

Living Symbols¹

(Examples That Are Acted Out)



SABBATH—OCTOBER 31

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S LESSON: Genesis 4:3–7; Numbers 21:4–9; Isaiah 29:16; Romans 9:18–21; Jeremiah 19; Hebrews 5:14; Jeremiah 13:1–11.

MEMORY VERSE: “Isn’t [is not] the potter free to make different kinds of pots out of the same lump of clay? Some are for special purposes. Others are for ordinary [common] use” (Romans 9:21, NlrV).

EVERY BIBLE STUDENT KNOWS THAT THE BIBLE IS FILLED WITH SYMBOLS. Symbols are things that represent ideas other than themselves. For example, the earthly sanctuary service was a prophecy (special message from God) in symbols that explained the plan of salvation. “The meaning of the Jewish sanctuary is not yet fully understood. Deep truths are used as examples in its rites [practices] and symbols. The gospel is the key that unlocks its mysteries. Through a knowledge of the plan of redemption,² its truths are opened to the understanding.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *Christ’s Object Lessons*,³ page 133. Through the symbols of the earthly sanctuary, or the symbols of prophetic (having to do with special messages from God) books (such as Daniel and Revelation), and in many other ways, the Lord has used symbols to teach the meaning of truth. Meanwhile, Jesus Himself, with His parables⁴ and object lessons, used symbols to explain deep truths.

This week we are going to study a few of the symbols in Jeremiah, what they are, what they mean, and what lessons we should learn from them for ourselves.

DEFINITIONS

1. symbols—word-pictures; things represented as ideas; for example, a flag represents a nation.
2. redemption—salvation for a price; for example, Jesus paid the price of our salvation by dying on the cross.
3. object lessons—lessons that use an object or a thing to teach a spiritual truth. Most often the object comes from nature, such as a flower, an animal, a tree, or a pearl. But the object used to teach the lesson might be man-made instead.
4. parables—very short stories that teach a spiritual lesson or a truth.

TRUTH IN SYMBOLS (Genesis 4:3–7)

The Bible is very rich in symbols. There are all kinds of symbols in it. In most cases, they represent truths greater than themselves.

Read Genesis 4:3–7. What do the two different sacrifices symbolize (mean; stand for)?

Very early in the Bible we find the difference between (1) trying to work one's way to heaven (in the offering of Cain) and (2) the understanding that salvation is by grace (forgiveness and mercy) alone. The second is made available to us only through a crucified (put to death on a cross) Savior who died for us (as found in the offering of Abel).

Read Numbers 21:4–9. What was the meaning of the symbol of the bronze serpent uplifted on the pole? Read also John 12:32.



“The Israelites saved their lives by looking upon the uplifted serpent.”

“The Israelites saved their lives by looking upon the uplifted serpent. That look meant faith. They lived because they believed God’s word and trusted in the promise that was given for their healing.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs [Forefathers and Leaders] and Prophets [Special Messengers From God]*, page 431.

All through the Old Testament, the earthly sanctuary service was the most carefully planned symbol for the plan of salvation. How much the Israelites understood about the meaning of all the sanctuary services has been an open question for thousands of years. But no doubt many did understand the most important of all truths taught there: the need for a Substitute to die in place of sinners so that their sins might be forgiven (read 1 Corinthians 5:7).

In fact, through the sanctuary service, we have been given symbols of: (1) the death of Jesus and (2) His high-priestly work in heaven, the pre-Advent (before the Second Coming) judgment, and the final removal of sin at the end of the age.

What other Bible symbols of the plan of salvation can you think of? Which symbols mean the most to you? What hope can we get from them?

THE POTTER'S CLAY (Jeremiah 18:1–10)

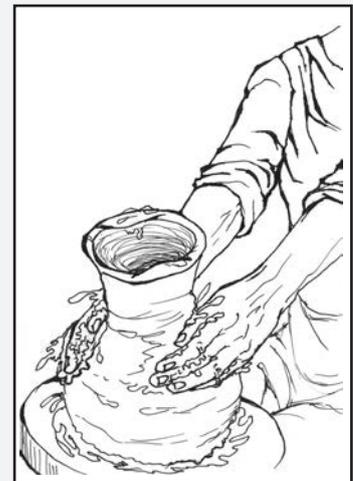
What crucial truths are taught from Jeremiah 18:1–10; Isaiah 29:16; Isaiah 45:9; Isaiah 64:8; and Romans 9:18–21. What do the symbols in these verses mean? Read Genesis 2:7.

