

The Great Teachings of the Bible and What They Mean for You: The Armour of God

In this last lesson in "The Armor of God" series, we look at an item not mentioned in Ephesians 6 at all but found in the book of Isaiah—the cloak of zeal. How does this cloak fit with the military equipment Paul wrote about? What lesson can we learn from it?

The Cloak of Zeal

Another piece of armour, not described by Paul but mentioned in Isaiah, is the cloak of zeal. While not listed with the rest of the armour of God, this cloak factors heavily in the lives of Christians everywhere.

On July 16, 2009, one young man stepped ashore of Marina Del Rey to complete his 13-month-long journey around the world. At the conclusion of his trip, Zac Sunderland officially became the youngest person in the world to have circumnavigated the globe alone in a boat. This amazing accomplishment began long before Zac set sail. His family was a sailing family and was fully supportive. They ensured Zac had all the latest safety equipment, from GPS to satellite phone to access to the best weather information. But ultimately it was Zac's own zeal that propelled him through the months of preparation and 13-month sailing marathon. Zac and his 36-foot boat, the *Intrepid*, endured an impressive list of hardships while out at sea, which, according to a *Los Angeles Times* article, included "trying to fix broken rigging in 15-foot seas and gale-force winds" and a close call "in the Indian Ocean [with] a mysterious-looking vessel that seemed sure to harbor pirates."

Zac could have landed in a port and called it quits at any point during his voyage. And let's face it; a potential scuffle with pirates would be enough to encourage most to throw in the towel and never set sail again. Yet Zac stuck with his goal and, as a result, gained the irrevocable title of the first person under 18 years old to sail around the world alone. What kept him going? In his own words, "I think society puts young people in a box—people 15, 16, 17—and does not expect them to do much but go to high school and play football and stuff like that. This just shows they can do a lot more with some strong ambition and desire. My [advice] is to get out there and do your thing with all you got."

In other words, it was zeal that carried Zac through. He decided on a goal, and his zeal to achieve it kept him going, even when things turned ugly.

Cloaked With Zeal

When cloaks appear in movies or books, it's often in conjunction with mysterious and enigmatic characters, shrouded in airs of intrigue or danger. But beyond their appeal in works of fiction, the cloaks used by ancient armies had a variety of uses that make them relevant today, not as a point of fleeting interest, but as an invaluable tool in our constant war against Satan.

What purpose did the cloak serve in the Roman army?

The cloak served multiple important functions for the Roman soldier. It provided warmth, which was important to defend against the cold. Natural oils were used to make it nearly waterproof, which was important when the rains came. It also provided makeshift bedding, which was important during long marches.

Without his cloak, a soldier was subject to bitter cold, freezing rain and painfully uncomfortable nights. These unfortunate conditions would give a noticeable edge to a better equipped enemy, since a cold, wet and sore soldier can easily be a demotivated soldier. And a demotivated soldier, while not incapable of fighting, will not be performing at his peak.

What is zeal?

Zechariah 8:2

Thus says the Lord of hosts: "I am zealous for Zion with great zeal; with great fervor I am zealous for her."

God Himself is zealous and fervently passionate about His people and His plan. In simplest terms, zeal is fuel. It is anything that drives people: their passion, their purpose, what they live for. For Christians, zeal is a burning desire to do God's will and to live according to His purpose.

Why is the cloak of zeal important to us as Christians?

Isaiah 59:17

For He put on righteousness as a breastplate, and a helmet of salvation on His head; He put on the garments of vengeance for clothing and was clad with zeal as a cloak.

Just as a soldier without his cloak could quickly find himself demotivated and unable to operate at his peak, so we soldiers of Christ will quickly find ourselves unable to operate at *our* peak unless we are fueled by zeal.

Can our zeal go astray if we don't base it on right knowledge?

Romans 10:2

For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge.

Paul himself was zealous in persecuting the Church (Philippians 3:6), until he learned that was not what God wanted. When he aligned his goals with God's plans, his zeal became very effective.



What biblical examples of zeal can we learn from?

Numbers 25:5-11

So Moses said to the judges of Israel, "Every one of you kill his men who were joined to Baal of Peor."

And indeed, one of the children of Israel came and presented to his brethren a Midianite woman in the sight of Moses and in the sight of all the congregation of the children of Israel, who were weeping at the door of the tabernacle of meeting. Now when Phinehas the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron the priest, saw it, he rose from among the congregation and took a javelin in his hand; and he went after the man of Israel into the tent and thrust both of them through, the man of Israel, and the woman through her body. So the plague was stopped among the children of Israel. And those who died in the plague were twenty-four thousand.

Then the Lord spoke to Moses, saying: "Phinehas the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron the priest, has turned back My wrath from the children of Israel, because he was zealous with My zeal among them, so that I did not consume the children of Israel in My zeal."

When Israel's sexual immorality with their pagan neighbours led them away from the true God and toward worshipping the pagan god Baal, Phinehas took a stand. After God told His followers to kill all those who were now worshipping Baal, an Israelite had the nerve to walk—in plain sight of everyone—to his tent with a pagan woman. He apparently thought he was too important to have to obey the laws against adultery and idolatry. Phinehas, on fire with zeal for God, followed the two to the tent and ran them both through with a spear. It seems like a harsh response, but Phinehas receives commendation from God and a later reference in the Psalms. Why? Because when God gives us a command, we are to keep it. The zeal of Phinehas is remarkable because, while the rest of Israel just stood and watched, Phinehas stood up and took the initiative, acting on the word of God. God does not command us to take lives today, of course, but the example shows the kind of zeal we must have.

Colossians 4:12-13

Epaphras, who is one of you, a bondservant of Christ, greets you, always labouring fervently for you in prayers, that you may stand perfect and complete in all the will of God. For I bear him witness that he has a great zeal for you, and those who are in Laodicea, and those in Hierapolis.

We are given only the briefest glimpse of Epaphras through the pages of the Bible. From this passage in Paul's letter to the Colossians, we learn two important facts about the man. First, he was a member of the early New Testament Church; and second, he had zeal. Paul commends him to the Church for "always labouring fervently for you in prayers" (verse 12). This was how his zeal showed itself: He cared deeply about his fellow laborers in Christ and as a result dedicated much of his time toward petitioning God on their behalf. True zeal for God's way means a love for and a desire to serve our brethren, just like Epaphras.

John 2:15-17

When He had made a whip of cords, He drove them all out of the temple, with the sheep and the oxen, and poured out the changers' money and overturned the tables. And He said to those who sold doves, "Take these things away! Do not make My Father's house a house of merchandise!" Then His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for Your house has eaten Me up."

What better example of zeal could there be than our Saviour and King, Jesus Christ? When He saw that money changers and sellers of livestock had overrun God's temple and were cheating people (in Matthew 21:13 Christ said they had made it a "den of thieves"), He drove them out. The disciples recognized this as a case study in being motivated by godly zeal. A true disciple of Christ, like his or her Teacher, is always seeking how he or she can serve those in need—not out of a desire to get ahead, but out of a zeal for our Father's house.

Reflection

Are we on fire for God's way? Do we care deeply about our brethren? Are we willing to serve, to act and to live as God would have us live?