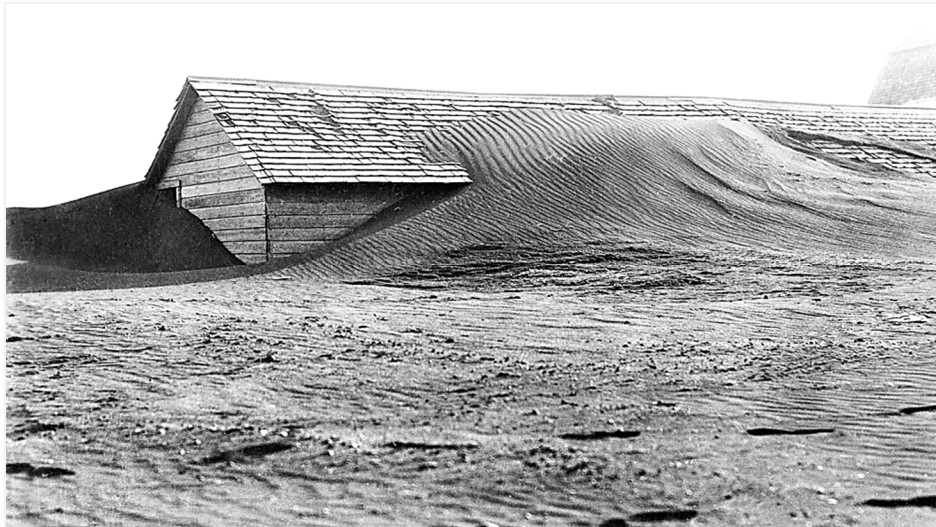


Humility 101: Dust

by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle



Prayer of Illumination

Merciful God, your word is our way of truth and life. Create in us hearts that are clean and put your Holy Spirit within us, so that we may receive your grace and declare your praise forever; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Background

Psalm 90 is the only psalm attributed to Moses. David was not the only leader of Israel who was musically inclined. This psalm is a model of prayer for people who have waited long and patiently for God to bring prosperity to the community. It's a great psalm for not only a pandemic, but for Ash Wednesday. And so we, along with the psalmist and ancient Israel, encounter the living and Holy God in Psalm 90, even in the thick of our weakness and exile. For it is here we see ourselves for what we truly are: made by God of dust.

Let's hear now our reading for Ash Wednesday from:

Scripture: Psalm 90:1-17 (NRSV)

A Prayer of Moses, the man of God.

- ¹ Lord, you have been our dwelling place
in all generations.
- ² Before the mountains were brought forth,
or ever you had formed the earth and the world,
from everlasting to everlasting you are God.

- ³ You turn us back to dust,
and say, "Turn back, you mortals."
⁴ For a thousand years in your sight
are like yesterday when it is past,
or like a watch in the night.
- ⁵ You sweep them away; they are like a dream,
like grass that is renewed in the morning;
⁶ in the morning it flourishes and is renewed;
in the evening it fades and withers.
- ⁷ For we are consumed by your anger;
by your wrath we are overwhelmed.
⁸ You have set our iniquities before you,
our secret sins in the light of your countenance.
- ⁹ For all our days pass away under your wrath;
our years come to an end like a sigh.
¹⁰ The days of our life are seventy years,
or perhaps eighty, if we are strong;
even then their span is only toil and trouble;
they are soon gone, and we fly away.
- ¹¹ Who considers the power of your anger?
Your wrath is as great as the fear that is due you.
¹² So teach us to count our days
that we may gain a wise heart.
- ¹³ Turn, O Lord! How long?
Have compassion on your servants!
¹⁴ Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love,
so that we may rejoice and be glad all our days.
¹⁵ Make us glad as many days as you have afflicted us,
and as many years as we have seen evil.
¹⁶ Let your work be manifest to your servants,
and your glorious power to their children.
¹⁷ Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us,
and prosper for us the work of our hands—
O prosper the work of our hands!

*The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.*

MEDITATION – Humility 101: Dust

Dust.

