

“And they buried him...”

Joshua 24:29-33

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We come this morning to the last paragraph of this great book. It forms an *inclusio* for the book as a whole. Joshua is mentioned in the first verses of the book and his death and burial in the last. We have made a point of saying many times that this history bristles with lessons for our life today. We are taught in the Bible that the history recorded in Joshua demonstrates the pattern of human life and particularly the life of faith. Joshua is, in the terminology of biblical hermeneutics or interpretation, typological or paradigmatic. And so it proves to be to the very end.

Text comment

v.30 In other words, Joshua was buried on his own property, identified earlier in 19:50. Moses had died outside the land, and no one knew where he had been buried. But the fact that Joshua is buried *in the land* indicates in a potent way that Israel is now settled in Canaan and the land *is theirs*. [Hubbard, 592]

The LXX, the old Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, adds after v. 30 that they buried with Joshua the flint knives with which the nation had been circumcised at Gilgal, as we read in chapter 5.

v.32 The story of Israel’s possession of the Promised Land was now complete. Israel had fulfilled a promise made to Joseph hundreds of years before, as we read in Gen. 50:25-26. Believing in the Lord’s promise, believing that Israel would someday inherit Canaan as their own land, Joseph wanted to be buried in the Promised Land and now he was. I’m not sure what the significance of this is, if it is significant, but both Joseph and Joshua lived to be 110.

v.33 Eleazar, the high priest, was likewise buried on his family inheritance.

Now, it is altogether easy for us to miss the obvious in reading through these final verses of the book. In fact only one of the seven or so commentaries that I consulted in preparing these sermons on Joshua took any notice of the most obvious point. Two of them did not even comment on the last five verses of the book! But these final verses are about the burial of the dead! Three times we read that “they *buried* him...” It is certainly worth pointing out the significance of *where* they were buried, but the fact *that they were buried* is important in its own right. Here a point is made of great importance. If you remember the account in Genesis, it was a significant step toward eventual settlement in the Promised Land; a true act of faith in the promise of God that led Jacob to purchase a burial plot at Shechem. It was for the family “a toehold” in the Promised Land. And now all Israel is there. Burial signified possession. Remember, in the typology of Scripture, Canaan stands for heaven. Burial is a toehold in heaven!

Now many of you have heard me before on this subject, but I make no apologies for taking the opportunity provided by this text to emphasize the importance of this practice of burial -- whether underground or in tombs -- precisely because this practice is for the first time in the history of the Christian church in decline and no one is even talking about this change much less speaking against it. Christians in large numbers are growing comfortable with the practice of cremation. And I don't want you to grow comfortable with that practice. It is anti-Christian in profound ways. Burial is an act of faith; cremation is an act of unbelief. It is that simple. Burial is a greeting of the better country from afar. Cremation is an act of utter indifference to the possibility of there being another country and a future life. It's that simple. Jacob buried his family in Shechem as an act of faith in the Promised Land. Joseph asked for his bones to be carried to Canaan and buried there as an act of faith in the Promised Land. These men, Joshua and Eleazar, so we read in Hebrews 11, were buried in Canaan as an act of faith that they would eventually awake in *the* Promised Land; that is, in heaven.

These examples need to be taken to heart by Christians today because for the first time in the history of the people of God in this world the age-old custom of Christian burial is under direct attack. Another practice is replacing that of Jacob and Joseph and Joshua and Eleazar and everybody else in the Word of God. Cremation is now being practiced on a scale totally unprecedented in Christian history. As I said, it is a part of our faith and a practice of our faith that no one is thinking much about, or, at least, is not thinking biblically and theologically about at the very time the practice is being abandoned. in our thoughtless and decadent age.

