

Shalom AZ Ministries

In Pursuit of Israel's Redemption



What the LORD means by “Afflict Your Souls”

Rabbi Cosmo Panzetta

Devotion and Discussion Questions

Key Texts (TLV): Isaiah 58:6-7; Isaiah. 56:1-2; 57:17-18; 58:1-5; Lev. 16:30-31; Jer. 34:8-16; Job 31:13-23; Matt. 25:34-40; Jas. 1:21-27; Eph. 5:1; Luke 13:10-17

In Leviticus 16, when the Lord speaks of Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, He instructs us to “afflict” ourselves – to **עָנָה**, *anah*, to “humble” ourselves. It’s a instruction that has come to be synonymous with “fasting” on Yom Kippur. But what is it that ADONAI is instructing His people to do? What is He trying to form in us? The phrase “afflict yourselves” can sound very intense, and over time people can reduce it to a checklist, a set of visible denials, or a ritual that can be completed without ever really getting near the heart. But in Isaiah 58 makes clear that the Lord is not looking for a performance. He is going after the deeper issue of what is ruling us—our cravings, our self-interest, our insistence on our own way. In that sense, “afflicting your soul” is not about putting on a display of sorrow. It is about allowing God to deal with the self-centeredness that keeps us from hearing Him and reflecting Him.

That is why Isaiah 58 is so piercing. The people are seeking God day after day. They feel like they *want* to know His ways. They ask for righteous judgments and desire the nearness of God. Outwardly, it all looks so spiritual. And yet the Lord says there is rebellion underneath it all. Why? Because their fasting is still wrapped around their own desires. They want God to notice them, respond to them, and do what they want. But the true essence of our faith has never been using religious acts to pressure God. It has always been *Shema*—to hear, to receive, and to respond in obedience. The Lord is not trying to train us in empty ritual. He is transforming us into a people who know His heart.

1. THE FAST GOD CHOOSES EXPOSES WHAT RULES ME

We often think of fasting as mainly being about not eating food. We think the essence of the fast is the denial itself—the missing meal, the empty stomach, the outward act of restraint. But Isaiah 58 shows that the Lord is after something much deeper than the physical act. The issue is not simply whether food is absent from my table, but whether self is still enthroned in my heart. As I fast, one of the things that begins to surface is how much my cravings often rule me. Appetite, comfort, irritation, impatience, the insistence on getting what I want—these things can remain hidden and out of view of my own awareness until they are challenged.

That is why fasting can be a gift when it is rightly understood. It becomes a mirror. It reveals how easily my soul is governed by fleshly desire and self-centered instinct. The Lord says the people were fasting, yet still seeking their own pleasure and pursuing their own will. So the true fast is not merely the removal of food—it is the exposing of what has too much influence over me. As I humble myself before God, He shows me where I am still driven by cravings rather than led by His Spirit. In that sense, fasting becomes a holy interruption that helps loosen the grip of self.

2. THE FAST GOD CHOOSES AWAKENS ME TO GOD'S HEART

When I am in the process of not eating, I may begin to notice something I usually don't experience for very long: hunger. And through my temporary hunger of my fast, the Lord can awaken me to those for whom hunger is not temporary. In the midst of fasting, I begin to recognize that what I am experiencing for this short season, others may carry daily. Suddenly, fasting is no longer just about me enduring discomfort. It becomes an opportunity for the Lord to tune my heart to His compassion. He uses my emptiness to make me aware of the emptiness around me. He uses my discomfort to awaken mercy. He uses the quieting of my appetites to help me hear what matters to Him.

That is why Isaiah 58 moves immediately from fasting to feeding the hungry, helping the oppressed, welcoming the poor, and clothing the naked. The Lord is saying, "Now you are beginning to understand My heart." Fasting is meant to clear the static of self-preoccupation so that God's priorities become clearer. It is meant to help me feel what I often rush past, notice what I often overlook, and care about what He cares about. The true fast opens my ears, my eyes, and my heart to HIS heart.

3. THE FAST GOD CHOOSES ALIGNS MY LIFE WITH HIS WAYS

The people in Isaiah 58 were treating fasting as a tool to get God to respond to them. "We have fasted—why don't You notice?" But the Lord turns the whole idea upside down. Fasting was never meant to manipulate heaven. It was never meant to pressure God into aligning with my desires. It was meant to humble me so that my heart could be aligned with His desires. The purpose is not to bend His will toward mine, but for my will to be softened, redirected, and aligned with HIS desires, that I would be increasingly re-shaped into His likeness.

So as I fast, the Lord is not merely asking me to stop eating. He is teaching me to stop living for myself. He is forming in me His priorities, His compassion, His generosity, His justice, and His mercy. He is producing a life that increasingly does what He does. The result of a true fast is not simply that I endured hunger for a day. The result is that I come out of it loving what He loves more deeply, seeing people more clearly, and walking more closely in His ways. That is the fast He chooses.

CONCLUSION

The Lord's call to "afflict your souls" is far richer than many of us have imagined. It is not merely about abstaining from food or enduring discomfort for a set time. It is about humbling the inner person before God so that He can expose what rules us, awaken us to His heart, and align our lives with His ways. He is not interested in outward religious activity that leaves the heart untouched. He desires a people who are becoming like Him—people who hear His voice, reflect His compassion, and live according to His priorities.

So when you fast, do not treat it as a ritual to complete or a lever to pull in order to get something from God. Come before Him honestly. Let the hunger remind you of your dependence on Him. Let the discomfort expose where self still rules. Let the quiet awaken you to the needs around you. Let the Lord form His likeness in you. The true fast is not measured merely by what you gave up for a day, but by what God produced in your heart through it. That is the fast He chooses.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. How has your understanding of fasting been shaped more by tradition than by Isaiah 58?
2. What cravings or attitudes tend to surface in you when comfort is removed?
3. How can fasting help awaken compassion for those who live with daily need?
4. In what ways can spiritual disciplines become attempts to get God to serve our agenda?
5. What would it look like for your next fast to focus on alignment with God's heart rather than outward performance?

CLOSING PRAYER:

Avinu Malkhenu, Our Father, Our King, thank You for loving us enough to confront shallow religion and outward performance. Thank You that You do not merely ask for rituals, but for hearts that are humble and open before You. Forgive us for the times we have treated fasting as an exercise, a badge of spirituality, or a way to try to get our own desires fulfilled. Cleanse us from self-centered devotion and teach us what it truly means to humble our souls before You.

Lord, as we seek You, expose what rules us. Reveal the cravings, fears, and habits that compete with Your leadership in our lives. Awaken us to Your compassion for the hungry, the hurting, the oppressed, and the overlooked. Align our priorities with Yours. Let our times of fasting produce more than temporary denial—let them produce Your likeness in us. Make us a people who hear Your voice, love what You love, and do what You do.

B'Shem Yeshua, In the name of Yeshua, amen.