

# CHRISTIAN BURIAL

There are a number of things you want to look at when it comes to discovering Christian truth. There are a number of ways to go about theologically discovering truth from the Word of God. One way is to look for direct statements. There are times in the Bible when there is a plain, obvious direct statement of truth. So we look for those direct statements. Sometimes there aren't very many direct statements on a particular issue, then we look for what we call indirect implication of a passage. While a truth might not be explicitly stated in a passage, the implication of a passage tends to teach one thing or another. Thirdly, we like to look into the Scriptures and see what God's people believe or what they practice. What are God's people doing? We assume they will be responding to what they understand to be truth, so they will be obeying truths. We want to see what they are practicing. For instance, in the New Testament we want to see what the Christians in the New Testament were doing. If they were following revelation, if they were following truth, then they ought to be practicing and doing that which is pleasing to God. Then there are times when we see what God himself does in a situation. There are times when God is directly involved in a situation that teaches us or at least gives us some insight into what God's will might be in a situation. So we look to see what God himself does, or in the New Testament what the Lord Jesus may do, because he is our example.

So as we begin this study on Christian burial or cremation, we want to look into the Word. First of all we want to look for some direct statements. In hermeneutics or the science of interpreting the Bible there is a principal called the first mention principal. One of the things you need to do when you are studying a doctrine in the Bible is to go back in the Bible and find out the origin of the doctrine, find out where it is first mentioned. Begin there and trace it through.

In Genesis 3:19 we have what is God's first statement concerning death and what takes place upon death and what takes place after death. While neither burial nor cremation is mentioned here, I believe we have some implication of truth in the verse. In Genesis 3:19 notice what the Lord said, "In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread." This is a part of the curse, the fall of man, because of sin. "Till thou return unto the ground," notice that phrase "till thou return unto the ground." "For out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return." So, while neither burial nor cremation is mentioned here, God's terminology here is that you will return to the ground, you will return to dust. He doesn't mention by what process that will happen. Factually speaking, neither burial nor cremation is mentioned here, but we have God's statement that his plan, because of sin, is for man to return to the ground.

Now we are going to have go further into the Bible to see if God says anything else so that we can get an understanding of what he meant by man returning to the ground. What process did he have in mind when man returns to the ground. The next statement of God concerning this issue is in Genesis 15:15. God says something to Abraham in this verse and what he says to Abraham has implication concerning the subject of Christian burial. Notice what he says to Abraham in this

verse. “And thou shalt go to thy fathers in peace.” He is talking about Abraham dying. He says Abraham you are going to live a long time and then you are going to go peacefully to meet your fathers. Then he says this, “thou shalt be buried in a good old age.” And so God tells Abraham that he is going to be buried in the ground. He doesn’t mention cremation. Now we could say that God is speaking prophetically. It was the custom of the people to bury and God was just simply saying you are going to follow the customs of the people and you are going to be buried. But, I think it goes a bit farther than that. God is telling Abraham what his plan is and what his will for Abraham’s life is. God says, Abraham, you are going to live, you are going to die in an old age, you are going to go to your fathers in peace, and you are going to be buried.

So, as we begin to get into the subject and lay the foundational groundwork for it, the implication at this point is that burial would be the natural process through which man would return to the dust of the earth.

Now as we go on through the patriarchal age we come to Genesis chapter 49. We are going to look at a few verses that at this particular time reflect the tradition that had by this time been laid by the patriarchs, by Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and the people of that age. Genesis 49:28 is in reference to the death of Jacob. Jacob has finished blessing all the twelve sons, all of the twelve tribes of Israel and now he is ready to die. Notice what the verse says in relationship to this. Notice what Jacob’s command to his sons is in reference to his death. “All these are the twelve tribes of Israel: and this is it that their father spake unto them, and blessed them everyone according to his blessing he blessed them.” So Jacob blesses and prophesies concerning the twelve tribes and now he begins to speak to them concerning his own death. Verse 29 says, “And he charged them, and said unto them, I am to be gathered unto

my people.” That was an expression in reference to the fact that he was going to die. His time to leave this life was closing in and he is going to go and be with his people. This is in reference to the departure of his spirit. Notice what Jacob says. He says, “I am going to be gathered unto my people: bury me with my fathers in the cave that is in the field of Ephron the Hittite.” So, the express charge of Jacob to his sons was that when he died he wanted to be taken to the family burying place and be buried there.

