
SERMON FOR ASH WEDNESDAY 2021**A Significant Problem****Genesis 3:19b**

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon tonight is Genesis 3:19b: **“For you are dust and you will return to dust.”**

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of Lent, our 40-day journey (excluding Sundays) to Jesus’ cross and His tomb to await the proclamation of Easter. Ash Wednesday begins our Lenten journey with a reminder of our mortality and a call to repentance. The ancient practice of imposing ashes on the foreheads of Christians gives Ash Wednesday its name. The church father Tertullian, who was born 160 AD, writes of the practice as *a public expression of repentance and of our human frailty that stands in need of Christ*. Even to this day, some churches begin their Ash Wednesday services by imposing ashes on their worshipper’s forehead. Where do the ashes come from? One tradition is to keep and then burn the palms from the prior year’s Palm Sunday service. Or, if the congregation used a real Christmas tree, then this tree is burned once it dries out and those ashes are used. Often, the words of our text are spoken over the person as the ashes are then applied.

The use of ashes as a sign of repentance is often mentioned in the Bible. When the king of Nineveh heard Jonah’s message that the city would be overthrown, in repentance he *“arose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes”* (Jonah 3:6). Job too, in repentance, sat *“in dust and ashes”* (Job 42:6). When Jesus denounced the cities where most of His mighty works were performed, because they would not repent, He said, *“Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes”* (Matthew 11:21).

So it was that the early Christians adopted the use of ashes as an external mark of penitence.

Next to Good Friday, Ash Wednesday is the most sombre day on the Christian calendar as we remember the word of the LORD, **“For you are dust and you will return to dust.”**

What do these words mean for us? We’re remembering a tragically significant day in human history, a day that necessitated everything we must remember through this entire season of Lent. That day created for us a significant problem, namely, **“you will return to dust.”**

God spoke these words to Adam immediately after the fall into sin in the Garden of Eden. He had informed Adam of all the negative consequences of his and Eve’s disobedience in eating the fruit of the tree from which God had instructed them not to eat. Earlier, God had warned Adam and Eve that if they would eat the fruit from that tree they would surely die.¹ But they did not obey God and instead followed the tempting words of Satan and ate the fruit from that tree.

So from that day on, death followed, just as God said it would. Adam had been formed by God from the dust of the ground. God’s statement to Adam, **“For you are dust,”** simply acknowledged that.² Then the words **“you will return to dust”** acknowledged Adam’s pending physical death and the decay and returning to the ground that death would bring. Adam was formed from the ground, and Adam would return to the ground. **“For you are dust and you will return to dust.”**

There is also an eternal spiritual death that the sin of Adam and Eve brought into the world that day: an eternal estrangement and separation from God. It was a banishment from God with His love, mercy, and compassion. Adam would live the rest of his days remembering those sobering words from God. How he must have wished that he could turn the hands of time back and undo what he and Eve had done; but it *was* done. **“For you are dust and you will return to dust.”**

¹ Genesis 2:17

² Genesis 2:7

Unfortunately, you and I are conceived and born facing the same problem that Adam did following his sin. As Paul writes in Romans 5, “*Therefore, as sin came into the world through one man and death through sin, so death also spread to all people, since all have sinned*” (Romans 5:12). Paul is talking about inherited sin, or original sin. With his sin, Adam has given sinfulness to all people, so that all people are born in a sinful condition. King David finds it necessary to confess, “*Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me*” (Psalm 51:5). The statement of God to Adam, “**For you are dust and you will return to dust**” is just as valid when spoken to us.

