

# OpenTheo

## #106 Is cremation or burial best?

February 24, 2022



### Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

Tom continues to answer listener questions on the practical side of death - funerals, cremation vs burial and organ donation. Is there a biblical approach to these topics?

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## Transcript

(upbeat music) Hi there. Before we begin today's podcast, I want to share an incredibly special resource with you today. If you're like me, life can get pretty hectic pretty quickly.

But one thing that helps me slow down is connecting with God in new ways. And I'd like to share a resource that has really helped me do that. It's called Five Ways to Connect with God.

And you can download it for free right now at [premierinsight.org/resources](http://premierinsight.org/resources). I think you'll find refreshment for your soul. So go right now to [premierinsight.org/resources](http://premierinsight.org/resources) and download your copy. That's [premierinsight.org/resources](http://premierinsight.org/resources).

(upbeat music) - The Ask NTY Anything podcast.

(upbeat music)

(upbeat music) - Hello and welcome back to today's show. It's Justin Briley, head of theology and apologetics at premier unbelievable, bringing you another edition of the programme that gives you the thought and theology of NTY, where you get to ask the questions and done in partnership as usual with NTY Right online and SBCK. And forgive

me if you can hear any wind whistling through my windows in the background.

We've had a very windy couple of weeks here in the UK. But we're still here despite storm units and bringing you some more interesting stuff today, continuing to look at the theology of death, but from a more practical angle today, questions like when we die, are we asleep or with Jesus? Questions around cremation versus burial. You'll find out which of those Tom would prefer.

And what about organ donation? Thanks by the way to those who leave comments about the show, review the programme. Mama Bear never sleeps left this. This is my favourite podcast by far.

I look forward to every new episode. After I began devouring this podcast, I went back to listen to every older episode from the beginning, NTY Right has a lot to say about the Bible and modern Christianity. He gives detailed insight into scripture and gentle reminders of God's love for us.

I just love this podcast. Thank you very much, please. If you haven't yet rated and reviewed the podcast, if you do that, it helps other people to discover the show.

You can find out more about us, of course, at [askNTYRight.com](http://askNTYRight.com). And just before we leap into today's show, just a reminder that our Ask Philip Yancy Anything event from Premier Unbelievable, coming up on Tuesday, the 1st of March, you can register free to be part of that audience from anywhere in the world. It's gonna be a live Q&A with one of the most significant voices in the Evangelical Church from the past few decades. And you can also now book for Unbelievable, the conference 2022.

That's happening on Saturday the 14th of May, live from the British Library in London, but you can attend from anywhere in the world online. Our theme, God Unmuted, helping the church to find its authentic voice again. Guest speakers will include Alistemograph, Lisa Fields, Gensgriven, John Wyatt, Phil Visher and Sky Jatani, and more to be announced.

For both of those events, [Unbelievable.live](http://Unbelievable.live) is the link you need, and it's with the podcast on today's show. Let's get into our questions. Well, welcome back to another edition of the podcast, and we're really continuing a conversation on the issue of death and dying from last week.

We had really theological questions last week on this, Tom. Today, edging towards more practical questions, so there's an awful lot of overlap, obviously, between them. And wanted to bring a couple that are related to begin with.

Firstly, Tyler in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, says, "I know that Dr. Wright has written extensively "about how the hebraic notion of humanity "cannot be separated into a body and a soul, "but that idea is so prevalent in our culture "that many of my congregants I

serve as a pastor "cling to that idea and find hope in it. "As their bodies deteriorate, "they find hope in the eternal nature of their soul." Now, when it comes to the issue, Dr. Wright, how do you pastorally meet people where they are, but also teach a congregation a more biblically-based understanding of what it means to be human? And then I'll also ask, well, let's answer this one, and then we'll go to Stephen in Riverside's question, which is also about what happens when we die. I mean, I'm very much aware of the kind of pastoral edge to this question because one of the last times that I was with a couple that knew that the husband was going to die within a matter of two or three weeks, and both the couple were Christians, but in a quiet way and not a very well taught way, there hadn't been lifelong attenders at a good teaching church, for instance.

I took the decision that I would stick with the kind of language that they knew and were familiar with, and the kind of biblically-exegesis that they were familiar with. So I went to John 14, where Jesus says, "In my father's house are many dwelling places, and if it were not so, I would have told you, I'm going to prepare a place for you." And I could see them visibly relax and kind of a sigh of relief they were going to trust this promise. Now, I feel a bit bad about that because I know that what I was conveying there is not what I would actually regard as the full truth of what's going on in John 14.

But when people are absolutely faced with the imminent reality of one of them dying after a 50-year marriage, then this is not the time to be saying, now, forget everything you've heard, let's go back to the beginning and talk about how the Bible sees human beings. I think that this is something that, as pastors, we often have to do to work with the people that we've got, where we've got them. And I've often said the time for teaching about the resurrection of the body is not at the funeral, but rather is in the ordinary course of teaching in church.

