

Christian Faith and Practice Through...Tzitzit

Adonai said to Moshe, "Speak to the people of Isra'el, instructing them to make, through all their generations, tzitziyot on the corners of their garments, and to put with the tzitzit on each corner a blue thread. It is to be a tzitzit for you to look at and thereby remember all of Adonai's mitzvot and obey them, so that you won't go around wherever your own heart and eyes lead you to prostitute yourselves; but it will help you remember and obey all my mitzvot and be holy for your God. I am Adonai your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt in order to be your God. I am Adonai your God." (Num. 15:37-41, CJB)

This is another in a continuing series of articles written to give a little help to the person who has decided to ignore the doctrines of men and include Torah submissiveness in their walk with the Father. And one way to do this is to wear tzitziyot, or tassels, on your garments.

Four words need to be defined from this command. Through defining these words we will work through a sample process on how we figure out a lot of the meanings in the Word. There is more involved than merely looking up a definition, because to develop meaning is more than just defining a word, although a definition is a good place to start. The four words are Isra'el, tzitzit (pronounced tsee-tseet) or tzitziyot (plural, tsee-tsee-yoht, the word for tassel), corners (Hebrew *kanaph*), and blue (*techelet*). The word mitzvot might already be familiar to you as the Hebrew word for commandment, or "that which is assigned."

Right off the bat let me say that I don't want to get lost arguing about the nature of the first word, Isra'el, or who is included in Isra'el. For the moment, my own opinion is that since we are all of one household (Eph. 4:4-6), and since the same Law applies to everyone in that household (Ex. 12:49; Lev. 19:34, 24:22), then I am going to go with the plain meaning of Scripture and include myself in Isra'el, at least as far as adoption and faith, if not by actual physical birth. If your understanding is different, that's between you and Him. But be careful not to teach others your own interpretation lest you become subject to the millstone effect. Stick with teaching Scripture and you'll be better off.

The next word to define is tzitzit. The word is pronounced tsee-tseet, sort of like tse tse fly. The "t" and the "s" blend to form a hard "z" sound against the teeth with the tongue. It means tassel, or a fringe, a group of threads that form a bundle. The Strong's number (Strong's Concordance) is 6734 for those so inclined to look it up. The third word needing definition is kanaph (Strong's number 3761), which is the Hebrew word for "wing" or "extremity," and is translated into English as corner or border. We'll talk about why this is important in a minute or two, depending on how fast you read.

The fourth word to define, strangely enough, is the word blue. Some have done word studies to show that the Hebrew word for blue (*techelet*, Strong's #8504) used here is a specific color from a specific snail. This snail was long thought to be extinct, so for an equally long time Jewish people did not have a blue thread in their tzitziyot. But in my opinion, according to a simple reading of this set of verses, there is no specific color of blue that we need to use for the blue thread. A lot of the rulings you will hear about concerning commandments such as this come from the Oral Law, which we talked about in the Dietary Laws article. I mean, when the Father thinks He has to be specific, He has no trouble giving us the exact idea He was going for, as evidenced by the detail in the Tabernacle. Heavenly blue is the Father's color, and I believe that's the meaning here.

I took the time to define these four words not only for the sake of our current discussion, but also because many arguments have been generated by each of the four. Some people want to argue, as they do about all of the instructions of Yahveh, about who is Isra'el and whether or not they've been replaced. Others argue about how to make the tassel, and exactly what shade of blue should be used for the blue thread. And still others want to fight about exactly what a corner is, and how the tassel should be fastened. And oh yeah, I forgot, some also want to argue that the tassels are only for males (some Bible translations have "sons" of Isra'el instead of "people" or children of Isra'el). I'm not criticizing those who have a deep reverence for the Word, and who go to great lengths to help us define words. The work of some of these people has helped tremendously in my understanding and practice. However, sometimes attitudes get out of whack and one person's understanding develops into somebody else's rule, which contributes to an unhealthy emphasis on the letter of the Law while ignoring the Spirit. In my opinion the challenge is to incorporate both into our lives.

While I applaud and agree with the attitude that each and every word is important, and precise definitions are always welcome, I feel we should not get bogged down in splitting hairs about definitions. We must develop meaning, which may be a lot different than a string of definitions. What does other parts of the Word say? What is the intent behind the Instructions? How do we balance all of the Words of Yahveh so that no part is excluded or suffers neglect? We must look to the immediate context as well as the greater context of the entire Word to help us with our meaning.

There are two extremes, I think, to avoid in applying this command to one's life. On the one hand, the standard Christian extreme is to ignore it, along with many other commands. It's kind of odd, though, because it's not like they haven't come up with a bunch of other things to hang around their necks (like a crucifix, which is not in the Word) or fasten to their wrists (WWJD bracelets, also not in the Word) or clothing (remember the PBPGINFWMY buttons? (Please Be Patient, God Is Not Finished With Me Yet), most definitely not in the Word either), or stick on their car bumpers (My Boss is a Jewish Carpenter?). This is an interesting effect in Christianity; throw out God's Law but replace it with man-made laws.

