

The Testimony of a Lifetime

(Making the Last Word Count!)

There are many types of "testimonies" given when someone dies. Many of the events surrounding the Christian funeral, memorial or grave-side services are about giving a "testimony" about the life of the one that has passed.

Funeral Home Directors suggest those left behind should dictate the focus of the funeral or memorial services. They insist that individuals must see the body of their loved ones to have proper "closure." They contend, "This will enable them to move on with a more healthy perspective of life."

Their recommendations lead me to look at Scripture for answers to the following questions:

1. Is it God's will that the primary focus of Christian's death, mourning or burial be fixed on a body and earthly loss or should the testimonies given speak of the loved one's faith in God and point toward the eternal victory found in Christ and the resurrection?
2. Does the Bible address the issue of how the body of those that have passed on should be processed for interment?
3. If those that refute cremation as a reasonable option for processing the remains cite a "desecration of the body" as a key concern, then why is embalming (replacing the blood with chemical preservatives and puncturing, draining, and filling all the organs with disinfectants and preservatives) viewed as better than cremation (quickly reducing the remains to ashes in a furnace)?
4. Is the cremation of a human body truly viewed by God as a curse while the Egyptian practice of embalming is preferred?

The purpose of this paper is to clarify any Scriptural inferences or guidelines regarding the physical body and how those teachings ultimately influence the potential "last word" and testimonies offered at the memorial or funeral service. Is there another way of ministering to those left to grieve while lifting the message of the Gospel in the internment process?

1. 1 Cor 15:50-51 *"I declare to you, brothers, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable."*

It's not a dead body that goes to heaven it is a resurrected body. Paul refers to the temporariness of an earthly tent in 2 Cor. 5:1 as opposed to heaven's permanency of another body built by God. Even the opponents of Cremation acknowledge that, *"Old Testament Law, says nothing definitive about burial regulations."* Also, *"The New Testament lacks specific regulations for handling*

the dead. Its sparse texts on the topic seem to be descriptive rather than prescriptive.¹ In another place, Mark Creech, an opponent of cremation admits "Cremation can in no way effect the outcome of our resurrection."²

2. Gen 2:7 *"The LORD God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being."*

God created the first man from dust with no problem. Why is it so difficult or immoral for Him to recreate him from dust again?

Is the future resurrected body adversely effected by the condition of the physical body before, during or after an individual's physical death?

1. 2 Cor 5:1 *"Now we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands."*

The word "destroyed" (kataluo) is used in Matt. 24:2 to refer to the destruction of the Temple, in Acts 6:14 to Jerusalem, and in Gal. 2:18 to the Law as a means of justification. Paul in 2 Cor. 5:1 is clearly saying the condition of our bodies "earthly tent" is inconsequential to our heavenly body. Through the ages many Godly people have been burned at the stake, lost at sea, or left on the battle field - lost in action. Some have been eaten by wild animals and crushed into the ground by earth quake or tragic accident. Avoiding cremation because of the permanent loss of body parts ignores the realities of organ donations. The assumption that cremated bodies are desecrated while the destroyed bodies of accident victims and organ donors is foolish. Jon Ralls makes a good point when he says. "I am sure at the second coming Jesus is not going to say, 'Stop the resurrection, I can't find all their parts!'"

2. Matt 18:7-10 - *"Woe to the world because of the things that cause people to sin! Such things must come, but woe to the man through whom they come! **8** If your hand or your foot causes you to sin cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life maimed or crippled than to have two hands or two feet and be thrown into eternal fire. **9** And if your eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into the fire of hell. **10** "See that you do*

¹ Elesha Coffman - <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2002/februaryweb-only/2-18-52.0.html>

² Mark Creech- <http://www.worldnewspaperpublishing.com/News/FullStory.asp?loc=TRW&ID=367>

not look down on one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven.

