





# SHROVE TUESDAY/ASH WEDNESDAY

*What is Shrove Tuesday?*

To be frank, Shrove Tuesday is just an excuse for a church party -- after all, pancakes need no theological justification! But it does have a long and venerable history.

Shrove Tuesday is an 800+ year old tradition in English speaking churches. It marks the end of the festive season of Epiphany and the beginning of the more somber, solemn season of Lent. To wrap up Epiphany, people would have a pancake dinner together, using eggs and syrup, which they would be giving up for Lent. It was also a time to begin confessing ("shriving" in Old English) sin and focusing on repentance.

Other national cultures produced different pre-Lenten customs (e.g., French Mardi Gras), but as an English speaking church that traces its historical roots back to through the English Reformation, a Shrove Tuesday celebration makes perfect sense for TPC.

*How will we celebrate Shrove Tuesday?*

We will gather for a pancake feast! Several church officers will make pancakes. We'll eat and fellowship together, and then wrap up the evening with a short time of prayer and singing. This is mainly a "fellowship" event -- it's very casual and festive.

*What is Ash Wednesday?*

Ash Wednesday is the first day of Lent, a season of contrition and repentance. The church's Ash Wednesday observance can be traced back to the early church. It is a 40 day block that culminates with "Holy Week" and ends with Easter. The Lenten period of time is patterned after other periods of time associated with the number 40 -- including Israel's 40 year period of wilderness wandering, Ninevah's 40 day period of repentance in sackcloth and ash in the book of Jonah, and Jesus' 40 days of fasting and fighting Satan in the gospel accounts. Obviously, all of these "40" events have something in common with the major themes of Lent.

*How will we observe Ash Wednesday?*

We will have a traditional "Service of Ashes" at 6:00 in the evening in the sanctuary. The service has an extended public confession, a thematic sermon, and, yes, the application of ashes to the forehead in the sign of the cross (which is optional).

*Tell me more about the ashes.*

This may be a new thing for many, and no one should feel pressured to be involved. We'll have a time in the service when those who wish to receive ashes may come forward and do so. There are several biblical examples of people using ashes as a visible and tangible sign of contrition over sin and mourning (e.g., 2 Sam 13:19; Esther 4:1, 3; Job 2:8; 30:19; 42:6; Jonah 3:6; etc.). Ashes played an important role in the sacrificial system as well (e.g., Lev. 4:12; 6:10, 11; Num. 19:9, 10, 17; etc.). This is not just a ritual action invented by the early church; it has biblical roots. The ashes serve as a vivid reminder of sin and the death we all deserve. In the words of the Book of Common Prayer, "ashes to ashes and dust to dust" -- we came from dust and, if left in our sins, will end up

as ash. The ashes bring us face to face with the reality of sin and death. But the ashes are applied in the shape of a cross as reminder that for those who are in Christ, death does not have the last word.

*Why are the ashes applied in the sign of the cross?*

The form of the cross is obviously central to all Christian symbolism. The emphasis on the cross as an event in the New Testament needs no explanation. It is nothing less than our salvation. Because the cross was the main event in the life of Christ, the shape of the cross became central in Christian rites, symbols, art, architecture, etc. The symbol was adopted for Ash Wednesday's ashes for the very reasons you might expect: While the ashes remind us of sin, curse, and death, the cross shape reminds that sin, curse, and death have all been defeated by the Son of God. Yes, we will die and turn to dust -- but we have a hope that overcomes death, a hope grounded in the cross.

What may not be as obvious is the fact that the sign of the cross on the forehead has biblical roots. There are several places in Scripture that make mention of a sealing mark on the forehead (e.g., Ezek. 9:1-7, Rev. 7:3). The Israelite high priest wore a mark on a gold plate on his forehead that declared "Holy to the Lord" (Ex. 28:36). In Deuteronomy 6:6-8, the law is to be symbolically on the forehead of God's people, including their children -- a sign that all our thinking is to be governed by God's Word because we belong to him. However, it is Ezekiel's account that is most directly relevant to Ash Wednesday and the sign of the cross. Ezekiel speaks of the saints who will survive the coming judgment being given a protective mark on their foreheads. The protective mark in Ezek. 9:4 is literally the *tav*, a Hebrew letter which in ancient script was written as a cross-shaped letter (*tav* = "+"). The early church picked up on this -- indeed, the use of the sign of the cross during baptisms and on Ash Wednesday probably traces back to Ezek. 9:4. One church father, Tertullian, remarked that God had given to Ezekiel "the very form of the cross, which he predicted would be on the sign on our foreheads in the true Catholic Jerusalem." Thus, it would not be improper to link the ash cross on the forehead to one's baptism. Baptism joins us to Christ in his death and burial (Rom. 6:1ff) -- the very things the ashes signify.

