

Cremation and Funerals

For some time I have thought to deal with this topic though I have no studied outline and proof-texts in mind. Since I have just concluded a series of lessons concerning death, immortality, and heaven, this seems to be an appropriate time to consider these matters.

Lacking any instructions in the Scriptures concerning either cremation or funerals, we are even at a loss to find snippets of texts to use. So we will search for any principle that may guide us. However, I am convinced that we will be dealing more with emotionalized concepts than with facts.

First, let us consider the emotionalized attitude we all have against burning. I suppose that it is because we have such horror of fire and burning that Jesus chose to associate it with the horror of being separated from God eternally in Gehenna – actually, a garbage dump outside Jerusalem where refuse fed a continuous flame. (The Scriptures do not teach “the wages of sin is eternal life in endless, fiery torment” but “the wages of sin is death,” but that is another subject.) It would be a life-scarring trauma to watch the body of a loved one burn to ashes, whether by accident or on a funeral pyre as they use in India. We almost shudder to think of such.

It would be no less torturous and emotionally scarring, however, to watch the body of a loved one slowly decay. We bury their bodies out of sight to lessen the impact. Likewise, cremation is done out of sight and away from the family to lessen that emotional scarring. We have to face the reality that this body is going to disintegrate by one process or another. Some are burned in house fires. Some are vaporized by explosions. Those lost at sea are eaten by marine creatures which are also later eaten by other animals and even humans. The flesh of those drowning near land may be stripped from the bones by crabs. Bears have eaten many. Vultures claim those who die in remote areas. The creatures that consume the dead flesh of humans die and are eaten by other creatures. When we go back to the dust from which we came, that is, disintegrate into the earthly elements of our bodies, our substance diffuses and circulates in the air, water, and food-producing soil. So, as I read once, each of us may well have some molecules in our bodies that once comprised the body of Julius Caesar. And, if Julius Caesar, maybe of Jesus also.

The Scriptures speak of us coming forth from our tombs, so we like to put the body in a coffin (a coffer where treasures are stored) where its elements will be somewhat confined. Does that mean that a cremated person will miss out on immortality? Nothing in the Scriptures indicates or warns against that. If the actual physical elements of our body at the time of death are to be reconstituted into their original form, would the sealing of the body in a metal casket impede that as much as cremation would? If there is to be a physical restoration of the body, we cannot hinder it nor does God need our help in bringing it about.

When your saintly father died, you did not bury him or cremate him. He had returned to God, leaving a physical body in this physical universe which you buried or cremated. Paul, long ago contended, “*I tell you this, brethren: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable.*” (1 Cor. 15:50). In this chapter Paul labored to implant that in their minds, but because we are so earthly

minded, we have twisted his teachings to indicate that this physical body will be restored in a changed form – into some sort of humanoid, science-fiction “spiritual body.” Paul used the term “spiritual body” indicating a spiritual entity but, by the way we have interpreted it, we make it into “spiritual flesh” -- an oxymoron.

I have dealt with this at length in recent articles but let me repeat one indisputable point. Hymenaeus and Philetus were upsetting the faith of disciples where Timothy was by teaching that the resurrection was past already in their time (2 Tim. 2:14-19). Why did not Timothy take those two men with other witnesses on both sides of the contention to the tombs and show them the bones of the dead? That should have made fools of them. Why did Timothy not do that, or why did not Paul instruct him to do it? Simply because neither Timothy nor Paul had taught them to expect a physical resurrection! That conclusion is inescapable.

What about destroying God’s temple? Paul demanded, *“Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you? If any one destroys God’s temple, God will destroy him. For God’s temple is holy, and that temple you are”* (1Cor. 3:16-17). Paul is referring to them as the church rather than as individuals. His “you” is plural like a Texan’s “y’all”. Read the whole context to see that he is dealing with the destructive divisions among them. God will destroy those who destroy the body by disunity. That should scare us to death! We justify division preferring our doctrinal scruples as more important than unity.

Paul was referring to individuals in Chapter 6:12-20 concluding with, *“Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God? You are not your own; you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.”* The context clearly indicates that Paul was speaking of sexual immorality. The Greeks had their temple served by prostitutes in their cult of sexuality. Paul was warning believers against participation in this immorality approved by Grecian culture. Their bodies, being holy (devoted to Christ) would dishonor God by joining a prostitute. So they were to glorify God in their bodies by moral purity. This is not referring to destroying one’s physical body.

So I see no teaching or principle that would refer to the treatment of a corpse. Who can believe that the Holy Spirit still resides in the corpse of a disciple? The disposal of a deceased body is left to the choice of those in charge with no spiritual principles involved. Neither choice inflicts pain on the deceased for we neither bury nor cremate living persons or indwelt temples! The only pain is to the emotional sensibilities of the living persons making the choices.

Having decided to be buried at Rochester where others of my family are buried, several years ago I bought four plots there for \$50.00! After moving to Oregon, Lea and I talked it over and decided that for all practical purposes it would be better to be cremated. Dealing with funeral homes in Oregon and Texas, the great expense of transporting our bodies, and the inconvenience and cost for the family members could be avoided by cremation. We do not make decisions about such matters looking for the most economical route, but there is a great difference in the cost. In 1990 the funeral cost for Lea’s mother was \$4,449.00 plus the cost of a plot with a modest traditional funeral and local burial. It would cost two or three times that much now. I do not begrudge the expense for it honored her in the way she wanted it. But we honored Lea in a much different manner.

