

SABBATH THOUGHT 2025-09-13—FASTING & AFFLICTION

May God bless you on His Sabbath day!

Everyone understands that fasting is going without food or drink for a period of time. The Bible certainly confirms this:

MATTHEW 15:32 Then Jesus called his disciples unto him, and said, I have compassion on the multitude, because **they continue with me now three days, and have nothing to eat: and I will not send them away fasting**, lest they faint in the way.

It is obvious what fasting does physically but what is the PURPOSE of fasting? It is an important question since fasting is synonymous with the Day of Covering.

NOTE: Most refer to this as the Day of Atonement, called *Yom Kippur* in the Hebrew; however, *kippur* means COVERING, not *atonement*. For more information, refer to the Sabbath Thought [2025-08-30 Day of Atonement or Day of Covering](#) and the Bible Study [Atonement - Covering Sin](#).

Read the commandment for the holyday Day of Covering:

NUMBERS 29:7 ‘On the tenth day of this seventh month [*Day of Covering*] you shall have a holy convocation. **You shall afflict your souls**; you shall not do any work.

In case you never noticed, nowhere in Scripture is FASTING ever commanded on the Day of Covering. Instead, the commandment is to “**afflict your souls**.” The reason fasting is foundational to the Day of Covering is that it CAUSES affliction:

ISAIAH 58:3, 5 ‘Why have we **fasted**,’ they say, ‘and You [*the LORD*] have not seen? Why have we **afflicted our souls**, and You take no notice?’ “In fact, in the day of your fast you find pleasure, and exploit all your laborers. ... 5 Is it **a fast that I [the LORD] have chosen, a day for a man to afflict his soul**? ...

Affliction is a RESULT of fasting. So why, then, does God specifically command His people to afflict themselves instead of “fasting” on the Day of Covering? This is so important that God even emphasizes it with a warning:

LEVITICUS 23:29 “For **any person who is not afflicted** in soul on that same day [*Day of Covering*] **shall be cut off** from his people.

Anywhere that God threatens to cut off someone should be taken very seriously. Biblically speaking, being cut off is either physical death or removal from a covenant with God. In either case it is a matter of life and death. Being afflicted on the Day of Covering is mandatory, not fasting. This distinction requires understanding the difference between fasting and affliction, which is crucial for observing that day in a manner that pleases God.

Affliction is simply a state of pain or suffering. So, does fasting always produce affliction? Affliction can be anything from significant to crippling but, by definition, it is not a minor condition. For example, fasting for health reasons is likely not an affliction. Most of the time, this is done to improve health not cause affliction. For some, fasting for a day might be nothing more than minor discomfort or hunger craving. That can hardly be what God intended when He said to afflict yourselves.

In general, healthy people do not have physical ailments that can be called afflictions. For them, fasting is the way to observe the Day of Coverings but that only works if fasting is done with the understanding that its purpose is to cause AFFLICTION. Simply being a little hungry or tired generally falls short of that.

Fasting became the central focus on the Day of Covering rather than affliction because a majority of people are healthy. They *need* to fast in order to become afflicted. But the idea that observing the Day of Covering simply requires abstaining from food and drink for 24 hours is not what is required. Recognizing we must afflict our souls is the proper observance of the day. Those who are healthy likely experience little more than discomfort from a one-day fast. Some even try to minimize it. How many eat a supper before sundown to minimize suffering on the next day? Some are so unaffected on the Day of Covering that they joke around. Others, however, barely survive the day. Which one would you say was afflicted? Being afflicted should reflect a somber and serious state of heart and mind on the Day of Covering. God never said to rejoice on that day.

PRINCIPLE: A fast devoted to God is self-denial of food and drink for the purpose of **AFFLICTING** our souls.

There are also some who cannot completely abstain from food and drink for various reasons. Some are dependent upon lifesaving medications or have serious diseases and illnesses such as cancer or diabetes. If the focus is on fasting, what are they to do? Often they will consume what they must in secret because everyone believes the day is about *fasting*. They are ashamed that they cannot they abstain from food and drink because it will cause *serious adverse health consequences*. But the commandment for the Day of Covering is to afflict our souls—not to fast. Whatever their health situation, some are truly afflicted WITHOUT fasting.

The Day of Covering is not about an empty stomach; rather, it is a day to be afflicted. But more than that, it is an affliction of the SOUL. That can be a physical state but it is likely an emotional or spiritual one as well. Notice David and Job:

JOB 30:15-16 Terrors are turned upon me [*Job*]; they pursue my honor as the wind, and my prosperity has passed like a cloud. 16 “And now **my soul is poured out** because of my *plight*; the **days of affliction take hold** of me.

[DOUAY] PSALMS 143:11-12 for thy name’s sake, O Lord, thou wilt quicken me in thy justice. Thou wilt **bring my soul out of trouble**; 12 and in thy mercy thou wilt destroy my enemies. And thou wilt cut off all them that **afflict my soul**; for I am thy servant.

Typically, emotional and spiritual afflictions affect our physical condition and vice versa. God's command to "afflict your souls" perfectly describes affliction that causes some degree of all three—physical, emotional, and spiritual distresses.

But for the vast majority who are healthy, what does it mean to fast to the point of affliction? There is no single answer because every person is unique. Some people suffer terribly if they fast for a day while others can fast for a couple of days or more before it begins to noticeably affect them. For these reasons, there are some obvious precautions that must be noted. David abstained from food and drink so long that he was not only weak but he was emaciated:

PSALM 109:24 My [David's] knees are weak from fasting, and **my flesh has become gaunt.**

Fasting to the point where there are outward signs of starvation is a serious condition; worse than God requires on the Day of Covering. It is a day to be afflicted but NOT to the point of *serious adverse health consequences*.