None of that is to say that the ashes are a sacrament. We need to be careful to not add rituals to church practice which would obscure the centrality and simplicity of baptism and the Lord's Supper. We do not want to encrust the sacraments with additional ritual actions which do not carry the same weight or covenantal significance. Nevertheless, the church through the ages has found some value in these symbolic actions, and it is safe to say they have biblical warrant. Some Protestants have mistakenly believed that Roman Catholics simply made up things like the sign of the cross. While I would be quick to point out that the Roman church has indeed made up many rituals which are a distraction from the gospel and the true means of grace, this is not one of them. It is ancient, even biblical, in its symbolic roots. Many of the more thoughtful Reformers recognized this fact. For example, Martin Bucer (one of the most brilliant of the Reformers of the 16th century and close friend to John Calvin) provided feedback to Thomas Cranmer's original *Book of Common Prayer* (1549), and approved of the use of the sign of the cross, provided it was not done in superstition. It is well known that Martin Luther used the sign of the cross at baptism and other times as well. There is no reason Protestants should reject this rich and meaningful symbolism.

*What if I'm not sure I want to come up and be "ashed" at the service? Should I still come?*

By all means, still come to the service. There is no pressure to be involved in this ritual, any more than there is to give something up for Lent. This *not* a "sacrament" that belongs to the whole

church and requires our participation. It is a voluntary symbolic action. We may have 10 people receive the ashes, or 100. It just doesn't matter. Because it is a traditional aspect of the service, and because it has biblical warrant, we want to offer it to those who will be blessed by it. But it is by no means necessary. It's your own decision whether or not you join in this part of the liturgy. (That also means that those who leave the service with ashes and those who don't should not look suspiciously at one another!)

*Why should Presbyterians have an Ash Wednesday service?*

Our hope is that services like Ash Wednesday will be a means of edification to you. The church calendar is a tool that is full of the wisdom of the ages. It is a tradition that pre-dates the Reformation and belongs to all of Christendom. God has been sanctifying his people for centuries, and an Ash Wednesday service (as well as the season of Lent as a whole) has proved to be helpful to that end. In our day especially, a sentimentalized, artificially-sweetened version of the gospel is all too popular -- Ash Wednesday (with or without receiving ashes) and the season of Lent remind us that the biblical narrative has some darker themes and threads as well, and we are not doing the Scriptures justice if we totally neglect them. We want to be well-rounded Christians, shaped by the whole counsel of God, not just a few favorite "happy" texts. The church calendar imposes a discipline upon us, bringing us into contact with the more unsettling, uncomfortable teachings of the Word -- but it does so in order that we may have a fuller and deeper joy when the celebrative seasons of the calendar roll around! My guess is that Easter will mean more to those who have been through Ash Wednesday (just like Christmas means more to those to observe Advent).

But Ash Wednesday and the like not only put us in touch with the overarching narrative of Scripture; the calendar also links us with the historic catholic church. Americans do not have to observe the 4th of July to be American -- but there's no doubt that doing so can encourage patriotism (love for country), a deeper sense of appreciation for "the American story," civic virtues, a sense of belonging, etc. In the same way, but much more deeply, the church year forms in us a Christian identity, a greater sense of our history, stronger bonds of fellowship, etc.

Yes, we are Presbyterian -- but more than that, we are "simply Christian." Our Presbyterian distinctives do not really define us. They are important, but not ultimate. We are proud to be associated with the wider church, as she has existed through the centuries and throughout the world today. The fact is, the vast majority of God's people will be doing Ash Wednesday and observing Lent in some form or fashion, just as they have done for almost two millennia -- why should we hold out rather than joining in? Ash Wednesday has not necessarily been a feature of Presbyterian church life, but if look closely at the historical reasons for that, you find that many of them were reactionary or political and are no longer applicable in our situation.

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