The other extreme is to analyze these verses (or any verses) to death (literally), splitting hairs about what color blue, how to tie them, where to wear them and so on. There are lots and lots of mystical concepts we could draw from these verses; however, what is not in this command is the freedom to ignore it if you cannot find the correct shade of blue. This is the type of thinking that has derailed many a fervent, respectful, seeker of God.

Notice that this command is not for other people, but for the individual. The tzitziyot is to remind me about the instructions of my Father, and to help me remember not to follow after my own understanding. These tassels are not for showing how holy I am, or for how closely I follow someone's interpretation of the Word. They are reminders for me, because my eyes and heart are tempted to go a different way than Yahveh commanded.

I have chosen to use a style of tassel that is Jewish in origin, but that is only because I like the style not because it is any holier than another style. I learned how to tie them from a book by a rabbi named Aryeh Kaplan titled "Tzitzith, A Thread of Light," and he teaches a number of very interesting concepts in it. He has complete instructions on how to tie them, if you choose this type. They are very simple to tie, and the knots have meaning related to the commands. But remember, there are many different styles of tzitziyot even in Judaism. I don't think it matters; what's important is trying to do what your Father says as best you know how.

I happen to interpret the word "corners" to mean "all around" as in the "four corners" of the earth (even though it's round). So, I fasten four tzitziyot to the belt loops of my pants. Mostly I use a kit I buy through the Temple Store in Jerusalem (www.templestore.com) that has three white wool threads (about 36 inches long) and one blue thread (about 48 inches). I put the tzitzit on a very small key ring then put the ring on the belt loop, otherwise the wool threads wear out too quick. I have also used nylon (mini-blind riser cord) and cotton (such as Perle Crochet). I braid the top loop (email me if you would like instructions on four-strand braids) and I don't attach them permanently because of the command not to mix threads (Deut. 22:11) in my garment. I choose this method because I am "surrounded" by reminders about my Father's instructions, and I also feel surrounded by His Love.

And believe me, it does make a difference. I don't know why, but these reminders help a great deal to discipline the awareness and help me remember to match my actions with my words. At first I felt a little weird wearing them, but most people do not know what they mean so after a bit I just relaxed and concentrated on using them to remind me not to sin. Most people do not understand the significance, and probably think they're some sort of Native American fetish, but so what. I wear them long, because as rabbi Kaplan says, they should be long to get in the way of the flesh in the same way that the Word gets in the way of the flesh. After a while I have to trim them because they get caught and twisted and frayed and fall apart.

My wife has some on her purse, because in her thinking a purse is like a garment and she doesn't wear pants that often. I'm sure she will wear them on her pants if she comes to that understanding as well, but in the meantime she does what she understands is right between her and her Father. I have seen women wearing all four on their belt loops as I (and others) do, but I do not think this is a problem if I read the text correctly.

Jews wear a shirt under their outer shirt called a talit katan (taw-leet kaw-tawn). This shirt has four pointy corners to hang their tzitzit from because some people think a corner has to have right angles. That's okay; I don't see a problem with this unless someone tries to make it a rule for other people. Another way to wear tzitziyot is on a talit, which is also known as a prayer shawl. These have tzitziyot on the corners and are used for privacy in prayer. Be cautious if you choose to use a talit, however, and stay sensitive to possible offense given to Jewish people. The talit and the talit katan are not specifically commanded in Scripture, but there is a great deal of meaning to them. The talit is related to the Tabernacle, and to clothing, and even to the Glory of YHVH that He covers Himself with. This glory is none other than Yahshua haMashiach, so the talit is also related to Him. I use one for prayer because it has a deep significance for me. I advise you to develop your own understanding about the talit before you begin to use one. Mr. Kaplan goes over some of the meanings in the book I mentioned, or I can go over these teachings more thoroughly in another article if you'd like.

I said we would talk about the word *kanaph* in a few minutes, so thanks for waiting. In Malachi 4:2 the Father says,

But to you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings; and you will break out leaping, like calves released from the stall. (Mal. 4:2 (3:20 in the CJB))

The word for wings here is, you guessed it, *kanaph*. Now flash forward to the woman with an issue of blood who moved through the throng to touch the corner of His robe (Mk. 5:25-34). It is probable that she understood this verse, and very probably that what she touched was His tzitzit on the corners or "wings" of His talit. Of course, to some this would be merely coincidence.

"Remember and obey my mitzvot and be holy (qadosh) for your God."

Yahveh bless all your efforts to walk in His Ways
Bruce Bertram