So, why does God command us to afflict our souls? First of all, it produces a heart and mind pleasing to Him:

DEUTERONOMY 8:2 "And you shall remember that the LORD your God led you all the way these forty years in the wilderness, to **humble [H6031 = `anah/ you]** and test you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not.

Interestingly, the Hebrew word for *humble* is translated *afflict* in the commandment for the Day of Covering:

LEVITICUS 16:31 "It [*the Day of Covering*] is a sabbath of solemn rest for you, and **you shall afflict [H6031 = `anah/ your souls]**. It is a statute forever.

It is translated *afflict* here because it is what we must DO. In Deuteronomy 8:2, it is translated *humble* because it is what God wants us to BECOME. He commands us to afflict our souls because He wants His people to be humble on the Day of Covering. After all, He is the Almighty God¹; Most High², Ancient of Days³, the Great King⁴, the Beginning and Ending⁵, the Creator⁶—in simple terms, He is the MORE than the sum of all eternity, authority, power, and wisdom. Humility is the ONLY way to come into His presence. In fact, humility is THE test of eternal life:

¹ Gen. 17:1; Exod. 6:3; Ezek. 10:5; Rev. 19:15; et al.

² Gen. 14:18-22; Num. 24:16; Deut. 32:8; Mark 5:7; Heb. 7:1; et al.

³ Dan. 7:9, 13, 22.

⁴ Ps. 47:2; 48:2; 95:3; Mal. 1:14; Matt. 5:35.

⁵ Isa. 44:6; Rev. 21:6.

⁶ Isa. 43:15; Rom. 1:25; 1 Pet. 4:19.

DEUTERONOMY 8:2 “And you shall remember that the LORD your God led you all the way these forty years in the wilderness, to humble /H6031 = `anah/ you and test you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not.

Through affliction we humble ourselves and prove that our hearts and minds are committed to loving and obeying God. Fasting is simply one way to afflict ourselves and put on humility. That is why the commandment is to “afflict our souls” on the Day of Covering as opposed to fasting on that day.

PRINCIPLE: Being willing to suffer for God is an act of HUMILITY that establishes and proves the thoughts and intents of our hearts⁷.

This is evident in our covenant with God. Love for God is established and proven through obedience to His Law⁸. Afflictions cause suffering and suffering produces humility. This proves our heartfelt desire to obey God. Why do this? Notice this from the Sermon on the Mount:

MATTHEW 5:6 Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for [justice] /H1343 = dikaiosune/, for they shall be filled.

Denying ourselves food and drink produces “hunger and thirst” What is God’s justice? A state of being justified from our sins by God:

ROMANS 4:5-8 But to him who does not work but believes on Him [*God*] who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for [justice] [*H1343 = dikaiosune*], 6 just as David also describes the blessedness of the man to whom God [accounts as] [justice] /H1343 = dikaiosune/ apart from works: 7 “Blessed are those whose [iniquities] are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; 8 Blessed is the man to whom the LORD shall not impute sin.”

Why does God care for those who hunger and thirst for justice? Because God’s forgiveness is only through the sufferings of His Son Jesus Christ:

HEBREWS 5:8-10 though He [*Jesus Christ*] was a Son, yet He learned obedience by the things which He suffered. 9 And having been perfected, He became the Author of eternal salvation to all who obey Him, 10 called by God as High Priest “according to the order of Melchizedek,”

Jesus Immanuel (God with us) proved His obedience to God the Father by willingly suffering unto death. Through this singular act He became the blood sacrifice for sins. God forgives sin and justifies to those who are willing to suffer as Jesus Christ did. If Jesus Christ proved He was obedient to God the Father through sufferings, then all who would be children of God must likewise suffer:

⁷ Heb. 4:12.

⁸ 1 John 5:2-3; 2 John 1:6.

ROMANS 8:17 and **if children**, then heirs—heirs **of God** and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed **we suffer with Him [Jesus Christ]**, that we may also be glorified together.

PHILIPPIANS 3:10-11 that I may know Him [*Jesus Christ*] and the power of His resurrection, and **the fellowship of His sufferings**, being conformed to His death, 11 **if, by any means, I may attain to the resurrection from the dead.**

Fasting is a unique way to afflict ourselves because it is VOLUNTARY suffering, which differs from those who are afflicted by serious illness or disease—“the chastenings of God”⁹. Fasting is one way of observing the Day of Covering but the true PURPOSE of that day is to **afflict our souls**. Fasting is a selfless act with which God is well-pleased.

Afflictions are of the SOUL when they exceed minor discomforts of this life. We cry out to God, not for pleasures of the flesh, but by reason of our afflictions. And our afflictions of the flesh are to gain the **eternal** pleasures of our SOUL!

2 CORINTHIANS 4:16-18 Therefore we do not lose heart. **Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed day by day. 17 For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory,** 18 while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen *are* temporary, but **the things which are not seen are eternal.**

For more information, refer to the booklet on the website titled “[Fasting—Afflicting the Soul, Humility, & Prayer](#).”

May God’s grace and peace be upon you!

Steven Greene

<https://sabbathreflections.org>
sabbathreflections@gmail.com

⁹ 1 Cor. 11:32; Heb. 12:5.