Initially it may seem that Jesus related the earthly body's condition to its eternal condition in Matt. 18:8,9. The common rules of interpretation demand consistency in hermeneutics. If Jesus is to be taken literally linking the body's condition, then he must have intended for us to be prepared to cut off our hands and feet...right? Notice that the point of the text from verses 7 and 10 is concerning our casual concern about temptation which can "cause" young Christians to sin. Look at the context of Matthew 18 and all of the parables surrounding this one. Is Jesus concerned about a lost lamb, or the money of an unpaid debt? Minute details of a parable should not be used to proof text an application that is unrelated to its purpose.

Is fire always an indicator of God's condemnation? The Bible also describes fire as something used to purify that which is earthly in preparation for that which is eternal?

1. 1 Peter 1:6-7 *In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith — of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire — may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.*

To assume that fire is only a sign of God's condemnation is not accurate. Fire is also used to destroy that which is corrupt and purify or refine that which is eternal.³

Is the burial process of individuals described in the Bible indicative of God's preferences for outlining a burial process?

1. Deut 34:5-8 *"And Moses the servant of the Lord died there in Moab, as the Lord had said. **6** He buried him in Moab, in the valley opposite Beth Peor, but to this day no one knows where his grave is. **7** Moses was a hundred and twenty years old when he died, yet his eyes were not weak nor his strength gone. **8** The Israelites grieved for Moses in the plains of Moab thirty days, until the time of weeping and mourning was over."*

³ 1 Cor 3:12-14 *If any man builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, **13** his work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man's work.*

Mal 3:3-4 *He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver. Then the Lord will have men who will bring offerings in righteousness.*

2. The fact that Moses body was not laid in state before all of Israel is just as much an indicator that it isn't necessary for there to be a body for proper "closure" to take place. Today Moses body would be nothing more than dust and bits of bone left in the sand. Since God did not allow Moses' dead body to be seen by Israel it could be a testimony that too much can be made of a person's dead body! Gen 47:29-30 *"When the time drew near for Israel to die, he called for his son Joseph and said to him, 'If I have found favor in your eyes, put your hand under my thigh and promise that you will show me kindness and faithfulness. Do not bury me in Egypt, ³⁰ but when I rest with my fathers, carry me out of Egypt and bury me where they are buried.'"*

Do we assume that it is immoral or pagan to be buried in a different cemetery (or cave) other than our forefathers? Why do we not use this example as a biblical mandate that family members must be buried in the same place?

3. Ex 13:19 *Moses took the bones of Joseph with him because Joseph had made the sons of Israel swear an oath. He had said, "God will surely come to your aid, and then you must carry my bones up with you from this place."*⁴

The New Testament book of Hebrews indicates Joseph's instruction regarding his bones was a statement of his faith not a prescription for burial. A box of bones after 400 years of decay would have been not much larger than an urn of ashes!

4. Gen 23:19-20 *Afterward Abraham buried his wife Sarah in the cave in the field of Machpelah near Mamre (which is at Hebron) in the land of Canaan. ²⁰ So the field and the cave in it were deeded to Abraham by the Hittites as a burial site.*

Why do we not use this example as a biblical mandate to personally buy land with a cave on it for burial rather than digging a hole in a public plot?

5. John 19:39-41 *"Nicodemus brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds. Taking Jesus' body, the two of them wrapped it, with the spices, in strips of linen. This was in accordance with Jewish burial customs."*

⁴ Ex 13:19 *Moses took the bones of Joseph with him because Joseph had made the sons of Israel swear an oath. He had said, "God will surely come to your aid, and then you must carry my bones up with you from this place."*

Heb 11:22 *"By faith Joseph, when his end was near, spoke about the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt and gave instructions about his bones."*

Why do we not use these Jewish burial customs as a biblical mandate to purchase herbs and spices to wrap the dead body instead the embalming process?

Is God's condemnation of Moab's sin(s) a clear decree condemning cremation?

