

Symbolic Acts



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Gen. 4:3–7, Num. 21:1–9, Isa. 29:16, Rom. 9:18–21, Jeremiah 19, Heb. 5:14, Jer. 13:1–11.*

Memory Text: “Hath not the potter power over the clay, of the same lump to make one vessel unto honour, and another unto dishonour?” (*Romans 9:21*).

Every student of the Bible knows that it is filled with symbols, things that represent concepts and ideas other than themselves. The entire earthly sanctuary service, for example, was a symbolic prophecy of the plan of salvation. “The significance of the Jewish economy is not yet fully comprehended. Truths vast and profound are shadowed forth in its rites and symbols. The gospel is the key that unlocks its mysteries. Through a knowledge of the plan of redemption, its truths are opened to the understanding.”—Ellen G. White, *Christ's Object Lessons*, p. 133. Through the symbolism of the earthly sanctuary, or the symbols of prophetic books (*such as Daniel 2, 7, 8, and Revelation*), and in many other ways, the Lord has used symbols to convey truth. Meanwhile, Jesus Himself, with His parables and object lessons, used symbols to explain deep truths.

The book of Jeremiah itself is rich with symbolism and imagery. This week we're going to take a look at a few of these symbols, what they were, what they meant, and what lessons we should take away from them for ourselves.

* *Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, November 7.*

Truth in Symbols

Scripture is exceedingly rich in symbols. All kinds abound, and in most cases, they represent truths greater than themselves.

Read Genesis 4:3–7. What do their two different sacrifices symbolize?

Very early in the Bible we can see the difference between the attempt to work one's way to heaven (in the offering of Cain) and the realization that salvation is by grace alone, made available to us only through the merits of a crucified Savior (the offering of Abel).

Read Numbers 21:4–9. What was the symbolism of the bronze serpent uplifted on the pole? (See also John 12:32.)

“The Israelites saved their lives by looking upon the uplifted serpent. That look implied faith. They lived because they believed God’s word, and trusted in the means provided for their recovery.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 431.

All through the Old Testament, the earthly sanctuary service was the most detailed symbolic representation of the plan of salvation. How much the Israelites understood about the meaning of all the rituals has been an open question for millennia, though no doubt many did grasp the most important of all truths taught there: substitutionary atonement, the idea that in order for their sins to be forgiven, a substitute had to die in their stead (see *1 Cor. 5:7*).

In fact, through the sanctuary service we have been given symbols, not only of the death of Jesus but also of His high priestly ministry in heaven, the pre-Advent judgment, and the final disposition of sin at the end of the age.

What other biblical symbols of the plan of salvation can you think of? Which ones especially speak to you about God’s saving grace and the hope we can derive from it?

The Potter's Clay

What crucial truths are taught from these verses and the symbolism found there? (See Gen. 2:7.)

Jer. 18:1–10 _____

Isa. 29:16 _____

Isa. 45:9 _____

Isa. 64:8 _____

Rom. 9:18–21 _____

Because of the constant rejection and persecution that he faced, Jeremiah no doubt wanted to give up. Was it worth struggling and fighting for that nation? At times he certainly felt that the answer was “No!”

No question, though, as he watched the potter's hand, he was given an image, a symbol, of how the Lord worked with human clay. Whatever other truths are found in the image of the potter and the clay, it does teach the ultimate sovereignty of God. That is, however hopeless the situation might have seemed from Jeremiah's perspective, the symbolism of the potter and the clay showed him that ultimately, despite the wrong or even *willfully* wrong decisions that people make, the Lord is in control of the world. He is the absolute source of power and authority, and in the end He will triumph, regardless of appearances now.

Centuries after Jeremiah, Paul picks up on this Old Testament image in Romans 9 and continues with it, basically using it to teach the same lesson that it was to teach Jeremiah. In fact, Paul may even be directly referring to Jeremiah 18:6 in Romans 9:21. We can rest assured that, despite the reality of human free will and free choices, and the often calamitous results of abusing that free will, in the end, we can hope in the absolute sovereignty of our loving and self-sacrificing God, whose love is revealed on the cross. Evil won't triumph; 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, regardless of present circumstances? What other Bible texts show us the reality of God's sovereignty?

The Degeneration of a Nation

“Because they have forsaken me, and have estranged this place, and have burned incense in it unto other gods, whom neither they nor their fathers have known, nor the kings of Judah, and have filled this place with the blood of innocents” (Jer. 19:4).