Cremation as a means of disposing of a human body is rapidly becoming the norm in our West Coast culture. Upwards of 50% of the dead are now cremated every year on the West Coast of the United States and that number continues to rise year by year and there is nothing to suggest it won't continue to rise for the years to come. Those are the facts. And they would not disturb me overmuch except for the fact that cremation is coming to be accepted among Christians as proper, even, in some cases, as the preferred method of treating their own dead. What pagans do with their dead is none of our business. What Christians do with our dead is absolutely our business. We are told that it is cheaper, as it is, and that it is not right to burden the bereaved with a large bill for burial. We have been taught to worry that land for new cemeteries is simply not going to be available to us any longer, that existing cemeteries are filling up and that, therefore, we must find a different way of dealing with our dead. Some even like the idea -- I've heard Christians say they liked the idea -- of being able to scatter Uncle Henry over his favorite fishing hole or Aunt Mary in the rose garden she loved so much. *Don't you swallow this hogwash!* We are Christians. The Bible speaks to this issue clearly, emphatically, and repeatedly in a way the Christian church has had no difficulty understanding for thousands of years. It is not Christian thinking that lies behind the growing popularity of cremation; it is a resurgent paganism, pure and simple.

Now, having stated that point so strongly, I must say something else and I beg you to listen to me carefully. I do not blame individual Christians who have, in the past, made the decision to cremate a loved one. My brother-in-law was cremated. I have, I believe, thankfully talked my sister out of doing the same for herself when she comes to die. I didn't blame her. She'd never thought seriously about the practice. No one told her to think again or even raised a question in her mind. She'd never heard a sermon on the subject; never read a book. I blame the Christian ministry entirely. It is a complete act of dereliction on the part of the Christian ministry. Christians can be forgiven for not

having thought about this, for unwittingly assuming that such a practice would be proper, because their ministers have either been silent in regard to the issue or in some cases have actually encouraged them to use cremation as a means of disposing the human body. I have in my files an article by a minister of one of our conservative Presbyterian and Reformed Churches that argues that cremation is an entirely appropriate practice for Christians. Not much of an argument by the way! Furthermore, it is obvious that the cremation of a Christian does not affect his or her future blessing. Obviously many Christians have been burned to death on martyrs' stakes or have died at sea or have decayed to nothing in deserts and battlefields. God is able to raise the dead! That is not the issue. The issue is what is right for *us* to do, what practice is in keeping with our faith and the teaching of the Word of God, and what way of treating our dead conforms to what we believe about them and about their future.

The arguments for cremation are, in fact, strikingly, eerily like the arguments for abortion: they amount to a case for making it easier for the living. Burials are too expensive, too land intensive in the same way that pregnancies can be so very inconvenient, can affect our working life, our careers, bring babies into the world that parents cannot afford, and the like. Well, then, we may notice this analogy as well. Miscarriage is not abortion. What happens when a mother miscarries – as when a martyr is burned or a Christian sailor is lost at sea – is not at all the same thing morally as an abortion. The fact that babies die in the womb is no argument for killing them there! What *happens* to us is not the same thing as what we ourselves *choose* to do. The fact that God does not need an existing body in order to resurrect the dead is no argument that we should burn the bodies of our loved ones when they have died.

The longer cremation is not spoken against, the longer the practice is tolerated in the church, the harder it will be to repudiate it and to end it. Too many Christians will have cremated a loved one and will not want to admit that they have done something they shouldn't or that they have mistreated the body of someone dear to them; that they have done something wrong they cannot undo. I've encountered this defensiveness already. So let me give you reasons to think that these three burials at the end of Joshua are not mere historical detail, but, like the rest of the book, instruction in our faith.

I. First, the practice of burial has the support of Holy Scripture from beginning to end but cremation does not.

This is very striking and all the more because God's people, throughout the entire course of the history covered in the Bible itself, were rubbing shoulders with cultures that practiced cremation. But the patriarchs buried their dead, so did Israel, and so did the church in the new epoch. Every statement regarding the dead in the Bible assumes this practice. Christ was buried and we were buried with him. *We were not cremated with him.* Jesus said, "Those who are in their graves will rise to live..." Statements that characterize death as a sleep assume burial. They are simply incompatible with cremation, which is not in fact or appearance "sleep," but complete and utter destruction and dissolution.

Now, you will hear folk argue that, in fact, cremation does appear in the Bible and that, therefore, the practice does have biblical support. And cremation does occur in several instances. The first is that of Achan, whose sin at Jericho brought Israel to ruin at Ai, and who, with his family, was

stoned to death in the Valley of Achor, and then their bodies burned. But surely here cremation is *a sign of divine judgment and wrath*. A similar instance of cremation as a sign of damnation is found in Josiah's burning the bodies of the idolatrous priests on their own altars (2 Kgs. 23:20). It is precisely that significance – as an emblem of hellfire – that makes it so inappropriate for God's people when they die and why it is not used otherwise in the biblical history.

