

NUMBERS

Lesson 19 - Chapter 15 Conclusion

We'll continue today in Numbers chapter 15 and bring it to a conclusion. Last week the highlight was probably the discussion of the man who was executed for gathering sticks, firewood, on the Sabbath. And we discovered that the man was actually subject to two penalties: one, a civil judicial penalty for violating the Sabbath Laws, and that penalty was physical death by stoning. The second penalty was of divine origin; that is, it was accomplished by God and in Hebrew is called **karet**. In its simplest English sense **karet** means to be "cut-off".

What these two penalties together demonstrate is the basic underlying Christian principle that as humans we are comprised of a physical component and a spiritual component. God usually lets men (by means of His moral laws and commandments) and human governments deal with the physical aspect of punishment for violations or moral laws. But the meting out of punishment upon the spiritual component of humans is in God's hands alone for, in the end, it is the most devastating and permanent action and thus cannot possibly be something trusted to the judgment of mere men. It is rather common to be excommunicated from a church or a religious institution but that is only a physical earthly act despite what the leaders of the group might claim; only God Himself has the authority to dissolve the relationship (which is what **karet** is) between you and Him; and that dissolution is accomplished spiritually, not by some writ or declaration of a human.

Today we move to a device that Yehoveh instructed for the express purpose of assisting men to avoid these missteps when it came to obeying His Laws. And, that device is, in Hebrew, **Tzitzit**. There's more to the **Tzitzit** than meets the eye, or is said in these two verses here in Numbers.

Let's re-read this short section of Numbers 15 about Tzitzit and its purpose.

RE-READ NUMBERS 15:37 - end

In the most ancient era of Hebrew culture, **Tzitzit** more or less literally meant, "lock of hair"; indeed, a **Tzitzit** resembles a lock of hair. And, in modern terms, it looks much like what we would call a tassel. But, of course, in ancient times, tassels BEGAN as but decorative locks of hair. As with so many of these sorts of things we find in the Torah, the concept of **Tzitzit** was not an entirely new invention, as much as it was an evolution and transformation of something that already existed. Ancient etchings and pictographs from various regions in Asia show that the wearing of tassels on garments was fairly widespread. Though, as far as anyone knows,

the Hebrew PURPOSE for the tassels, the **Tzitzit**, was unique.

And, that stated purpose for **Tzitzit** is laid out in Numbers 15 verse 39: that when the Israelites looked at them, it would remind them of God's commandments. And, so we see how this instruction is connected to the story of the man who gathered the firewood. The **Tzitzit** were intended to be a constantly worn reminder that God's Laws were to be obeyed, so that the Israelites would not commit sins against the Lord and thus be subjected to the curse of the law.

The vast majority of the details concerning exactly how a **Tzitzit** is to be made and worn are Tradition. We get the primary Biblical instructions right here in Numbers 15, and there is precious little said about the subject. However, if we are to understand, today, the significance of the **Tzitzit**, we must begin by understanding what the writers of the Old Testament understood: that what was worn as, or on, the hem of one's garment was an indication of one's status in the community. Even more.....now please pay close attention to this.....the hem of one's garment was seen as an extension of one's own personality and authority. The hem was the common status symbol of the Biblical era, throughout the Middle East, and even in somewhat earlier times.

Now, you might scoff and say, the hem of a garment as a status symbol.....as an extension of one's personality? Sure, we do the very same thing only in different ways in each culture of the world. In America in general, we believe the car we drive or the brand of the clothing we choose says something about whom we are inside. Christians often plaster their cars with bumper stickers and various religious insignias as another means of explaining something about our beliefs. Or we wear Crosses, or Stars of David, or that 3-part Symbol, or other items that are but visible extensions of our personalities and persona. And don't even think some people aren't superstitious about these emblems with St. Christopher's medals, WWJD bracelets, and so on. The hem of the garment played a similar role in more ancient times.

Ancient Akkadian documents indicate that a husband who cuts the hem off of his wife's garment thereby divorces her. A sorcerer might recite an incantation over a cut-off piece of hem from a demon-possessed person, so much was the hem thought to be a literal extension of that person.

And of course we find several mentions of hems of garments being involved in some of the more famous Biblical stories (though really we Christians have had some rather odd notions of what was being indicated such that had a person of the Biblical era listened in on our views about it, they would have rolled in laughter).

