

IF YOU'VE WONDERED...

“Why do we visit a grave?”

After a death, many communities will have a ceremony at a grave site or burial vault. These ceremonies can spark curiosity about why people would choose to visit gravesites. There might be hesitancy or even fear about visiting. Depictions of gravesites can fuel fear or interest. Many may be interested in exploring why a body is buried, abandoned, or cremated and what happens to the body of the person after death. When graves are outside the normal interactions, there can be a sense of mystery or novelty about them that leads to conversations about how those who died might still be “there” in some way. Questions can be explored regarding the boundaries of burial sites and what happens when those boundaries are crossed. There might even be questions about the expectations for visiting the burial site and why certain traditions regarding the dead are practiced. Especially when a relative or friend has died, interactions with different types of burials and locations can raise questions.

.....➤ What the Bible says:

The Bible mentions many types of graves, and the types are similar to ones used today. These Biblical types include a burial plot (qeber), a place where the dead reside (sheol), and the bottom of a pit or container (shahat). Frequently the choice depended upon the size of the city whether a burial plot would be acquired or whether a body might be put into a holding period so that the bones could be relocated at a later time. The Bible teaches that human bodies were made from the dust of the earth and will return to dust after death. Burying a body in the ground, placing it in water, or cremating it are all respectful ways of caring for the bodies of the dead. These methods—using earth, fire, water, or containers—can also help contain disease and eliminate odor while bodies go through natural decomposition.

Health reasons, however, are not the only purposes for burial sites. In the Bible, families often chose burial places so that loved ones could be buried together. Burial locations were sometimes chosen as an expression of trust in God's promises—promises that go beyond a person's lifetime. Gravesites can serve as memorials, helping people remember the life of the person and the promises God gave to or through them. Visiting a grave can prompt reflection on the person's life, on one's own life and death, or on the broader realities of life and death. Gravesites can also be places of mourning and comfort. Some will leave flowers, gifts, or other items at the graves, which can bring peace or support to present and future visitors. Visiting can help people feel closer to those who have died. In this way, visiting graves can offer reflection, remembrance, mourning, comfort, and a sense of connection.

The Bible also presents graves as places where new life can begin. The Bible teaches that God has power over life and death. There are passages in which people who were buried are brought back to life, at least for a time. The Bible does tell of one person—Jesus—who rose from the grave with a resurrected body and will never die again.

These passages point to God's promise and power to raise the dead, bringing resurrection and new life. The Bible describes a future moment when all the types of graves will release the bodies placed there, and the dead will rise with new, resurrected bodies. Because of this, visiting a gravesite can also inspire hope and reflection on the coming resurrection. Gravesites can bring rejoicing and thankfulness. Even still, the choice to visit a gravesite can be difficult, and it is fine for someone to decline to visit. The Bible reminds us that whether we go to a grave or the highest mountain, God is there.

.....> What you could explore:

Graves of the past: Many gravesites have survived from both the ancient and recent past. Archaeological research can reveal how people have memorialized the dead and how you might want to match or deviate from past practices. It can be helpful to consider what we leave behind after death.

Graves of the future: Many find preparing for death to be a comfort. Exploring options for our own deaths or others close to us can lead to conversations about values and expectations. It can be comforting to express our desires and hear from others in order to prepare well.

.....> What you could do:

Consider memorials together: There are various types of monuments or memorials that have been designed for people who died. The artistic configurations can be interesting to explore or designing a memorial can be enjoyable or therapeutic.

Leave a memento: Before visiting a gravesite, consider what you would take with you. There might be something temporary or permanent to bring. Activities can accompany the memento. Another option is to ask others that you know if they have any mementos that you could take to the gravesite for them.

.....> Where you could look for more information:

- ✕ **Stories of people who visited gravesites:** Genesis 25 and 50 • Judges 16 • 1 Samuel 10 and 31 • 2 Samuel 3 • 1 Kings 14 • 2 Kings 23 • 2 Chronicles 32 and 35 • Matthew 28 • Luke 24 • John 11 and 20 • Acts 2
- ✕ **Stories of people who acquired gravesites:** Genesis 23 and 33 • Deuteronomy 34 • Joshua 24 • 2 Samuel 19 • 1 Kings 13 • Isaiah 22 and 53 • Ezekiel 32 • Matthew 27
- ✕ **Stories of people who made memorials or left mementos:** Genesis 35 • 2 Chronicles 16 • Isaiah 65 • Acts 2
- ✕ **Stories of people coming back to life at gravesites:** 1 Kings 17 • 2 Kings 4 and 13 • Ezekiel 37 • Matthew 9 and 27 • Luke 7-8 • John 11 • Acts 9, 14, 20
- ✕ **Passages about not decaying in the grave:** Psalm 16, 30, 49, • Proverbs 15 and 23 • Hosea 13 • Jonah 2 • Daniel 12 • John 20-21 • Acts 2 and 13 • 1 Corinthians 15 • 1 Thessalonians 4 • Revelation 1 and 20