Obviously this poses a *significant* problem! But we don’t like to think about it, do we? Our own death, the fact that we shall one day go into the earth - or even if we are cremated which also returns one to dust - is not something we like to remember. It makes us uncomfortable. And our society makes it very easy to avoid remembering that we are dust. From advertising to books to movies, so often the impression is given that life in this world goes on forever, that we are invincible, that somehow, we are the exception to death! We convince ourselves that maybe if we don’t think about it, we can somehow avoid it. And so, many people go through life avoiding that one final earthly reality until they are right at death’s doorstep. God reminds us all this day, “**you will return to dust.**”

So, as people who remember that we are dust, we gather here on this Ash Wednesday *and repent of our sin*. We confess; we admit before God and one another our sin and our sinfulness. We express our sorrow for our sin. We ask God to forgive our sin. We ask God to help us amend our sinful life and live a more God-pleasing life.

However, even more important than *we* remembering that we are dust is the fact that *God* remembers it. This is what David writes in Psalm 103. He says that God “*knows what He has fashioned. He remembers that we are dust*” (v. 14). And in the Scriptures, whenever God *remembers* His people, He always acts on behalf of His people, to bless His people.

In fact, God had already remembered us and all His people even before He told Adam, “**For you are dust and you will return to dust**” because, just four verses before God spoke these words to Adam, that very same significant day,

God spoke to Satan saying, “*I shall make you and the woman hostile to each other and shall make your descendants and her Descendant hostile to each other. He will crush your head and you will crush His heel*” (Genesis 3:15). With these words, God assured and promised Adam that He was going to send One who would crush Satan’s head.

Remembering that we are dust, God has acted on behalf of us and all people. He has come here and lived among us in the person of His Son, Jesus Christ. Christ completely and voluntarily took upon Himself all sin and all evil, even the penalty for sin and evil: death itself. He Himself went into the earth, into the dust of the ground, as He was buried in a tomb. Worst of all, He endured the penalty of spiritual death there on the cross as He was abandoned and forsaken by His Father and cried out, “*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*” (Matthew 27:46).

But He would not remain in the dust of the earth. On the third day, He would rise from the dust of the earth, just as He predicted He would. And so shall we. On the day when He returns, all believers in Jesus Christ will rise from the dust of the earth with new, glorified bodies that are incorruptible, no longer subject to sin. Bodies that are immortal, and no longer subject to death.

That is why when churches observe the custom of placing ashes on people’s foreheads, they do so in the shape of a cross. For only in the cross of Christ and what occurred there do we have hope and life.

There’s an old expression that maybe you’re familiar with: “Left in the dust.” For example, when there’s a race taking place and one runner pulls away from the other, the announcer may say that the runner who pulled away “left the other runner in the dust.” In other words, he left the runner behind.

We give thanks that God has not “left us in the dust.” He has not abandoned us in our deadly significant problem. He has not left us behind. Just the opposite is the case. He has come in the person of Jesus Christ to make certain that we would be lifted from the dust of the earth. Just as Christ rose physically, bodily, from the grave, so we, too, shall join Him “*in a resurrection like His*” (Romans 6:5). God will not leave us in the dust. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

PRAYER FOR ASH WEDNESDAY

O Lord, our heavenly Father, You desire not the death of a sinner, but rather that we would turn from our evil ways and live. Turn us again, O God of our salvation, and let Your anger cease from us. Spare us from every evil to body and soul.

Look graciously on Your Church, and preserve the Gospel among us. Renew us in this penitential season to strive against the desires of the flesh, to grow in the joy of Your salvation, and to look in love and service toward our neighbours, especially those of the household of faith.

Look graciously on the families of our congregation. Strengthen parents for their duties, especially bringing up their children in the fear and instruction of the Lord, and preserve us all faithful to the end.

Look graciously on our nation and its leaders, all civil servants, and those who protect us and work for the common good. Drive away all disease and fear from us. Grant peace, we pray, O Lord.

Behold in mercy all who are sick, who suffer and who rejoice; and be with all expectant mothers, all whose labour is dangerous, the unemployed, those near death and those who mourn. Give comfort to us, who are dust and must return to dust, that a broken and contrite heart You will not despise.

