

# **BIBLICAL INSIGHTS #93: FUNERALS**

**By John Temples**

Today's article is about funerals. Most people don't like to think about funerals, especially their own. Funerals are unpleasant because they cause us to confront death. Someone has said there are two things we cannot look at directly: the sun and death.

In this article we'll discuss:

- Some odd anecdotes regarding funerals
- A history of funerals
- Some disturbing trends in funerals
- Reasons for having funerals
- Some thoughts on the disposition of the dead

## **FIRST: SOME ODD FUNERAL ANECDOTES COLLECTED IN MY FILES OVER THE YEARS**

The following is from a 1984 bulletin article of the East Hill Church of Christ in Pulaski, Tennessee: "A few years ago I attended an unusually dismal funeral. The deceased was the father of one of my schoolmates, and several from the class went out of respect for her. The man was about 50 years old. He had a wife and several children, but he had left them to go live in adultery with another woman, who also had a family. He left his first family carrying loads of debts that could likely never be paid. One day he selfishly put a gun to his head and died. The preacher stood and did the funeral service with not one single mention of the deceased. He did not even speak his name. There was nothing fitting that could be said that would be of any comfort to either of his families."

I read of a similar case involving the death of a man who was not a member of any church and was bitterly anti-God and anti-religion. The family wanted to have the funeral at the church building. When the hearse arrived, and the coffin was unloaded, the preacher stopped the pallbearers at the door. He told them, "Leave the coffin outside while we have the service. Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ would not have entered this

building while he was alive, and he does not deserve to enter it now.” They conducted the entire service with the coffin outside on the porch.

I clipped this funeral notice from a classified ad in the Cape Haze, Florida newspaper in the 1970s: “My sweet lover and friend, Eleanor, died yesterday. We celebrated our 34th anniversary last month and her 57th birthday Monday. We said years and years ago that if one or both of us were ‘snuffed out,’ we’d not have any regrets. This was because our life and marriage together was more full than most...we got two years for every normal one. There will be no ‘service,’ but her friends are invited to Joshua’s Sunday between 4 and 6 pm. Eleanor will buy her last round and you can tell some good stories and big lies.”

One time a preacher did a funeral for the town drunk, and the preacher got all carried away complimenting the deceased, telling all the good things he had done, with the audience all the while knowing none of it was true. Finally the widow leaned over to her grandson and said, “Slip up to the casket and see who is in there. I know it can’t be your grandpa.”

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF FUNERALS

We don’t know how our ancestors disposed of the dead in the centuries before the Flood. The only possible allusion to the subject that I can find is Genesis 4:10, where God tells Cain after he murdered his brother, “What have you done? The voice of your brother’s blood cries out to Me from the ground.” It’s not clear whether God is referring to Abel’s spilled blood which fell to the ground, or to the burial of Abel’s body.

Burial was the preferred practice throughout most of Old Testament history. The first explicit Bible reference to burial is the record of the death of Sarah. Genesis 23:2-4 says, “So Sarah died in Kirjath Arba (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan, and Abraham came to mourn for Sarah and to weep for her. Then Abraham stood up from before his dead, and spoke to the sons of Heth, saying, ‘I am a foreigner and a sojourner among you. Give me property for a burial place among you, that I may bury my dead out of my sight.’”

Wayne Jackson gives some interesting information on funerals in Bible times: “When a Hebrew died...the first duty was to close and secure the eyes and mouth of the deceased, after it was absolutely certain death had occurred. The body then was washed with warm water (cf. Acts 9:37)... The nails and hair were trimmed, and the body was anointed with ointment in preparation for burial (cf. Mt. 26:12; Lk. 23:56; Jn. 19:39)... Most Hebrews were buried in inexpensive linen garments. The Gospel records reveal that the body of Jesus was wrapped in ‘linen clothes,’ with a ‘napkin’ about his face (possibly to keep the jaw from sagging) (Jn. 20:5,7; cf. 11:44). Burial usually was effected as quickly as possible--frequently the same day (cf. Acts 5:6,10; 8:2)... The Jews did not practice cremation, believing that such was paganistic.” (Wayne Jackson, *Christian Courier*, October 1999.)

When someone died, great lamentation and mourning was made over him, particularly if he was a person of means. There were even “mourners for hire” who were especially skilled in blood-curdling shrieks and wails. Jesus encountered some “hired mourners” in a house and expelled them before raising the dead person (Matthew 9:23-25).

