

## The Biblical Foundations of Lent and Ash Wednesday



Ash Wednesday was yesterday. It marked the beginning of Lent, the 40 days of fasting and penance that culminate in Easter Sunday. Yesterday, parishioners around the world had the sign of the cross made on their foreheads with ashes to mark the holy day. While Ash Wednesday and Lent have been observed by Catholics and some Protestants for centuries, today, more Protestants also choose to observe the tradition. But what are Ash Wednesday and Lent? And what is the Bible's role in their origins and traditions?

Though Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of Lent today, Lent is the older of the two. Lent was established and accepted only after the early church sorted out how to calculate the date of Easter. At the Council of Nicaea in AD 325, "all the Churches agreed that Easter, the Christian Passover, should be celebrated on the Sunday following the first full moon after the vernal equinox." Since the spring equinox usually falls on March 21, the date of Easter in the Western Church can occur anytime between March 22 and April 25.

At Nicaea, the council settled on the 40-day fast period for Lent because it has roots in biblical writings. God sends rain on the earth for 40 days and 40 nights when Noah and his family go into the ark (Genesis 7:4). Moses sits atop Mount Sinai receiving instructions from God for 40 days (Exodus 24:18). Elijah "walked forty days and forty nights to the mountain of God, Horeb" when he flees Jezebel's wrath (1 Kings 19:8). The 40 days of Lent, however, are primarily identified with the time Jesus spent in the desert fasting, praying, and being tempted by the devil (Matthew

4:1–11). But though the length of Lent was set by the council, its start date in relation to Easter was still undecided.

It was not until AD 601 that the start date of Lent was set. Pope Gregory moved the start of Lent to 46 days before Easter, and established Ash Wednesday at the same time. This allowed for 40 days of fasting—where only one full meal and no meat are to be consumed—with six Sundays counted as feast days—when fasting does not apply—for a total of 46 days. He also established the tradition of marking parishioners' foreheads with ashes in the shape of a cross. But why ashes?

The symbolism of marking oneself with ashes traces its history to ancient traditions. The liturgical use of ashes can be seen in the Old Testament, where they denote mourning, mortality, and penance. In Esther 4:1, Mordecai puts on sackcloth and ashes when he hears of the decree of King Ahasuerus of Persia to kill all of the Jewish people in the Persian Empire. In Job 42:6, at the end of his confession, Job repents in sackcloth and ashes. And in the city of Nineveh, after Jonah preaches of conversion and repentance, all the people proclaim a fast and put on sackcloth, and even the king covers himself with sackcloth and sits in ashes, as told in Jonah 3:5–6.

In the early Catholic Church, Eusebius, a church historian, wrote in his book *The History of the Church* that once an apostate named Natalis came to Pope Zephyrinus clothed in sackcloth and ashes, begging for forgiveness. By the Middle Ages, those who were dying lay on the ground on top of sackcloth and were sprinkled with ashes. The priest would bless the dying person with holy water, saying, "Remember that thou art dust and to dust thou shalt return."

These words are still uttered today by the minister, deacon, or priest when they mark the foreheads of their parishioners. Another admonition sometimes given is "Repent and believe in the Gospel." The connection of the ashes to the Gospels, which record the life of Jesus, comes from their preparation. The ashes used each year are made from burning the blessed palms from the previous year's Palm Sunday celebration, which commemorates the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem the week of his death. Making the sign of the cross with these ashes ties the beginning of Lent, 46 days earlier, to the commencement of holy week the Sunday before Easter.

Today, Ash Wednesday is one of the most heavily attended non-Sunday masses, even though it is not a holy day of obligation in the liturgical year. Worship services are also held on Ash Wednesday in Anglican, Lutheran, and some other Protestant churches, who also sometimes observe Lent. Most importantly, however, Ash Wednesday and Lent lead up to the holiest day in the Christian calendar, Easter, which commemorates the resurrection of Jesus. Ashes and fasting, both drawing on several biblical traditions, create a season of penitence and expectation as Easter approaches. In this way, the Bible's impact on our rituals and sense of sacred time becomes clear.

During this year's season of Lent, we invite you to visit Museum of the Bible and engage with our artifacts and exhibits pertaining to Easter. A cast of Michelangelo's *Pietà*, a depiction in stained glass of Jesus on the morning of his resurrection by Louis Comfort Tiffany, and the exhibition of Gib Singleton's *Stations of the Cross*, will all be on display. We hope you'll include a visit to the museum to celebrate the Lenten season and Easter this year.

*By Judy Hilovsky, Copywriter and Editor*