The other instance is that of Saul who, we read in Kings, after being killed in battle, was taken by his enemies to Beth Shan where his body was hung up on the city wall that his enemies might gloat. The men of Jabesh Gilead, whom Saul had years before rescued from their enemies, went at risk to themselves, stole the body of Israel's king – or what was left of that body after some days hanging in the Near-eastern sun – burned it, and then carried the bones home where they were buried. Cremation in that case was not a matter of disposing of the human body, but of necessity. What could be carried back for burial was carried back. Interestingly, the Chronicler only mentions Saul's burial, not the burning and some scholars have argued that the burning was not the burning of the body but the burning of incense, funeral rite. Eventually, as you remember, the body was exhumed and reinterred in the family grave. If you interrogate Holy Scripture to learn how Christians ought to treat their dead, there is one answer given and one only: their bodies are to be buried or entombed. *This, we may say, is the exegetical argument for burial and against cremation.*

II. Second, the practice of burial attests to the biblical doctrine of man and the greatest argument against cremation is the Holy Scripture's emphatic declaration of the personhood of the body.

The reason we are against abortion is that the Bible teaches us that the fetus is a person; not a person-to-be, not a potential person, but a person; already a moral, a spiritual being, already having begun his or her journey from this world to the next. And do you know how we know that, among other things? Because the baby in the womb is referred to in the Bible with personal pronouns. It is not an "it," it is never an "it," it is always a "he" or a "she." The baby is a person already bearing the image of God. You can't kill other people.

But the Bible even more emphatically and more often refers to the dead human body *as a person!* If it does so in regard to a fetus, it does it more often in regard to the dead human body. It is not what used to be a person; he or she is not what might become a person again. He is a person. She is, as she lies in the grave, a human being. What does the Bible say? "...*they who* are in their graves will come out..."; "...*he* rested with his fathers"; "...*we* will not all sleep, but *we* shall all be changed..." and other texts like those. When Joseph of Arimathea took the body of Jesus down from the cross we read that he took *him* down, not *it* down, and laid *him* in a tomb. The personhood of the body is also the burden of those texts, a number of them, in which the dead are said to be *sleeping*, a striking and obviously significant metaphor for death. People sleep; ashes don't! *And one who sleeps will someday wake up!* That is the point of that metaphor. To say that the dead body is sleeping is a powerful assertion of the personhood of the body and of the resurrection of the body. Personhood, in other words, attaches to the entirety of man, not only to his soul. The body is the person as well as the soul and both are the objects of Christ's redeeming love.

This biblical material proves that it is not too much to say that cremation is an attack on the personhood of man in very much the same way that abortion is. In each case the attack comes at the

most vulnerable point on the continuum of life: in the case of abortion, on the person while still in the womb; in the case of cremation, on the person after death when the body lacking the soul no longer ceases to maintain the functions of life. We cannot *see* the living person in the womb or in the grave and so it is easier to think of them as not persons at all. It is no surprise whatsoever that abortion and cremation should appear together in modern culture. They are the inevitable consequences of a loss of human identity in our culture. But Christians cannot share that loss of identity and should never act as if they do!

Again, people will argue that the body is going to disintegrate in the grave anyway. There is no preventing its return to dust. What's the big deal if we help the disintegration along at the outset? But the body is not ours to destroy. To destroy God's masterwork by fire is not, is never our place. God may destroy it by fire or in some other way, but we may not. Cremation is as different from the decay of the body in the grave as abortion is different from miscarriage. *The personhood of the body we may say is the theological argument for burial and against cremation.*

III. Third, the practice of burial attests the Christian hope of resurrection, the practice of cremation is an affront to that hope.