1. Amos 2:1 *"For three sins of Moab, even for four, I will not turn back [my wrath]. Because he burned, as if to lime, the bones of Edom's king."⁵*

It is important to look at the context of the passage before determining its meaning. While we have no clear biblical reference to the exact circumstances of Moab's condemned actions, we do find a picture of Moab sacrificing his firstborn in order to win the war against Edom, Israel, and Judah. This was a common pagan practice that God calls an abomination. Are these circumstances related? No other circumstances surrounding these two men are described in the Bible. It is clear that the Old Testament era demonstrated significant beliefs regarding the burning of someone's body in the open. It was viewed by the culture as overpowering them, and desecrating their honor, or trying to manipulate the pagan god's to destroy that person's people. Without any passage of Scripture in the New or Old Testaments offering a clear condemnation of cremation it is inconclusive to assume Amos's condemnation is referring to cremation rather than a human sacrifice made to pagan gods.

What does it mean to dishonor God with your body? And could this refer to cremation?

1. 1 Cor 6:19-20 *Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; ²⁰ you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body.*

This text is clearly talking about the need to abstain from sexual immorality. The context makes no reference to a method or process of preparing the body for burial. When worn out American flags are retired there is a solemn military service honoring their retirement and protecting them from desecration. The military guards burn the flags. It's an honorary service, not a desecration!

Consider what God's word says about the death of "the believers":

⁵ 2 Kings 3:26-27 - *When the king of Moab saw that the battle had gone against him, he took with him seven hundred swordsmen to break through to the king of Edom, but they failed. **27** Then he took his firstborn son, who was to succeed him as king, and offered him as a sacrifice on the city wall. The fury against Israel was great; they withdrew and returned to their own land.*

1. 1 Thess 4:13-18 *Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope. **14** We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. **15** According to the Lord's own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. **16** For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. **17** After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. **18** Therefore encourage each other with these words.*

The Christian's memorial should be noticeably different than those of the non-Christian's.

2. Phil 1:21 *For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.*

The Christian's funeral should not focus on the loss, but acknowledge it in light of the Gospel.

3. Rev 14:12-13 *This calls for patient endurance on the part of the saints who obey God's commandments and remain faithful to Jesus. **13** Then I heard a voice from heaven say, "Write: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on." "Yes," says the Spirit, "they will rest from their labor, for their deeds will follow them."*

How many of those that died under the persecution of Rome had their bodies devoured by animals, and burned? Are we really to believe that this a problem for God during the resurrection, or a shame to those that were martyred?

4. 2 Cor 5:8-9 *We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord. **9** So we make it our goal to please him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it.*
5. Isa 57:1-2 *The righteous perish, and no one ponders it in his heart; devout men are taken away, and no one understands that the righteous are taken away to be spared from evil. **2** Those who walk uprightly enter into peace; they find rest as they lie in death.*

Things to consider that will help us make biblical decisions about embalming VS. cremation:

- The preference of embalming or the cremation process to prepare the body for internment is personal and based upon cultural traditions not decisive biblical teachings.
- To presume the Egyptian developed embalming process as allowed within Scripture and cremation regarded as a desecration and pagan is inconsistent and biblically unfounded.
- While either an embalming or cremation process may be used to prepare the body for internment, the Scripture definitely promotes a focus on the resurrection and our future glory in heaven rather than on a chemically preserved dead body.
- It has long been a human desire to try to prevent the body's natural process of decomposition⁶. History records countless examples of various human desires which evolved into religious commands such as the embalming and burial processes. The only Scriptural commands given regarding the bodies of those who have died are from the Old Testament aimed at preventing disease and promoting a spiritual sense of "cleanness." Over all the most quoted command was that the dead body was not to be touched.
- The bodies of those people in Scripture which are under God's judgment are stoned, left out in the open to be scattered by wild animals, and sometimes burned⁷. Their bodies were subject to more than just fire. In the cremation process the body is returned to its original form of ashes and dust. To assume a particular process of burial to be an indicator of God's blessing or judgment is not based on a thorough study of Scripture.⁸
- The embalming process as designed by a funeral home costs an average of 400% more than a cremation and church designed memorial service.