We kept her at home with a little nursing help. I cared for her by myself until I needed more help. Mira was there at all times ready to help. Late in the evening when she was drawing her last breaths, Paul was at her bedside also holding her hand. It was just family – Paul, Mira, Tom, Joey, and me – in a most loving experience. Mira called the people who handled the cremation. As we awaited them, we viewed her lovingly together for the last time. The very kind man and wife came for her body. Two days later we received her cremains in an artfully wrapped plastic box. On the weekend when people were free to attend we had a memorial service in the church building. I introduced the service and Sol and grandsons, Daniel and Ryan, led the service. A local brother read my piece I wrote several years ago about Lea titled “Riding in the Front Seat,” and various friends there expressed thoughts and feelings in an open informal session. We recalled happy things about her with laughter and tears. In going through mementos before the service, Sol had found a fun valentine that she had made for me many years ago. He read it to us. On the front she had written, “You are the answer to my prayers.” Then on the inside she had continued, “You are not what I prayed for but you are the answer I got!”

About six months later when the family collected for a family reunion in Texas, we took her ashes to the cemetery. No funeral director or cemetery caretaker was there. Just family. Family members, even the very young, had part in digging the spot for burial and then filling it. We sang a few songs by memory and prayed. Again, it was a loving experience for us all. We knew the cremains were not Lea for she was with God and all the redeemed.

I have been involved with many grieving families in making funeral arrangements. Making all the decisions and arrangements is very stressful in an emotional time for most families, often creating ill feelings between family members. Emotions allow many to spend much more on the funeral than they had planned. Stress is added to grief. It is a traumatic experience to collectively say farewells at the last viewing in the funeral home. Often the family member who neglected the parent or caused the parent the most grief laments the loudest and wants to spend the most on the parent’s funeral. All this colors the last memories of the deceased with bad emotions rather than the recalling of happy times.

All of the funeral and burial expenses for Lea amounted to \$565.00. We could have gladly paid for more but we could not have honored her more.

Even though I am trying to show both perspectives of funerals, you can see that I am favoring the cremation route. Laws and rules may vary in different places but, so far as I know, you are free to dispose of human ashes in various places by various means without regulations. They are not infectious, so they may be dispersed or buried most any place. Some cemeteries may require the assistance of a caretaker. Ornate urns are available. A memorial service can be delayed until a weekend or indefinitely when people are more able to attend. If it is to be at the building where you attend, you will need to arrange for it and notify any minister, singers, or song leader to be involved. You will probably want to provide a family floral arrangement and decide what to do with the flowers afterward. If an honorarium is to be given the minister and singers, that will be another family decision. These are all simple decisions that require little or no extra expense. No funeral home is involved. When they are involved, their fees are added.

A traditional burial is much more complicated with variable choices to be made. A funeral home is notified to get the body, usually at a hospital. Decision is made as to whether to embalm or not. A casket is selected in an emotionally-charged situation. Burial clothing must be provided. The morticians provide a beautician to prepare the appearance as you prescribe. Will there be jewelry, glasses, or artifacts included? Visitation hours will be determined. Where and when will the funeral be conducted? Who will officiate and who will be pallbearers? Will it be an open casket or closed? If open, will it be at the funeral and graveside? If there will be music or singing, it must be arranged for. Will you want special cars for the family? There is a charge for a flower van. A traffic escort will be needed. A burial plot and the opening and closing of the grave must be arranged. To prevent underground pollution, laws now require a water-proof liner. You may choose between a vault of concrete or metal. If a family floral arrangement is desired, all of its details will need to be handled. After the funeral, decision will have to be made as to the disposal of any pot plants and floral arrangements. If the funeral or burial is not locally, then transportation of the body and arrangements with a funeral home in another city or state will have to be decided upon. If an honorarium is to be given the minister or singers, that will involve more decisions.

Even as it is wise to make a will “now,” it is good to plan funeral details at whatever stage of life you are in. They may be changed at any time. Written instructions can save your survivors from stressful decisions. Funeral homes offer helpful information for planning. And you may call a crematory for information. You may buy prepaid services from your funeral home, but you may come out ahead financially by investing that money where it can draw interest.

Funerals are not required for the dead. They are a social custom for honoring the deceased, expressing sympathy with the survivors, and for a sense of closure for the family and community. Whether you go the cheapest route or spend with impressive extravagance is your choice like whether you buy a Ford or a Mercedes. The funeral affects you rather than the deceased. Buying a sealed casket that preserves the body for decades is for your emotional satisfaction rather than to benefit the departed one. No one is going to check fifty years later to examine the state of the body.

I am glad that custom has changed allowing us to review happy things and laugh about them in funerals. But this must not be an escape from the awesome reality of death and the concern and heartbreak of the bereaved ones. It is better to express grief than to cover it with superficialities. Surely, it is healthful to grieve the loss of one dear to us. []

(Cecil Hook; March 2006)

“I believe; help my unbelief!” (Mark 9:24).