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## ASHES TO NEW LIFE

*Pastor Richard Mau*

What do you think of when you hear the word, ashes? If you're a cricket fan you may think of those ashes kept in an urn at the Lord's Cricket Ground. Every few years the battle goes on between the England and Australian cricket teams in order to gain the ashes. It's a very serious business and it's been going on for years. Or, you may think of a loved one who has passed on. At their funeral service you heard the words, "Ashes to ashes, dust to dust". Today as I write, Australians across South Australia and Victoria are facing another catastrophic bushfire day which could reduce the countryside and buildings to ashes, causing loss and suffering. Hopefully that won't happen.

In the Bible, ashes are often used as a symbol for grief and repentance. In ancient times, people often sprinkled ashes on their heads as a sign of their grief. They would do the same at times when they felt remorse about something they'd done or said that was wrong and hurtful. It was a practical action which showed how sorry they were. It's not a thought which is so foreign to us, either. Some years ago a Lutheran Church in Adelaide burned down. The pastor recalled standing in the ashes of his church building with feelings of grief and repentance: grief and sorrow over what had happened; repentance for having questioned why God let this arson attack happen.

When was the last time you stood in ashes?

Next Wednesday is an important day for the Christian church. It follows Shrove Tuesday and it's called Ash Wednesday. It's the start of a six-week period leading up to the observance of Good Friday and Easter. It's a time when many Christians take time out to prepare for such important events in the history of the world.

Toward the end of his ministry, Jesus Christ said to his followers, "We are going to Jerusalem where everything the prophets wrote about the Son of Man will come true. He will be handed over to the Gentiles, who will mock him, insult him, and spit on him. They will whip him and kill him, but three days later he will rise to life."

The purpose of 40 days of Lent as it is called, is to give people the opportunity to think deeply about this great event—to journey in spirit with Jesus, to stand at the foot of Calvary's cross and then at the open tomb, to reflect on who and what we are, and on who God is and what he's done to bring us into a living relationship with himself.

As we reflect on the reasons for Jesus' suffering, death, and resurrection, we stand in ashes. We stand in the ashes of grief—deep sorrow over our condition of rebellion against God, which caused such terrible suffering. We also stand in the ashes of repentance—firmly resolved to change our ways and to lovingly respond to God's great love and compassion for us.

Of course talk about sorrow over what we've done wrong, an emphasis on the forgiveness of sins, and a call to repentance sounds foreign to many people today and does not fit easily into day to day living in our modern society.

Have you thought about your need to stand in ashes? If you don't sense a need to grieve and repent, that doesn't mean you don't have that need. For example: two planes may be on a collision course. In one a man may be casually reading a magazine while waiting for dinner to be served. In the other plane, a woman may just be finishing her meal and chatting with the passenger next to her. The fact that those passengers don't realise the danger they're in doesn't make their situation any less serious. If the pilots don't do something about it and alter course, the planes will collide, and the passengers are likely to be killed.

Lent reminds us of our plight, and tells us that a change in life's direction is both necessary and possible.

As we stand in ashes, we discover again the meaning of Godly sorrow over our sin. We learn that there's real joy in repentance, and a wonderful release in the announcement: "Your sins are forgiven." We discover, to our great relief, that we don't have to prove ourselves to God, or try to generate enough good deeds to show that we deserve God's love.

God says to us: 'I know you better than you know yourself. You don't deserve forgiveness. But you're mine, despite your insincerity, your doubts, your guilt, your self-centredness, and whatever else pulls you from me.'

Even though Lent begins with the ashes of Ash Wednesday it doesn't have to be a time of gloom and doom. Instead, it can be a time when we learn more about ourselves and about God; when we experience both sorrow, and the release involved with repentance; when we're assured of God's forgiving love, and empowered to live each day as God's new people.

The good news is that out of ashes there comes new beginnings. It's a lesson we learn from the Australian bush. It doesn't take long after a fire before we see evidences of new life and growth. Many of those who lose their homes and possessions in bush fires have to start all over again. They soon clear away the burnt remains. Then they rebuild and refurnish their houses. They re-establish their gardens. If there can be a positive side to it they also have the chance to change things, or set up their houses differently. So something new comes out of the ashes.

During Lent many churches have special groups meeting for study and reflection and some have special mid-week services. Ask someone at your local church about joining such activities. On Ash Wednesday in some Christian churches the pastor or priest will mark the sign of the cross on people's foreheads in ashes. It can be very meaningful and a special time to pause and reflect in our retrace of a world.

Standing in ashes, like this, can be the start of a whole new way of life!

For more encouragement about finding beauty out of the ashes, go to [messagesofhope.org.au](http://messagesofhope.org.au), where you can order your free booklet, WHERE'S GOD IN ALL THIS? or call 1800 353 350. God is with you in difficult times and has a future prepared for you.

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