

The History and Origin of Ash Wednesday

Ash Wednesday is a holy day of prayer and fasting observed in many Western Christian denominations. It follows Shrove Tuesday and marks the first day of Lent, a six-week period of penitence before Easter. Ash Wednesday is observed by Catholics, Lutherans, Moravians, Anglicans, and United Protestants, as well as by some churches in the Reformed tradition, including certain Congregationalist, Continental Reformed, and Presbyterian churches. It is also recognized by some Baptist, Methodist, and Nazarene traditions. Traditionally, Ash Wednesday is observed with fasting and abstinence from meat in several Christian denominations. As the first day of Lent, many Christians begin their observance by marking a Lenten calendar, praying a daily Lenten devotional, and making a Lenten sacrifice, which they commit to maintaining until Eastertide. Many Christians attend special Ash Wednesday church services, where ashes are placed on their foreheads or the tops of their heads—a practice rooted in biblical times when the wearing of ashes was a sign of repentance.

The name "Ash Wednesday" originates from this practice, in which the placement of ashes is accompanied by the words, "Repent, and believe in the Gospel," or the phrase, "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return." These ashes are traditionally made by burning palm leaves from the previous year's Palm Sunday celebrations.

The Liturgical Use of Ashes Originated in Old Testament Times

Ashes have long symbolized mourning, mortality, and penance. For example, in the Book of Esther, Mordecai put on sackcloth and ashes when he learned of King Ahasuerus' (Xerxes I, 485–464 B.C.) decree to kill all the Jewish people in the Persian Empire (Esther 4:1). Job, whose story was written between the 7th and 5th centuries B.C., expressed repentance in sackcloth and ashes (Job 42:6).

Prophesying the Babylonian captivity of Jerusalem, Daniel (c. 550 B.C.) wrote, "I turned to the Lord God, pleading in earnest prayer, with fasting, sackcloth, and ashes" (Daniel 9:3). In the 5th century B.C., after Jonah preached conversion and repentance, the people of Nineveh proclaimed a fast, donned sackcloth, and the king himself covered in sackcloth and sat in ashes (Jonah 3:5–6). These Old Testament examples illustrate both the established practice of using ashes and their recognized symbolic meaning.

Jesus Himself also referenced ashes when speaking about unrepentant towns that had witnessed miracles and heard the Gospel. He said, "If the miracles worked in you had taken place in Tyre and Sidon, they would have reformed in sackcloth and ashes long ago" (Matthew 11:21).

The early Church continued the use of ashes for similar symbolic reasons: In his book *De Poenitentia*, Tertullian (c. 160–220) instructed that penitents must “live without joy in the roughness of sackcloth and the squalor of ashes.” Eusebius (c. 260–340), a prominent early Church historian, recorded in *The History of the Church* how an apostate named Natalis approached Pope Zephyrinus clothed in sackcloth and ashes, begging for forgiveness. Additionally, during this period, priests sprinkled ashes on the heads of those performing public penance after confession.

By the Middle Ages (at least by the 8th century), the dying were laid on sackcloth sprinkled with ashes. A priest would bless them with holy water, saying, “Remember that thou art dust, and to dust thou shalt return.” He would then ask, “Art thou content with sackcloth and ashes in testimony of thy penance before the Lord on the day of judgment?” To this, the dying person would reply, “I am content.” These examples consistently emphasize the symbolism of mourning, mortality, and penance.

Eventually, the use of ashes became associated with the beginning of Lent, the 40-day period of preparation (excluding Sundays) for Easter. The ritual for the *Day of Ashes* is documented in the earliest editions of the *Gregorian Sacramentary*, dating at least to the 8th century. Around the year 1000, the Anglo-Saxon priest Ælfric preached: “We read in the books, both in the Old Law and in the New, that men who repented of their sins bestrewed themselves with ashes and clothed their bodies with sackcloth. Now let us do this little at the beginning of our Lent, that we strew ashes upon our heads to signify that we ought to repent of our sins during the Lenten fast.”

As an illustrative warning, Ælfric also recounted a tale of a man who refused to attend church on Ash Wednesday and receive ashes—only to be killed a few days later in a boar hunt. Since the Middle Ages, the Church has continued to use ashes to mark the beginning of Lent, a penitential season in which believers reflect on their mortality and repent for their sins.

Ash Wednesday in the Present Day

In modern Ash Wednesday liturgies, ashes are made from the burned palm branches distributed on the previous year’s Palm Sunday. The priest blesses the ashes and imposes them on the foreheads of the faithful in the shape of a cross while saying either:

- “Remember, man, that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”
- “Turn away from sin and be faithful to the Gospel.”

As we enter the holy season of Lent in preparation for Easter, we must remember the significance of the ashes we receive. They serve as a reminder of our need for repentance and penance. We recommit our hearts to the Lord, who suffered, died, and rose for our salvation. We renew the baptismal promises by which we died to our old lives and were reborn in Christ. Finally, keeping in mind that the kingdom of this world is temporary, we strive to live in God’s kingdom now and look forward to its fulfillment in heaven.

