

Cremation

By W. E. Best

Cremation is an unnatural practice in an amoral society. That which is of heathen origin should not be practiced in what is supposed to be a civilized society. (See Deut. 12:31; Judges 15:6; II Kings 17:31; II Chron. 28:3.) However, what the world considers wisdom and what God calls wisdom are two different things: "For it is written, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and will bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent. Where is the wise? where is the scribe? where is the disputer of this world? hath not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? For after that in the wisdom of God the world by wisdom knew not God, it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe" (I Cor. 1:19-21).

No one can deny that the wisdom of this world has made things worse rather than better. The inhabitants of this world know about God; but apart from regeneration, they will never know God. God is known essentially by means of general revelation (Rom. 1:19, 20), but He is known representatively in Christ by means of special revelation (Rom. 1:16, 17). Therefore, a true knowledge of God is reached only through Jesus Christ who is Wisdom Incarnate (Prov. 8). Plato lamented that he could not find the Father of the universe. Socrates deemed such knowledge the greatest happiness, but he confessed he did not know how to obtain it. Hence, man's highest wisdom is only folly.

The Moabites were so perverse that they added crime to crime, proving they were wholly inhuman and barbarous: "THUS saith the LORD; For three transgressions of Moab, and for four, I will not turn away the punishment thereof; because he burned the bones of the king of Edom into lime: But I will send a fire upon Moab, and it shall devour the palaces of Kerioth: and Moab shall die with tumult, with shouting, and with the sound of the trumpet: And I will cut off the judge from the midst thereof, and will

slay all the princes thereof with him, saith the LORD" (Amos 2:1-3). God punished the Moabites because they burned the bones of the king of Edom into lime. The only thing that can be said about those who practice cremation is that people who live like pagans may as well have their bodies disposed of like them. They have no criterion by which to judge what God approves or disapproves. Their depraved subjective opinions have blinded them to the objective truth of God. Consider the pagan religions today that practice cremation. In God's sight, cremation was the most dishonorable way of disposing of human bodies.

God commanded cremation as the most severe punishment in Israel. The purity of Israel was so important that the strongest punishment was administered upon the sin of Achan (Josh. 7). Had God allowed Israel to triumph at Ai, He would have manifested indifference to the sin of the people and revealed that He could sanction "the accursed thing" (v. 11). Achan could not hide his sin from God. Therefore, God was in the midst of Israel to lay Jericho in ruins not only because of Achan's sin but because his sin had leavened the whole nation (Josh. 7:10-12; Gal. 5:9).

The whole nation was involved in Achan's sin because the covenant relationship imparted a unity to all the people. The nation was bound together in such a manner as to involve all in the sin of one. Israel was one nation; therefore, it was impossible for anyone to take an independent stand. The same principle applies to each local church. Realizing that the whole congregation of either Israel or the local church is held responsible for sin in her midst is peculiarly solemn to a Christian. When sin is not dealt with by God's people, they are deprived of spiritual discernment. Joshua did not understand that the glory of God's great name necessitated the defeat at Ai, as it had achieved the victory at Jericho.

The appointed leader of Israel should have concluded that something was wrong in the condition of the people. He ought to have known that the

failure was with Israel and not with God. Having seen what God's presence secured, Joshua should have known that God demanded holiness of life. How fearful to think that just one man, for the sake of personal gain, could plunge the whole nation of Israel into trouble and defeat.

Defeat will never be turned into victory until sin is judged. Therefore, Joshua must lead the people to destroy the accursed thing and sanctify themselves against tomorrow (Josh. 7:10-21). There must be no delay regardless of the painfulness of the task. Some are more concerned for the feelings of relatives and friends than the presence and honor of the Lord.

Although Achan's sin was revealed, he remained impenitent and had to be dealt with in the most severe manner. Achan's confession could be compared with that of Judas (Matt. 27:4). A true confession of sin is impossible until one first gets a glimpse of divine perfection and human imperfection. The Israelites were responsible to take Achan, his family, and his possessions and exercise God's most severe punishment upon them: "And Joshua, and all Israel with him, took Achan the son of Zerah, and the silver, and the garment, and the wedge of gold, and his sons, and his daughters, and his oxen, and his asses, and his sheep, and his tent, and all that he had: and they brought them unto the valley of Achor. 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. And they raised over him a great heap of stones unto this day. So the LORD turned from the fierceness of his anger. Wherefore the name of that place was called, The valley of Achor, unto this day" (Josh. 7:24-26). The burning of the children does not contradict Deuteronomy 24:16 because it is the fulfillment of Deuteronomy 13:16-17. Achan's family became participants with him in his crime; therefore, they fell under the same judgment with him.

God commanded cremation as punishment not only for certain individuals but for idols: "The graven images of their gods shall ye burn with fire: thou shalt not desire the silver or gold that is on them, nor take it unto thee, lest thou be snared therein: for it is an abomination to the LORD thy God" (Deut. 7:25). "And it shall be, that he that is taken with the accursed thing shall be burnt with fire, he and all that he hath: because he hath transgressed the covenant of the LORD, and because he hath wrought folly in Israel" (Josh. 7:15). "And they brought forth the images out of the house of Baal, and burned them" (II Kings 10:26). Cremation was Tamar's punishment for playing the whore (Gen. 38:24). Hazor, head of the kingdoms against Israel, was burned (Josh. 11:11).

God's method of disposing of the deceased human body is given after the fall of man: "In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return" (Gen. 3:19). As wonderful as the human body is, according to Psalm 139:14-16, God formed it from the dust of the ground rather than from the celestial (heavenly) bodies (Gen. 2:7). The realization of "...dust thou art..." is a humbling thought to man. This points to the transitoriness of the material from which the human body was made; "...unto dust shalt thou return" points to the corruption to which the body is destined in time (Gen. 3:19). Job attested this truth: "And though after my skin worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God" (Job 19:26).

The deceased bodies of saints are not to be treated as being divinely cursed but as belonging to God (I Cor. 6:19, 20). These bodies which have served as temples of the Holy Spirit in life should never be treated as being under God's curse in death. Therefore, Abraham purchased land in which Sarah was buried (Gen. 23). Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, and Jacob and Leah were all buried in the same place (Gen. 49:30, 31; 50:13). Joseph died and was put in a coffin in Egypt; but some 300 years later, Moses moved his bones to Shechem for burial (Ex. 13:19; Josh. 24:32).

Jesus Christ was buried in Joseph's borrowed tomb (Mark 15:42-47). Both John the Baptist and the first Christian martyr were buried (Matt. 14:10-12; Acts 8:2).

Although many are recommending cremation today because it is sanitary and economic, the bodies of saints are not to be treated like those of pagans. To treat the body which belongs to God as if it were the body of a pagan is a sin. No one will deny that cremation is cheaper, but economics must not take precedence over that which honors God. Furthermore, no one will deny that cremation is sanitary, but so is burning garbage in a garbage dump.

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