Dust is the sign that opens Lent in our Ash Wednesday liturgies. We depart from this service with the sign of dust placed smack dab on our foreheads:

*Remember that you are dust,
and to dust you shall return.*

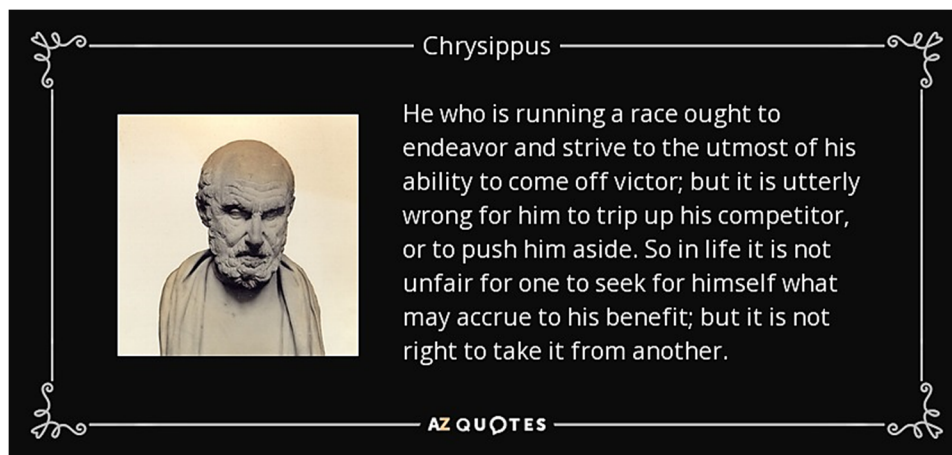
The starting point of Lent for all of us is very clear: dust.

Genesis tells us, *"the Lord God formed man out of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living soul."* (Gen. 2:7)

Jesus, the Second Adam, after he was baptized by John, ventured into the arid dust of the desert lands, 'into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.' And unlike the First Adam, the Second Adam was not let into temptation and he was delivered from evil. And later in his ministry, Jesus silently bent down and wrote with his finger in the dust.

Ash Wednesday is a time for us to gaze intently into the dust of our own lives, and to read what the finger of the Lord is writing upon our hearts.

This last year, the pandemic has been reminding us on a daily basis that we are dust, from first to last. That's what we share in common—dust. Dust unites us. Every human being is on the same team—Team Dust. We're all made it to the Dust Bowl together.



Author Ryan Holiday shares that more than 2000 years ago, the competitive athlete and philosopher **Chrysippus** wrote about what scholars now call the **No Shoving Rule**. Yes, we're competing with each other, he said, but we're all on the same team. We're all on **Team Dust**. To cheat or trip or push an opponent? To do this is to lose, even if you win.

Imagine if we instituted the **No Shoving Rule** in politics... in the church... in our homes.

While we're at it, let's add the Golden Rule. The royal law of love. Marcus Aurelius, the emperor of Rome, continually valued being on Team Dust. *I am a citizen of the world*, he said.

Ash Wednesday reminds us not to define ourselves too narrowly. And to put ourselves in a healthy perspective: we are dust. We're in this together. We're a part of not only the Milky Way, but the Dusty Way. And God is our Maker—we're his sons and daughters. We're made in God's similitude—God's image, God's likeness. So let's respect each other—we're cut from the same cloth of dust. To respect God's creation is a way to respect the Creator. So let's be humble and kind, Immanuel. Generous of spirit. Generous in our orthodoxy.

Dust reminds us that life is unspeakably short—it's gone in no time, like dust in the wind. Like a sigh, that flies away. Or as one comedian put it, our lives are like toilet paper—the closer you get to the end of the roll, the faster it goes...

When Psalm 90 was written, life expectancy was somewhere between 40 and 50 years old. The Psalmist is being optimistic here. Even if you're fortunate enough to live to 70 or even 80—and today we can add 90, 100, or more years—it's still a blink.

We're all finite—even those most chronologically seasoned amongst us. No matter how many days we're given, It's all a gift and it isn't forever—for anybody.

And so Ash Wednesday is an important **reality check** for us. A **spirituality check** too. Like grass, we sprout in the morning and wither and die by evening. My backyard reminds me of this every day! I knew I should have gotten artificial grass!

Indeed, the grass withers and the flower fades,
but the **Word of God** endures forever.

Ash Wednesday reminds us about not only ourselves, but God.