In this text we are given a few examples of the evils that had overtaken Judah. Besides forsaking the Lord, offering incense to “other gods,” and shedding innocent blood, they also “estranged this place.” The Hebrew verb there means “to make foreign,” “to make strange,” or to “profane.” Whether “this place” was the temple itself or Jerusalem, the text doesn’t say. The crucial point, though, is that the nation was to be holy, special to the Lord (*see Exod. 19:5, 6*), something different and distinct from the nations around them. But that’s not what happened. They lost their unique character, the distinctiveness that would have made them a witness to the world. They became just like everyone else.

What lessons are here for us?

“They have built also the high places of Baal, to burn their sons with fire for burnt offerings unto Baal, which I commanded not, nor spake it, neither came it into my mind” (Jer. 19:5).

Though the concept of human sacrifice was known in the ancient world, it was anathema to the Lord, who forbade the practice to the Israelites (*Deut. 18:10*). The phrase, translated above as “neither came it into my mind,” in the Hebrew reads, “it did not rise up on my heart.” This was an idiomatic expression showing just how alien and far from God’s will such a practice was. If we, sin-hardened, fallen beings find it abhorrent, imagine what it must have been like to our Holy God!

Nevertheless, over time, the power of corruption and culture so overwhelmed His people that they had degenerated into this horrific ritual. What a lesson it should be to us all about how easily we can become so blinded by the prevailing culture that we accept, or even take part in, practices that—were we connected to the Lord and in tune with His Word as we should be—we would never accept. We would, instead, be horrified by them (*see Heb. 5:14*).

Smashing the Jar

As we saw yesterday, the nation had fallen into deep apostasy. The people weren't getting the message. God then used Jeremiah to do a powerful symbolic act that, ideally, 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. This time, though, the Lord wanted to make sure that he brought witnesses with him to see exactly what he was going to do. The witnesses were the elders and priests from Judah (*Jer. 19:1*). As leaders, they were responsible for what happened in the nation, and so they needed to get the message that Jeremiah was to give to them through the power of his symbolic act. The Potsherd Gate (*Jer. 19:2, NKJV*), where he was to smash the jar, might have been near where the potters worked, and just outside the gate might have been where they would dump their shards of ruined pots. Thus, the symbolism became even more powerful.

What good is a smashed clay jar? If the jar were cracked, some use might be found for it, even if not for the original intent of the jar. But Jeremiah wasn't merely to crack it. Instead, he was to break it, essentially rendering it useless. Between the act itself and the words that followed, it's 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 entirely.

What's even more frightening is the apparent finality of the act. Who can repair a smashed jar? Though the Lord gave the nation a hope for the future, yet for the moment, unless they were to turn around, the Judeans were doomed, they and their children. All the places that they had defiled with their abominations and sinful acts would soon be defiled with their corpses. Perhaps, the depths of their depravity can be best understood by the depths of the punishment that their depravity brought upon their heads.

Think of something ruined—ruined beyond repair. What was it originally made for, and what happened to it that now rendered it useless? How careful we need to be that this doesn't happen to us!

The Linen Belt

Read Jeremiah 13:1–11. What was the symbolic act Jeremiah was ordered to do, and what important lesson was it to teach?

This symbolic act has caused some difficulties for interpreters because the river Euphrates (a common interpretation of the Hebrew but not necessarily the only one) was hundreds of kilometers from Jerusalem. Ezra needed four months to travel there in one direction only (*Ezra 7:9*). In order to understand the message better, God made Jeremiah go back and forth twice. Thus, some scholars have argued that some other geographical location was meant. On the other hand, some argue that the long distances he had to travel helped show him just how far away the children of Israel would be taken. What's more, after returning from such a long trip, Jeremiah could understand the joy of returning after 70 years of captivity.

Whatever the case, the belt symbolizes both the house of Israel and the house of Judah, pure and unstained at the time of God's request. The man wearing the belt is God Himself. This shows, among other things, just how closely tied God Himself was to His people. Some commentators have seen significance in the fact that the belt was made of linen, the same material as the priestly garments (*Lev. 16:4*); after all, Judah was to be a priestly nation (*Exod. 19:6*).

Just as the belt had been ruined, the pride of the nation would be too. As a belt clings to a man's waist, these people had once clung to the LORD and were His source of praise and glory. But they had become tarnished and spoiled by contact with the surrounding cultures.