The personhood of the body, its value and significance, is confirmed by the Bible's doctrine that it is *the self-same body* that will be raised alive and transformed on the day of resurrection as it was in the case of the first resurrection, that of our Lord Jesus Christ. His disciples could see the nail prints still in his hands and his feet. This point is emphasized repeatedly in Holy Scripture and in the creeds of the church and represents one of the cardinal distinctives of our faith among the religions and philosophies of the world. Once again, this hope of resurrection for the self-same body that died is given expression in the Bible's habit of referring to the dead as "sleeping." The point is often made, even in those cases where it would seem to us that nobody any longer exists to be raised to life again. At the last day, we read in Rev. 20, "the sea shall give up its dead." What can be left of the person who died at sea thousands of years ago? Still, that is what the Scriptures say! It is the body that died that will rise again.

But contemporary Christians have lost touch with this great hope. Again and again I hear believers speak as if our hope were the immortality of the soul rather than the resurrection of the body. When I worked for a mortuary during my seminary years I noticed how often people would take comfort in this gnostic belittling of the dead body. "That is not Uncle Henry," they would say as they stood beside the open casket, "Uncle Henry is in heaven." Well, to be sure, if Uncle Henry was a faithful believer in Christ, his soul is in heaven upon his death. But it is not Christianity to say that Uncle Henry is not lying in that casket! That body *is and remains* Uncle Henry, whether Henry was a Christian or not, and that selfsame body will awake and appear alive in the world on the day of resurrection. It is one thing to destroy by fire *what used to be* Uncle Henry; it is another thing altogether to destroy Uncle Henry himself! People who cremate the bodies of their loved ones do not think they are destroying their loved ones by fire; but they are! Paul is careful to say, along with the rest of the Scripture, that the life of the soul in heaven without the body is by no means the full measure of salvation that God has promised us and Christ has won for us. No, the soul groans, even in heaven, longing to be clothed with its immortal body, Paul says in strikingly strong language in 2 Cor. 5. We don't put groaning and heaven together very often in our minds but Paul does in that very important text. In the Bible the believer's hope is not death – that is an interim blessing – but

the resurrection of the body at the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. But the prospect of resurrection has no place, none, in the view of death that permeates the practice of cremation.

It is very important to realize that the religions that practice cremation as an article of faith, such as Hinduism, always do so in the service of a principle that elevates the spiritual – the soul – over the physical – the body. Salvation is conceived of as the deliverance of the spiritual part of man from the physical part. *That is exactly what Christianity does not do and will not do.* Our bodies will rise again just as our Savior's did after he died on the cross for our sin. The salvation God proclaims and Christ procured for us is the salvation of our whole man, leading to the transformation of our whole man, body and soul, that very same body and soul which first began life in the womb of our mother. *This, we may say, is the eschatological argument for burial and against cremation.*

IV. *Fourth, burial has the unqualified support of the entire history of Christianity in the world: cremation has always been rejected as an unacceptable practice for Christians.*

The Christian Church has never cremated her dead! Did you know that? The unbelieving emperor, Julian the Apostate, Constantine's nephew, who sought to undo what his uncle had done in recognizing Christianity and to restore paganism to first place among the religions of the Empire, thought that Christianity's triumph was due principally to three things: Christians' benevolence to the poor, their honesty, and *their treatment of the dead.* In their funeral rites, in other words, they embodied before the world a new hope, a hope the rest of mankind did not have. Their practice was to wash the body, sometimes to embalm it, to wrap it in linen and then, in the presence of ministers, family, and friends, to commit the body to the grave with prayer and singing. It was a powerful testimony to their reverence for life and their hope of resurrection. They did not fear cremation or other ways in which the body might be destroyed: it was the fate of the martyrs, after all. But they did not make the mistake of supposing that the manner of disposing of human bodies was therefore immaterial. Indeed, they did other things to embody their hope in the resurrection. They buried their dead with their heads to the west and their feet to the east so that when Jesus came again in the East (a conclusion based on a remark in Matthew 24), they could stand up to face him and not have to turn around. Most cemeteries still today bury on an east/west axis though I have discovered that most funeral directors no longer know why. What is more they often buried the dead with their shoes on, as an illustration of their expectation that we would rise to walk and to live again as human beings.