Because of the continuing rebellion (war against God's authority) of the people, no doubt Jeremiah wanted to give up. Was it worth struggling and fighting for that nation? At times, he certainly felt that the answer was "No!"

But as Jeremiah watched the potter's hand, he was given a symbol, or a picture, of how the Lord worked with human clay. Other truths may be found in the symbol of the potter and the clay. But it does teach the full rulership of God over all things. No matter how hopeless the situation might have seemed to Jeremiah, the symbols of the potter and the clay taught him that the Lord is in control of the world. He is always the greatest source of power and authority, and in the end He will triumph, no matter how hopeless the world may be.

Centuries after Jeremiah, Paul picks up on this Old Testament symbol, in Romans 9. And he uses it to teach the same lesson that it taught Jeremiah. In fact, Paul may even be pointing to Jeremiah 18:6 in Romans 9:21. We can have peace in knowing that we have hope in the full rulership of our loving and self-sacrificing God. His love is made clear on the Cross. Evil will not succeed. God and His love will. What a hope we have!

How can you learn to trust in the lesson of the potter and the clay, no matter what happens in the world? What other Bible verses teach us that God is the real ruler of the world?



The potter's hands gave Jeremiah a picture of how God worked with human clay.

THE DOWNWARD PATH OF A NATION (Jeremiah 19:4, 5)

In Jeremiah 19:4, we are given a few examples of the evils that had overtaken Judah. Besides forgetting the Lord, offering worship to “other gods,” and killing innocent people, the people also have “estranged this place” (KJV). The Hebrew verb there means “to make foreign,” “to make strange,” or to “profane [pollute].” Whether “this place” was the temple itself or Jerusalem, the verse does not say. But the important point is that the nation was to be holy, special to the Lord (read Exodus 19:5, 6), something special and different from the nations around them. But that is not what happened. They lost their specialness that would have made them a witness to the world. They became just like everyone else.

What lessons are here for us?

Human sacrifice was common in Old Testament times. But it was disgusting to the Lord, who did not permit the practice among the Israelites (Deuteronomy 18:10). The phrase translated in Jeremiah 19:5 as “neither came it into my mind” (KJV) also means “it did not rise up on my heart” in the Hebrew language. This is a sentence explaining just how strange this practice is to God. If we sin-hardened, fallen humans find it terrible, imagine what it must be like to our Holy God!

Anyway, over time, the power of sin and culture so influenced God’s people that they had fallen into this terrible practice. What a lesson it should be to us all about how easily we can become so blinded by the culture around us that we accept or take part in practices that we would never do if we were connected to the Lord (read Hebrews 5:14).



We can become so easily blinded by the culture around us that we take part in practices that we would never do if we were connected to the Lord.

SMASHING THE JAR (Jeremiah 19:1–15)

As we saw yesterday, the nation had fallen into deep backsliding. They were not getting the message. God then used Jeremiah to do a powerful symbolic act that would help wake them up to the danger they were facing.

Read Jeremiah 19:1–15. What was Jeremiah to do, and what was the meaning of this act?

Jeremiah had to go to the potter's house again. But this time the Lord wanted to make sure that he brought witnesses with him to understand exactly what he was going to do. The witnesses were the elders and priests from Judah (Jeremiah 19:1). As leaders, they were responsible for what happened in the nation. So, they needed to understand the message that Jeremiah was to give to them through the power of his symbolic act. The Potsherd Gate (Jeremiah 19:2, NKJV) might have been where Jeremiah was to smash the jar. It also might have been near where the potters worked. Just outside the gate might have been where the potters would dump their broken pieces of ruined pots. Thus, the symbols became even more powerful.

