

## Stringing Pearls for Yom Kippur

*“On exactly the tenth day of this seventh month is the day of atonement; it shall be a holy convocation for you, and you shall humble your souls and present an offering by fire to the Lord. “You shall not do any work on this same day, for it is a day of atonement, to make atonement on your behalf before the Lord your God.” (Leviticus 23:26,27 NASB)*

The instructions our Father gives us to follow for His appointed day of Yom Kippur are not very complex. They consist of 1) have a holy convocation; 2) afflict or humble your souls; 3) present an offering by fire; and 4) no work of any kind, not even for meal preparation (hence the idea of fasting).

Three of these are fairly straightforward. A holy convocation is simply a gathering, which could be a lot of people or as little as two or more (Matthew 18:20). An offering by fire was done by the high priest, and with no temple anywhere close by (notwithstanding the fact that His people are His tabernacle), it is safe to assume this is not necessary (probably because Yahshua did it/is doing it for us, see Hebrews 9 and 10). No work means pretty much what it says. But what about the afflicting or humbling of our souls? On the one hand it is connected with fasting, but on the other does it mean we are supposed to be miserable? And what about people who cannot fast?

**The Meaning of Affliction.** The Hebrew word that is translated as ‘humble’ in the above reference is transliterated *ahnaw* (Strong’s 6031a). There are as many as eight or ten Hebrew words that are related to this word used throughout the Bible including *kawnah* (3665) *shawfale* (8213) and *ahnee* (6041). Some of the English words that translate these Hebrew words are “lowly,’ ‘poor,’ ‘meek,’ ‘afflict,’ ‘enslaved,’ ‘least,’ ‘subdued,’ ‘helpless,’ ‘needy,’ ‘bowed down,’ and the related ‘humbled.’ The English words help those of us who can’t read Hebrew to begin to build a picture of what it means to “humble your soul.”

Checking through The Book, there are a number of associations we can safely make that go along with the idea of humbling ourselves, and perhaps help us to also understand the concept better. Deuteronomy 8:2,3 is a good place to start.

*“You shall remember all the way which the LORD your God has led you in the wilderness these forty years, that He might humble you, testing you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not. He humbled you and let you be hungry, and fed you with manna which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that He might make you understand that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the LORD.”*

Several points are made for us here. First is that fasting is connected with humbling, and going hungry reminds us that God provides for us in all ways, not just with bread for our stomachs. Another pondering point is that sometimes we go hungry in order for God to test us and see whether we will stick with Him and His Word or not. Sometimes we experience hardship in life simply because He wants to know if we are really His, even when things look bad. On the other hand lots of people fast but have no intention of really doing what He says to do, so the ‘humbling’ in this instance is useless. Which points to another truth: going without food minus the God-honoring motivation is nothing but a dry run (a pun for those of you who know the Biblical metaphor for ‘dry,’ which is without fruit or ‘sinful’).

In Judges 16:6, Delilah wants to know how to “afflict” Samson.

*So Delilah said to Samson, “Please tell me where your great strength is and how you may be bound to afflict you.”*

Most know that she eventually found out that a haircut was his weakness, but this serves to shed more light on what it means to humble ourselves. Samson was indeed humbled, but that is another story.

*...and My people who are called by My name humble themselves and pray and seek My face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, will forgive their sin and will heal their land.*

2 Chronicles 7:14 above is quoted by many Christians and applied to the United States. But it is clear from the context that this applies to ‘My people’ which are the ones who follow ‘My statutes’ and ‘My commands’ (see verse 19). This description hardly fits either U.S. citizens or even the Christians who quote it for that matter. This reference helps us clarify even more what it means to “humble our souls,” because God tells us in verse 19 that it means to follow His commands.

Moving on, we find that Ezra proclaims a fast for the purposes of humbling and petitioning God for a safe journey.

*Then I proclaimed a fast there at the river of Ahava, that we might humble ourselves before our God to seek from Him a safe journey for us, our little ones, and all our possessions.*

So a fast is definitely a way to humble ones’ self.

We know that God rescues or delivers the ‘afflicted’ and the ‘needy,’ which comforts us in our own affliction.