Now in ancient times people were usually buried in tombs of one sort or another. Sometimes the tombs were natural caves. They would find a natural cave and go in and carve out little sepulchers throughout the cave and there the family would be buried. At other times if they had a little bit more money they could purchase a special place and make themselves a sepulcher or a tomb there. It was considered to be a great honor to be buried in the family tomb, to be buried as a family. This is what they tried to do. Notice verse 30 now, “In the cave that is in the field of Machpelah, which is before Mamre, in the land of Canaan, which Abraham bought with the field of Ephron the Hittite for a possessions of a burying place.” So Abraham bought this field with this cave for the express purpose of it being a burying place. Verse 31 goes on to say, “There they buried Abraham and Sarah his wife; there they buried Isaac and Rebekah his wife; and there I buried Leah.” So all the ancestors had been buried there. They bought the place specifically for burying, for entombing. So Jacob says, when I die I want you to take me there and I want you to bury me there.

Notice now in Genesis 50:4-6, “And when the days of his mourning were past, Joseph spake unto the house of Pharaoh, saying, If now I have found grace in your eyes speak, I pray you in the ears of Pharaoh saying, My father made me swear, saying, Lo, I die: in my grave which I have

digged for me in the land of Canaan, there shalt thou bury me. Now therefore let me go up, I pray thee, and bury my father, and I will come again. And Pharaoh said, Go up, and bury thy father, according as he made thee swear.” So Jacob had died and everyone had mourned for him. At this time they were in Egypt. Now what I am demonstrating from this is that by the time of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob it had been well established that burial was the normal process by which man would return to the ground.

Remember that God said, you are taken out of the ground and you are going to return to the ground. How did the early saint, the early patriarchs, understand that? What did they mean that to be? From the time that God said to Abraham, Abraham you are going to go to your fathers in peace and you are going to be buried what did Abraham do? Abraham went out and bought a field. He went out and bought a burying place. Abraham and his wife were buried there and the rest of the patriarchs were buried. This custom, which I believe is more than custom, based on revelation is the practice that ensued during the time of the patriarchs. So, we have the direct statement of God concerning burial, we have implied passages concerning burial and then we see the practice of what God’s people did. We see Abraham, Isaac and Jacob burying. From the very early chapters of the Bible we see that the customary thing for God’s people was to bury their dead.

Now lets go to the time of the law. Lets go to Numbers 20. More time has passed on and now it is time for Aaron the brother of Moses to die. Numbers 20:23-29 says, “And the Lord spake unto Moses and Aaron in Mount Hor, by the coast of the land of Edom, saying, Aaron shall be gathered unto his people: for he shall not enter into the land which I have given unto the children of Israel, because ye rebelled against my work at the water of Meribah. Take Aaron and Eleazar his son and bring them

up unto Mount Hor: and strip Aaron of his garments and put them upon Eleazar his son: and Aaron shall be gathered unto his people, and shall die there. And Moses did as the Lord commanded: and they went up into Mount Hor in the sight of all the congregation. And Moses stripped Aaron of all his garments, and put them upon Eleazar his son; and Aaron died there in the top of the mount: and Moses and Eleazar came down from the mount.” So, Aaron dies. Now what happens to Aaron when he dies?

Look at Deuteronomy 10:6 “And the children of Israel took their journey from Beeroth of the children of Jaakan to Mosera: there Aaron died, and there he was buried; and Eleazar his son ministered in the priest’s office in his stead.” So Aaron was buried.