What good is a smashed clay jar? If the jar were cracked, some other use might be found for it. But Jeremiah was not to just crack it. Instead, he was to break it, making it useless. Between the act itself and the words that followed, it is hard to imagine how the people could not have understood the warning. Of course, understanding the warning and acting on it are two different things.

What is even more frightening is how final that act could be. Who can repair a smashed jar? The Lord gave the nation a hope for the future. But for the moment the Judeans were doomed unless they would repent (turn away from sin) and change their ways. All the places that they had dishonored with their sinful acts would soon be polluted with their own corpses.⁵ Perhaps, how deep their sins were can be best understood by how severe (harsh) the punishment was for their sins.

Think of something that is ruined and cannot be repaired. What was it made for in the first place? What happened to it that now makes it useless? How careful we need to be that this does not happen to us!



What good is a smashed clay jar?

DEFINITIONS

5. corpses—dead bodies.

THE LINEN BELT (Jeremiah 13:1–11)

Read Jeremiah 13:1–11. What item did God tell Jeremiah to get? What did God ask him to do with it? And what important lesson was it used to teach?

What God asked Jeremiah to do caused some difficulties for interpreters (people who explain things). The river Euphrates was hundreds of miles from Jerusalem. Ezra needed four months to travel there in one direction only (Ezra 7:9). In order to understand the message better, God told Jeremiah to travel there twice, back and forth. Thus, some scholars have argued that it meant some other geographical place. But some argue that the long distances he had to travel helped him to understand just how far away the children of Israel would have to travel to Babylon. Plus, after returning from such a long trip, Jeremiah could understand the joy of returning after 70 years of slavery in Babylon.

Whichever it is, the belt symbolizes the house of Israel and the house of Judah. The belt is pure and not yet stained or ruined at the time of God's request. The man wearing the belt is God Himself. This explains just how closely tied God Himself was to His people. Some Bible scholars have given special meaning to the fact that the belt was made of linen. Linen was the same material used for the priestly robes (Leviticus 16:4). Judah was to be a priestly nation (Exodus 19:6).

Just as the belt had been ruined, the pride of the nation would be too. As a belt clings (holds) to a man's waist, these people had once clung (held) to the Lord. While they did this, they gave the Lord praise and glory (honor). But they had become spoiled by the surrounding cultures.

Read Jeremiah 13:11 and compare⁶ it with Deuteronomy 4:5–8. How do these verses together explain what happened to the nation? What should these verses say to us, too?

DEFINITIONS

6. compare—to show how two or more things are the same or different.

ADDITIONAL THOUGHT: The symbols of the potter and the clay, as written in Romans 9, bring up the important question of how we try to understand God's actions. The fact is that we often do not understand. That should not be surprising. Read Isaiah 55:8. As humans we simply are very limited in what we can know about the ways of God.

The limitation of human knowledge is shown by this sentence: "The barber of Seville shaves everyone who does not shave himself." Does the barber of Seville shave himself? If he shaves himself, he cannot shave himself because he shaves everyone who *does not* shave himself. But if he does not shave himself, then he has to shave himself, for the same reason—because he shaves everyone who does not shave himself. The answer is a puzzle that cannot be solved. It is an example of the limits of reason. So, if reason gets tangled in itself on something as simple as whom the barber of Seville shaves, how much more so on something as deep as the nature and greatness of God's dealings in the world? What we do have is the Cross, which gives us enough reason to trust in Him and His love even when what happens in His world makes no sense to us at all.

"To many people the start of sin and the reason for its growth are a great puzzle. They see the work of evil, with its terrible results of sadness and destruction. They question how all this can grow under the rulership of God who is unlimited in wisdom, in power, and in love. Here is a mystery of which they find no explanation nor answer. And in their uncertainty and doubt they are blinded to truths plainly shown in God's Word [the Bible] and important for salvation."—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy [War Between Christ and Satan]*, page 492.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- 1 What challenges does the idea of God's full rulership present to us about the question of evil? How does the great controversy help us to work through the tough questions?
- 2 What other symbols can you find in the Bible? Why would God use symbols anyway? What are the advantages of symbols?