*And my soul shall rejoice in the LORD; It shall exult in His salvation. All my bones will say, “LORD, who is like You, who delivers the afflicted from him who is too*

*strong for him, and the afflicted and the needy from him who robs him?” (Psalm 35:9,10 NASB)*

The humble have seen the salvation of God and are glad, and God hears the needy.

*But I am afflicted and in pain; May Your salvation, O God, set me securely on high. I will praise the name of God with song and magnify Him with thanksgiving. And it will please the LORD better than an ox or a young bull with horns and hoofs. The humble have seen it and are glad; you who seek God, let your heart revive. For the LORD hears the needy and does not despise His who are prisoners. (Psalm 69:29-33 NASB)*

The next reference tells us that affliction helps us to learn to keep His Word.

*Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I keep Your word. You are good and do good; teach me Your statutes. The arrogant have forged a lie against me; with all my heart I will observe Your precepts. Their heart is covered with fat, but I delight in Your law. It is good for me that I was afflicted, that I may learn Your statutes. The law of Your mouth is better to me than thousands of gold and silver pieces. Your hands made me and fashioned me; give me understanding, that I may learn Your commandments. May those who fear You see me and be glad, because I wait for Your word. I know, O LORD, that Your judgments are righteous, and that in faithfulness You have afflicted me. O may Your lovingkindness comfort me, according to Your word to Your servant. May Your compassion come to me that I may live, for Your law is my delight. (Psalm 119:67-77 NASB)*

Another psalm gives us a sweet picture of humility in the form of a weaned child.

*O LORD, my heart is not proud, nor my eyes haughty; nor do I involve myself in great matters, or in things too difficult for me. Surely I have composed and quieted my soul; Like a weaned child rests against his mother, my soul is like a weaned child within me. O Israel, hope in the LORD from this time forth and forever. (Psalm 131 NASB)*

His Word is also equated to His statutes, commands, law, judgments, and compassion. When we afflict ourselves by fasting on the day that He told us to, we are following His Word, and in a sense are fasting from the things we would otherwise do.

*Seek the LORD, all you humble of the earth who have carried out His ordinances; Seek righteousness, seek humility. Perhaps you will be hidden in the day of the LORD'S anger.*

Zephaniah makes a connection for us in chapter 2 verse 3 between being humble, carrying out His ordinances, righteousness, and perhaps being hidden in the day of the Lord's anger. The 'day of the Lord's anger' is frequently connected with the Day of Atonement. So humility is again intimately associated with following God's commands, and this reference describes a future benefit also.

Jeremiah has an excellent discussion of some of the finer points of humility as opposed to mistreating people, especially in chapter 22 around the middle verses. *“He pled the cause of the afflicted and needy; then it was well. Is not that what it means to know Me?” declares the LORD.* Here God tells Jehoiakim, one of the more wicked kings of Judah, that building cedar-lined rooms in fine houses is not what makes a righteous king, but rather seeing to the needs of the ‘afflicted and needy’ like his father did (Josiah, one of the best kings). It is even said here that pleading the cause of the afflicted and needy is what it means to know God.

Isaiah 58 speaks of the type of fast that God wants, which is to fast from wickedness. In this sense we fast all the time, all year-round. The whole chapter is a good section to read and contemplate, but verses five and six highlight the differences between ‘looking’ like you are fasting (verse 5) and actually fasting (or humbling) in a manner that pleases God (verse six).

*5 “Is it a fast like this which I choose, a day for a man to humble himself? Is it for bowing one’s head like a reed and for spreading out sackcloth and ashes as a bed? Will you call this a fast, even an acceptable day to the LORD? 6 Is this not the fast which I choose, to loosen the bonds of wickedness, to undo the bands of the yoke, and to let the oppressed go free and break every yoke?” (Isaiah 58:5,6 NASB)*

Our Messiah Yahshua is described in many places with humble characteristics.

*Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout in triumph, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your king is coming to you; He is just and endowed with salvation, humble, and mounted on a donkey, even on a colt, the foal of a donkey.*  
(Zechariah 9:9 NASB)

And Isaiah also has something to say about humility in verse 2 of chapter 66.

