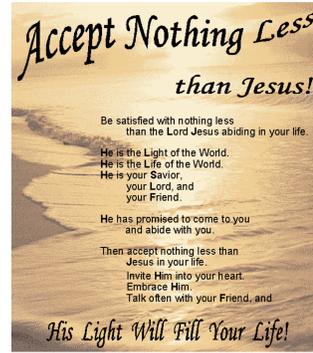


Lent is intended to be a time of self-denial, moderation, fasting, and the forsaking of sinful activities and habits. Ash Wednesday commences this period of spiritual discipline. Ash Wednesday and Lent are observed by most Catholics and some Protestant denominations. The Eastern Orthodox Church does not observe Ash Wednesday; instead, they start Lent on "Clean Monday."



While the Bible does not mention Ash Wednesday, it does record accounts of people in the Old Testament using dust and ashes as symbols of repentance and/or mourning (2 Samuel 13:19; Esther 4:1; Job 2:8; Daniel 9:3). The modern tradition of rubbing a cross on a person's forehead supposedly identifies that person with Jesus Christ.

Should a Christian observe Ash Wednesday? Since the Bible nowhere explicitly commands or condemns such a practice, Christians are at liberty to prayerfully decide whether or not to observe Ash Wednesday.



If a Christian decides to observe Ash Wednesday and/or Lent, it is important to have a biblical perspective. Jesus warned us against making a show of our fasting: "When you fast, do not look sombre as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen" (Matthew 6:16-18). We must not allow spiritual discipline to become spiritual pride.

It is a good thing to repent of sinful activities, but that's something Christians should do every day, not just during Lent. It's a good thing to clearly identify oneself as a Christian, but, again, this should be an everyday identification. And it is good to remember that no ritual can make one's heart right with God.