

What Is Ash Wednesday?

By Tim Vande Griend

Ash Wednesday is full of gospel truth, is rich with biblical themes, and has nourished the faith of Christians for centuries. I'd like to briefly share with you some of the history and meaning of Ash Wednesday as well as some biblical foundations.

Ash Wednesday is the name given to the first day of Lent. On Ash Wednesday, Christians gather for worship to receive a mark of ash on their foreheads in the shape of a cross, a sign of their mortality, sinfulness, repentance, and identity as those who have been buried and risen with Christ in baptism. The ash placed on the forehead is accompanied with the words, "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return" (Genesis 3:19), or "Repent and believe the good news" (Mark 1:15). Often, multiple Ash Wednesday services are held throughout the day from morning to evening, allowing people to participate before work, during a lunch hour, or in the evening; thus, it is common to see people throughout the day wearing the mark of ash.

Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of Lent, a season of prayer and fasting in preparation for Easter. The early church decided that Lent should last forty consecutive days, symbolizing Christ's forty days of fasting in the wilderness (Matthew 4:2). The forty days started on the seventh Sunday before Easter and ended on the Thursday of Holy Week. At the time, Friday, Saturday, and Sunday constituted a three-day celebration of Easter. Later, since some congregations didn't fast on Sundays (a celebration of the resurrection), and because Easter shifted to a single-day celebration on Sunday only, four days were added prior to the first Sunday of Lent to make a full forty days, thus beginning Lent on a Wednesday. The ashes associated with this day come a few centuries later but have biblical roots in the Old Testament. In Scripture, dust and ash are associated with death and mortality (Genesis 3:19; 18:27; Psalm 103:14; Ecclesiastes 12:7), confession of sin and repentance (Jonah 3:6; Job 42:6), humility (Isaiah 58:5; Job 30:19), judgement (Jeremiah 6:26; Lamentations 3:16), and mourning (Esther 4:3). This symbolic expression continued into the early centuries of the church. As Lent shifted from a season of preparing converts for their baptism on Easter to a more penitential season for Christians in general, the practice of placing ash on the heads of worshipers increased and eventually became an official practice of the church.

Ash Wednesday worship remained basically unchanged until the Reformation. In reaction to the Roman Church, the Reformers rejected many practices of the church, which they judged unnecessary at best and heretical at worst. Among those rejections was Ash Wednesday, along with most of the Christian year. Their rejection was understandable considering the misuses of the Roman Church; however, in doing so they threw out some good with the bad. Today, many churches, including Reformed, are recovering elements of the Christian year, including Lent and Ash Wednesday; thus, Ash Wednesday should not simply be considered "a Catholic thing." At the same time, Christians who left the Roman Catholic church, as well as Christians taught to be suspicious of any practices that seem Roman Catholic, question the appropriateness of Ash Wednesday. After all, the Bible never mentions, let alone prescribes, Ash Wednesday or Lent, and Jesus' teaching in Matthew 6 seems to stand in direct contradiction to the practice of putting ashes on your face. Additionally, Ash Wednesday and Lent may seem like a form of works, an attempt to earn God's grace through certain spiritual practices. Here are a few responses to these understandable concerns. To be sure, the Bible does not require Christians to observe Ash Wednesday or Lent. The invitation to participate is just that, an invitation. The Bible does, however, instruct us to confess our sins (Psalm 32:5; 1 John 1:9; James 5:16) and to "repent, and

believe the good news” (Mark 1:15). Jesus teaches against practicing faith hypocritically to be seen and admired by others. In fact, this is considered such an important teaching for this season that the church intentionally reads this passage (Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21) on the first Sunday of Lent to remind people of the proper heart disposition as they journey through Lent. Lastly, if you are attempting to earn anything from God through participating in Ash Wednesday, you are doing it wrong. Our salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, to the glory of God alone (see Ephesians 2:8-10; Romans 3:21-26; 9:16). Though we don’t earn God’s grace, we do seek it, and often with great effort (see 2 Peter 1:5; 1 Corinthians 9:24-27; 15:10; Philippians 2:12-13). God continues to extend grace throughout our lives as we learn from Christ (Matthew 11:29; 1 Peter 2:21; 1 John 2:6) and grow in union with him, dying and rising with him (Romans 6:3-11). This doesn’t happen just once at conversion; it is an everyday call to repentance and renewal, putting off the old self, and putting on the new self (Ephesians 4:22-24). This is the aim of Ash Wednesday. It calls each person in the community to pause, examine themselves, confess their sins, and repent. It is a time to remember our mortality (see Ecclesiastes 7:2), to “number our days” (Psalm 90:12), to acknowledge our frailty as creatures of dust, and that “to dust [we] will return” (Genesis 3:19). It is a time to remember that, left to ourselves, we all remain dead in our sins (Ephesians 2:1). All this may sound rather depressing, but Ash Wednesday is not simply a somber ceremony in which we merely think about sin and death. The ashes are a sign of death as well as a promise of life. Ash Wednesday, then, is also a time to say to God, “Restore to me the joy of your salvation” (Psalm 51:12). We remember and celebrate that Christ has redeemed our dust, and that through him we have eternal life. On Ash Wednesday we find that the depth of joy experienced in our redemption through Christ is that much greater when we also acknowledge the depth of our helplessness and hopelessness without him.

Ash Wednesday is ultimately about the Gospel. Christians are those who have been brought from death to life through the saving power of Christ’s death and resurrection. Ash Wednesday is an opportunity to remember and enact our place in God’s story of redemption. That story begins with God’s good creation, which included humans’ intimate relationship with him. Through sin, we broke that relationship and brought disorder and death. In love, God promised to rescue us and fulfilled that promise through Jesus Christ, the second Adam, who fulfilled for us what we never could have done on our own, restoring the broken relationship between God and humanity. Jesus broke the power of sin and death, rising victoriously from the dead. All those who place their trust in him have forgiveness of sins and new, eternal life. Through the Holy Spirit, we are united to Christ’s in his death and resurrection and are being renewed day by day into his image. One day, Christ will return to make all things new.

In summary, Ash Wednesday reminds us that we were once dead in our transgressions as sins (Ephesians 2:1) and that we still struggle with sin, failing to live as we ought (Romans 7:14-23). The ashes placed on the forehead of worshipers are a symbol that we will return to dust; but the ashes are imposed in the form of a cross, a symbol of Christ’s defeat of death, as well as a sign of our union with him. In our baptism, we too have been buried into his death and raised to new life in his resurrection (Romans 6:3-11). Our call is to lead a life of daily repentance, dying to sin, pursuing a fuller union with him. May Ash Wednesday help us as a community to do just that.