



Truth

On Tough Texts

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What About Cremation?

Selected Texts

WHAT ABOUT CREMATION FOR A CHRISTIAN? This is a question I have been asked many times throughout 35 years of ministry. Reasons for the question vary. Some ask for convenience sake, since it is obviously far easier to cremate than bury.

The chief reason, as one might assume, seems to be monetary. As TOTT reader TO in Texas recently wrote:

I wanted to get your feedback on cremation as a choice for final internment. I find the open casket and burial in a high dollar casket a bit odd. When we lay down for our final rest, I have always felt as a saved Christian we have gone on to be with the Lord. All else seems to me to be for the benefit of the living.

We agree, and even empathize, here. While there are certainly Christian (or at least ethical) funeral directors who are not guilty of this, I have seen those who take advantage of bereaved people, selling them high dollar “packages” when there were several ways to lower the cost dramatically. So why not just go the cheap route of cremation? After all, we even have an urn for a memorial.

For those reasons and others, more and more people are opting for cremation. According to the Cremation Association of North America, for example, in 2005 there were 778,025 deaths in America, 30.88% of which were then cremated. Based on the current rate of increase, the CANC goes on to estimate that the percentage will grow to 38.15% in 2010. Another interesting statistic is the percentage of cremations in other countries: China (41%), New Zealand (58%), United Kingdom (70%), and Japan (97%).

We would submit, however, that the biblical evidence is overwhelming that cremation is not the best, that it is, indeed, burial that is the Scriptural precedent.

The Biblical Precedent of Burial

The Hebrew *qābar*, which is also found in most of the other Semitic languages, appears about 130 times in the Old Testament, the vast majority of which are in the Pentateuch and historical books. It means to bury or entomb and in every instance except one (Jer. 22:19) refers to human burial.

This fact immediately and fundamentally underscores that burial was important in Hebrew thinking. “A proper burial was a sign of special kindness and divine blessing,” writes one authority.¹ Not to be properly buried, in fact, was considered great misfortune, calamity, and even judgment (1 Kings 13:22; 14:11; 2 Kings 9:37; Jer. 7:33; 8:1; Ezek. 29:5; Ps. 79:3; Rev. 11:9). In accordance with Genesis 3:19, burial was the accepted method of disposal of the dead. We repeatedly see God’s people buried throughout Scripture, often in a family tomb, as with Sarah (Gen 23:19), Abraham (25:9), Isaac, Rebekah, Leah (49:31), Jacob (50:13), and many others; the list, in fact, is long.²

The Pagan Practice of Cremation

There is no doubt whatsoever that cremation has always been practiced predominantly by pagans. The Greek Homeric heroes were burned, for example, cremation being introduced to them by the nomadic Achaeans and Dorians centuries before Christ.³ First century Roman

senator and historian Tacitus records that by the time of Christ cremation was almost universal among the Romans.⁴

Writing on this issue around the mid-20th Century, Scottish born missionary and pastor James W. Fraser recounts:

I asked a missionary from India if the Christians of that land cremated their dead. With a look of surprise he said, "Positively not! Cremation is heathen. The Christians of India bury their dead, because burial is Christian."⁵

It's extremely significant that Tacitus also observed that in contrast to the Romans, it was a serious matter of piety with the Jews "to bury rather than to burn dead bodies."⁶

Cremation was, in fact, rare among the Hebrews: "According to the Mosaic law burning was reserved, either for the living who had been found guilty of unnatural sins (Lev. 21:9; [also 20:14; Gen. 38:24; 2 Kings 23:16, 20]), or for those who died under a curse, as in the case of Achan and his family."⁷ It was also used to prevent disease epidemics in the case of mass death (Amos 6:10).

As a rule, then, burning was considered the ultimate desecration of the dead (1 Kings 13:2; 2 Kings 23:16, 20). Note that even though the bodies of Saul and his sons were burned, undoubtedly because the bodies were badly mutilated and/or decayed, the bones were still buried (1 Sam. 31:11–13), not crushed into powder as in modern cremation. While a question is sometimes raised over Asa, he was unquestionably buried but was then honored by "a very great burning," that is, a fire of incense and spices (2 Chron. 16:14). In contrast, Jehoram did not receive the honoring spice burning because of his shameful reign (21:19).

During my research of this question, I ran into one Christian leader who was asked, "My husband and I are considering cremation. Is cremation against the teaching of the Bible? Will those cremated also be resurrected?" In His nationally syndicated column, that Christian leader answered this way:

The aspect of cremation that worries some Christians is the thought of the total annihilation of the body. We need to get our thinking in a right perspective here. The body is annihilated just as completely in the grave as it is in cremation. The graves of our ancestors are no longer in existence, and soil in which they were buried has long since been removed elsewhere. We must therefore accept that what happens to the body or to the grave cannot be of any significance so far as the resurrection is concerned.

