

## Leader's Guide for Session 1

**BEFORE CLASS:** Read through this session yourself. Examine the Bible readings listed and become acquainted with them.

**READ:** Have a member of the group read the Introduction on page 4 aloud.

**READ:** Have someone read the Opening Prayer or read the prayer in unison.

**DISCUSS:** Discuss ways in which people show that they are sorry for something they have done wrong.

**READ:** Read aloud or have someone read aloud the Introduction.

### SESSION 1



# Mercy in Ashes

*Rend your hearts and not your garments. JOEL 2:13*

#### OPENING PRAYER

Heavenly Father, during this season of Lent, we pray that you lead us by your Spirit in true repentance as we remember the suffering, death and resurrection of our Savior. Guide us in the study of your Word so that we might grow in faith toward you and in love and service toward others. Hear our prayer in Jesus' holy name. Amen.

#### DISCUSSION

How do people usually show that they are sorry for something they have done wrong?

#### INTRODUCTION

Suffering severe trials of grief and loss, faithful Job maintained his innocence. But when he was questioned by the Lord and confronted by God's immense might and majesty, Job could only respond, "I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes" (Job 42:6). Job was forgiven and the Lord blessed Job's family and restored his wealth and property. After Jonah repented

## DUST AND ASHES

1 **Read Genesis 2:5-9.** The dust and ashes remind us that the first man was created from the dust of the earth. His name, Adam, means dust or soil. Answers will vary, but Lent is a season of repentance, as we remember our sins and the fact that Jesus suffered the penalty of death in our place. The ashes remind us that God is our Creator and that, apart from Christ, we are sinners in his sight.

2 **Read Genesis 3:14-19.** Because of sin, Adam and Eve knew shame; they tried to hide from God because they were afraid of him. Adam blamed the woman and God for the sin; Eve blamed the serpent. From that time on, the relationship between the man and woman would be difficult and contentious. Even the earth would contend with Adam as he tried to work the soil. The earth would readily produce thorns as the man tried to grow crops. Producing food would be difficult. Answers will vary.

3 **Read Genesis 13:14-18.** God promised to give Abraham descendants as numerous as the dust of the earth. **Read Isaiah 65:17-25.** God will create new heavens and a new earth; the former heavens and earth will not be remembered. People will be filled with joy and gladness and there will be no more weeping, distress and death. There will be peace and dust will be the serpent's food, just as God foretold in Eden.

and finally obeyed the Lord's command to warn Nineveh of God's wrath, the king and his people cried out for mercy. "The word reached the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes" (Jonah 3:6). Even the animals were included in the repentant response of their owners. "Let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and let them call out mightily to God" (Jonah 3:8). On Ash Wednesday, in keeping with ancient practice, we receive a mark of ashes and call out to God for mercy and forgiveness for the sake of his Son.

## DUST AND ASHES

1. **Read Genesis 2:5-9.** Job said, "I repent in dust and ashes." In ancient times, people might demonstrate repentance, grief or sorrow by sitting in the dirt, wearing sackcloth (black cloth) and putting dust and ashes on their heads. How is this ancient practice a reminder of our origins? Why is such a reminder of our beginnings an appropriate part of our Lenten observance? What does this show about our relationship to God?
2. Adam and Eve failed to trust the Word of God. They disobeyed their Creator and ate the fruit forbidden to them. Their sin is passed down from generation to generation like an inherited disease. Their sinful choice had an impact on all of their relationships, with God, with each other and with the earth that God created for them. We share in the rebellion of our first parents as we daily choose to disobey the Word of God and fail to follow his commands. **Read Genesis 3:14-19.** How has sin impacted relationships? How does the fall into sin affect the earth itself? In what way does "dust" play a part in the effects of sin? How do we see these results of sin expressed in our relationships and on the earth today?
3. God gave our first parents the promise of hope and deliverance. A child born of the woman would come to do battle with the ancient serpent. That child would be the woman's offspring and the offspring of Abraham. **Read Genesis 13:14-18.** How does "dust" figure in the promise of hope that God gives to Abraham? The woman's offspring, the promised Messiah, would defeat the serpent and restore the relationships that were shattered in Eden. **Read Isaiah 65:17-25.** When the Messiah reigns, all things will be made new. In Genesis 3 we heard

