

A Prayer Guide for Ash Wednesday

Lent. The word itself connects us to a season of life. Its Latin root means “lengthen” as the days grow longer. We trace its beginnings within a couple generations from the Apostles. Lent has marked God’s people for centuries. Initially, this was a time of preparation for converts awaiting baptism on Easter Sunday. Eventually, the whole church engaged for 40 days from Ash Wednesday to Holy Saturday (not counting Sundays). It is a time of sober reflection but also one of heightened awareness of God’s movement in our lives. Ultimately, it is a journey designed to reveal more of who Jesus is and who we are in response.

The ancient church understood that ashes are a prerequisite for Easter, brokenness for healing, death before resurrection. Our ancestors have given us Lent to help us find our way.

Traditionally, there have been three spiritual practices associated with Lent: **fasting**, **giving**, and **prayer**.

Fasting during Lent began in the simplest sense of denying oneself food, Jesus himself being the model. This practice was expanded to “giving up something for Lent” but its purpose, we remember, is spiritual not commercial. In fasting, we voluntarily abstain from something good. By doing so, we acutely experience our dependence on material things through their absence. This helps us more fully depend upon God. **This Lent** you may consider a fast from something that you depend upon daily: coffee or alcohol, forms of entertainment, unnecessary internet time, radio/music in your car. As you experience absence pray for God’s presence to fill you. You may become more attune to The Word.

Giving is not a badge of honor for the spiritually advanced but a blessing for all who desire to follow Christ. In the times of Christ and within much of our world today, people’s very lives depend on the generosity of others. That may be true of you. When we choose to give, we declare that what we have belongs to God. We begin to hold things loosely with an open hand. **This Lent** you may consider helping a particular person in need. Maybe you begin by asking God to reveal someone in your path you can help. Perhaps there is one organization that has long captured your imagination and leads you to involvement. Giving releases us from our culture of consumption and frees us from its tyranny.

Prayer during Lent traditionally focuses on repentance; we seek to undeceive ourselves. This kind of prayer is closely linked with fasting. As our bodies hunger and crave we replace the material solution with a spiritual one: we pray. There are many Lenten prayers to discover, but we may always look to the one practiced by Christ and

known as *The Lord's Prayer*. It is intentionally couched between his words on fasting and giving. The key to all three, he says, is to practice these for an audience of One rather than for the strokes of others. By doing so, *your Father who sees in secret will reward you*. **This Lent** consider daily recitation of *The Lord's Prayer* (Matthew 6). Let it be a springboard to others prayers for yourself, your community, and even your "enemies." See if you can't find a rhythm of prayer that marks your days.

Receiving the Ashes

Ash Wednesday is the gateway to Lent. Through receiving the ashes we remember our humanity in an age of consumption, and come to terms with the loss of Eden. In biblical times ashes were used to signify grief and dismay. Job, Tamar, David, Ezekiel all poured ashes on their heads or sat in ashes to exemplify the tremendous ache in their hearts. But the ache is often necessary to remind us that we are human, created in the image of God, part dirt and part divine. This is why these words accompany the ashes:

**Remember that you are dust
and to dust you shall return.**

Receiving the ashes is to be purposefully passive recipients of something we cannot earn and do not deserve. And in the dirt we remember and proclaim that God has marked us for Divine Love - God loves us more than we know.

WORD

Take a moment to reflect and pray. Allow God to speak a word to you. Write that word in a journal or on a card that you can come back to throughout the season.

May this word become *The Word* and may it nourish your soul.

Time of Reflection and Prayer

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. LORD, hear my prayer; listen to my cry for mercy; in your faithfulness and righteousness come to my relief.

Do not bring your servant into judgment, for no one living is righteous before you. If you, LORD, kept a record of sins, Lord, who could stand? I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight;

When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long.
For day and night
your hand was heavy on me;
my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer. Then I acknowledged my sin to you
and did not cover up my iniquity.
I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD."
And you forgave the guilt of my sin.

Adapted from Psalms 32, 51, 130