Our resurrection is related to that of Christ's in 1 Corinthians 15, and we must realize that the resurrection of Jesus was quite different from that of say, Lazarus. Lazarus needed the body that had been bur-

ied, but when Jesus came forth from the tomb, his body was so changed that he could not be easily recognized.

In that chapter, Paul states of the burial of our bodies: "thou sowest not that body that shall be" (v.37). The body that rises is not made of the same substances as the one that was buried, but is immortal and incorruptible.

In Corinthians 5, Paul makes the contrast between living in a tent, a temporary home that can be pulled down and put away, and living in a permanent home that will last forever. Our bodies are our temporary tents. Our resurrected bodies will be our permanent homes. They are similar in appearance but different in substance. Cremation is therefore no hindrance to the resurrection.⁸

The ignorance of Scripture and history in that answer is sad in light of it coming from a supposed great Christian leader. The resurrection is not the real issue here; it is the desecration of the body that is the issue, for the body is most certainly "significant." Even more tragic is the fact that many other Christians, including some Bible teachers of a more evangelical position than the above, are being deluded into believing that cremation is acceptable. This is due chiefly to the increase of pagan influence that has been going on in Christianity for centuries.

Perhaps most significant of all, it should also be noted that there is not a single instance of cremation in the New Testament, and that the body is always treated with respect, the burial of our Lord, of course, being the greatest example. A reading of 1 Corinthians 15:35–46 quickly demonstrates the obvious precedent of burial as well as the joyous event of future resurrection. Throughout Scripture, therefore, we see that it is *burial*, not *burning*, that honors the body. Let us be Christians, not pagans.

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NOTES

¹ *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words* (Thomas Nelson, 1985 revision), p. 28 ("To Bury" entry).

² Just a few more include: Moses (Deut. 34), Gideon (Judg. 8:32), Samson (16:31), Samuel (1 Sam. 25:1), David (1 Kings 2:10-12; 1 Chron. 29:26-28), Solomon (1 Kings 11:41-43), and the long list goes on.

³ See Will Durant, *The Story of Civilization II: The Life of Greece* (Simon and Schuster, 1939, 1966), p. 311 (cf. 37–38; 62–63).

⁴ Tacitus (ca. 56 – ca. 117 AD), *Annals*, 16, 6.

⁵ *Cremation—Is It Christian?* (Loizeaux Brothers). Reprinted by Sola Scriptura Ministries, 2001, p. 8.

⁶ Tacitus, *The Histories*, Book V (ca. 110 AD).

⁷ James Orr (General Editor), *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (electronic edition), "Burial" entry.

⁸ Billy Graham, "My Answer," a nationally syndicated newspaper column.

New Book Announcement: *A Hebrew Word for the Day*

By: Pastor Watson

Back in 2006, Pastor Watson's book *A Word for the Day*, a daily devotional based upon Greek word studies, was published by AMG Publishers. Upon being well received, AMG asked if he would be open to writing a similar book, this time on Hebrew words. Like its predecessor, its purpose is to share the richness of the words of the biblical languages and help make them practical in the reader's Christian living. After some delays, it is close to release. Below is more information and a few excerpts (endnotes not included). You can read more and find ordering sources at AMG's website:

http://www.amgpublishers.com/www/docs/114.421/hebrew_word_day_watson.html

Features

Word Studies and devotional applications for over 380 Old Testament words.

Additional "Scriptures for Study" that reinforce each word study.

"Hebrew Pronunciation Guide" to make it easy to learn how to pronounce transliterated Hebrew words.

Strong's numbers included for every word, allowing quick lookup in other resources.

Included in most studies are etymology, Septuagint (LXX) use, and especially OT use.

Bonus chapter on how to mine your own word riches, including a section on Bible interpretation.

Numerous Endnotes on the text and a Bibliography on major language resources used in writing the book.

Four indexes: Scripture, English words, Hebrew and Greek words, and Strong's numbers.

Excerpts

January 1



New Song

chādāš šīyr

We've all heard the old expression that someone is "singing a different tune" or has "changed his tune." The school bully, for example, changes his tune after little Billy has finally had enough and punches the bully in the nose. The expression probably arose in the Middle Ages among wandering minstrels. As they traveled from court to court, they thought it prudent to change the words of their songs to please each baron.