We'll get to one of those stories in particular in a moment; first, though, we must understand that hems of garments held actual legal force thousands of years ago. They were more than mere status symbols; they were legitimate I.D. in many cases. Thus kings and very high leaders might wear a very intricate hem that often included the use of the color purple. Purple was, and remains, a symbol of royalty in most Middle and Far Eastern cultures, and the practice of using purple as a royal color became practically world-wide in time.

In fact, written records found in Mesopotamia indicate that a seer or a wise-man in service to

the King was required not only to TELL the King his vision or prophetic dream, but that he had to write it down. Once written the document was presented to the King along with a lock of hair from that seer's own head, along with a piece of the hem of his garment. This was the equivalent of a sworn and notarized affidavit and indicated the truthfulness of what was recorded.

So in the **Tzitzit** we see the blending between two ancient symbolic elements: the "lock of hair" with "the hem of the garment". But we also need to recognize that it was primarily royalty and aristocrats who HAD elaborate garment hems..... not the common folk. The average common person had no need to display his status nor could he afford to. So we must add to the equation that in the ancient world the concept of hems as a means of status (that at God's direction evolved into **Tzitzit**) is also generally considered to be an indication of royalty and legal authority.

Now, let's apply this to the Hebrew **Tzitzit**.

Basically, the **Tzitzit** is but an extension of the hem. Notice that the **Tzitzit** is commanded to be worn on the corners of the garment. This usually taken to mean an outer garment, something that is visible. However not all Hebrew sects accept that and many wear them underneath their outer garments.

The Hebrew word usually translated as corners (as in corners of the garment) is **kanaf**. And **kanaf** more correctly means "extremity" or "wing" not corners. The idea is that the hem is the extremity of any garment. So it's not that **Tzitzit** directly represents the hem of the garment, rather **Tzitzit** are to be ATTACHED to the hem of the garment. Although, exactly how this was manifested varied over the centuries.

There is an OT story about David and Saul that demonstrates the meaning of garment hems in the ancient world at least in the early era of the Kings of Israel. The mentally unstable King of Israel, Saul, has determined that he must kill David and David has fled with a band of about 600 men from the northern part of Israel, down to the southern desert reaches of Israel. That area today is called Ein Gedi, very near the Dead Sea.

Let's read the story from 1st Samuel 24.

READ 1 SAMUEL 24: 1 - 8

David and his men are avoiding the patrols Saul has been sending out to find David by hiding in the many caves that lace the barren mountains that surround Ein Gedi, which is adjacent to the Dead Sea. In rather graphic detail the Bible tells us the Saul wandered into a cave to relieve himself; unaware that this just happened to be the very cave where David and his men were currently hiding!

While King Saul was in the act, David sneaks up behind Saul, and carefully cuts off a portion of the hem of Saul's garment. Later on David was (oddly) remorseful of doing this and tells his men, " Lord forbid that I should do such a thing." Later yet when David is able to have a pow-

wow with Saul (in one of Saul's more and more rare lucid moments), King Saul responds to David's act of cutting off the hem of his garment by saying, " Now I know that you will become King." What a strange set of circumstances, and even stranger responses.

The whole key to this story is understanding the very real issue of the authority symbol that rests in the hem of Saul's garment. Even more it is not unlike the matter when Delilah conspired to have the locks of Samson's hair cut off. To Saul, and to David, and to every one of that era the hem was far more than a symbol; it was an extension of Saul. It was an extension of his persona and his royal essence.

By the stealthy removal of that piece of hem by David, Saul saw it as a divinely devised transfer of kingly authority from himself to David. And, to continue with my analogy of Samson, by the removal of those locks of hair....Samson's tassels, if you would.... Samson lost his connection to divine authority and power. More to the point, just as the cutting off of Samson's locks represented his being **karet**.....cut-off.....from God, so it was that Saul saw his hem being cut-off as his being cut-off from his divine status as King of Israel.

The **Tzitzit** holds great meaning. It is manufactured from two different kinds of materials; linen and wool. Each **Tzitzit** was to have a single strand of wool, dyed to royal blue or royal purple, at the center and surrounded by many of strands of white linen. That single woolen strand of blue is called a **tekhelet**, and it key to the meaning of the **Tzitzit** for it indicates nobility.

