

ASH WEDNESDAY (The Day of Ashes)

Ash Wednesday is a Christian festival. It marks the beginning of six and half weeks of repentance, fasting and abstinence in preparation for the most important Christian festival of Easter.

Why is it called Ash Wednesday? Ashes are something that is left when something is burned. For Christians, ashes are a symbol of being sorry for things they have done wrong and want to get rid of forever. It is also a reminder that we all come from ashes and to ashes we will return.

Why are ashes marked on the forehead? For Christians, the marking on the forehead with ash marks the commitment to Jesus Christ and God. We want to show God that we are sorry for the wrong things we've done in the past year.

What happens on Ash Wednesday today? Many Christians will attend a religious service where the ashes are blessed by the church leader, and placed on their forehead. Christians believe this marks the physical and spiritual beginning of a personal Lent season in which 40 days of repentance will begin leading up to the celebration of Easter Sunday. The actual moment when the forehead is marked initiates the beginning of Lent for each individual person.

What are the ashes made from? In churches the priest first burns the palm that have been kept from last year's Palm Sunday and then mixes the ashes of these crosses with holy water (which has been blessed) to make a grayish paste. When people go to church on Ash Wednesday, the priest dips his thumb in the paste and uses it to make the sign of the cross on each person's forehead.

Why are last year's Palm Crosses recycled? Palm Sunday celebrates Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem, so when the crosses used in the last years Palm Sunday service are converted to ashes, worshippers are reminded that defeat and crucifixion swiftly followed triumph.

What do the ashes symbolize? Using ashes to mark the cross on the believer's forehead symbolizes that through Christ's death and resurrection, all Christians can be free from sin. The removal of the ashes is up to the individual. It is recommended for them to remain throughout the day, however, there is no spiritual prohibition one way or the other.

WHAT IS SPIRITUAL FASTING?

In most cases, a spiritual fast involves abstaining from food while focusing on prayer. This can mean refraining from snacks between meals, skipping one or two meals a day, abstaining only from certain foods, or a total fast from all food for an entire day or longer.

For medical reasons, some people may not be able to fast from food altogether. They may choose to abstain only from certain foods, like sugar or chocolate, or from something other than food. In truth, believers can fast from anything. Also doing

without something temporarily, such as television or soda, as a way of redirecting our focus from earthly things toward God, can also be considered a spiritual fast.

THE PURPOSE OF SPIRITUAL FASTING

While many people fast to lose weight, dieting is not the purpose of a spiritual fast. Instead, fasting provides unique spiritual benefits in the life of the believer.

Fasting requires self-control and discipline as one denies the natural desires of the flesh. During spiritual fasting, the believer's focus is removed from the physical things of this world and intensely concentrated on God. Put differently, fasting directs our hunger toward God. It clears the mind and body of earthly attentions and draws us close to God. So, as we gain spiritual clarity of thought while fasting, it allows us to **hear God** more clearly. Fasting also demonstrates a profound need for God's help and guidance through complete dependence upon him.

EMPHASIS ON PRAYER, REPENTANCE, & SACRIFICE

STEP 1: PRAYER

Identify an area which you feel you are so engaged in that it conflicts with you giving your all and all to the "Things of God" including God. Ask the Holy Spirit to search your heart and bring to mind those things that pre-occupy your time, talent, and treasures. ***"Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts:"*** (Psalms 139:23 KJV)

STEP 2: REPENTANCE

To turn from sin and dedicate one's life to Christian values. To feel regret and contrition. To change one's mind.

Enter into your personal closet and seek God for direction. ***"Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me."*** (Psalms 51:10 KJV)

STEP 3: SACRIFICE

Committing to a new direction/behavior as we refrain from the activity that has infringed on our closeness with God which becomes our new practice.

"Commit thy way unto the LORD; trust also in him; and he shall bring it to pass." (Psalms 37:5 KJV)

TIMEFRAME:

(40 days) March 5, 2014 to April 17, 2014