

You will eat bread by the sweat of your brow
until you return to the ground,
since you were taken from it.

***For you are dust,
and you will return to dust***

Genesis 3:19

Christians have observed a 40-day period of fasting and reflection before Easter since 325 AD. Around 600 AD, Ash Wednesday was formalized.

What can Ash Wednesday teach us, and what should we (as Baptists) do with it?

Dust and ashes remind us of the curse that fell on Adam and Eve in the garden. One consequence of the curse is that Adam and Eve (and all their children after them) are mortal. They have limits. They toil and sweat. And soon, because they cannot eat from the Tree of Life in the garden, they will die, buried in the same dust that God had once shaped and breathed life into to make a man.

Yes, we have very mortal bodies. But our hearts have also been stricken by the curse. Like our first parents, we have all turned to our own way instead of trusting God's design for life and his care for us. We have all failed to love him and our neighbor.

At times, we deceive ourselves into thinking we have no sin. At other times, our sins seem to mount up so high they threaten to bury us beneath their crushing load. Since the earliest days of walking with God, people have covered themselves with dust and ashes as a way of expressing their grief over their sin.

On Ash Wednesday, for about 1,000 years, many Christians have received a cross of ashes on their forehead. This symbol is often understood as a sign of a person's humiliation and repentance. But the symbolism is even more profound than that.

By drawing the symbol of the cross in ashes, Christians are professing that Christ has come, even taking on a body of dust, and that Christ has died, *precisely to overcome the curse of sin connected with dust and ashes.*

He has come to kill our mortality. The Lord of life died on Good Friday so that we might live—not for 100 years, or 500 years, or 100,000 years, but for all eternity.

He has come to erase every trace of sin from our hearts. The guilt, the shame, the power it holds over us. All of it.

We cannot conquer mortality or the sin in our hearts, but Jesus has.

So, as we come to Ash Wednesday, we want to take time to remember that without the curse of sin that we brought into the world (through Adam and Eve, who represented all humanity in the garden), Jesus would not have needed to come. He would not have needed to die.

This should lead us to solemn reflection. But in that moment of grief, contrition, and humility, let's lift our eyes and see the hope. Yes, now, the curse marks us. But another stronger thing marks us as well. The cross of Christ. And it is by that cross that our mortality and sin are overcome.

I would encourage you to take some time to sit and reflect on Christ's great sacrifice made for sinners. If it's helpful, here's a short liturgy or meditation you can use on your own or with friends/family.

If possible, place a small bowl of ashes (or even plain dirt) on a table. If you do not have ashes, simply proceed without them.

(read everything aloud except headings and instructions like "brief silence")

Opening Scripture

"For you are dust, and to dust you shall return." — Genesis 3:19

Confession

Lord God,
We are dust.
We are mortal.
We have sinned against you.
Have mercy on us.

(Brief silence)

The Cross

(Hold some dirt in your hand **OR** if using ashes, mark a small cross and say together...)

Jesus, you entered our dust.
You bore our sin.
You conquered death.

Assurance

Because Christ died and rose again,
our sins are forgiven
and death will not have the final word.

Amen.