We see that all through the patriarchal age into the time of Moses and Aaron and into the time of the law that God’s people are burying their dead. We might ask ourselves why are they doing this. I would like to suggest to that even though there are not many explicit statements in the Bible the statements that we do have tend toward burial. God said you are going to return to the ground. Then he said to Abraham that you are going to be buried. From that time on all we read about is God’s people being buried.

Now there is something else very important that I want you to see and it has to do with Moses. In Deuteronomy 34 we read about the death of Moses. Remember that God also told Moses that he would not be able to enter into the land. God was going to take him up on the mount, show him the land and then he was going to die. Deuteronomy 34:4-6 says, “And the Lord said unto him, this is the land which I sware unto Abraham, unto Isaac, and unto Jacob, saying I will give it unto thy seed: I have caused thee to see it with thine eyes, but thou shalt not go over thither. So Moses the servant of the Lord died there

in the land of Moab, according to the word of the Lord.” Moses did not die of any natural cause, but he died as a judgement of God. The Bible is very clear about that. Verse seven tells us that “Moses was an hundred and twenty years old when he died: his eye was not dim, nor his natural force abated.” God took him up there and took his life.

Now notice what God did when he took his life. Look at verse 6, “And he buried him in a valley in the land of Moab.” Who is the he? God. No human hand buried Moses. God buried Moses. Notice what the Bible says in the rest of the verse, “but no man knoweth of his sepulcher unto this day.” God took the body of Moses and he buried it where no man could find it. I think that the reason for that was that God did not want anybody taking the body of Moses and idolizing it. So God took Moses and buried him some place where no one could find him. But what did God do to Moses when he died? God buried him. So you see that we have direct reference to what God himself did in a situation. God buried Moses.

Lets look at something else in Deuteronomy. Deuteronomy 21 contains a direct statement from the law given by God as to what the Israelites were to do with a criminal that was executed. In verses 22 and 23 it says, “And if a man have committed a sin worthy of death, and he be to be put to death, and thou hang him on a tree: His body shall not remain all night upon the tree, but thou shalt in any wise bury him that day: (for he that is hanged is accursed of God:) that thy land be not defiled, which the Lord thy God giveth thee for an inheritance.” So if a person had committed a capital offense and was executed, God commanded the people to bury him. So this is also a direct statement that would seem to indicate that it is God’s desire that burial be the natural process through which man returns to the ground.

Let’s go on now to talk about cremation because there are examples of cremation in the Old Testament. One is in Joshua 7:25. Remember the story of Achan. When God told the people to go in and take the land, defeat the enemies, and drive them out, he warned the people not to take any of the possessions of the people, especially not anything that had to do with idolatry. Remember what Achan did. He took some stuff and he hid it. The Israelites had just finished defeating Jericho and the next town on the list was a little town by the name of Ai. It was so insignificant that they decided just to send a small force against it and not the whole force. They thought this would be easy picking after Jericho. So this force goes up against the little town of Ai. Remember what happened? They got soundly trounced. They eventually find out the reason for their trouncing, the reason that God’s blessing is not with them any longer is because there is hidden sin in the camp. So eventually they go through the camp family by family by family searching for that which is causing God’s blessing to be removed from them. Finally they come upon the family of Achan and the forbidden thing that he has done. To make a long story short they judge the family by executing them. We come down to chapter 7 verse 25 of Joshua. Notice the judgement here. “And Joshua said, Why hast thou troubled us? The Lord shall trouble thee this day. And all Israel stoned him with stones and burned them with fire, after they had stoned them with stones.” So here is a case in which they executed them by stoning them and then they burned them. I want you to understand that this is an exception. This isn’t the normal procedure and it is a judgement. The burning was a part of that judgement. The stoning and the burning were part of a judgement because they had displeased God. They would have never done that otherwise.

