

Tzitzit

By Matthew Day

"Speak to the people of Israel, and tell them to make tassels on the corners of their garments throughout their generations, and to put a cord of blue on the tassel of each corner. And it shall be a tassel for you to look at and remember all the commandments of the LORD, to do them, not to follow after your own heart and your own eyes, which you are inclined to whore after. So you shall remember and do all my commandments, and be holy to your God.
(Numbers 15:38-40 ESV)

"You shall make yourself tassels on the four corners of the garment with which you cover yourself.
(Deuteronomy 22:12 ESV)

Whenever one goes out walking with blue and white string hanging from his shirt, people tend to ask the question: "Why do you have strings hanging down from your shirt?" I have been asked this a few times. The short and simple answer is the scripture verses I pasted above. However, it goes deeper than that. I want to begin with the physical aspects of tzitzit (the Hebrew word for "fringe" or "tassel") and then move into the spiritual meaning behind the commandment. The physical part will be more technical and deal with Jewish tradition, while the spiritual part is more of my own opinion.

Fringes

The commandment basically has four parts. Wear fringes. Wear them with a thread of Techillot (see below). Wear them on the four corners of your garment. Remember the commandments. What kind of fringes is up to debate. There are traditional ways to tie tzitzit so that it represents the number 613, however, no specifics are mentioned in Torah. Another question is are women obligated? Judaism and most of the people I have talked to say that women are not obligated but are allowed to wear tzitzit.

Techillot

There has been debate in the Messianic movement as to whether the Hebrew word Techillot refers to any kind of blue (as translated above) or blue from a specific source (which is Judaism's view). Hebrew colors do not have abstract names as in English; in Hebrew they are named for the source from which one can get a dye of that color. It is the same with techillot. Techillot is named for the animal from which that color comes from. For a long time, it has been said that the source of this dye has been lost. However, there are now Jewish authorities (such as Reuven Prager) who claim to have found the true source of Techillot.

Four-cornered Garment

Another debate within the Messianic movement is whether tzitzit must be on a four cornered garment or whether they can be worn on belt loots. If you look at the command in Deuteronomy, you will notice that it does not say "make tassels on your garment." So, from this we can infer that the number four is important. Second, it does not say "make four tassels on your garment." The number four is tied to the number of corners, not the number of tzitzit.

Remember

Last, but certainly not least, the tzitzit should help you remember the commandments. If they are only decoration on your shirt—it doesn't matter how strict you are or how close you hold to tradition—unless they remind you to be obedient to God, they are worthless.

Alright, so let's get into the spiritual aspect of tzitzit.

Covering – Works

Scripture uses clothing as a symbol for someone's works. You can see this in Zechariah 3:4 and Isaiah 64:6 where iniquity is compared to filthy garments. Also, in Revelation 7:14 where Yeshua's blood wipes away our evil deeds (sin) and leaves us with white garments (righteousness). In the parable about the wedding guests (Matthew 22), there is a man who is kicked out because he has no wedding garment—that is his works were evil.

So, we attach the tzitzit to our garments so that our works (clothing) will be guided by Torah (tzitzit). We cover ourselves in the works of Torah.

Marriage Covenant

In the Numbers passage, it is stated that the reason we should wear tzitzit is so that we do not go “whoring” after other gods. We are in a marriage covenant with God. That means we belong to Him alone. The tzitzit are like the wedding ring that is to remind us of this covenant. The Hebrew word Techillot is actually related to the Hebrew word for “bride.” We are the bride of Messiah. The tzitzit hang down from the bottom of our garment, so that when we go to remove that garment of Torah we see the tzitzit and remember who our Husband is.

This is only scratching the surface. There are still other scriptures about tzitzit such as when Yeshua condemns the Pharisees for making theirs too long or when the sick woman took hold of the hem of Yeshua's garment (probably the tzitzit). There are still other questions such as why the number four? Numbers have meanings and four is no exception. I encourage you to study this farther. If you find anything interesting, send it my way—I always like to learn more about my Creator and His Word.

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Edit (March 8, 2010) – A reader pointed out some interesting points on the color techellet and how tzitzit should be worn. The idea that the techellet must come from a specific source comes from Talmud...specifically it says it must come from an animal known as the Chillazon. This may or may not be related to the animal for which techellet is named. Also, since all colors in Hebrew are named for their sources, it would be impossible to get across our idea of “blue” any other way.

On the four-cornered garment, it was pointed out that four is often symbolic for “all” (like the four corners of the earth). While, I don't think this negates the literal meaning, it is an interesting note. Our works are to be surrounded on ALL corners by the commandments.

Finally, I want to make a correction. I am not saying that tzitzit MUST be worn on a four-cornered garment or MUST have the right blue. I do believe a four-cornered garment is preferred and if you desire to seek the purest source of techellet, I encourage you to do so. However, like I said earlier, the purpose is to remember the commandments. To judge each other on the particulars is contrary to the spirit of the commandment.