

5 Prayers for Ash Wednesday

by Mike Leake



Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of Lent, a 46-day period of fasting and self-denial before Easter Sunday. As such, this day is often marked for It is 46 days before Easter Sunday. Lent is a period of self-denial, fasting, and moderation. Ash Wednesday begins this season of repentance.

The ashes on the forehead represent an identification with Christ. Ashes are a symbol of death and mourning.

If you participate in Ash Wednesday, here are five prayers to guide you:

1. A Prayer from the Book of Common Prayer, 1979

Almighty and everlasting God,
you hate nothing you have made
and forgive the sins of all who are penitent:
Create and make in us new and contrite hearts,
that we, worthily lamenting our sins
and acknowledging our wretchedness,
may obtain of you, the God of all mercy,
perfect remission and forgiveness;
through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns
with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

2. A Prayer Based on Psalm 51

Psalm 51 is often read during Ash Wednesday services. Here is a prayer that is inspired by Psalm 51:

O God, we need your mercy. You are compassionate, and your love is unfailing. I am guilty before you and in need of your mercy. I have tried to cleanse myself, and I cannot get to the depths of my plight. Wash me, Lord, and I will be clean. My sin is ever present before You, and yet is carried away by Christ.

My bones and my being are crushed by my sin. You, O Lord, were crushed on my behalf. May these crushed bones cry out with joy and gladness. Give me ears to hear your song of joy and redemption. You have, in Christ, given me a new and redeemed heart. You

have welcomed me into your presence. Restore in me the joy of my salvation. May I realize today that my identity is not defined by my sin and the wreckage I've caused but by the restoration of Christ Jesus.

My spirit is broken because of my sin, yet I know that my acceptance is not dependent upon the depth of my brokenness but on the finished work of Jesus Christ. Your delight is in His finished work. Today, may I, though broken, rejoice in His completed work on my behalf.



3. A Prayer to Identify with the Suffering of Christ

In 2 Samuel 13:19, after being abused by Amnon, Tamar “put ashes on her head and tore the ornate robe she was wearing.” As we participate in Ash Wednesday, we are identifying with the suffering of Christ, and Christ identifies with those who are suffering from abuse.

Father, today we choose to identify with those who are battered and broken by others. We, like Tamar, mourn precious things which have been taken away by others. Yet, we also hold within us resurrection hope. We know that You are a God who restores. Help us, gracious Lord, to walk with the hurting. Help us as we fight against injustice. We long for the day when You return and set all things right. We are longing for your redemption.



4. A Longing Prayer for the Return of Christ

In Job 2:8, Job cuts himself with pottery and sits in ashes. His world is broken around him. We're also reminded of the words of Christ about fasting. Why didn't His disciples fast? Because Christ was present with them. This is a reminder that someday fasting will be over because all of the brokenness (which Job epitomizes) will be over.

Lord Jesus, we know that someday you will return and set all things right. Yet, today we sit in ashes. There are so many broken things in our world and even in our own life. We hold on to the promise today that there is a day in which every tear will be wiped away from our eyes, and there will be no more death, mourning, crying, or pain. But we are

not there yet. And so today, we remember the ashes. We also believe in hope, knowing that these ashes do not get the last word. Beauty will spring from these ashes. Come, Lord Jesus.



5. A Prayer to Remind Us of Our Mortality

In Genesis 3:19, we read that part of the curse upon humanity is death, “for dust you are and to dust, you will return.” We are created from dust, and it is to this dust that we will return. The ashes upon the forehead are a reminder of our mortality. But Psalm 103 also reminds us that we are valuable—we are “but dust,” and yet God remembers us.

Father, we are so insignificant. We are only dust. As David marveled, “what is man that you are mindful of him?” So too, we marvel. We know that someday death will be destroyed. We know that we are more than dust because of your grace. But we are also aware of our own mortality. Until Christ returns, we will all return to dust. Teach us, then, to number our days. May the life that we have been given be used for your glory. And may these bodies of ours be sown in resurrection hope. We are but dust, and yet so much more because we are created in your image.



Why We Should Participate in Ash Wednesday

There is no mention of Ash Wednesday in the Bible. There is certainly repentance, mourning, and mention of sackcloth and ashes. But the Lenten season is not something that is prescribed for us in Scripture. There is no indication in Acts that this was something in which the first disciples engaged.

Because of this, many who follow the regulative principle of worship will not observe Ash Wednesday. The regulative principle teaches that only that which is expressly prescribed in Scripture should be done within the local assembly of believers. Yet, many denominations and people of faith do engage in Ash Wednesday.

Personally, I would not say that you should or must participate in Ash Wednesday. It’s not something that Scripture speaks of, and so there isn’t the authority to bind your conscience in participating. But I would also argue that repentance and fasting are certainly

biblical. And there are certainly prescribed seasons within Scripture for engaging in such activity.

If this is the only time of the year when you engage in repentance and lament, then this might only be a formal ritual for you. But these seasons can also serve as reminders. It can direct our hearts toward a season of lament. And it can help us as we prepare for the hope of Resurrection Sunday.

The Puritan, Thomas Watson, once said, “Until sin be bitter, Christ will not be sweet.” That is part of what we do with Ash Wednesday. We are sitting in the ashes, lamenting sin, acknowledging the darkness, mourning loss, etc., to prepare us for celebrating the wonder and beauty of the resurrection. When we consider the magnitude of our depravity, the depth of our active sin, and all that is broken around us, we are prepared to celebrate when we enter into a season of resurrection.

You don’t have to participate in an Ash Wednesday service, but it could be a helpful prompt to engage your heart in worship. But even if you don’t participate in an Ash Wednesday service, it is still important to have penitent hearts that are longing for redemption and rescue.

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