Augustine wrote a beautiful little work: *On the Care of the Dead [De Cura pro Mortuis]*. It was written to answer a question from one Paulinus, the bishop of Nola in southern Italy, who wanted to know if any advantage would be gained by burying a Christian next to a saint. Augustine answered, in effect, “No, though the sentiment is perfectly understandable and appropriate” and then supported his answer with a typically cogent argument from Scripture. He then took the occasion to speak to the larger question of Christian burial.

“...the body is not simply an external or incidental covering for the soul, something that can be disposed of and forgotten. ... As the ring or garment of a loved one is treated with love and affection, so we should care for the bodies of our loved ones as though they are the persons. Bodies are not ‘ornaments’ ...that are ‘fitted from without.’ The body belongs to the ‘very nature of man.’ ... ‘Care for the bodies of our dead is an affirmation

of our firm belief in the resurrection.” [Wilken, *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought*, 159-160]

Indeed, in reference to texts such as the one we read today, Augustine observed, it was because of the precious nature of the bodies of believers that the godly in ancient times provided funerals and graves for their beloved dead -- such as for Joseph, Joshua, and Eleazar --. . . . [5] The Lord Jesus, if you remember, commended Mary for having anointed him with precious perfume, because, he said, she was preparing him for burial. It would never have occurred to any pious Jew that their dead would be cremated! And there is little point in anointing a body about to be incinerated! And why was it always burial, Augustine asked? *As a sacred testimony to our confidence in the resurrection of the dead*. Such a practice, you see, is highly important for the living. [8-10] Augustine concluded: if unbelievers, those who have no hope of the resurrection, often take loving care of the bodies of their loved ones, how much more those whose Christian faith assures them that every human being will live again and every Christian body will rise to new and everlasting life.

For thousands of years this has been the Church's universal custom. For what reasons now do we overturn that tradition, rooted as it clearly is in practices that are everywhere illustrated and commended to us in Holy Scripture and expressing as it so naturally does the hope of the resurrection? *This, we may say, is the historical argument for burial and against cremation*.

Concerns about available land for cemeteries are misplaced. There is plenty of land and many ways to make burial grounds go much further than they have in the past. My mother is buried on top of my father, both in the same grave. And, while it is certainly responsible to think about how much money should be spent for a casket and burial, let us make sure that we are not, in that concern, masking a worldliness that quibbles over several thousands for the burial of a human being made in the image of God, a human being who will live forever, but does not hesitate to spend many, many thousands more for a new automobile that will have for a few years and then trade away. These are not the real question. Can we cremate our loved ones to the glory of God? Can we embody our Christian faith by cremating our loved ones? These are the real questions.

G.K. Chesterton raised this latter point -- the point that Augustine raised concerning burial's witness to our faith in the nature and destiny of man, in the personhood of the body, and in man's intrinsic dignity in a series of debates on cremation vs. burial that he conducted with George Bernard Shaw. The point he made with his characteristic wit was that the treatment of the dead cannot help but express our beliefs concerning life and death. It is an act too fraught with significance concerning what human beings and human bodies *are* not to convey our convictions to our children, to our fellow Christians, to the bereaved, and to the culture as a whole. It certainly has for a long time in Christianity and it does in other religions.

Chesterton contended against Shaw that if one wanted to return to paganism, thinking it for some reason a better idea to destroy the body by fire than to lay it in a grave to sleep, then at least one should do as the pagans do and make the destruction magnificent. He wrote a poem to this effect meant to point out the absurdity of turning this most sacred of acts into an empty, entirely unceremonial and unsymbolic act of mere utility or convenience.

If I had been a heathen,
I'd have piled my pyre on high
And in a great red whirlwind
Gone roaring to the sky.
But Higgins is a heathen,
And a richer man than I;
And they put him in an oven,
Just as if he were a pie.

Israel embodied her faith in the Promised Land by burying her dead. The Scripture teaches us to do the same. It is the Bible's way, the Christian way to see the better country and welcome it from afar. When we cremate our dead we are publicly renouncing, however unintentionally, one of the most important truths we are commanded to proclaim to the world: *everyone lives forever, body and soul!* And for us Christians this truth as well:

God my Redeemer lives,
And often from the skies,
Looks down and watches all my dust,
Til he shall bid it rise.