

About Ash Wednesday

In the weeks leading up to Easter Sunday, many Christians around the world observe a forty-day season called Lent. Mirrored after Jesus' own forty days in the wilderness, Lent is a sober time of reflection, repentance, and self-denial in which we seek to internalize more deeply our absolute dependence on God's grace and the life-giving power of his resurrection. Indeed, the formative power of the Lenten season is its hope-filled reminder that, in our death and in dying to ourselves, we receive new life in Christ. Dorothy Sayers says, even in the cold, gray languor of winter, "[Lent] is meant to be the church's springtime, a time when, out of the darkness of sin's winter, a repentant, empowered people emerges."

Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of Lent. In worship services centered around this day, participants come forward and receive a cross of ashes on their foreheads, often the remnants of burned palm branches from Palm Sunday observance the year before. These ashes symbolize God's words to Adam and Eve in Genesis 3: "Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return." A vivid reminder that our frailty is a reality we must reckon with every day, even as we bear the image of our Creator. But, far from leading us to despair, this acknowledgement leads us to Jesus himself. As one liturgist has prayed, "Grant that the awareness of our mortality may lead us not to fear, but to faith. In our weakness teach us to look to you for strength, in our failures to turn to you and find forgiveness, and in our dying to await the gift of everlasting life; through Jesus Christ our Lord." Ash Wednesday is not about wallowing in the weight and guilt of our human weakness, but about affirming that we are God's workmanship, created to put aside everything that hinders and run the race that has been set before us. It is to *him* we must look for the strength he will surely give to those who ask.

Ash Wednesday offers us an invitation to seek true repentance by denying sinful habits and filling our hearts, minds, and bodies with "a more excellent way" as we eagerly await the sunrise on Easter morning. If you would like to observe Lent this year and would welcome some guidance in your personal reflections, the liturgy below is for you.

We encourage you to read these passages aloud and/or with family and friends.

Preparation

Remember that you are dust, and to dust you will return.

Call to worship

Lord, you have been our dwelling place throughout all generations.
Before the mountains were born or you brought forth the earth and the world,
from everlasting to everlasting you are God.

You turn men back to dust, saying, 'Return to dust, O sons of men.'
For a thousand years in your sight are like a day that has just gone by,
or like a watch in the night.
You sweep men away in the sleep of death; they are like the new grass of the morning--
though in the morning it springs up new, by evening it is dry and withered.

We are consumed by your anger and terrified by your indignation.
You have set our iniquities before you, our secret sins in the light of your presence.
All our days pass away under your wrath; we finish our years with a moan.
The length of our days is seventy years--or eighty, if we have the strength;
yet their span is but trouble and sorrow, for they quickly pass, and we fly away.

Who knows the power of your anger?
For your wrath is as great as the fear that is due you.
Teach us to number our days aright, that we may gain a heart of wisdom.

Relent, O Lord! How long will it be?
Have compassion on your servants.
Satisfy us in the morning with your unfailing love,
that we may sing for joy and be glad all our days.
Make us glad for as many days as you have afflicted us,
for as many years as we have seen trouble.
may your deeds be shown to your servants, your splendor to their children.

May the favor of the Lord our God rest upon us;
establish the work of our hands for us--
yes, establish the work of our hands.

Psalms 90

Repentance

Remember that you are dead to sin and alive in Jesus Christ.

Call to repentance

“Even now,” declares the Lord,
“Return to me with all your heart,
with fasting and weeping and mourning.”
Rend your heart and not your garments.
Return to the Lord your God,
for he is gracious and compassionate,
slow to anger and abounding in love,
and he relents from sending calamity.

Joel 2:12-13

Prayer of confession

Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your steadfast love;
according to your abundant mercy
blot out my transgressions.
Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
and cleanse me from my sin!

For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is ever before me.
Against you, you only, have I sinned
and done what is evil in your sight,
so that you may be justified in your words
and blameless in your judgment.

Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity,
and in sin did my mother conceive me.
Behold, you delight in truth in the inward being,
and you teach me wisdom in the secret heart.

In my weakness, I have disobeyed your commands.

In my apathy, I have ignored the promptings of your Spirit.

In my arrogance, I have considered myself and my desires above all else.

In my self-pity, I have refused your tender, healing hand.

In my sexual brokenness, I have abandoned your holy purpose for my body.

In my fear, I have forgotten your promises.

Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.
Let me hear joy and gladness;
let the bones that you have broken rejoice.
Hide your face from my sins,
and blot out all my iniquities.

Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and renew a right spirit within me.
Cast me not away from your presence,
and take not your Holy Spirit from me.
Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
and uphold me with a willing spirit.

Then I will teach transgressors your ways,
and sinners will return to you.
Deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God,
O God of my salvation,
and my tongue will sing aloud of your righteousness.
O Lord, open my lips,
and my mouth will declare your praise.
For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it;
you will not be pleased with a burnt offering.
The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

Psalm 51:1-17

Promise of forgiveness and renewal

“As a Father has compassion on his children,
so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him;
for he knows how we are formed,
he remembers that we are dust.
As for man, his days are like grass,
he flourishes like a flower of the field;
the wind blows over it and it is gone,
and its place remembers it no more.
But from everlasting to everlasting
the Lord’s love is with those who fear him,
and his righteousness with their children’s children--
with those who keep his covenant and remember to obey his precepts.
The Lord has established his throne in heaven,
and his kingdom rules over all.

Psalm 103:13-19

Dependence

Remember that in your dying you await everlasting life.

Declaration of dependence and hope

“Whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ--the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain the resurrection from the dead.

Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.”

Philippians 3:7-14

Prayer of dependence

O God our Father,
grant that the awareness of our mortality may lead us not to fear, but to faith.
In our weakness teach us to look to you for strength,
in our failures to turn to you and find forgiveness,
and in our dying to await the gift of everlasting life;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

from a prayer by John Paarlberg

Resources for further devotional reading during Lent:

Bread and Wine: Readings for Lent and Easter, various contributors including Lewis, Augustine, Chesterton, Rossetti, L'Engle, etc.

O Sacred Head, Now Wounded: A Liturgy for Daily Worship from Pascha to Pentecost, Jonathan Gibson

The Word in the Wilderness: A Poem a Day for Lent and Easter, Malcolm Guite

Lent with the Desert Fathers, Thomas McKenzie

Behold the King of Glory: A Narrative of the Life, Death, and Resurrection of Jesus Christ, Russ Ramsey

Undone, Philip Yancey