

FOLLOW ALONG WITH US

THE SEASON OF
LENT

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LENT

RECLAIMING LENT FOR CHRIST

Historically, our earliest Protestant ancestors revolted against the idea of Lenten practices, and with good reason. In the pre-Reformation mind, penitence, ashes, and self-denial had become ends in themselves. Gradually, however, a biblical understanding of lament has re-entered Christian orthodoxy, anchored in an embrace of our fallen-ness.

Ashes on the forehead rightly represent our need to *“repent in dust and ashes”* (Job 42:5–6), and our identity as *“a people of unclean lips [who] dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips”* (Isaiah 6:5). Jesus pronounced a blessing upon those who recognize their poverty of spirit and mourn the effects of sin on their life and in the world (Matthew 5:3–4).

Grounded in gospel truth that prompts genuine penitence without crippling guilt and deep conviction without devastating shame, Ash Wednesday invites the believer to a renewed awe of our great salvation. While there is no merit in the wearing of ashes, a season of mourning leading up to Easter may actually enhance our celebration of Resurrection Sunday.

Please enjoy this collection of scriptures, prayers, and meditations. I hope that they will bring depth to your own Lenten devotions and inspire your worship service preparation.

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ASH WEDNESDAY

Prayer

Almighty and everlasting God, You hate nothing You have made and forgive the sins of all who are penitent: Create in me a new and contrite heart, that I, worthily lamenting my sins and acknowledging my wretchedness, may obtain perfect remission and forgiveness; through Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Scripture (Psalm 51)

¹ Have mercy on me, O God, according to Your steadfast love; according to Your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. ² Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin!

³ For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. ⁴ Against You, You only, have I sinned and done what is evil in Your sight, so that You may be justified in Your words and blameless in Your judgment. ⁵ Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me. ⁶ Behold, You delight in truth in the inward being, and You teach me wisdom in the secret heart.

⁷ Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. ⁸ Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that You have broken rejoice. ⁹ Hide Your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities. ¹⁰ Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. ¹¹ Cast me not away from Your presence, and take not Your Holy Spirit from me. ¹² Restore to me the joy of Your salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit.

¹³ Then I will teach transgressors Your ways, and sinners will return to You. ¹⁴ Deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God, O God of my salvation, and my tongue will sing aloud of Your righteousness. ¹⁵ O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare Your praise. ¹⁶ For You will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it; You will not be pleased with a burnt offering. ¹⁷ The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, You will not despise.

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¹⁸ Do good to Zion in Your good pleasure; build up the walls of Jerusalem; ¹⁹ then will You delight in right sacrifices, in burnt offerings and whole burnt offerings; then bulls will be offered on Your altar.

Return to the Heart

In recent times, theologians such as James K. A. Smith have returned a much-needed focus back on our “heart” as a better way to understand our human problem. *“Jesus’s command to follow Him is a command to align our loves and longings with His – to want what God wants, to desire what God desires, to hunger and thirst after God and crave a world where He is all in all.”* (Smith, [You Are What You Love](#)). Thus, to cry “create in a me a clean heart” – a heart that desires after the right things – is the cry of every faithful disciple.

What then does it mean to be “broken and contrite” in our “heart”? How do we do this so that this is not mere uttering of word (paying lip service), whereby we fool ourselves... about ourselves? Most of us have seen abuses of this sort of push for premature reconciliation personally, whereby someone will demand our forgiveness for them – might it be possible for us to do that to God as well?

Truth-Telling

As with all reconciliation, there needs to be a “truth telling” – a deep confession – about what it is that’s wrong. A corresponding spirit of contrition that’s genuine is also in order. Lastly, we need to be willing to make restitution for the wrong that we’ve caused. Without a willingness to undergo such hard work, the call for a relational reconciliation is almost always abusive.

Psalm 51 models for us a better path.

Benediction

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In His great mercy He has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead (1 Peter 1:3).

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THE FIRST WEEK OF LENT

Prayer

Almighty God, have mercy upon me, forgive me of my sins, and lead me to everlasting life. I unite my voice with the psalmist who said, "Whoever dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty. You are my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust." (Psalm 91:1-2)

Scripture (Romans 10:8b-13)

⁸ "The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart" (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); ⁹ because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. ¹⁰ For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved. ¹¹ For the Scripture says, "Everyone who believes in Him will not be put to shame." ¹² For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing His riches on all who call on Him. ¹³ For "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."

