

ASH WEDNESDAY

Text: Joel 2:12-19; 2 Peter 1:2-11; St. Matthew 6:1-21

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER, AND OF THE ✠ SON, AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Tell me, what is it you intend to give up for Lent? Is it simply some superficial pleasure or selfish habit which you fully intend to take up again when the season has passed? How does that prepare you for your new life in CHRIST's resurrection? What does that say about your faith? Are you living for yourself or for the One who suffered and died for your sake? After all, you belong to Him. You are His own.

Therefore, let not Lent be a time of shallow hypocrisy. Rather let this season be a time of training, even as an Olympic athlete trains to strive for the gold. No successful athlete stops training before his race has been run, and neither should we before our race is made complete. For an athlete runs for that which perishes and the earthly praise of men, but your reward is more than that; you run for the praise of God and the very treasures of Heaven.

Thus, Lent does not mean the superficial shallowness that tends to come around every year as we make useless promises to give up things that mean little if anything at all in this life, especially if we intend to only take them up again after the season passes.

No! Instead, it means dying to self, dying to your sinful desires and evil lusts; it means that daily we take up our cross and die with CHRIST, and dying with CHRIST means dying to sin. It means drowning the lustful and selfish desires of the Old Adam who daily struggles within each of us in an attempt to dominate our life. It means returning day after day after day to your Baptism where your sin was put to death and the Old Adam drowned, that being raised from death by the glory of our FATHER in Heaven we may walk in newness of life—*abundant life*—in CHRIST JESUS, whose innocent suffering and death satisfied God's righteous wrath against mankind's rebellion, reconciling us to the FATHER, and whose glorious resurrection foreshadows our own.

Therefore, let us now excise from our lives all that remains of the old, all that would separate us from the love of CHRIST. Let us turn away from the sins that have a way of creeping back into our lives to ensnare us, to plague us, to ruin us, to kill us. For that is the purpose of Lent. That is the meaning of the ashes that adorn our foreheads this night. That is the purpose of our penitential reflection this and every Lenten season, indeed each and every day.

So, let us now turn to God, our FATHER, who hates nothing He has made and forgives the sins of all those who are penitent. Let us daily implore Him to give to us new and contrite hearts, that we may worthily lament our sins and acknowledge our wretchedness. Let us daily pray to our God of mercy for His perfect remission and forgiveness.

Yes, pray we must. For without the strength of God's HOLY SPIRIT, no works of our own can avail us. Indeed, our hearts naturally follow our labors, and our works become the treasures upon which our hearts are set. Yet, Holy Scripture warns that no works of our own can afford us any benefit toward our salvation, for salvation comes alone by the works of CHRIST.

Even so, our works stand to make our call and election sure, for the pursuit of heavenly things produces a heavenly mind and changes our inward reality, that running our race we may not stumble, but attain the prize that awaits us—the Crown of Righteousness which the LORD, our Righteous Judge, has promised to give to us on the Day of His triumphant return on the clouds of heaven.

For this reason, we *do* pray. We pray as God's holy people, set apart for good works appointed by our God in advance for us to do, that we may serve Him in righteousness and holiness all the days of our life, living as becomes the children of God.

So, let us this night, begin our Lenten journey; tonight, let us Christians prepare. Let us *"...turn to [our God] with all [our] heart, With fasting, with weeping, and with mourning."* Let us prepare, looking to the grace and mercy of our Easter LORD.

For behold, the grace and mercy of the LORD are this: despite our sin, despite what we deserve, the curse of death and hell no longer holds any power over us. For our God *"...is gracious and merciful, Slow to anger, and of great kindness; And He relents from doing harm."* God loves the unlovable and those who hate Him. He has relented from doing harm to you and instead did harm to His SON in order to spare you from the wrath of His judgment and cancel the power of the curse through JESUS' Blood. Therefore, you are His beloved and in you our Father is well-pleased.

For this reason, we treasure and hold fast to our LORD's sacrifice. We received it in Baptism and continue to receive it in His Supper and His Word of forgiveness in Holy Absolution. These are truly the very treasure of heaven on which we are to rely, and which neither moth nor rust can destroy, for in and with these we receive the life JESUS gave on Calvary in our stead. In these are life, His life, given to us to erase the sting of death and the curse of the grave. These are the treasure our heart is to desire.

Thus, the ashes placed on your forehead this night are not a sign of the curse of death, but of the gift of everlasting life in CHRIST. Placed upon you in the Sign of the Cross they symbolize the life now found in what was once an instrument of death. The ashes indicate what you have escaped by the LORD's grace and mercy—eternal death and the grave.

For this reason, the ashes are also a sign of what will be on the Last Day. For is it not our confession that we believe in the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come? What does this mean other than, *“On the Last Day the HOLY SPIRIT will raise me and all the dead and will give to me and all believers in Christ eternal life,”* (Luther's explanation to the Third Article of the Apostle's Creed)? We will be raised from the dust of the grave, our bodies alive with the SPIRIT breathed into them by CHRIST Himself just as He breathed life into Adam so long ago. For JESUS is *“...the resurrection and the life. He who believes in [Him,] though he may die, he shall live. And whoever lives and believes in [Him] shall never die.”*

Yes, the season of Lent is a penitential season, a season of preparation and contemplation of our LORD's suffering and death on the Cross to save us from Satan, the grave, and our own sinful desires. Yet, the real purpose of the season is our preparation for our rising to the newness of life gained for us by JESUS' resurrection on Easter morning. Thus, the sum total of Lent is simply this: Easter is coming! JESUS has gained our salvation; death, hell, and sin have been overcome and the grave is left empty, once and for all.

Hear now, the prophet Joel. Let us come as he bids us: *“with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning,”* in repentance and quietness. For God is *“gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness.”* Your LORD is zealous for you and has taken pity on you. He has not allowed His SON to die in vain. He has accepted His sacrifice and plucking you from the dust of your grave He speaks these words to you: *“I forgive you all your sins.”*

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER, AND OF THE ✠ SON, AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

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