

**I'm glad you asked:
Is it okay to cremate a loved one?**

Don Reigstad

Cremation is increasingly considered by many as an option to interment (i.e. burial). Thoughtful Christians are asking, "Is there anything wrong with cremating a loved one?" "Why was it taboo for many in the past generations?" What does the Bible say about cremation? I will attempt to answer these questions in this brief position paper.

- 1.) Definition of cremation: "burnt to ashes", from Latin "cremare", to burn.
- 2.) History of cremation.
 - a) Widely practiced in the ancient world except in Egypt and China.
 - b) Uncommon among the Israelites.
 - When the Philistines found the dead bodies of Saul and his 3 sons, they dishonored them by hanging them exposed upon the wall of Beth Shan. Courageous men came from Jabesh Gilead, cut down the bodies, burned them and buried their bones. There was no stigma of disrespect in this burning (I Samuel 31:8-13).
 - "And if a relative who is to burn the bodies comes to carry them out..." (Amos 6:10).
 - The death penalty in some cases (Genesis 38:24) and the climax to the death penalty in others (Joshua 7:25).
 - Burning of persons was often seen as a judgment of God upon the person(s).
 - ⇒ Tamar (Genesis 38:24)
 - ⇒ The house of Jeroboam (I Kings 14:10; cf I Kings 13, II Kings 23, and II Chronicles 34).
 - ⇒ Sodom (Genesis 19:24; cf I Peter 2:6).
 - ⇒ A man who married a woman and her mother (Leviticus 20:14).
 - ⇒ A priest's daughter who became a prostitute (Leviticus 21:9).
 - ⇒ Korah and his rebellious cohorts (Numbers 16).
 - Burning is often related to God's anger against sin and, as such, it is a purification of uncleanness.
 - ⇒ God's anger to burn against all who follow other gods (Deuteronomy 6:15; cf Joshua 23:16, I Chronicles 13:10, Psalm 89:46).
 - ⇒ Impurities to be burned (Leviticus 13).
 - ⇒ Idols burned (Deuteronomy 7).
 - ⇒ Josiah cleanses Israel with fire (II Kings 23).
 - c) Common in Greek and Roman society, it came to be fashionable among the Roman aristocracy.
 - d) Uncommon/rare among the first centuries of the church.
 - "Though the early Christians did not fear cremation, they preferred to follow the burial customs of the Jews," (James Taylor).

- “I on my side must deride [the pagan custom] still more, especially when it burns up its dead with harshest inhumanity...” (Tertullian, c. 210).
 - [Said of Christian] “Whenever one of the poor among them passes from this world, each one of them give heed to him, according to his ability, and carefully sees to his burial...If any righteous man among them passes from this world, they rejoice and offer thanks to God. They escort his body as if he were setting out from one place to go to another nearby,” (Aristides, c. 125).
- e) Uncommon throughout Christianized Europe. The doctrine of the resurrection of the physical body inhibited the practice of cremation. The Cremation Society of Britain was founded in 1874 and soon after in the United States of America.

3.) Concluding Thoughts

- a) Burial has for generations of Jews and Christians been the preferred means of respectful disposal of the body.
- b) Burning of bodies has often been associated with showing disrespect for the bodies God has created.
- c) In the first several centuries of the church, believers saw this as an opportunity to witness respect for the crown of God’s creation, man. This was in contrast to the heathen’s disrespect in burying their dead.
- d) Cremation is not sin unless it is carried out in a way disrespectful of the human body as created by God.
- e) The doctrine of the resurrection of the dead is not, and never has been, dependent upon any one method of disposing the body. God is able to reconstitute the physical body, from whatever state into which it has descended and from wherever in the world it may be found.
- f) “Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind,” (Romans 14:5).