Long before the Middle Ages, however, God's people were singing a **new song**, and that song was of much greater joy and significance. **New** is the Hebrew *chādāš* (2319), which often indicates something new in the sense of "never seen or done before." It appears in Ezekiel 18:31, for example: "Cast away from you all your transgressions, whereby ye have transgressed; and make you a new heart and a new spirit."

Song, then, is *šīyr* (7892), a type of lyrical song or religious song. It also appears several times in Ezra and Nehemiah to refer to songs of Levitical choirs. In Nehemiah 12:46, for example, Nehemiah recounts that in David's day music directors led "songs" of praise. Significantly, it is at times also used in a negative way. Amos uses it to picture the apathy of the people, as they lay around eating, drinking, strumming their musical instruments, and singing, totally oblivious to God's coming judgment (Amos 6; "music" in verse 5 is *šīyr*). Here is a warning to the world, and even the church, concerning complacency and an insatiable desire for entertainment and leisure.

It is when we see these two words together, however, that we see a wondrous truth. The term **new song** appears seven times in the OT, and in each case we see a new song being composed in response to what God has done. "Fresh mercies," writes commentator Adam Clarke, "call for new songs of praise and gratitude." The first occurrence, in fact, is Psalm 33:3, which is set in the context of the great event of creation.

What, then, could be more appropriate as we start a new year than to be reminded to sing a **new song** every day? Does not each day bring new mercies, new blessings, new joys, new triumphs? It also reminds us that we do, indeed, “sing a different tune” than the world.

Scriptures for Study: Read the other OT occurrences of **new song**, noting how God is being praised for what He has done: Psalm 40:3; 96:1; 98:1; 144:9; 149:1; Isaiah 42:10. 📖 Note also the two NT occurrences of **new song** (Rev. 5:9; 14:3). **New** is the Greek *kainos* (2537G), something new in quality having never existed before.

February 27

Blessed

’ešer

The very first word we read in the Book of Psalms is **blessed**. The Hebrew here is *’ešer* (835), a masculine noun meaning a person’s state of bliss. It’s never used of God, rather always of people, and is exclamatory in emphasis, as in “O the bliss of . . .” Most of its forty-four appearances are appropriately in the poetry of Psalms and Proverbs.

It is extremely significant that the Septuagint translates *’ešer* using the Greek *makarios*, which our Lord used nine times in the Beatitudes (Matt. 5:3–11). While many Bible teachers come to this word and say that it just means “happy,” which is always circumstantial, it actually speaks of the far deeper idea of an inward contentedness that is not affected by circumstances (cf. Phil. 4:11–13).

Of the many occurrences of *’ešer*, one that immediately strikes us is Psalm 1:1: “Blessed is the man,” where the unknown psalmist distinguishes two lifestyles (cf. Feb. 23), one that is **blessed** and one that is not. We find in verses 1–3 three realities that produce genuine bliss and contentment.

First, a *path* that is holy. In three distinct statements, the Psalmist outlines holiness. The holy person first does not *stroll* with the “ungodly” (*rāšā’*, 7563) people. He doesn’t associate with, listen to, or join those who are guilty before God and transgressors of His Law. Second, the holy person does not *stand* with sinners. **Way** is *derek* (Feb. 23), a marked out pattern of life, and “standeth” is *’amad* (5975), which figuratively indicates living somewhere, standing, remaining there (e.g., Ex. 8:22, “dwell”). The holy life, then, is one whose pattern of life does not remain in sin (cf. 1 Jn. 3:9, where “commit” is present tense, to “continually habitually commit sin). Third, the holy person does not *sit* with the “scornful” (*liys*, 3887) person, that is, those who boast, scoff, mock, and deride, as in showing or expressing utter contempt, in this case for the things of God.

Second, blessedness comes from a *passion* for Scripture. The blissful and contented person is one who takes **delight** (Feb. 29) in God’s Word and his **mediation** (Jan. 6) on it is the rule of life and his daily priority.

Third, blessedness comes from a *prosperity* that is dependent upon God. The image of sitting by a river is a graphic one, picturing nourishment, growth, fruitfulness, and much more. While “prosperity teachers” promise monetary riches, true prosperity is found in the spiritual riches we have in Christ (Eph. 1:3–23).

Scriptures for Study: Read the following verses, noting what else brings bliss and true contentedness: Psalm 2:12; 32:1–2; 112:1; 119:1–2; 127:4–5 Prov. 3:13 (“happy”); 8:32.

March 5

Praise [Hallelujah] (1)

hālāl [hālāl yāh]

Another predominate theme in Scripture, as well as an integral part of **worship**, is **praise**. So central is this activity that we will consider it over the next few days.

