

Deuteronomy 34:5-6, 8

Then Moses, the servant of the LORD, died there in the land of Moab, at the LORD's command. He was buried in a valley in the land of Moab, opposite Beth-peor, but no one knows his burial place to this day. ... The Israelites wept for Moses in the plains of Moab thirty days; then the period of mourning for Moses was ended. (For context, read 34:5-8.)

Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt and through the wilderness for 40 years but was not to enter the promised land. As the Israelites had mourned for Moses' brother Aaron for 30 days, so they mourned for Moses for a month, before the official period of mourning concluded.

The facts that no one knows where Moses is buried and that his official mourning period was cut short are important. Today, we think and talk about death in a much different way than in the time of Moses, and even than in decades past.

Death, dying, and the way we talk about end of life.

More Choose Cremation, Not Burial, When Making End-of-Life Decisions

Cremation rates in the United States surpassed traditional burials for the first time in 2016, according to industry records. The National Funeral Directors Association projects that by 2030, the bodies of seven of every 10 people who die in America will be cremated rather than buried.

"Cremation has become the new tradition," says Barbara Kemmis, executive director of the Cremation Association of North America. "It's a seismic shift in the [\$16 billion] profession," considering the fact that the cremation rate was under 10 percent in the United States in 1980.

Some factors driving the change in after-death practices include concern for their environmental impact and financial cost, less rigid religious beliefs, the greater geographic mobility of the populace and the appeal of simplicity.

In the 1800s, some believed cremation was more sanitary and environmentally friendly than burials, which were thought to spread germs and poison wells. Embalming a body for burial could create health risks for funeral workers and lead to toxic chemicals leaching into the environment, as

well. But cremation by fire involves the use of fossil fuels and incineration of mercury and dental fillings, which can also create health hazards.

To minimize negative impact on the environment, some people now opt for natural or "green" burial without embalming, or alkaline hydrolysis (flameless, water-based or "green" cremation).

Economics play a role in the choices of some consumers. Cremation may be thousands of dollars cheaper than burial, which usually involves a casket, a cemetery plot or vault, a hearse, car service for the family to the gravesite, a headstone and embalming. Added features such as a public viewing, visitation or calling hours, and a memorial service can raise the cost of burial or cremation. About one quarter to one third of all cremations in this country are in the basic "direct cremation" category, with the remainder involving enhanced features.

Changing religious beliefs and practices mean that fewer people connect with after-death traditions such as a church memorial service followed by burial. According to a 2015 report from the Pew Research Center, 20 percent of American adults no longer follow the religion in which they were raised. Nearly 25 percent call themselves atheist, agnostic or "nothing in particular." The Catholic Church, which historically opposed cremation, has become more accepting of the practice as well.

What's more, even when a traditional funeral with burial is arranged, many families find that attendance at the calling hours is significantly larger than at the funeral itself.

Fewer Americans are now tied to a single community from cradle to grave than in previous generations. Cremation can provide different options for mourners who live far from other mourners, hometowns or family plots. With cremation, mourners often can set the time and location of a memorial gathering in a flexible manner that better suits their needs and the wishes of the deceased. One crematory owner said that cremation allows for procrastination.

A man's grandchildren were speaking to him about his wishes regarding end-of-life issues. As they discussed options, he mentioned that his first wife was buried on the West Coast, and his second wife was buried in the central part of the country. His grandchildren observed that if he chose cremation, he could have some of his ashes buried next to each woman. The grandfather smiled and said, "So for the first time in my life, I can be in two places at once."

While cremation allows for family members to process grief in their own way and time, often scattering ashes in different locations and as part of different groups, for some it can cause a feeling of a lack of closure.

Roughly a third of the ashes of those who have been cremated are scattered, a third are buried and a third are stored in urns, at the home of a family member or friend, or in an urn vault in a public or private space.

"For a lot of people [cremation] feels more intimate and more personal than a big funeral," said Caroline Jones, a spokesperson for Co-op Funeralcare and Later Life Planning based in Manchester, England.

Whatever the method of dealing with human remains following a death, people have found it helpful to create or follow certain rituals or traditions and to preserve or acknowledge certain places as sacred where the dead are honored and remembered.

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

Genesis 49:29-31; 50:13

Then [Jacob] charged [his sons], saying to them, "I am about to be gathered to my people. Bury me with my ancestors -- in the cave in the field of Ephron the Hittite, in the cave in the field at Machpelah, near Mamre, in the land of Canaan, in the field that Abraham bought from Ephron the Hittite as a burial site. There Abraham and his wife Sarah were buried; there Isaac and his wife Rebekah were buried; and there I buried Leah ..." They carried him to the land of Canaan and buried him in the cave of the field at Machpelah ... which Abraham bought as a burial site from Ephron the Hittite. (For context, read 49:29-33; 50:1-14, 24-26.)

In Genesis 23:1-20 is the account of Abraham's purchase of a cave as a family burial site for what is believed to have been in the neighborhood of \$41,600 in today's money. Each subsequent generation used the family plot as a burial site. When Jacob gave this charge to his sons, they were about 250 miles away in Egypt. But Jacob did not want his bones left in Egypt (Genesis 47:29-31).

When Jacob died, his son Joseph had his physicians embalm his body, a process that took 40 days. The Egyptians mourned for Jacob for 70 days (Genesis 50:1-3). Then Jacob's sons carried his body to the burial place that was sacred to the family, mourned for seven days with "a very great and

sorrowful lamentation" (Genesis 50:10), and afterward, they returned to Egypt to resume their daily life (Genesis 50:14).

Later, when Joseph neared death, he made the Israelites promise not to leave his bones in Egypt when they left, but to take them with them to the land God had promised to Abraham and his descendants (Genesis 50:24-26). Moses did carry Joseph's bones back to Canaan 400 years later when he led the Israelites out of bondage in Egypt (Exodus 13:19; Joshua 24:32).

Questions: What is the significance of sacred places for honoring the dead? Do you have a family plot or a particular cemetery that you use? Are the remains of your family members scattered across great distances? Do you visit cemeteries regularly?

Ruth 1:17

*Where you die, I will die --
there will I be buried.*

*May the LORD do thus and so to me,
and more as well,*

if even death parts me from you! (For context, read 1:14-18.)

These words were spoken by Naomi's daughter-in-law Ruth, a Moabite, after both women had been widowed in Moab. Naomi had decided to return to her home in Bethlehem, and Ruth was determined to accompany her: to share whatever fate might befall the older woman; to become part of her people and serve her God; to live, die and be buried alongside her.

Questions: How do you think Ruth's words and actions affected Naomi? What is the significance of sharing a burial plot?

Prayer (Suggested by Matthew 22:31-32 and 1 Thessalonians 4:13)

God of life and love, God of the living and God of us all, quicken us by your Spirit, that we may live in love as Christ did. When we grieve, help us not to do so as those who have no hope, but as those who believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ that conquers death for all who put their trust in him. *Amen.*