

Lent

What is lent? It's the annual 40-day period before Easter during which many Christians fast and do penitence in preparation for Easter. This begins on what is called Ash Wednesday, at which time it is the custom to have a priest dab a bit of ashes on the adherent's forehead.

How did this custom begin? From the Christian's perspective it began at the time of Emperor Constantine when he began the "Christianizing" of the highly pagan Roman population. Roman religious beliefs were many and varied, having been adopted from the various cultures they had conquered and assimilated. They worshiped many gods, and when Christianity came into vogue it presented no problem to the pagans. Christ was added as just one more god to be worshiped. Contrary to common belief, the majority of the population did not "convert" to Christianity but merely added its trappings to their pagan beliefs if and as they chose.

However, for the faithful formerly persecuted genuine Christians, this sudden "freedom" brought with it some very serious ecclesiological problems. Immediately there was this incredible pressure to "go along in order to get along." Much of this pressure was to incorporate the trappings of the pagan worshiping ways to the Christian expressions of worship. Festive holidays and celebrations were among the first to be compromised in the liberated Christian Community, along with their morals, manners of prayers and worship. Doctrinal issues took a little longer to become perverted. For instance, there seems to be no evidence that Christ's birthday had ever been celebrated by the early Christians. In fact no one even knew when He was born. What was known, however, is that it was not December 25th or any other winter date. Nevertheless, it wasn't long, as we shall see that this pagan holiday date became celebrated as Jesus' birthday. Jesus' resurrection had always been celebrated on the 17th of Nissan, the third day after His crucifixion on Passover which was, of course, on the 14th day of Nissan, according to the Jewish calendar. Now instead it was to coincide with the day of worship of Ishtar, the

pagan goddess of fertility. However, after the council of Nicaea in 325 AD, and after several later amendments, it was decreed by the “official Church” that this holiday Ishtar, now called Easter, would be celebrated throughout the “Christian” world on the Sunday after the full moon following the vernal equinox. If the full moon should occur on a Sunday and thereby coincided with the Jewish Passover festival, Easter would be commemorated on the following Sunday. Thus it could never fall on the 17th of Nissan, the date Jesus actually rose from the dead. But who cared? Those who might were so glad to get the Roman yoke off their backs again, that they perhaps viewed this as a minor concession, and, therefore, accepted this as a small compromise of going along in order to get along. So from then on Christians have celebrated both Christ’s resurrection by church services, and also Ishtar through the rabbit and eggs rituals which symbolize fertility. His death and His resurrection are not celebrated on their correct anniversary dates, but instead on dates pagans had chosen to celebrate events related to their false gods. As we can see and imagine, many pagan and Christian feasts were reinvented, co-mingled and merged into a perverted amalgam, eventually having little if anything remaining which related to the doctrines for which millions of Christians had suffered and died.

Regarding Lent, there is nothing in Scripture anywhere calling for a 40 day period of mourning (which is the supposed symbolism of the ashes). The custom seems to have originated perhaps as far back as the time of Nimrod, the first “world” dictator, the founder of Babylon, Nineveh and several other cities, all of which became perpetual enemies of Israel. This was less than 300 years after the flood. Legend indicates that Nimrod and Simeronus had a son Tammuz. Perhaps because he died around the winter solstice, and they chose to deify him, they made him into the Sun god. They are said to have begun the custom of burning a Yule log commemorating his death, at the end of the shortening days of winter. The next day, when the days began to lengthen, as the sun grew “stronger” they cut down and decorated a fir tree to celebrate his rebirth, the “returning” of the sun. This then is one of the explanations floating around as to how this pagan winter celebration began. The “Official Church” under Constantine also “grafted”

this pagan holiday unto the church tradition making it Christ's birthday with no Scriptural basis what-so-ever.

Somehow, associated with this, is how the ash-on-your-face idea may have started, as we shall see. There is evidence that such a practice was going on in apostate Israel, based on Ezekiel 8:13, 14, which tells of God lamenting to Ezekiel about the degenerate state of his priesthood. God showed him examples, saying "turn thee yet again, and thou shalt see greater abomination that they do. Then he brought me to the door of the gate of Yahweh's house which was toward the north, and behold there sat women weeping to Tammuz." The pagan custom of that day was for there to be a period of mourning and fasting and covering themselves with ashes to show their grief. After this period of 40 days was ended, at the time of the Feast of Ishtar, they would again celebrate the "resurrection" of the sun god, as he resumes his life-giving warmth and fertility to the earth.

The ritual of covering ones self with ashes as a sign of lamentation does also seem to have a basis in Old Testament Scripture, but I find no such thing advocated anywhere in the New Testament.* The first mention of such a ritual is by Mordicai in the Book of Ester 4:1, then later Jeremiah says, "...wallow thyself in ashes, make thee mourning as for one only son..." This is a messianic prophecy certainly advocating the use of ashes as a symbol of mourning. Ezekiel speaks similar words in a pagan context of those lamenting the destruction of the sin city Tyre. In Daniel 9:3, he hid himself to do "...supplications, with fasting and sackcloth and ashes." I believe that it is evident from all of this that the practice of applying ashes to one's self has a basis in Scripture as well as in pagan rituals. However, nothing of this nature was taught by Jesus directly, nor is it advocated anywhere else in the New Testament teachings.

Am I reaching too far to suggest that this ritual, which evidently has its roots, at least in part, in pagan (Satan inspired) ancient religions, is merely one way in which Satan is "conditioning" many to become familiar, with and thereby more accepting of, the mark that Antichrist will demand on every forehead or hand? I probably am, to those who

choose this manner of reverence and who are less sensitive to what Scripture reveals regarding Satan's end time plan (Revelation 14:9). Do what you choose in this matter; I pray you do so fully informed through Scripture and in genuine reverence to our Savior.

*In both Matthew 11:21 and Luke 10:13 Jesus makes reference to that old custom regarding ashes, but does not in any way promote it for His church.