Why was royal blue or royal purple considered "royal"? Because purple was a most difficult, and therefore horrifically expensive, dye to make. As a result only the royal and wealthy could afford it. In Romans records dating to 200 B.C., is the payment of the modern day equivalent of almost \$100,000 for what amounts to about one pound (about 450 grams) of this purple dye. The reason is that the best quality of purple dye was extracted from a tiny sea creature called the Murex snail. But, it took about 12,000 of these snails to produce less than 2 grams of this purple dye. For sure, due to demand, it wasn't long before a much cheaper, though far inferior, bluish-purple dye was developed, but aristocrats and royalty would never have used it, and Rabbis prohibited this inferior dye's use for making the **tekhelet**.

Now let's stop and think for a minute: Rabbis say that the **Tzitzit** was to be made from a mixture of wool and linen; does that ring any bells? See, interestingly in Leviticus and in Deuteronomy the Lord commands that the Hebrews are NOT to wear garments made from mixture of different kinds of thread. Linen (which comes from the flax plant) and wool (coming from a sheep) were not ever to be used in the same article of clothing. Yet here the **Tzitzit** is made of that forbidden mixture, which in Hebrew is called **sha'atnez**. Now for sure making **Tzitzit** using **sha'atnez**.....a mixture of wool and linen..... is not specifically called out in the Bible. But very ancient Hebrew sages (and later, Rabbis) precisely called for **sha'atnez** claiming that it was that way from Moses' day forward.

Not long ago, in a cave in Israel, some ancient **Tzitzit** were found, largely intact, dating back to the era of the Bar Kochba Rebellion (around 135 A.D.); and these **Tzitzit** verified the use of the woolen tekhelet along with the white linen threads.

Now here's what is interesting: two reasons are given by God for not allowing the Israelites to wear garments of mixed threads: 1) it symbolizes **tevel**, confusion. And, 2) only priests are allowed to wear **sha'atnez**.....garments with mixed threads. In other words, the mixing of threads was allowed ONLY for priestly garments.

Now let me show you the value of consulting with our Jewish friends, especially Hebrew scholars, when it comes to understanding certain OT passages in their proper context. Allow me to read for you one of the most poorly translated verses in the Bible. Turn you Bibles to Deuteronomy 22:9, because as you have different versions, you get different readings.

NAS Deuteronomy 22:9 "You shall not sow your vineyard with two kinds of seed, lest all the produce of the seed which you have sown, and the increase of the vineyard become defiled.

Simple enough. Except there's a problem with the last word in that verse. The word that is translated as "defiled" is absolutely incorrect. The Hebrew word being translated here is **qadash**. And **qadash** has absolutely nothing to do with being defiled. In fact it is the exact opposite: **qadash** means consecrated, set-apart, to be made holy. Of the scores and scores of time in the Bible that **qadash** is used, this is the one and only time that Christian scholars chose to make this word mean the opposite of it's usual and accurate meaning: holy. Jewish scholars better understand what is going on here, and so Young's Literal translation uses, instead of defiled, separated (which is much closer but still doesn't quite get the point across).

In other words the problem of sowing two kinds of seed together (which is carried over to prohibition of mixing two kinds of threads together) is that doing so makes them HOLY, and therefore only fit for Temple service, which can be performed ONLY by Priests. This is not the Tom Bradford doctrine. Rashi and Ibn Ezra among other of the greatest Hebrew sages fully agree on this point. Now are they correct in their interpretation? Well, I don't know that we can be absolutely sure but it is certainly based on a literal reading of the Scripture and their unparalleled understanding of Hebrew ritual.

In Exodus 39:28 and 29, while describing the sash of the ordinary priests and the High Priest's Turban, or Mitre, it says this: **NAS Exodus 39:28 and the turban of fine linen, and the decorated caps of fine linen, and the linen breeches of fine twisted linen, 29 and the sash of fine twisted linen, and blue and purple and scarlet material, the work of the weaver, just as the LORD had commanded Moses.**

The key is the second half of this verse couplet, where after it says, **"...of fine twisted linen"**, the word **AND** is inserted before "blue and purple and scarlet material", separating the fine linen from the colored material. When one looks at all the wording of the Law on making the priestly garments, this is an unusual word construction that departs from the normal and from all the other descriptions of how to make the Priestly garments. Therefore the ancient Rabbis said that this indicates that the blue, purple and scarlet material is NOT Linen, but in fact is another material.....and that material has to be wool because it was the ONLY other material commonly used to make garments by the Hebrews.