We thank You, heavenly Father, that You have sent Your only Son into our flesh to offer Himself as the atoning sacrifice for the sins of the world. Trusting in His mercy, bring us in repentance and faith to Your altar to eat His body and drink His blood for the forgiveness of our sins.

Graciously receive our prayers, deliver and preserve us, for to You alone we give all glory, honour and worship, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

ASH WEDNESDAY

Joel 2:12-19

¹² “Nevertheless, even now,” declares the LORD, “return to Me with all your hearts, with fasting,

with weeping and with mourning!

¹³ Tear your hearts and not your clothes!”

Return to the LORD, your God!

For He is gracious and

compassionate, slow to anger, abounding in mercy and relents from sending calamity. ¹⁴ Who knows whether He may turn back, relent and leave a blessing behind Him, a grain-offering and a drink-offering for the LORD, your God?

¹⁵ Blow a trumpet in Zion! Announce a holy fast! Call an assembly! ¹⁶ Gather the people! Consecrate the congregation! Assemble the aged people! Gather the children, even the breast-fed infants! Let the bride-groom leave his bedroom, and let the bride leave her bridal chamber! ¹⁷ Let the priests, who minister to the LORD, weep between the Temple-porch and the altar! Let them say, "Look com-compassionately on Your people, O LORD! Do not make Your inheritance a disgrace and a byword among the nations! Why should people ask among the nations, 'Where is their God?'"

¹⁸ Then the LORD became deeply devoted to His land and took pity on His people. ¹⁹ The LORD answered His people: "Look! I am sending you grain, new wine and olive-oil. They will satisfy you. I shall not make you an object of scorn among the nations any longer.

2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10

^{20b} We implore you on Christ's behalf: "Be reconciled to God!" ²¹ God made Him who did not know sin to be sin for us, that in Him we might become the righteousness of God.

^{6:1} As men who are working with God, we also plead with you not to receive the grace of God in vain. ² For He says: "At a favourable time I have heard you and on the day of salvation I have helped you." Look! Now is the favourable time. Look! Now is the day of salvation.

³ We do not lay any kind of obstacle, to avoid discredit on our ministry. ⁴ Rather, in everything we commend ourselves as the ministers of God: in great endurance, in troubles, in calamities, in difficulties; ⁵ in beatings, in imprisonments, in riots; in hard work, in sleepless nights, in hunger; ⁶ in purity, in knowledge, in patience, in kindness, in the Holy Spirit, in sincere love, ⁷ in truthful speech and in the power of God; with weapons of righteousness on the right hand and on the left; ⁸ through glory and dishonour, through bad report and good report; as

deceivers and yet true; ⁹ as unknown and yet well known; as dying and, you see, we go on living; as chastened and yet not killed; ¹⁰ as made sad but always rejoicing; as beggars but making many rich; as having nothing and yet possessing everything.

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

¹ “Be careful not to perform your righteous deeds before other people, to be seen by them! If you do, you have no reward from your Father in heaven. ² Therefore, when you give to the poor, do not sound a trumpet before you as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be praised by other people! Truly, I tell you, they have their reward in full.

³ “When you give to the poor, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴ that your giving may be in secret! Your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

⁵ “When you pray, do not be like the hypocrites! For they love to stand praying in synagogues and on the street corners, to be seen by other people. Truly, I tell you, they have their reward in full. ⁶ However, when you pray, go into your room, shut your door and

pray to your Father, who is in secret! Your Father, who sees in secret, will reward you...

¹⁶ “When you fast, stop looking sombre, like the hypocrites! For they neglect their appearance, that they may appear to people to be fasting. Truly, I tell you, they have their reward in full. ¹⁷ However, when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, ¹⁸ that you may not appear to other people to be fasting, except to your Father, who is in secret! Your Father, who sees in secret, will reward you.

¹⁹ “Stop storing up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal! ²⁰ Rather, keep storing up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal! ²¹ For your heart will also be where your treasure is.