



What are Ash Wednesday and Lent All About?

When I was in college, someone handed me a nail on a leather string during a worship service. Students on my campus were wearing the nail around their necks in the weeks before Easter to remind themselves of their sin. The nail was to remind me not only that my sin needs a savior, but also that my sin too caused Jesus to be nailed to the cross. This was my introduction to the idea of Lent, and it was powerful preparation for an Easter celebration.

Lent begins on Ash Wednesday 46 days before Easter. Just as Advent leads up to Christmas, Lent is a season of preparation for Easter. For over fifteen centuries, Lent and Ash Wednesday have been observed in the Christian church, not only by Roman Catholics, but also by Eastern Orthodox, Episcopal, Lutheran, Reformed, and non-denominational Christians as well.

Why observe Lent?

From the earliest history of Lenten tradition, new Christian converts often prepared to be baptized on Easter Sunday through Lent. Over time, Lent became a season of reflection and renewal for all Christians. Ash Wednesday and Lent are themselves by definition incomplete: they are only the beginning of a greater story. We remember our brokenness, and turn to Christ who restores us. In the end, Lent amounts to nothing without the celebration at Easter!

Why is it a Wednesday?

Ash Wednesday is the first day of Lent. The early church decided that just as Jesus spent forty days fasting in the wilderness (Matthew 4:2) to prepare for his ministry, so we might prepare for Easter for forty days. We count back forty days from Easter but exclude Sundays, which remain days of celebration. That lands us on the Wednesday seven weeks prior to Easter.

Why is it Ash?

In the Bible, ash and dust mean frailty or death (Genesis 18:27), sadness or mourning (Esther 4:3), judgment (Lamentations 3:16), and repentance (Jonah 3:6). Some have also seen ash as a purifying or cleansing agent. All these images figure into ash as an expressive symbol in Lent. In Christ's work on the cross we see God judge evil. In penitence, we remember Christ's passion saved us from our sins. Throughout Lent, we see that we are purified and renewed by His sacrifice.

Many churches hold Ash Wednesday worship services in which the minister thumbs a cross of ash on each person's forehead. To each, he might say, "Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return," or, "Repent, and believe the gospel." This is not a sacrament, and it's not instituted in scripture. It's really just a gesture of prayer, saying "Lord, have mercy; Come Lord Jesus!" It's like lighting the candles of Advent, hoping for God to be with us, Immanuel.

Preparing to be washed

Lent's connection to baptism is important. Baptism reminds us that our sins are washed away by the blood of Christ. Baptism reminds us we have been dead in our sins but have risen again with Christ. We are baptized into God's own name and family as his children!. Ash Wednesday reminds us that we need a Savior. Once we were smeared with sin and dead as ash; now we are raised to new life as co-heirs with Christ Jesus.

Living in God's Story

Essentially, we observe Lent for the same reasons we celebrate Advent and even Christmas. We do it to ready our hearts for Easter, the good news of our salvation. These seasonal traditions focus us on key truths in the biblical story and point us to Christ. The year's beginning reminds us of God's creation and the revelation of Jesus Christ. Through Lent we remember that we are sinners who need a Savior. Easter and the following weeks celebrate the resurrection of our Lord. With Pentecost and the following weeks we learn that we are Spirit-filled followers of Christ, called as a church to live life in grateful service to the Lord, who is the center of all things.

This is God's story! Join me in celebrating his story, even as we wear the ashes of repentance.

For more about Lent

[Lent: A season for sacrifice, repentance, and prayer](#)

Written by Steven Koster — <https://today.reframemedia.com/authors/steven-koster>

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