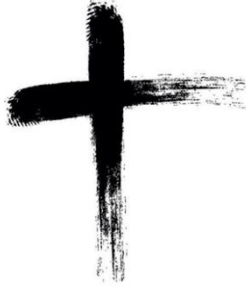


'SMOKE & MIRRORS'

(Biblical Wisdom to See Through the Facades of This World) Studies in Ecclesiastes

'Ash Wednesday'



Catholics, Lutherans, Methodists, some Presbyterians and even a few Baptist denominations began this day with the smearing of ashes on their members' foreheads to start the religious season of *lent* (6 weeks prior to Resurrection Day, which they call 'Easter'). The ashes are burnt remains of the palm fronds from the previous year's *Palm Sunday* and are smeared by a religious leader on foreheads in the symbol of a cross. Some people wash the ashes off soon after receiving the sign of the cross, but others retain them throughout the day. The religious ritual's meaning is to remind people of **Genesis 3:19** where God completed His curse upon Adam for his disobedience by saying, "...for dust you are and to dust you shall return."

Great way to start the day, right?! Being reminded of the curse sin brought into the world and necessitated Christ's death on a cross isn't exactly a great way to begin your Wednesday morning journey to work or school! However, for those who participate in this vain ritual, Ash Wednesday follows *Shrove (Fat) Tuesday* or as it is sometimes known as, *Mardi Gras* where the day before, indulgence of the flesh to the limit, one more time, before the 40-day Lenten period of sacrifice and self-denial beginning with '*Ashes Wednesday*'.

The ashen cross on the forehead is a reminder to you, and others staring at you, that you are just fallen mortal beings headed for the grave someday (as if we didn't already know that), therefore do some good works for the next 40 days and give up something you usually do or eat to mitigate your sin debt with God. Of course, not a single bit of any this is in the Bible and is extra-biblical addition to the Bible and embellishment of the *works based religious systems* of liturgical denominations of Christendom.

'Religious vanity' (pointless religious ritual) is what God through Solomon would call this charade of special days leading up to 'Easter' (the pagan name for 'Resurrection Day'). The 40 days prior to the cross for Jesus wasn't about remembering Satan's temptations in the wilderness as is the reason given for the 40 days of *lent* (old Anglo-Saxon word for 'spring') – the 6 weeks before the cross were filled with Jesus preaching the gospel and ministering grace to as many as possible prior to His sacrifice on the cross.

If true disciples of Jesus want to do something special on these weeks leading up to celebrating Jesus' resurrection, it is a great idea to share the gospel of salvation by grace, through faith in the finished work of Christ instead of putting dirt on your face and avoiding meat on Friday! Instead of religious *vanity* rituals, true Christians celebrate *victory* in the Lord Jesus Christ's death, burial, and resurrection from the dead.

Returning to ashes and dust isn't what true Christians are to be remembering or thinking about this time of year – we're to look forward to our glorious *ash-free* resurrection body any day now – PtL

"...our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly await the Savior,
the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body
that it may be conformed to His glorious body..."

Philippians 3:20-21

'Let Your Life Shine!'

(The wise pursuit of happiness 'under the sun')

Ecclesiastes 8

The Premise:

"Who is like a wise man? And who knows the interpretation of a thing?

*A man's wisdom makes his face shine,
and the sternness of his face is changed."*

8:1

Submission to God's Authority

(Trust biblical 'chains-of-command' to steer you 'under the sun')

8:2-9

Discuss the different biblical *chains-of-command* you are responsible to respect and obey as a good Christian *'under the sun'* and *'under heaven'*: (example: *government (Romans 13:1-5)*, others you are responsible to as a spouse in marriage, youth at home, student at school, church member, military, citizen, etc.

- Talk about the benefits of being under God-given authorities in your life:
- How can God use these authorities to keep you in His will and learning His ways?
- If you believe an authority over you is wrong, can you biblically change the situation?
- Discuss why being a wise Christian helps you be careful getting under any new authority in your life.

Acceptance of God's Toleration

(Trust God's calendar for future justice and reward 'under heaven')

8:10-17

- Do you find God's allowance of injustice and toleration of the wicked hard to understand and frustrating?
 - Discuss why you think He lets the wicked *'get away with it'* in this life.
 - Similarly, do you find it frustrating that God lets the righteous *'be oppressed'* in this life.
 - What are the reasons God lets righteous Christians experience injustice and difficulty now?
- Discuss Solomon's suggestion for coping with the enigmas and inequities during this life in verse 15. How does this recommendation resemble the good life of those *'under heaven'*?
- What other suggestions for accepting the sometimes bewildering ways God seems to handle (*or not handle*) things in this life *'under the sun'*?
- How does this help you with some of the things that have happened or are happening in your life right now?