Now you and I can argue against this if we wish. We can say we're straining gnats. But the fact remains that the oldest Targums and other ancient Hebrew documents known clearly state that they made the Priest's sashes and the High Priest's grand head covering based on this principle of using two different materials.

Why did the Rabbis think that the Priests could do this but the Israelites' in general could not? Because God had separated the entire tribe of Levi away from Israel. Technically Levites were no longer Israelites. In fact from this separation of Levi from Israel onward, God says that just as the Israelites are **ger** (protected foreigners) to Him, so are the Levites **ger** (foreigners) to the Israelites. The Priests were different from the general Israelite population and this is completely and plainly scripturally based as I've demonstrated to you a number of times in recent lessons.

So why did I go through that long explanation? Because **Tzitzit** are an exception to the Torah prohibition against the wearing of mixed fabrics and they are an exception because, according to the Rabbis, the **Tzitzit** is modeled after the special Priestly garments that no regular Israelite is permitted to wear, otherwise their garments would become holy and that is NOT permitted. The **Tzitzit** represents the reality that God has declared all Israel to be, at some level or another, holy. Leviticus 19 tells Israel, "You shall be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am holy."

So just as the High Priest's special head covering is **sha'atnez** (made of mixed material) that thus is holy, so is the sash of the regular Priest and the **Tzitzit** to be worn on the hem of the garment by ordinary Israelites. Look at this amazing hierarchy that is set up when we understand what is actually being stated: The High Priests head is covered with the **sha'atnez**, the regular Priests waist, or middle of his body, is covered with the **sha'atnez**, and the common person wears the **sha'atnez**, in the form of **Tzitzit**, between his knees and ankles. High, middle, low. This represents gradients (various levels) of holiness. And, this allowance (commandment of God, actually .for common Israelites to wear **Tzitzit** is the grand epitome of the instruction that Israel is to be "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation."

We have seen this model of "gradients" or degrees of holiness before. One of the prime models is the Temple where we have the highest degree of holiness present in the Holy in Holies chamber, the middle level of holiness in the Holy Place chamber, and the lower (but still holy) level of holiness in the outer court where God's ordinary people (members of Israel) may gather. This is a pattern and thus we can expect to see this pattern reflected and demonstrated in a number of ways in the Holy Scriptures.

By adding to the **Tzitzit** the single blue woolen thread that signifies royalty (adding it to the white linen threads surrounding it that signify the priesthood) the two are combined. Every Israelite dons a symbolic measure of holiness; every Israelite has a measure of Priest in him; every Israelite has been set apart, to one measure or another, to serve God.

Now as to the more practical matter of just how the **Tzitzit** were worn there is no doubt that they were originally attached to ORDINARY, everyday garments at the hem level. Down low. And I suspect they got filthy, stepped on, easily yanked off, you name it. So over time a separate garment was developed that was called a **tallith**; it was the **tallith** that held the **Tzitzit**. The **tallith** was a rectangular piece of cloth with a head-hole in the middle that, when

worn, generally went just below the waist on both the back and the front. It was upon the 4 corners of this **tallith** that the tassels, the **Tzitzit**, were attached. This **tallith** was kind of a middle garment; it wasn't fully an undergarment, yet usually an outer garment like a coat went over the top of it, but left the hem of the **tallith** (along with the attached Tzitzit) showing.

Later, some Hebrews (not all) further modified the **tallith** until it became a separate garment that we now call a prayer shawl; something more like a large head-covering, or a portable prayer booth. And **Tzitziyot** (plural) were attached to the 4 corners of the prayer shawl. Depending on the sect, **Tzitzit** and **tallith** today are some combination or another of all the above. As I mentioned earlier some sects wear them exposed while some wear them underneath their outer garments.

So, when you say **tallith** to a Jew be aware that he may not be thinking "prayer shawl" at all. He may be thinking of that middle garment, often worn under his coat, to which his **Tzitzit** are attached.