A Challenge of Familiarity

Familiarity often dulls the power of biblical texts. We hear the words, but we they don't pierce our thick layer of past interpretation/teaching, expectations, and theological assumptions. I think Romans is one of the books which most suffers from this. It's not even that this barrier between us and the text is false. But we are coming to Romans for the word of God, not the word of Luther, Calvin, Kuyper, or Barth, no matter how good their insights are.

Wednesday's reading from Psalm 51 exhorted all of God's people to repent and return to God. This week, in Romans 10, we are encouraged to call upon the Lord. Lest we believe that our returning to God is ultimately a matter of works or our own merit, Paul wants us to see that repentance first involves a change of mind and heart: calling on God to save us. We don't save ourselves, but in repentance, our lives do change. When we are dead to sin, we cannot continue living in it.

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Part of the Lenten paradox we are considering is the joy of this free salvation which comes with the grief for the sins which made Christ's sacrifice necessary.

The Lordship of Jesus

It's worth exploring what the Lordship of Jesus actually is. If we really confess and believe in the Lord Jesus, what does that look like in our lives? During Lent, how might we better shape ourselves to remember and act on this reality?

It might even be worth spending some time exploring what the Lordship of Jesus means in practice. What would a person who claims to be a Christian, but doesn't actually believe that Jesus is Lord look like? What would someone who genuinely lives a life in recognition of Jesus' lordship look like? Paul's life was completely transformed! (Maybe Ananias and Saphira are a contrast? – Acts 5:1-11)

Benediction

Our God and Father, I want to trust in You, and do good. I desire to dwell in the land, and enjoy safe pasture. Help me, O God, to delight myself in You in order that these desires may be experienced. Through the power of the Holy Spirit I commit my way to the You and trust in You. Cause my righteousness to shine out like light and my justice as the noon day sun for Your glory. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen. (Psalm 37:3-6, adapted)

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THE SECOND WEEK OF LENT

Prayer

O Lord our God, Great, Eternal, Wonderful in Glory, cleanse me from my sins, and from every thought displeasing to You. Cleanse my soul and body, my heart and conscience, that with a pure heart and clear mind, with perfected love and calm hope, I may venture confidently and fearlessly to pray to You. Amen. (Basil, adapted)

Scripture (Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18)

¹ After these things the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision: "Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great." ² But Abram said, "O Lord God, what will You give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" ³ And Abram said, "Behold, You have given me no offspring, and a member of my household will be my heir." ⁴ And behold, the word of the Lord came to him: "This man shall not be your heir; your very own son shall be your heir." ⁵ And He brought him outside and said, "Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them." Then He said to him, "So shall your offspring be." ⁶ And he believed the Lord, and He counted it to him as righteousness.

⁷ And He said to him, "I am the Lord who brought you out from Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to possess." ⁸ But he said, "O Lord God, how am I to know that I shall possess it?" ⁹ He said to him, "Bring me a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtledove, and a young pigeon." ¹⁰ And he brought Him all these, cut them in half, and laid each half over against the other. But he did not cut the birds in half. ¹¹ And when birds of prey came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away.

¹² As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell on Abram. And behold, dreadful and great darkness fell upon him.

¹⁷ When the sun had gone down and it was dark, behold, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. ¹⁸ On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying, "To your offspring I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates,

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The Old, Old Story

Last week focused on Paul's proclamation in Romans 10 that, because of what Christ did for us, we must put our faith in Him to be saved. In the background is Paul's discussion in Romans 4 that we, like Abraham, are justified by faith.

We go to "Father Abraham" (or "Father Abram," as the case may be) this week and the cutting of the covenant between him and God. In the ruin of humanity and the rest of creation after the Fall, God is putting a plan into motion to bring hope to all.

When we meet Abram in Genesis 15, things have been going pretty well. He's been having adventures in Egypt, the Jordan River valley, and is treated with honor by the local rulers. Abram might even think that he's seeing the blessings God has promised. But the childlessness remains. How can God deliver on His promise? Just look up at the night sky.

What's the night sky like where you live? Most of us live where artificial lights (not to mention pollution) have dulled our sight of the stars. Abram lived with the stars as his nightly companions. This is the extravagance of God's promise to Abram. And though God has only answered Abram's question with an amplification of His *earlier* promise... Abram believes.