⁶ Egyptian ritual of embalming; Jewish ritual of packing the body in spices

⁷ 2 Kings 9; Joshua 22; 1 Kings 18

⁸ Joshua 8:29; 10:27; Lamentations 3:53; 2 Samuel 21:14;

A Proposal to Restore Biblical Testimonies Amidst the Death of a Christian

- A testimony of victory and peace amidst the acknowledgement of death.
 - A testimony of hope in eternity amidst our earthly loss.
 - A testimony of faithfulness and gratitude recounting heavenly accomplishments
 - A testimony of comfort to the hurting rather than a lifeless body
 - A testimony of reasonable stewardship
 - A testimony of respect and sanctity of life where cremains may be placed in memorial status on the church property.
1. Let every Christian that anticipates his/her imminent "commencement" enjoy a reception before they die when the "thank yous" and testimonies of love and gratitude can be heard.
 2. Let those Christian families that prefer a visitation with the body to "lie in state" at a visitation feel free to cremate the body after the viewing and then place the ashes in a permanent Columbarium or scatter the ashes in a Resurrection Garden on the church property.
 3. Let those Christian families that prefer to have a memorial without the body of their loved one lying in state feel free to cremate the body, plan a memorial with the church, and place the ashes in a permanent Columbarium or scatter the ashes in an uniquely designed Resurrection Garden on the church property.
 4. Let those Christian families that prefer to demonstrate a strong sense of spiritual and financial stewardship feel free to contact the minister of the Church to transport their loved one's body to a crematorium and set up a memorial service without the need for costly assistance through a funeral home.
 5. Let the Christian Minister officiating a funeral or memorial service of a Christian that has "Gone Home" prepare his thoughts based upon the good news of the Gospel and a realistic recounting of the good faith and deeds of the one that has died, and a call to gospel action for those left behind.
 6. Let the Christian Minister officiating a funeral or memorial service of one who does not know Christ prepare his thoughts based upon the good news of the Gospel, a realistic recounting of the kindness of the one that has passed, and a call to accept the gospel for those left behind.
 7. Let those Christian families that are grieving the loss of their loved ones find closure after a funeral or memorial service by sharing in a family dinner provided by the church.

Comparisons of Estimated Costs

<u>Funeral and Embalming Services</u> ⁹		<u>Cremation and Memorial Services</u> ¹⁰	
Funeral Home Based Plan		Ministry Based Plan	
1.	Professional fees		
a.	F.H. Director	\$2,000.00	\$ 0.00
b.	Minister	\$50-\$100.00	\$ gift?
c.	Music	\$40-\$80.00	\$ gift?
2.	Embalming fees	\$1,000.00	\$ 0.00
3.	Cremation fees		\$ 1,000.00
4.	Transportation fees	\$700.00	\$ 350.00
5.	Chapel fees	\$750.00	\$ 50.00
6.	Casket & Vault fees	\$5,500.00	\$ 0.00
7.	Interment fees	<u>\$1,500.00</u>	<u>\$ 750.00</u>
	<u>(Columbarium)</u>		
	Total	\$11,540.00	\$2,100.00

Estimated Cost /Income for a church owned Columbarium

COST 56 urns per cluster cost to build = \$16,000 (\$285 per urn)

INCOME 56 urns avg. selling price (\$500 + 250= \$750-establishment fee) = \$42,000
Double urn benches cost \$1,200 (\$250 establishment fee X 9=\$2,250)

\$28,250 to establish "Resurrection Garden" once all niches are sold. Revenue from additional Columbarium cluster(s) will be used to provide ongoing maintenance needs.

⁹ <http://www.ogmhognj.com/PrInfABurialW.htm>

¹⁰ <http://www.babyboomercaretaker.com/funeral/cremation/What-Is-The-Average-Cost-For-Cremation-Services.html>