At the funeral, people are not ready to, and able to hear different things. But if one can, if one can, what I would push towards is not the platonic view, obviously, which is of a body and an eternal soul. That is not taught in the Bible, it is not taught in the New Testament.

When the New Testament uses the word for soul, psuke, it doesn't mean what that writer means and in the platonic sense. Rather, what you get in the New Testament is the spirit. And it's that the Holy Spirit is a very different idea, reality to the soul in Platonism.

And Paul talks mysteriously about the Holy Spirit and our spirit. And it's as though he's saying, look, the Holy Spirit indwells us now. The Holy Spirit bears witness with our spirit, our God-walled interiority, if you like, which is not the same as a platonic soul.

And the Holy Spirit, after our death, will hold onto us so that then ultimately, the Holy Spirit will be the agent of our resurrection. Romans eight verses nine, 10 and 11 is absolutely crucial. The body is dead because of sin, but the spirit is life because of de caisune, God's covenant faithfulness, righteousness.

Therefore, if the spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised the Messiah from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through the Holy Spirit who dwells in you. So to talk about the indwelling Holy Spirit, that then when we die, the Holy Spirit will look after our spirit in the presence of Jesus. Paul says, "My desire is to depart and be with the Messiah, which is far better." And then the spirit will raise us.

Now, you may say, in counseling a couple, one of whom is about to die, there's not a lot of difference between saying what I just said and saying, "Well, you'll die, but your soul will go to be with God." What they will hear is the word of comfort from the Creator God, and that's what they need at the moment. So, pastorally, that's where I would want to go. In teaching, I would want to have a more robust theology of the Holy Spirit as the means of continuity and of resurrection.

That's a really helpful distinction there. A funeral is not necessarily the place to correct people's theological understandings. But here is a sort of, if you like, more theological sort of question on that front from Stephen in Riverside, California, who says, "I'm wondering if after we die, and we are then at rest in paradise with Jesus until we're resurrected into the newly created heaven and earth, will we be conscious in that paradise?" Or is it essentially a bit like sleeping and will wake up when it's time for our bodily resurrection? What do you think, Tom? Yes, there have been some wise Christian teachers who've taken the word sleep.

Literally, Paul uses the word sleep. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed. And those who've fallen asleep in 1 Thessalonians 4, that is coming from the Old Testament language, particularly in Daniel 12.

Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, where it seems pretty clear. It's a metaphor for death and resurrection. And I would say, granted what Paul says in Philippians 1 about my desire is to depart to be with the Messiah, which is far better.

From that, I conclude, it will be conscious. It will not be an unconscious thing like a dreamless sleep. Because I don't think Paul would have said it would be far better if it was going to be unconscious.

And the whole idea of the Spirit taking us to be with the Messiah, all that we know of the Spirit and all that we know of Jesus is love. And the idea that we might be surrounded by and bathed in love, but we wouldn't know about it, seems to me a contradiction in terms. So even though it's very mysterious, I believe we will be conscious in the interval between bodily death and bodily resurrection.

But that being dead and then being bodily alive again is such a sharp contrast that the image of sleep and wake is still quite a good one to use. And I suppose it's also a

mystery as to how that existence, that state would necessarily interact chronologically with what is continuing to happen, is it worth in creation on, for those who remain alive, does it exist in a sort of different sort of relationship to time or? Well, yes, I'm very wary of people who say, well, we will then be outside time. I don't think we're told that.

And when Paul talks in Romans 8 about God's future for the whole creation, that the whole creation will be set free from its bondage to decay, because of the freedom that it will have when God's children are glorified, that hasn't happened yet. Therefore, the idea that some people have put out that we are sort of fast forwarded into God's future, I just don't think that will quite work. That's a complicated question.

In a sense, it doesn't ultimately matter what matters is that we are called to trust completely, that God will absolutely look after us and delight us with his presence and love, both in the immediate after death and in the ultimate future. Yeah. I have in mind when I ask that is because, going back to the first question, I have a friend, a dear young lady who was rather disturbed when in our church my wife Lucy started to sketch out that idea of actually really what heaven is about, is this new creation being raised into God's.

And was very concerned, but I want my dear aunt or my great-grandmother to be looking down at me from heaven right now. And it's very difficult to sort of say, well, maybe, maybe not, you know, because that's a very comforting idea to that dear person. But obviously isn't necessarily quite the logic.

I have met that in my own family, people saying, I'm sure, looking down and feeling, please. I see that as a kind of mythological way of talking about our good memories and about the fact that relationships, and I'm conscious of this now, playing with my grandchildren and so on, that I hope I am giving them a store of good memories, which, when I'm no longer present, they will remember the sort of person I was, which, hopefully, in a good way, may sustain them in certain ways in how they live their lives. I would rather they didn't then mythologize this into, oh, grandfathers, up there looking down, because actually there's nothing in the Bible which encourages that, and there's quite a bit in the Bible which discourages that.