*“For My hand made all these things, thus all these things came into being,” declares the LORD. “But to this one I will look, to him who is humble and contrite of spirit, and who trembles at My word.*

Humility and a contrite spirit seem to be related to ‘trembling at God’s Word.’ So we can probably safely conclude from this that the fasting we do on Yom Kippur is worthless without a humble and contrite spirit, one which does the things God commands.

Isaiah chapter 66 seems to be the source material for Yahshua when He is giving us His ‘Sermon on the Mount’ in Matthew 5, 6, and 7. There are many similarities. As a matter of fact, much of the Bible message repeats itself over and over again, to the point that Yahshua does not really preach a great deal of ‘new’ information so much as He emphasizes the information already given by God in what was written before.

*“Blessed are the poor in spirit , for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the gentle, for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied. Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God. Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.” (Matthew 5:3-12 NASB)*

These character traits are not separate traits of different people, nor are they individually exhibited one at a time. These are different aspects of the same person – the one who trembles at God’s Word, who humbles himself before His God and Father and Messiah by doing what is requested or commanded.

So it appears that fasting is the way to humble oneself on Yom Kippur, both through doing what God says in the first place and through the concept of being hungry. We learn from the discipline of hungering that we need more than food for our stomachs. We also need food for our spirit, which is the doing of God’s Word or practicing what we preach. Going without food and ‘looking’ like we are fasting but treating others in a wicked fashion at other times invalidates the effect of the fast and we might as well ‘pig out’ (pun intended) if we are not going to ‘fast’ all year long by doing righteously.

**Affliction minus misery.** However, ‘afflicting our souls’ does not necessarily mean we are to be miserable. Yahshua tells us in Matthew chapter six that we should definitely not go around looking like we are ‘afflicted.’

*“Whenever you fast, do not put on a gloomy face as the hypocrites do, for they neglect their appearance so that they will be noticed by men when they are fasting. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face so that your fasting will not be noticed by men, but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you. (Matthew 6:16-18 NASB)*

This also combines with the idea of a holy convocation or assembly to suggest maybe that singing and dancing would not be an activity that was out of the question, even if it was a little more subdued and reflective than the usual ‘get down, let’s party’ type of celebration.

**Affliction for the incapable.** But what about people who cannot go without eating, such as nursing mothers or small children or those with medical conditions? In my opinion it is safe to say, after meditating on the references given so far, that there are probably a

number of other ways for a person who is incapable of fasting to 'humble' themselves. For instance, food could be basic 'meat and potatoes' style, without the frills of, say, cake and ice cream. Perhaps quantities could also be limited if not eliminated. Other activities could help with humbling the soul, such as avoiding entertainment and reading the Word all day (a good idea anytime for anyone). Fasting is as much a function of attitude as it is of hunger, although the physical effects of hunger work extremely well to drive home God's point. Man indeed does not live by bread alone.

**Summary and personal testimony.** The first time I tried to fast on Yom Kippur I only made it till mid-afternoon. I wasn't used to fasting, and I am one of those people who sometimes need to 'own' the practice by understanding the whys and wherefores before I do it. So I broke down and started eating. The second time I did it I was into prayer in the afternoon and I believe I heard a clear answer to my prayers which startled me. I seemed to be able, through the focusing power of the hunger, to attain to an intimacy with my Father that was different than usual at the time.

In successive fasts I have learned more about self-control and being master of my body instead of being mastered by it (not that I have that area whupped completely yet). I have also learned to do what my Father asks me to do without additions or subtractions. I don't fast at other times of the year (although if you want to, go right ahead) because it seems to be part of the discipleship to do only what He says and nothing more or less. I don't pursue emotional experiences, even if I am an emotional person, because I don't trust feelings. I have learned that fasting all year from wickedness is what my Father truly desires, and I take the things I learned about going hungry on one day of the year and try to apply it during all days.

The experience of fasting, however, in addition to honoring God all year long in and through practicing His Word, has begun to be very meaningful to me. This last Yom Kippur I found that in the afternoon I was regretting the end of the fast rather than straining towards the evening meal and the breaking of the fast. God continues to change me in ways that are beyond the power of conventional Christian dogma. Praise Him and the bread of His Word!

May our Father bless you with His fullness  
Shalom  
Bruce S. Bertram