

# ASH WEDNESDAY

(Written as a study for Voyagers Sunday School Class)

Ash Wednesday marks the onset of the Lent.

Lent is the 40-day period of weekdays from Ash Wednesday leading up to Easter. For some Christians, Lent is a time of fasting and abstinence (recalling Jesus' 40-day fast in the wilderness--- Matthew 4:1-11, Mark 1:12-13, and Luke 4:1-13). Lent is a time of prayer, penitence, and self- evaluation.

Ash Wednesday is also known as the “Day of Ashes” because on that day at church, Christians have their foreheads marked with ashes in the shape of a cross, as a sign of repentance.

The practice, which dates from the early Middle Ages, is common among Roman Catholics, Anglicans and Episcopalians, and many Lutherans; it was also adopted by some Methodists and Presbyterians in the 1990s.

Repentance--- remorse for past conduct; - feeling or showing sorrow for wrongdoing; a change of thought and action to correct a wrong and gain forgiveness from a person who is wronged; confession to God, ceasing sin against God, and resolving to live according to God’s law.

## Mark 12:28-31: God’s Law

“ One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, “Of all the commandments, which is the most important?”

**“The most important one,” answered Jesus, “is this: ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these.”**

**Ash Wednesday**, in the Western Christian calendar, is the first day of Lent and occurs 46 days (40 days not counting Sundays) before Easter. It falls on different dates each year because it depends on the date of Easter. It can occur as early as February 4 (February 5 on leap years) or as late as March 10.

The ashes used are typically the burned Palm Branches that were saved from the prior year's Palm Sunday. In many Churches the ashes are mixed with the Oil (some Churches mix with the same sacred oils used at baptism), though some churches use ordinary oil. This paste or just the ash is placed on the forehead of Church members.

This placing of ashes in the sign of the Cross is a sign of penance, reflection, and fasting which prepares Christians for Christ's Resurrection on Easter Sunday, through which we attain redemption because through Jesus all sins are forgiven through faith.

**Redemption:** the act of delivering from sin or saving from evil; repayment of the debt at or before maturity—the repayment of our debt by Jesus Christ.

Mark 10:45: “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away, behold, all things have become new.”

(2 Corinthians 5:17)

“In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace.” (Ephesians 1:7)

**Fasting:** For some Christians Ash Wednesday begins fasting: recalling Jesus' 40-day fast in the wilderness:

Matthew 4:1-11: Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. The tempter came to him and said, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread."

Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'

Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. "If you are the Son of God," he said, "throw yourself down. For it is written:

"He will command his angels concerning you,  
and they will lift you up in their hands,  
so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.'

Jesus answered him, "It is also written: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.' "

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. "All this I will give you," he said, "if you will bow down and worship me."

Jesus said to him, "Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.'"

Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him.

Luke 4:1-13

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, left the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing during those days, and at the end of them he was hungry.

The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread."

Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man shall not live on bread alone.'"

The devil led him up to a high place and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And he said to him, "I will give you all their authority and splendor; it has been given to me, and I can give it to anyone I want to. If you worship me, it will all be yours."

Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.'"

The devil led him to Jerusalem and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. “If you are the Son of God,” he said, “throw yourself down from here. For it is written:

“He will command his angels concerning you  
to guard you carefully;  
they will lift you up in their hands,  
so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.”

Jesus answered, “It is said: ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”

When the devil had finished all this tempting, he left him until an opportune time.

But if fasting as a part of lent then follow the rules as set forth by Jesus:

Matthew 6:16-18:

And Jesus said, “When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show others they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. 17 But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, 18 so that it will not be obvious to others that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

## History of Ash Wednesday:

The inception of the day of Ash Wednesday and the time of Lent is not of biblical origins (not found in the Bible as commanded by God) although the Bible does discuss the use of Ashes in the Old Testament: used as a sign of grief, humiliation, or penitence. Ashes were used in ancient times, according to the Bible, to express mourning or a way of expressing sorrow or repentance for sins and wrongdoings. For example in Job 42:4-6 Job replied to the Lord:

4 “You said, ‘Listen now, and I will speak;  
I will question you,  
and you shall answer me.’

5 My ears had heard of you  
but now my eyes have seen you.

6 Therefore I despise myself  
and repent in dust and ashes.”

(other versions say “I sit in dust and ashes to show my repentance”)

The name 'Day of Ashes' comes from Latin "Dies Cinerum" (meaning day of ashes) in the Roman Missal (a book containing all the prayers and responses needed to celebrate Mass throughout the year) and is found in the earliest existing copies of the Gregorian Sacramentary; originating with the Roman Catholics somewhere in the 6th century. Though the exact origin of not clear, the custom of marking the head with ashes on this Day is said to have originated during the papacy of Gregory the Great (590-604).

(The Gregorian Sacramentary is the liturgical book ascribed to Pope Saint Gregory I, called sometimes the Sacramentary of Adrian I as it was Pope Adrian I who sent it to Charlemagne between the years 781 and 791 when the latter wished to introduce the Roman Rite into his kingdom. The book was copied many times so that there are many versions of it, each containing the additions made by the various scribes. At first these additions were carefully distinguished from the original text, but eventually they became part of it. The book has three parts as follows

- \* the Ordinary of the Mass
- \* the Proper of the Mass for the year beginning with Christmas Eve, but without any Masses for the Sundays after Epiphany and Pentecost
  - the prayers for ordinations).

The “Day of Ashes” early on may have been a renewal of Baptism commitments (thus explaining some current church practices of mixing the ash with Baptismal oils).

By the Middle Ages, the emphasis on Ash Wednesday and Lent became the passion and death of Christ, more than the opportunity to renew baptismal commitments. Medieval art reflected this increased focus on the suffering Savior; so did popular piety. Lent came to be seen as a time to acknowledge guilt for the sins that led to Christ's passion and death. Repentance was then seen as a way to avoid punishment for sin more than as a way to renew baptismal commitment.

“Day of Ashes” was made universal throughout the Western church at the Synod (church council) of Benevento in 1091.

In the 12th century the rule developed that the ashes were to be created by burning palm branches from the previous Palm Sunday.