Faith First

Paul will later see something of cosmic importance in this event in his letter to the Romans – Abram's belief in God's promise is counted as righteousness. It's not what Abram has done. It's Abram's trust in what God *will* do. Faith will always be the foundation of the relationship between God and His people.

We now know where this story is heading – the rescue plan that started with Abraham culminates in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. He fulfills the law which humanity could not do. He brings restoration to Israel and a blessing to all the nations in a way no one expected. He shares Abraham's flesh, but also points to a legacy for Abraham beyond the patriarch's imagination – as Paul points out in Romans 4:13-25.

And of course, that story is not over, yet. We look forward to the Second Coming, at which time Christ will finally complete God's rescue plan, with a completely renewed creation in the new heavens and new earth.

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If you're finding it hard to have faith in Christ's return, then just think back to Abram and how difficult it must have been for him to exercise faith in God when he had no children. What does it mean when this passage tells us that Abram had faith? How is his faith like yours, like mine? How did Abram display his faith in his life?

Benediction

And now, O Father, You who are the God of peace that brought again from the dead my Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant, make me perfect in every good work to do Your will, working in me that which is well pleasing in Your sight, through Jesus Christ: to whom be glory for ever and ever (Hebrews 13:20-21, adapted).

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THE THIRD WEEK OF LENT

Prayer

Lord, I confess my failure to hold fast to the message I've received. Forgive my wayward heart for seeking after false forms of good news in place of the true message of the Gospel. Forgive me for my failure to share with others the hope of the Gospel that is within me. Forgive me for the times I've turned the message of Christ into something other than good news to those in need of grace and hope. May your grace be at work within me, strengthening me to share Your message of forgiveness with those who long for the true Good News.

Scripture (Isaiah 55:1-9)

¹ “Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. ² Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen diligently to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. ³ Incline your ear, and come to Me; hear, that your soul may live; and I will make with you an everlasting covenant, My steadfast, sure love for David. ⁴ Behold, I made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander for the peoples. ⁵ Behold, you shall call a nation that you do not know, and a nation that did not know you shall run to you, because of the Lord your God, and of the Holy One of Israel, for He has glorified you.

⁶ “Seek the Lord while He may be found; call upon Him while He is near; ⁷ let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the Lord, that He may have compassion on him, and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon. ⁸ For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways, declares the Lord. ⁹ For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways and My thoughts than your thoughts.

Prophetic Voices for Lent

Even after we have sinned, God offers restoration freely. Israel had fallen into sin, but God calls them back to the living water in Isaiah 55. He's always available for the seeking.

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Even in the sting of punishment or trials, God offers a way toward Himself, the source of life. We only need to turn and seek Him. In the space between justification and glorification, we are constantly returning to seek Him who we have found because He found us.

The prophets are not afraid to confront human depravity. And Isaiah isn't timid about calling a spade a spade. God's people broke the covenant and there's a consequence coming.

Isaiah speaks to a people battered by centuries of upheaval. Whether facing Assyrian threats, Babylonian exile, or Persian restoration, the people of Judah wrestled with deep questions: Have we strayed too far? Is there any hope for us now? Their collective psyche is one of disorientation. Having experienced God's displeasure through repeated punishment, they are left questioning: What does our relationship with Him look like now? Perhaps you're asking similar questions?

Striving without Satisfaction

The timeless call to intimacy with God resonates today as much as it did in Isaiah's and Jesus' time, inviting us to reflect on our modern-day longings. Are you weary of striving without satisfaction? Do you long for something more? In a world that demands constant striving, Isaiah reminds us to pause, listen, and accept God's invitation to a grace-filled feast.

God isn't like a parent whose love rises and falls with the tides of success or failure. He knows that we already have and will continue to miss the mark, but He loves us, nevertheless. He expresses that love in both His correction and His comfort, but He never dangles His love for us as a motivation for us to work harder and be better. He invites us to a feast, not because we earned it or deserved it, but because He is our good Father.

Benediction

As the deer pants for water, so I need You, O God. However, I don't always turn toward to You as we need. Instead of seeking You, I turn to cheap and easy solutions. Please show me that You alone can satisfy my every desire and longing, for Christ's sake. Amen.