## SOME DISTURBING TRENDS IN MODERN FUNERALS

I am from the South, and when I moved to the West in the 1970s, I observed some radical differences in funeral customs. Brother Jackson’s comments on this are confirmed by my experience: “In the South funerals, for the most part, continue to be very ‘sacred’ events. Folks still pull to the side of the road when a burial procession passes. In the West...a funeral can take on a wholly secular aura. I have attended services where there was no hint of the spiritual--no mention of God, no reading from the Bible, no sacred reflections, and no spiritual hymns. Some services take on an almost festive air. Popular music is played, the dress is everything from sloppy to skimpy. It is as if there is no thought at all of eternity.” (Jackson, *ibid.*)

I attended several Mormon funerals while preaching in Utah. At one moment the congregation might have been singing “Rock of Ages, Cleft For Me”; at the next moment, George Jones could be heard singing “He Stopped Loving Her Today.” One moment, someone might read a solemn passage of Scripture; the next

moment, a relative would joke about how the deceased person enjoyed going to Las Vegas and gambling. This is bound to send a confusing message to people regarding life and death.

There's a trend away from a funeral being a sacred memorial service and toward its being a "celebration" of the deceased's life. I attended one funeral in Utah of a man who had been a real-life cowboy. His coffin had his saddle draped over it. His widow, who had quite a gift for comedy, had the audience laughing to tears with her tales of her dead husband's exploits.

Something else I have noticed about modern funerals: everybody who dies--no matter how wicked they may have been in life, no matter the fact that they had no relationship with God whatsoever--they all go to heaven!

There seems to be a complete denial of reality when it comes to the destiny of people's souls. Of course, I know that we cannot ultimately and infallibly judge a person's eternal destiny, and it would be totally inappropriate to announce at a funeral that the deceased is now getting what he or she deserved in Hades.

But the point is, if it is wrong to "send a person to hell" in a funeral sermon, then it is also wrong to "preach them into heaven," unless we are absolutely certain the deceased was a faithful Christian. A funeral sermon should emphasize what the Bible says about death and eternity, and leave the punching of the individual's ticket to God.

SO WHY DO WE HAVE FUNERALS? SOME REASONS:

*First, to underscore the finality and reality of death.* We live in an age when children (and adults) witness hundreds of "deaths" in movies, video games, etc., yet somehow the deceased survives for the next episode or the next movie. We need funerals because they make us face the fact that our loved ones are truly gone and will not come back to life until the resurrection. We also need funerals to make us contemplate the reality of our own deaths.

*Second, a funeral is a formal and reverent way to say goodbye.* Funerals give us an opportunity to comfort one another, to grieve, and to begin to cut the emotional ties that bound us to the person who has died. A funeral lets us collectively face the loss of our loved one's companionship, example, and love.

*Third, a funeral underscores the value and sanctity of human life--a principle sorely needed in today's coarse culture.*

*Fourth, a funeral presents an opportunity to teach the truth about life, death, and eternity.* That is why, if we make a funeral too much of a "celebration," we cheat ourselves out of some important lessons. A funeral ought to be a solemn time, not a social event or comedy special. Ecclesiastes 7:2-4 reads, "It is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting, for that is the end of all men; and the living will take it to heart. Sorrow is better than laughter, for by a sad countenance the heart is made better. The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth."

Brother Oran Rhodes said this in *Sound Words*, Nov/Dec 2000: "There is nothing wrong with remembering the good that someone has done in this life, but the reality is that death is a separation....Funerals are a time to comfort people in their loss and to pause in our headlong rush toward eternity and consider what life is all about. Funerals are for the living--true! For the living to be confronted with death and the realization that all must face that appointed time....If there is to be a celebration, it should be of Jesus Christ, who died to give hope of victory over death and the grave to those that are His. Funerals should cause those there to want to share in that hope, but they cannot if the truth is not taught."

## SOME THOUGHTS ABOUT DISPOSITION OF THE DEAD

There are at least two important questions you and I must consider when contemplating or experiencing the death of a loved one:

- What should be done with the body?
- Should there be a funeral, and if so, what kind?

There are several options regarding the disposition of a loved one's body:

*Donate the body to medical science.* The medical institution will dispose of the body, saving the family a considerable expense.

*Bury or cremate the body.* Burial is the traditional procedure, but to my knowledge there is no Biblical principle violated by cremation. With a burial, the body turns to dust over a long period of time; with cremation, it returns to dust in a very short time. Whether in 60 minutes or 60 years, the result is the same--dust.

There are also options regarding funerals. The Scriptures do not dictate any specific way to conduct a funeral, or even whether to have one. If one chooses not to have a funeral, he has not sinned. And how a funeral is conducted is a personal or family choice. The rights of the deceased or the family in determining such matters should be respected as far as possible.

If there is a funeral, my personal belief is that it should be:

- Not a circus, but a dignified and sacred memorial occasion.
- Personal reminiscences and anecdotes are fine; but a thoughtful lesson from the word of God is always desirable and appropriate.

Finally, so as not to end this sermon on a morbid or sad note, just be glad you do not live in the following places:

- Itsukushima, Japan
- Sellia, Italy
- Longyearbyen, Norway
- Le Lavandou, France

These are cities or regions in which, for one reason or another, *it is against the law to die.*

(<https://www.scoopwhoop.com/9-Places-Around-The-World-Where-It-Is-Illegal-To-Die/>) --John Temples