Another case that is an exceptional case is in

I Samuel 31 when Saul and his sons are defeated by the Philistines. You recall that really what happens in that Saul commits suicide. He falls upon his sword and kills himself. He asked his sword bearer to do it for him and he wouldn't do it and so Saul takes his sword and falls on it and kills himself. After he does that the Philistines come and desecrate his body. They behead him, desecrate his body and take it to the city. A little bit later on some of Saul's forces come to retrieve his body. When they come into the town to retrieve the body notice what happened in I Samuel 31:12, "All the valiant men arose, and went all night, and took the body of Saul and the bodies of his sons from the wall of Bethshan and came to Jabesh, and burnt them there." Now that was unusual. Why did they do that? The Bible doesn't explicitly say, but I have a couple of ideas. I think one reason that they burnt the body was because the considered it to be defiled. The body had been mangled mutilated, and defiled. I think that they considered that to be a curse and not only that, I don't believe that in that condition they wanted to take the bodies back to Israel. So they burnt the flesh of the bodies. But notice what they did even after they burnt the flesh of the mangled bodies. Verse 13 tells us "And they took their bones, and buried them under a tree at Jabesh, and fasted seven days." They burnt the mangled flesh but were still very careful to take the bones and bury them. So this was an exceptional situation. It was not something where they were practicing what they normally did. This was not normal. They did not normally burn the bodies. They normally buried the bodies, but because of what had happened to the bodies in this one case they burned them.

One thing we need to understand in the Old Testament especially is that devouring fire, fire that consumes, fire that devours, is typically considered to be a judgement of God. Remember what happened when Elijah

was sitting under a tree and the king decided that he was going to haul Elijah in. The king sends a company of fifty soldiers out to get Elijah. Elijah is sitting under a tree and this company of fifty soldiers come up to Elijah, ready to arrest him. Elijah simply looks at them and says, "If I be a man of God, let fire come down God out of heaven and devour you." And zap, they were gone. So the king sends out another fifty. Elijah is still relaxing under the tree. They come up to Elijah and Elijah says, "If I be a man of God, let fire come down out of heaven and devour you." Zap, that fifty is gone. It is good to be king, you don't have to go out and do it yourself. So the king says I think I will send out another fifty. He has lots of soldiers. He sends out another fifty. I can imagine that third fifty is very nervous. I wouldn't want to be in that group of the third fifty, would you? They do the same thing, and Elijah says the same thing and the same thing happens. The consuming fire, the devouring fire, that devours them and turns them into ashes is a judgement of God. The fire that devoured Sodom and Gomorrah is another example of the devouring fire being a judgement of God.

The great Jewish scholar, perhaps the greatest of all Christian Jewish scholars, Alfred Eidersheim in one of his books says this, "Cremation was denounced as a purely heathen practice contrary to the whole spirit of all Old Testament teaching." I give you that to show that in the Old Testament God's people understood that burial was the way that God had chosen to return the body to the ground.

Now let's go into the New Testament. In the New Testament the Christian practice is very clear. Lets go to the book of Acts chapter 5. Remember the story of Ananias and Sapphira, two people in the church there who thought they would pull a fast one on God. They didn't get away with it and God took their life. In Acts 5:5-6 we read, "And Ananias hearing these words fell down and gave

up the ghost: and great fear came on all that heard these things. And the young men arose, wound him up, and carried him out, and buried him.” About three hours later the wife comes in not knowing what was done. In verse 8 Peter asks “whether you sold the land for so much? And she said, Yea for so much. Then Peter said unto her, How is that ye have agreed together to tempt the Spirit of the Lord? Behold, the feet of them which have buried thy husband are at the door and shall carry thee out. Then fell she down straightway at his feet, and yielded up the ghost: and the young men came in, and found her dead, and carrying her forth, buried her by her husband.”

This simply tells us what the practice of the early Christians was concerning death and burial. They buried people. This is a very clear and plain teaching in the New Testament. When Lazarus died in John chapter 11 they took him out and put him in a tomb. That is where his body was when Jesus called him forth - in a tomb. Why? Because that was the natural thing. That was the thing they did. The bodies of the early Christians who suffered martyrdom in Rome were found when they dug down under the city of Rome into the catacombs. They found the catacombs strewn with sepulchers where the Christians buried their martyred dead, where the early Christians were buried. Under the streets, down in the caverns, underneath Rome they found all the tombs of the early Christians there. Why? Because that is what the Christians did. They buried their dead.