Hi there, before we go any further, I want you to know about a very special ebook we're releasing this month called Critical Race Theory and Christianity. This ebook draws from two unbelievable podcasts with Neil Shenvie, Rasselberry, Owen Strann and Jermaine Marshall, addressing questions like, has so-called woke ideology taken over parts of the church, or is white privilege a problem in the church, and is critical race theory compatible with the gospel? I'd love for you to have a copy of this powerful ebook as my special thanks to you for your gift to Premier Insight today, the ministry that brings you this podcast each week. You see, all of the conversations, insight, resources and encouragement that you get from Premier Insight programs, like this one, are only

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Let's go to another set of quite practical questions on this. And these are regards, sort of, what to do, as it were, with the body once we have died. For instance, there's the whole issue of cremation versus burial.

Here's three questions, which just shows how popular this is among people sending questions in. Lindy from South Africa says, "My parents are elderly and in declining health. Although throughout my life, there'd be models of strong faith.

I see anxiety and an unwillingness to talk about death," which saddens me. A complication is that they find the idea of creation of cremation abhorrent non-Christian. But we live in a part of the world where cemeteries are full of poorly maintained.

So many opt for cremation. How can I help them in grappling with these issues? Is there a particular Christian view on cremation versus burial? Alfredo in Paso Robles, California. What does the scripture teach about cremation versus burial? I believe that it didn't matter.

But after reading "Surprise by Hope" and "Listening to Tom," I've been pleased to have my whole world theologically turned upside down in the best kind of way, he says, being a typical American evangelical. So now I do question my view on cremation as a Christian. And finally, Nigel in Peterborough says, "Does the Bible indicate the preferred method for disposal of our earthly bodies at death, namely burial or cremation?" So they're all asking the same question in different ways, Tom, with different particular reasons behind it.

But what's your thoughts on this? Yes, I'll start with Nigel from Peterborough. The Bible doesn't indicate anything about the preferred mode of burial. And indeed, I think virtually nobody in the Christian church now gets buried in the way that a first century Jew, including first century Jewish Christians, would get buried, which is a two-stage burial where the body would be wrapped up with spices and so on and put, along with other decomposing bodies, in a cave, and people would come and go and come and go, and when the flesh had all decomposed, then the bones would be collected and folded up carefully and stored reverently in an ossuary, a bone box, which would then be put at the back of the same cave or in some other convenient place.

Now, we none of us do that these days, and I'm not sure who last did. So the Bible doesn't say, "You must do it this way. You must do it that way." And people in biblical

times know just as well as we do, that a lot of people die when they're lost at sea, they're drowned, and their bodies are never found, or if they're washed up on the shore, somebody will probably burn them because that's more hygienic than having them lying around.

Likewise, people knew perfectly well that people would die in fires, that their bodies would be reduced to ashes, and the early Christians don't seem to bother about any of those as that's what's going to happen, and indeed, when the question is raised, then teachers like Araneas, at the end of the second century AD and Tertullian, end of the second beginning of the third century AD, they say very clearly, this is not a big deal in terms of resurrection, because God is the creator who is going to recreate, he's going to do new creation, and it will really be you, but God doesn't have to take the exact same atoms and molecules. That's really rather important. C.S. Lewis makes the point in, I think it's in his book *Miracles*, that resurrection doesn't mean that we get the exact same bits and pieces back again.

God can do that if he wants to, but actually we share stuff around. Our bodies are in a constant state of flux, so that every atom and molecule in my body is completely different from what was here 10 years ago, because it's roughly every seven years, we change the whole molecular kit, so that it's not a big deal to get the same stuff back again, and God can do the new creation which he's promised. Now, granted all that, then the question of cremation and burial, I'm sorry to hear from Lindy in South Africa about cemeteries being full and poorly maintained.

This is a problem in many parts of the UK as well, when cemeteries are old graveyards around churches and people look and they're not well maintained and the stones are falling down and so on. I visited my parents' grave just recently in Morpith in Lothumberland in Northern England and was sorry to see that around in the graveyard, there were signs of decay and so on, and that's very sad. But the answer to that is, let's work with churches to try to maintain well-ordered graves, because actually, burying in the earth symbolizes what's said in the Bible, "You are dust and to dust, you shall return." There's not very happy thought, but it's you were taken from the dust to the ground and you go back to the dust of the ground.

There's a wholesomeness about that, whereas the deliberate and staged burning, I find makes the wrong point. And actually, cremation became popular in the UK at the same time as people were starting to doubt bodily resurrection and were reverting to a platonic view of the soul escaping and going somewhere else. And of course, that then fits with a sort of a Hindu view of burning the body and the soul being somewhere else entirely.