4] **Read Psalm 103:6-19.** God our Creator also creates righteousness and justice for those who are oppressed. He is merciful, gracious and slow to anger; he is filled with steadfast love. God remembers that we are made of dust and so does not deal with us according to our sins and repay us for those sins; he understands our weakness and has compassion on us. **Read Psalm 104.** Answers will vary; this psalm rejoices in God's continuing care for creation, for plants, animals and people. Verses 29-30 remind us that creatures die and return to dust. There is hope in the reminder that the Spirit gives life and new creation; the face of the ground will be renewed.

5] **Read Joel 2:12-13.** God calls us to return to him with fasting, weeping and mourning. We are to come with repentant hearts, not merely with outward shows of sorrow (with torn garments). We can be confident that we will be forgiven because God is gracious and merciful, filled with steadfast love.

**READ:** Read the Bible reading responsively.

of the destruction brought about by the fall into sin. While Isaiah also speaks of the return of the exiles, what details does Isaiah give concerning the way in which creation, work and relationships will be restored? How do these prophetic verses mirror the destruction described in Genesis? How does dust play a part in a way that recalls God's words to the serpent in Eden?

4. **Read Psalm 103:6-19.** Rebellion against the Creator shattered the perfection of God's creation, but God is faithful and keeps his promise of hope and restoration first made in Eden. How is our God and Creator described in this psalm? How does our Creator regard the fact that we are created from dust? **Read Psalm 104.** How does the Creator continue to care for the world he made? Yet even here we have a reminder of our "dusty" beginning. What is said about dust and about the new creation?
5. In Eden, Adam and Eve tried to hide from God and attempted to cover their guilt and shame. God our Creator does not want us to hide from him. **Read Joel 2:12-13.** How are we to return to our God? Biblical figures often tore their garments in an outward show of sorrow (Job 1:20; Job 2:12; Matthew 26:65), but what does God ask of us? We should not try to hide as our first parents did. Why can we be confident in our return to the Lord?

**RESPONSIVE READING—PSALM 103:8-14**

- L *The LORD is merciful and gracious,*
- C **Slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.**

- L *He will not always chide,*
- C **Nor will he keep his anger forever.**

- L *He does not deal with us according to our sins,*
- C **Nor repay us according to our iniquities.**

- L *For as high as the heavens are above the earth,*
- C **So great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him;**

**SING:** Sing (or speak) the hymn in unison.

**PRAY:** Pray aloud or have someone read aloud the Closing Prayer.

**ENCOURAGE:** Encourage participants to forgive those who have sinned against them.

L *As far as the east is from the west,*  
C **So far does he remove our transgressions from us.**

L *As a father shows compassion to his children,*  
C **So the LORD shows compassion to those who fear him.**

L *For he knows our frame;*  
C **He remembers that we are dust.**

#### **HYMN**

### **Savior, When in Dust to You**

Savior, when in dust to thee, low we bow the adoring knee;  
When, repentant, to the skies, scarce we lift our weeping eyes;  
O, by all thy pains and woe suffered once for us below,  
Bending from thy throne on high, hear our penitential cry!

#### **CLOSING PRAYER**

Crucified and risen Lord, by the power of your Spirit lead us to true repentance during this Lenten season and always, and teach us, in keeping with repentance, to bear in our lives the fruit of love and good works. Empower your Church on earth to continue its faithful proclamation of repentance and salvation in your name. Amen.

#### **BLESSED ARE THE MERCIFUL**

If there is someone in your life who has sinned against you, ask God's help in forgiving that person. "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy" (Matthew 5:7).