Who were the Zealots in the Bible?

In the New Testament, one of the disciples of Jesus Christ was named Simon the Zealot (Matthew 10:4; Mark 3:18; Luke 6:15; Acts 1:13). What was a Zealot?

The Zealots were members of a first-century political movement among Judean Jews who sought to overthrow the occupying Roman government. The word zealot derives from the Greek zelotes, meaning "emulator or (zealous) follower."

According to the Jewish historian Josephus, three main Jewish groups existed at the time of Christ—the Pharisees, the Sadducees, and the Essenes. He also mentions a fourth group called the Zealots who were founded by Judas of Galilee and Zadok the Pharisee. Josephus notes that the Zealots "agree in all other things with the Pharisaic notions; but they have an inviolable attachment to liberty, and say that God is to be their only Ruler and Lord" (Antiquities 18.1.6).

Of importance in New Testament history, the Zealots led a rebellion when Rome introduced imperial cult worship. The Great Jewish Revolt began in A.D. 66. The Zealots successfully overtook Jerusalem, but their revolt was ultimately unsuccessful. In A.D. 70, the Romans destroyed the city of Jerusalem and the temple. A remnant of the Zealots then took refuge in Masada.

Because of their often-violent tactics, the Zealots have been called some of the world's first terrorists. Though the label is only partially true (not all Zealots were violent), the reputation of Zealots as forceful, aggressive agitators carries a significant lesson for us. Jesus chose Simon the Zealot, a man who likely desired to forcibly remove the Roman government, and He also chose Matthew, a tax collector working

for the Roman government. Both Simon and Matthew, though natural enemies, were part of the Twelve. What a beautiful illustration of the peace Jesus brings! Today, God still brings healing and changes lives. Those with a violent past or extremist tendencies can be transformed as God uses them to spread the good news of Christ's love for all people.