And so, insofar as cremation can make the wrong point symbolically, I would prefer burial. And actually, my wife and I have specified in our will that we wanted it buried and

not cremated. However, most of my elderly relatives who have gone before have been cremated, and since most of them are definitely practicing Christians, I fully expect that God will raise them from the dead as well.

So in the long run, it's not a big deal, but as a witness to what the Christian faith is all about, I much prefer burial because how that is perceived or how cremation is perceived. That's really helpful to distinguish the symbolic aspect of it from the actual specifics about whether it really makes a difference in the long run. Exactly.

Yeah. Very much a related issue, then, in this sense. And I don't know how personal you want to be on this front as well, Tom, but organ donation.

This is Leslie in Canton, Mississippi. And also, forgive me if I mispronounce this. I think Tae Jae, perhaps from the Netherlands, asking similar questions.

Leslie says, "I've heard you speak about cremation and burial, and I know you favor burial because of the respect it gives the body, but is donating your body to medical science appropriate and respectful to our bodies? My mother has signed up to donate hers. And I'm thinking about doing the same. I would love to hear your insights.

And we've been greatly blessed by your books and lectures, says Leslie. And in like manner, I think it's Tae Jae from the Netherlands says, I have a question concerning organ donation. I often hear Professor Wright explaining that thinking of ourselves as merely spiritual beings that inhabit bodies is a Gnostic concept, not a Judeo-Christian one.

If I understand correctly that I am my body, what consequences does that have for how I should view organ donation, not just after I die, but also while living, for example, a kidney, and is being brain dead dead enough if I am not just my brain. I know you're not a doctor, but would love to hear a bit more theological input in this discussion, more than the usual "love your neighbours, so donate to your organ's argument". So yeah, both donating a whole body for the purposes of medical science and indeed organ donation, either while living or post-mortem.

What are your thoughts on all of that, Tom? Yes, great questions. And I was relieved when Tae, if that's how I pronounce it, said, I know you're not a doctor because I'm emphatically not a doctor, I'm not a scientist, I've not got the detailed knowledge here. I do think in terms of the whole dynamic of the gospel, which is about Jesus giving his body for the life of the world, and giving his body in the form of bread and wine, this is my body, this is my blood, to be your food and drink.

There is something very dramatic about that which somehow resonates with organ donation. And I'm a bit conflicted about this because I think if, say, my parents had said they wanted their bodies to go for medical research or to be used for organ donation, I



think I would have found that quite difficult in terms of, you know, we want to be very respectful and careful for this dear body that has nurtured us and which we have known and loved and so on. So I think there is a two and a fro, I don't want to be casual about it, and I think the wishes of the nearest and dearest are really quite important at this point because if things are done wrong after a death or seem to be done wrong or casually, then sometimes people can be left for years with a sense of unresolved grief that we wanted to be able to say a proper goodbye, but the body was taken off and we don't know what happened to it.

You know, that's a terrible thing in terms of the long-term effect on somebody. I don't actually know what happens when somebody gives their whole body to medical research. Does the laboratory give what little remains back to the family afterwards? I would hope they do and I would hope that then there is a time for an appropriate funeral or whatever.

I simply don't know how that works and it may vary from country to country and culture to culture, but the whole Christian gospel is about self-giving love. So in all sorts of ways, if somebody chooses to say, "I want as many people as possible to benefit from what's left of me," well, I would say if somebody really wants to do that, that seems to me a fundamentally Christian impulse. And since God is not committed to using the same molecules to put me back together again in the resurrection, then it seems to me that that will be a perfectly okay option from a Christian point of view.

Yeah, well, I hope that's been helpful and thank you again for your wisdom and thoughts on all of these issues. Tom, what do we often don't face up to until they're really staring us in the face, but it's helpful to think ahead of time, isn't it, and to think through what we would want and what it means symbolically and practically as well? I say this to myself because this is not a question that my wife and I have had discussed with our children, and maybe we should. Maybe we should remake our wills and discuss with the children what we are thinking about in that respect, but that's a question for us.

Indeed, well, thank you for being with us on this edition of the show, Tom, and we will see you next time. Thanks for being with us today on the show. You can receive more news from the show by registering at [AskNTRight.com](http://AskNTRight.com) and you'll get a link to ask a question too if you do that.

Until next time, have a good week, and next time your questions on baptism. What happens? A baptism? What was the significance of the baptisms that John was performing before Jesus' death and resurrection? And what does Tom think about the old infant versus believers baptism question? That's coming up next time. And just a final reminder to go to [unbelievable.live](http://unbelievable.live) to register for our upcoming live webinar with Philip Yancy on Tuesday 1st of March, and you can also check out the ticketing for our unbelievable conference in May there as well as going to be fab.

Unbelievable.live and the link is with today's show. See you next time.

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