The most general Hebrew word for **praise** is *hālāl* (1984), from which we get the English **Hallelujah**; the Greek *allēlouia* (239G) is a transliteration of *hālāl* with the addition of *Yāh* (3050), a shortened form of “Yahweh” (*Yehōwāh*; 3068; Jan. 8). *Hālāl yāh*, then, means “praise ye Yah,” which occurs some twenty-six times in the book of Psalms. Except for 135:3, it always appears at the beginning or ending of a Psalm, “suggesting that it was a standardized call to praise in temple worship.” (We should interject, as one Hebrew authority insists, that while “this word is

sometimes spelled *alleluia* in modern hymnals, in imitation of the mode of spelling that found favor in medieval times . . . The letter H ought certainly to be restored at both ends.”)

Significantly, the original picture in *hālāl* was “to shine,” even “the giving off of light by celestial bodies.” Job used it poetically, for example, as he “beheld the sun when it shined [*hālāl*]” (Job 31:26). Similarly, the Greek *doxa* (1391G), which is usually translated “glory,” includes the idea of “radiance” and “glory” (although those concepts were added to *doxa* in the NT and are foreign to secular Greek).

Hālāl ultimately came to mean to praise, celebrate, commend, or even boast. Appearing over 160 times, it sometimes refers to the praising of people, such as when the princes of Egypt “commended” Sarah’s beauty (Gen. 12:15, the first occurrence of *hālāl*) and when a husband praises his virtuous wife (Prov. 31:28).

It is, of course, when used of God (its most frequent use) that *hālāl* takes on its greatest significance. Scripture is permeated with this theme. It is noteworthy that its first appearance in reference to praise of God is in 2 Samuel 22:4, where David praised God for delivering him out of the hands of Saul, also calling God his rock, fortress, deliverer, shield, salvation, tower, and refuge (vs. 2–3). Is that not, indeed, cause for praise? This song of praise, in fact, is virtually identical to Psalm 18.

Not only do men and angels praise and commend God, but even nature itself does so (Ps. 148). All that we do should praise God (1 Cor. 10:31), even the playing of musical instruments (Ps. 150), and such praise should be constant (Ps. 34:1; 35:28; 44:8).

Scriptures for Study: In preparation for the readings for the next few days, read Psalm 100 and meditate on praising God in everything.

April 3

Save [and] Salvation

yāšā’ [and] yešū’āh

One of the key themes of the Bible, of course, is **salvation**. Nevertheless, despite not only the prominence of this theme but also the clarity of what it is and how it comes, there seems to be much confusion about it all in our day. An understanding of these words, however, along with yesterday’s study of **sin**, clears up all question.

As most Hebrew nouns come from a verb, the verb here is *yāšā’* (3467), which appears about 200 times and means “to save, help, deliver, or defend.” The “underlying idea of this verb is bringing to a place of safety or broad pasture as opposed to a narrow strait.” This idea actually comes from the same Arabic root that means “make wide or sufficient,” since “wide” implies freedom from stress and encumbrance. Such change, however, demands deliverance, and such deliverance must come from outside the individual. The LXX usually renders *yāšā’* as the Greek *sōzō* (4982G), to deliver or preserve from danger or destruction.

A vivid example of *yāšā’* is Israel’s deliverance from Egypt (Ex. 14:30), accomplished, of course, solely by God. Even when deliverance came through some human instrumentality, it was still only by God’s power, as when Gideon saved God’s people from the Midianites but only because of God’s empowering (Judg. 6:14–16).

From what, then, does salvation deliver us? What is its *substance*? Salvation is deliverance from spiritual death. Because of Adam’s **sin** in the garden of Eden (Gen. 2:17), “the soul that sinneth, it shall die” (Ezek. 18:4; cf. Rom. 5:12). It is, therefore, Christ alone who came to “save his people from their sins” (Matt. 1:21).

Further, no verse of Scripture is clearer on the *source* of **salvation** (*yešū’āh*, 3444) than is Jonah 2:9: “Salvation is of the LORD.” From beginning to end, and everything in between, salvation is *all* of God. It is not because of our partial merit or good works (Titus 3:5), not because we “said a prayer,” not because of our own “foreseen faith”—even the faith to believe the Gospel is God given (Eph. 2:8–9; Jn. 6:65; Phil. 1:29; Acts 18:27). Rather, “Salvation is of the Lord,” writes Charles Spurgeon, “The Lord has to apply it, to make the unwilling willing, to make the ungodly godly, and bring the vile rebel to the feet of Jesus, or else salvation will never be accomplished.”

Scriptures for Study: God continues to deliver us on a daily basis. Read Psalm 20, noting God’s deliverance from enemies.

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