

The Biblical Significance of Ashes and Their Preparation

Ash Wednesday opens Lent, a season of fasting and prayer. Ash Wednesday takes place 46 days before Easter Sunday, and is chiefly observed by Catholics, although many other Christians observe it too.



Ash Wednesday comes from the ancient Jewish tradition of penance and fasting, particularly the practice of wearing ashes on the head. The ashes symbolize the dust from which God made us. As the priest applies the ashes to a person's forehead, he speaks the words: "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return." Alternatively, the priest may speak the words, "Repent and believe in the Gospel." Ashes also symbolize grief, in this case, grief that we have sinned and separated ourselves from God.

Biblical Significance of Ashes



In Job 42:5–6, Job says to God: "My ears had heard of you, but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore, I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes." The prophet Jeremiah calls for repentance by saying: "Put on sackcloth, my people, and roll in ashes" (Jer 6:26). The prophet Daniel recounted pleading to God: "I turned to the Lord God, pleading in earnest prayer, with fasting, sackcloth and ashes" (Daniel 9:3). Just prior to the New Testament period, the rebels fighting for Jewish independence, the Maccabees, prepared for battle using ashes: "That day they fasted and wore sackcloth; they sprinkled ashes on their heads and tore their clothes" (1 Maccabees 3:47; see also 4:39).

Examples of the practice among Jews are found in several other books of the Bible, including Numbers 19:9, 19:17, Jonah 3:6, Book of Esther 4:1, and Hebrews 9:13. Jesus is quoted as speaking of the practice in Matthew 11:21 and Luke 10:13: "If the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago with sackcloth and ashes."

Why We Receive Ashes

Following the example of the Ninevites, who did penance in sackcloth and ashes, our foreheads are marked with ashes to humble our hearts and reminds us that life passes away on Earth. We remember this when we are told "Remember, you dust, and unto dust you shall return." Ashes are a symbol of penance made sacramental by the blessing of the Church, and they help us develop a spirit of humility and sacrifice.

Preparing the Ashes



The ashes are made from the blessed palms used in the Palm Sunday celebration of the previous year. The ashes are blessed with Holy Water. While the ashes symbolize penance and contrition, they are also a reminder that God is gracious and merciful to those who call on Him

with repentant hearts. His Divine mercy is of utmost importance during the season of Lent, and the Church calls on us to seek that mercy during the entire Lenten season with reflection, prayer and penance.