Read Jeremiah 13:11 and contrast it with Deuteronomy 4:5–8. How do these verses together show what happened to the nation? What should these texts say to us as well?

Further Thought: The image of the potter and the clay, especially as seen in Romans 9, brings up the important question of how we seek to understand God's actions. The fact is, of course, we often don't. That shouldn't be surprising, should it? Read Isaiah 55:8. As human beings, we simply are very limited in what we can know about anything, much less about all the ways of God.

This point, the limitation of human knowledge, is revealed by what has been called the "self-referential problem." Look at this sentence: "The barber of Seville shaves everyone who doesn't shave himself." Does the barber of Seville shave himself? If he shaves himself, he can't shave himself because he shaves everyone who *doesn't* shave himself. But if he doesn't shave himself, then he has to shave himself, for the same reason—because he shaves everyone who doesn't shave himself. The answer forms an insolvable paradox that reveals the limits of reason. Thus, if reason gets tangled in itself on something as mundane as whom the barber of Seville shaves, how much more so on something as profound as the nature and extent of God's dealings in the world? What we do have is the Cross, which gives us abundant reason to trust in Him and His love even when what happens in His world makes no sense to us at all.

"To many minds the origin of sin and the reason for its existence are a source of great perplexity. They see the work of evil, with its terrible results of woe and desolation, and they question how all this can exist under the sovereignty of One who is infinite in wisdom, in power, and in love. Here is a mystery of which they find no explanation. And in their uncertainty and doubt they are blinded to truths plainly revealed in God's word and essential to salvation."—Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, p. 492.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 What challenges does the idea of God's absolute sovereignty present to us in regard to the question of evil? How does the great controversy scenario help us work through the tough questions, at least partially for now?
- 2 What other symbols can you find in the Bible? Why would God use symbols anyway? What are the advantages of symbols?

Enlarge My Vision: Part 1

I never intended to become a Christian. I met God while enrolled in a public boarding school. Actually, I met a girl whom I wanted to date. I got up the courage to ask her out then went to her study hall to charm her into dating me. I knew she was a Christian, but that didn't bother me. When I entered the room, I found her reading a pamphlet. I sat down beside her and asked her what she was reading. She offered me one of the pamphlets, and I pretended to read it just to impress her. When I asked her for a date, she gently declined but asked me to keep the pamphlet. Later that evening I sat down and read it. It was a Voice of Prophecy lesson about hell, and it worried me. I hardly slept that night.

I was often in trouble because I frequently broke the school's rules. On Saturday morning, the day after I had asked this girl for a date, I went to the administration building to see if I had been caught breaking any rules that week and had been assigned campus duties.

As I was reading the list, a boy came up beside me and invited me to come to a worship service with him that day in the auditorium. I hadn't been to church in ten years and wasn't interested in religion. But, for some reason, I accepted this boy's invitation. I think even he was surprised when I accepted! We walked across campus together and entered the auditorium. It didn't dawn on me that the girl I had asked out the day before was a Seventh-day Adventist.

Something else really strange happened. I had two dollars in my pocket that I had planned to spend on drinking on Saturday night. But when the offering basket was passed, I surprised myself by giving the two dollars. Later I realized that this action saved me from drinking that weekend.

I discovered that this group of high school students on campus did more than just pray and sing. They had a strong Pathfinder program. I was interested in what Pathfinders do, so I stayed through the afternoon and watched. The next week I joined the Pathfinder Club. Everyone was surprised.

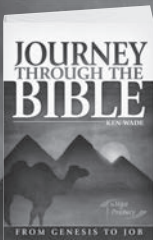
While I hadn't accepted the invitation to attend church because of the girl I wanted to date, I was glad when I saw her at church. She befriended me and helped me to feel welcome at the church meetings. But she still wouldn't go out with me.

From the first day I attended church, I decided to stop smoking and drinking. Thank God, I never smoked or drank again. When I broke away from old friends, they gave me trouble about my new religious interest. They begged me to go drinking with them and did everything they could to get me back. But I refused. I made new friends in church. Several months later I gave my life to Christ and followed Him in baptism. I was 17 years old at the time.

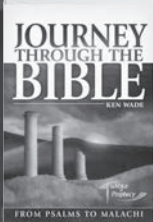
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