So, what I am trying to get across is that there is no doubt whatsoever that the Bible teaches burial. Jesus Christ was buried. Let’s look at Acts 2:26 concerning Christ. There is an important phrase here that I want you to see. Speaking of the death and resurrection of Christ, verse 26 says, “Therefore did my heart rejoice and my tongue was glad; moreover, also my flesh shall rest in hope.” This

is a quotation from the Old Testament. “My flesh shall rest in hope.” Stop and think about that for a minute. That is said in reference to Christ. Christ died, he was taken to the tomb and buried. Now, prophetically speaking of Christ, the Bible says that his flesh would rest in hope. The hope of Jesus was that his flesh would rest in hope. In hope of what? In hope of resurrection, but even more than that, that his flesh would not see corruption. How does that apply to us? What does that mean? It means that Jesus’ expectation was that he would be raised before his body decayed. His flesh would rest in hope. How do we know that? Let’s read verse 27, “Because thou wilt not leave my soul in hell, neither wilt thou suffer (allow) thine Holy One to see corruption.” Corruption speaks of the body. So, when the Bible says that Jesus in death, when he was buried, was buried with the hope that his flesh would not see corruption. His hope was that he would be raised before his flesh would see corruption. That has implications for us today. Cremation says I do not have hope that the resurrection will take place before I see corruption. In fact I think that is why some people prefer cremation, because they have negative feelings about the body seeing corruption. I may be mistaken about that, and I am not trying to make anyone say something that they don’t feel. I am just saying that all of us have a natural revolt about our bodies going to corruption. It is not an appealing thought. But the hope of resurrection is that Christ is going to come. I not only have hope of resurrection, I have hope that the resurrection will happen before I see corruption. That is the expectation of the Christian. That was Christ’s expectation, that his flesh would not see corruption and it didn’t see corruption, because God raised him from the dead.

I want to also remind you that according to the Word of God that in the atonement God has not only purchased our spirit, he has purchased our body. He has

redeemed our body. That tells us that God has a design and a purpose for the body, not only in this life but beyond this life. It points to resurrection and it points to the fact that God has a purpose for me in this body in the life to come.

It is true that this body will be changed. I want you to know something and that is that it is this body that is going to be changed. Some people do not have a clear understanding of that. Cremation will not stop that. Cremation will not stop God changing this body. There have been Christians who have died by fire. There have been Christians who have been burned. There have been Christians who have been cremated and there have been Christians who have died as martyrs at the stake. There have been Christians who have been in house fires and other tragedies. Cremation does not mean you are not going to be raised and cremation does not mean that the same principals will not apply. All I am trying to teach here is what seems to be God's order of things and the way God desires things to be done as a whole.

Let's look at I Corinthians 15. I want you to see something in this passage. I want you to see the relationship of the new body to the old body. I Corinthians 15:35-38 says, "But some man will say, how are the dead raised up? And with what body do they come? Thou fool, that which thou sowest is not quickened, except it die: and that which thou sowest, thou sowest not that body that shall be, but bare grain. It may chance of wheat, or of some other grain: but God giveth it a body as it hath pleased him, and to every seed his own body." I want you to notice here that our body is likened to a seed that is sown. The Apostle Paul uses an illustration of a seed. He says that a seed in order to bring forth something has to be planted, and when it is planted it germinates and bursts forth. Now when it bursts forth it is not the same as when it was planted. That is amazing. You take a seed, which can look very

