mind and sound judgment. With all the members of his body intact, with sight and hearing unimpaired, while we stood by and watched and prayed, "he slept with his fathers," as it is written, "well-nourished in a good old age." And in our presence, after a service was offered to God for the peaceful repose of his body, he was buried. He made no will, because as a poor man of God he had nothing from which to make it. He repeatedly ordered that the library of the church and all the books should be carefully preserved for future generations. Whatever the church had in the way of possessions or ornaments he left in charge of his presbyter, who had the care of the church building under his direction. Neither in life nor death did he treat his relatives according to the general custom, whether they observed his manner of life or not. But while he was still living, whenever there was need he gave to them the same as he gave others, not that they should have riches, but that they might not be in want, or at least might be less in want. He left to the Church a fully sufficient body of clergy and monasteries of men and women with their continent overseers, together with the library and books containing treatises of his own and of other holy men. By the help of God, one may find therein how great he was in the Church and therein the faithful may always find him living.