God is immortal, we're mortal.
God endures from everlasting to everlasting,
we're temporary.
God is All-Powerful,
we're fleeting, frail and fragile creatures—
even at our prime.

Lord Byron put it this way:

*Men think highly of those who rise rapidly in the world;
Whereas nothing rises quicker than dust, straw, and feathers.*

James, the brother of Jesus doesn't mince words either:

*For what is your life? It is even a vapor,
that appeareth for a little time,
and then vanisheth away.*

God is God... and we are not.

And yet, the Scriptures teach we're made in the **similitude of God**. This is the mystery, paradox, and beauty of it all.

Moses also teaches us in our psalm that our lives are so brief because of our guilt and God's anger at our wrongdoing. This isn't a message we hear too often. We bristle against it. We modern folk like to sanitize and update God—saying only outdated understandings of God. This is a grave mistake. God's anger can be found in both the Old Testament and New. God has emotions—and one of them is anger. It is a way of God expressing his care and concern. If we don't think God experiences anger. Nothing really matters. Anything goes. In essence, if God doesn't get angry, God doesn't care. Anger can be a sin, but most certainly it isn't always a sin.

This is a problem today I believe. We explain away, rationalize, excuse, downplay destructive patterns of behavior. We think too highly of ourselves. We're in a state of denial.

"Surely I would never do this."

"He would never do that."

Well, we do. Were human—a puff of wind and dust.

It's all too easy to play the victim, never taking ownership. Because then, we don't have to change or repent. Own up to our responsibilities. Grow. Mature. Develop. Learn. Care. It takes maturity to control our anger, Rather than be controlled by it.

As Ephesians says, *"Be ye angry, but sin not."*

Ash Wednesday reminds us that we all fall short of God's glory. We can sin by not being angry when we should be. We can also sin by being angry when we shouldn't be.

So like Job, we *'repent in dust and ashes.'*

But Ash Wednesday isn't all doom and gloom. There's the good news of Ash Wednesday too. The good news of Maundy Thursday, and Good Friday—all because of Resurrection Sunday. We can have hope, on Manic Mondays, or in the middle of exiles, pandemics, sickness or struggle. Even death. As the church reader board says:

***When you're down to nothing,
God is up to something.***

We look around today, and see the shambles and the scorched earth, and we ask: *where is the love?* God then points us to Christ. Christ took our shame and shortcomings upon himself—every sin of every human being, past, present, and future—and nailed it all to the cross putting to death our debt, shame, and record of wrongs.

Hear the good news from the Prophet Nahum:

***The Lord is slow to anger, and great in power...
The Lord hath his way in the whirlwind and the storm,
And the clouds are the dust of his feet.***

God is bigger than the storms we face. You see, the Lord is compassionate. He knows how we're made; he remembers that we are dust. He gave us the gift of Jesus—the Second Adam, and this time, Adam was more than human. Adam again was both human and divine. He was equipped to do what we could never do.

Because of Christ's crucifixion and resurrection, We can rise from the ashes. We rise because Christ rose from the ashes. Even though we're in Tucson, Immanuel, the Phoenix is our Church's bird. In the midst of our tears and ashes, God gives us the gift of hope and a wise heart.

***Teach us to count our days,
that we may gain a wise heart.***

By God's grace and through repentance, we're given a clean heart, a new heart, and a teachable heart. A humble heart. A heart that's both tough and tender. A tempered heart.

James describes the gift of godly wisdom as:

***first pure, then peaceable, kindly and considerate,
full of mercy and good fruits, free from partiality and hypocrisy.***

A wise heart knows we need help, forgiveness, and grace. That we can't do this on our own. We need God. A wise heart is a grateful heart, too.

***"Write your injuries in dust," says Benjamin Franklin,
"and your benefits in marble."***

Yet we are made of dust... and made of breath. The dust of God and the breath of God. And we will return to the dust—ashes to ashes, dust to dust.

But with Christ, his crucifixion and resurrection, we can be raised up as 1 Samuel 2:8 says:

"from the dust... and inherit a seat of honor."

In the waiting, God satisfies us in the morning with his merciful love,
That we may sing for joy and be glad all our days.
God gives us days of gladness for our days of affliction.
He prospers this bag of bones and bag of dust we are.

Amen.

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