unassuming, plant it and it is amazing what can pop up. But it doesn't pop up until it is planted. So, the Apostle Paul is likening this body to a seed. He says you take this body and you plant it. Then in the resurrection something pops up, but that which pops up has its origin in the original body. God doesn't just do away with our mortal body and then create something totally new and different that is not associated with this. That is important to understand. Some people do not understand that and some people do not believe that. Some people think that this body has nothing to do with the body that shall be. Paul does not teach that. He teaches that the body that shall be is going to germinate from this body. This is the seed for the body that shall be. God is going to change it, but this is the seed for the body that shall be. Now cremation will not change that at all. Whether this body goes back to dust through the slower process of corruption or whether it goes to dust very quickly will not change the fact that this seed body is still what God is going to use to bring forth something new. I think it does give us some implications of what is preferable for the Christian. Which better follows God's design and plan for things. That is burial, because this body is like a seed. What do you do with a seed? You sow it, you plant it and then God brings forth something. So, burial really reflects the hope of a changed, resurrected body. I am not saying that this body doesn't mean anything, I am saying that this body is the seed from which my new body will come. It is really going to be me.

When Jesus died and was raised from the dead that which was raised was really him, not just in the spirit, but that was really him in the flesh, in the body. It was glorified, but it was really him. When Jesus said look at me, come and touch me, it was really him. It was not somebody different and new. Someday when you see me in glory and you come up to me it will really be me, it will

be me changed, glorified, but it will be me and you are going to be you. You will have new qualities, but it is going to be you. So, I am not just taking this body and throwing it away. We need to realize that this body has a design and plan in God's design of things. There is a purpose for this body. This body was designed to get me through this life and this body is the seed for the life to come.

There are other things we could mention also. We could think of burial in reference to the gospel. The Bible says that the gospel is that Jesus Christ died for sins according to the scriptures, was buried and the third day rose again. The fact that burial is mentioned in relationship to the gospel is not incidental. Can you imagine what would have taken place if Jesus Christ had died on the cross and was cremated? God could have still raised him from the dead, but in relationship to the gospel what would have happened if Christ had been cremated. What proof would there ever have been? What tangible proof would there have been of an empty tomb and of a resurrected Christ. In relationship to that we can take it a step further. In Romans 6 we are told that we are buried with him in baptism. In the likeness of baptism we are buried with him, and in the same likeness we are raised with him. Now that has spiritual implications. That says we are identifying with Christ in his death and resurrection. It also says that we are dying to the old way of life and rising to a new way of life, but it also points down the way to the fact that we believe we are going to be raised. We have died with Christ, we are in Christ, we are identified with him and as he was buried and raised to life we are going to be buried and raised to life also. In baptism we are identifying our self in Christ with what he has done for us with the hope that the same shall be done for us. As he was buried and raised to life, someday

we shall be buried and raised to life. So there are a lot of implications here.

In summary, we have direct statements that point to burial. We have passages of implication that point to burial. The practice of the Old and New Testament saints was burial. The example of God's direct activity in relation to Moses was burial. In the example of Jesus, Jesus was buried. In the gospel picture concerning the redemption of the body burial is pictured. Moreover, by the peoples of the day cremation was considered to be a pagan practice and one that was a picture of God's judgement. So the Scripture weight overwhelmingly points to burial, but it does not affect your Christianity one way or the other really. As far as your salvation goes, as far as if you are going to go to heaven and be raised from the dead, it does not affect it one way or the other. There have been Christians who have been burned, they have been eaten by wild beasts, they have been torn asunder, they have died in every conceivable and possible way and God is going to deal with them just like everybody else. So the bottom line is going to leave the choice to you, but I believe that the preferable way for the Christian to be taken care of at death is burial.

In closing I want to say one more thing very gently. I believe that each person ought to take into consideration very carefully those they leave behind. I think that if for instance you are considering cremation that would not be a choice I would make if that is something that would greatly upset and disturb the loved ones I left behind. After all they are the ones who are going to have to live with your decision. The bottom line is that the choice is yours. I have conducted funerals mostly for those who chose burial, but I have also conducted funerals for those who were cremated. It is not going to affect whether or not you are going to go to heaven.

