

Ash Wednesday, Lent and Easter!
Celebrated in 2012 on Wednesday 22 February.

Ash Wednesday is a day of humbling penitence.

Biblical perspective on the practices around Ash Wednesday.

Ash Wednesday is a day of humbling penitence and it is the first day of the Season of Lent. Ashes were used in ancient times, according to the Bible, to express mourning. Dusting oneself with ashes was the penitent's way of expressing sorrow for loss, sins and short comings. An ancient example of one expressing one's penitence in this way is found in Job 42: 6. Job says to God: "*Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes.*"

The prophet Jeremiah, for example, calls for regret this way: "*O daughter of my people, gird on sackcloth, roll in the ashes*" (Jer 6:26). The prophet Daniel also pleaded with God: "*I turned to the Lord God, pleading in earnest prayer, with fasting, sackcloth and ashes*" (Daniel 9:3

Other examples are found in Matt. 11: 21 and Luke 10:13, "*...if the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes*". Hebrews 9:13 and 14 reads: "*The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean. How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death so that we may serve the living God!*"

Moses repented and fasted for 40 days after the Israelites made and worshipped the golden calf.

Ash Wednesday marks the start of a similar 40-day period (Sundays are not counted) which relates to Jesus praying and fasting in the dessert before starting his ministry.

How is Ash Wednesday and Lent observed?

Preaching, hymns and prayers in Church help us to remember how Jesus suffered, died and rose from the grave. Many Christians also use their private devotions during these seasons to reflect on what the gospel events teach them and what message the Lord personally has for them.

Some Christians, also in our Church, decide to "give up something for Lent".

The original thinking behind this custom was the deepening of our faith and spirituality, not just making people uncomfortable for six weeks. The basis of observing Lent in this manner was and always should be that we through spiritual discipline grow in our faith and our relationship with God and other people.

While the giving up of coffee, sugar, chocolate, golf, TV, games and other conveniences became the principal focus to some people, physical disciplines *are not an end in themselves*. If it does not help us to focus on growing our relationship with God, *it is a useless practice and can even be a superstitious tradition*.

The challenge is this: "What, if anything, is going to move me closer to God as I prepare for Easter - remembering Christ's resurrection, this year?"

Adding prayer and study time, time with my family and with my Church? Giving up conveniences to encourage spiritual discipline that will help me to focus on God and his calling on my life?

The “fast” or giving up something for Lent, is broken on Resurrection Sunday and adds joy to our remembering that Jesus rose from the dead, conquering our sin, our death and evil.

On what do protestant Christians focus during Lent?

There are two important aspects:

* Penitence: We realise our own brokenness and our need for Christ.

* Preparation: We strive to open our hearts wider for remembering Christ’s suffering and death and the celebration of his resurrection on Easter Sunday.

During this time people add to or subtract from their daily routines *with the goal of drawing closer to God.*

Keeping Perspective...

If one decides to observe these “fasts”, there must be **no legalism about it.** *We are not trying to impress God. We’re trying to prepare our hearts.*

Observing Lent in these ways is no obligation! It is not a Biblical requirement! It is a good custom that helped many Christians over the centuries to, in fellowship with their fellow Christians, seek a closer walk with the Lord, that really should last all the time and during all seasons!

Lent is an opportunity to grow spiritually rather than being a burden and we pray that yours will be meaningful!