This exact scenario that we just discussed was in full operation in Jesus' day and the NT makes it quite clear that Jesus wore **Tzitzit** (this is what most English New Testament translations call fringe). Let me just quote a couple of passages for you:

NAS Matthew 9:20 *And behold, a woman who had been suffering from a hemorrhage for twelve years, came up behind Him and touched the fringe of His cloak; 21 for she was saying to herself, "If I only touch His garment, I shall get well."*

NAS Matthew 14:34 *And when they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret. 35 And when the men of that place recognized Him, they sent into all that surrounding district and brought to Him all who were sick; 36 and they began to entreat Him that they might just touch the fringe of His cloak; and as many as touched it were cured.*

Now we can reasonably debate over whether the fringe of Yeshua's garment (Tzitzit) was on a prayer shawl or attached to a middle garment or located at the bottom of the skirt/robe that was the typical dress of folks in that era. But what is not arguable is that this "fringe" was **Tzitzit**. There is absolutely no record of any other kind of "fringe" that Hebrews wore at the hem (except for Hellenist Jews of the elite classes who had adopted Roman ways).

Let me also point out something else: that this practice was NOT limited to men. Women did, and do, observe the wearing of **Tzitzit**...although, as one would expect the practice varies from one Jewish sect to another. In general the wearing of **Tzitzit** by women was, and remains, a personal choice. It was so in Jesus' day as well and this is well attested to in documents from that era.

Now how might this affect gentile Christians? Well as with so many things that we encounter in Torah that have evolved in practice according to a mixture of Scripture and Tradition, just how Christians are to deal with this command is not entirely clear. I've already stated to you that while ordinary Israelites could not wear clothing of mixed fabrics, the Priests...according to all known documents...could and did.

And consider what John said in Revelation concerning our new position...whether Jew or gentile...before the Father, as Believers: **NAS Revelation 1:4 John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace, from Him who is and who was and who is to come; and from the seven Spirits who are before His throne; 5 and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the first-born of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To Him who loves us, and released us from our sins by His blood, 6 and He has made us to be a kingdom, priests to His God and Father; to Him be the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen.**

John states that Believers are as priests to God; just how literally we are to take that statement is debatable. I'm not sure but I lean towards a more literal interpretation. At it's most literal we have been given a similar status as the Priests of Israel; at it's most metaphoric we are priest-like in the sense that we are God's servants in Christ.

Point being that priests were not completely prohibited from actually wearing fabrics of mixed material. Since that is the case then any Believer, Jew or gentile, should take that into consideration when deciding whether or not that Torah command not to mix material in our garments is for us, today. However, the question of whether we can or should wear **Tzitzit** is another matter. I can say this with confidence, though: at the least, it is not wrong. The issues are intent and the principle that is embodied in the commandment. What is your intent when wearing **Tzitzit**? When many of us wear crosses or such, for some it's just a decoration, but for others it indeed IS a reminder of who we are and who HE is. The stated REASON for wearing **Tzitzit** in Numbers 15 is to REMEMBER God's Word and to obey His commands so that we don't go astray; and this says we need to do things that constantly remind us that obedience to Him is key to our relationship with Him. However to think that wearing a Tzitzit, or a cross, or a Star of David is required for Salvation, or to STAY saved, or that it gains us greater favor with God, or that it is a magic charm, is misguided.

The issue of just what in the Law is a culturally based expression of God's principles versus what is a non-culturally based expression is not always easy to discern. Obviously the prohibitions against adultery, stealing, lying, and murder are culturally neutral. Other things like not wearing fabrics of mixed cloth, hairstyles, whether or not to wear a beard, and such are deeply steeped in culture. So we're each going to have to carefully consider whether the wearing of **Tzitzit** is intended to be a cross cultural expression or not, and thus whether or not the God-principle behind Tzitzit can be legitimately expressed in other ways.

What we wear does not, by all I can tell, give us a status boost with Yehoveh. With **Tzitzit** the stated purpose for wearing it is summed up in the 3 verbs (action words) that characterize verse 39 of Numbers 15: Look...recall...observe. LOOKING at the **Tzitzit** RECALLS God's commands to our minds, and thus we are to OBSERVE those commands.

We'll start Numbers 16 next time.