

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 told Jeremiah to 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.

To be continued in next week's Inside Story.

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Texts:** *Jeremiah 19:1–15, Romans 9:18–21*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Understand the usage of symbols and symbolic acts in the book of Jeremiah, especially the symbol of the potter’s smashed earthen flask.

Feel: Appreciate the extent of Judah’s sin, which caused God to finally execute judgment on Judah in the form of the Babylonian exile.

Do: Resolve to pay attention to the signs and messages that God places in his or her path to keep him or her from going down toward the point of no return.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: Symbolic Acts

A What was the purpose of God asking Jeremiah to use symbolic acts to communicate His message to the people?

B How can we use symbols and symbolic acts in the proclamation of God’s message today?

II. Feel: Smashed Pottery

A What does the image of a smashed and irreparable vessel mean?

B Is it possible that we come to a point in our relationship with God when things cannot be fixed anymore? Why, or why not?

III. Do: Wrapped Up With God

A What did the symbolic act of the rotten linen belt mean for the relationship between God and Judah?

B What positive message can we learn from that symbol for our relationship with God?

► **Summary:** Symbols and symbolic acts can communicate powerful messages, and Jeremiah is probably the prophet who used those most frequently. A smashed pottery vessel and a rotten linen belt are not exactly comforting images, but they also communicate positively the sovereignty of God, as well as His desire to be close to us.

Learning Cycle

►STEP 1—Motivate

Spotlight on Scripture: *Numbers 21:1–9*

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: Symbols in the Bible serve to point us to a different reality, to God’s reality, which is sometimes best captured by means of symbols. As in the case of the bronze serpent, it can be lifesaving to recognize and understand the spiritual significance of a biblical symbol that ultimately points to Christ and salvation in Him.

Just for Teachers: The bronze serpent is a difficult symbol to understand: it points us to Christ’s death on the cross (*compare John 3:14, 15*), but it is also used to refer to Satan (*compare Rev. 12:9*). How can one symbol point to two such extreme opposites? Christ was made in the likeness of sin (*compare 2 Cor. 5:21*) and took our sins to the cross, but the fact still remains that one symbol can represent two very different realities.

In our discussion of symbols this week, the class should realize that it is not the symbol that saves but the reality behind it. As a matter of fact, the meaning of the symbol can be exchanged (*compare also the lion as symbol for Christ and Satan in the Bible*), and things turn sour if we put our faith in the symbol instead of the spiritual reality represented by it. Just consider what happened to the bronze serpent in the history of Israel: it eventually had to be destroyed in the time of Hezekiah, because it had become an idol.

Opening Discussion: A blue bubble with a stylized window in its center, consisting of four panes in the colors red, green, yellow, and blue—right, you got it: the virtual start button of the operating system running on the vast majority of this planet’s computers. Five bars in ascending lengths from left to right, hopefully all five of them illuminated—yes, you got it again: connectivity—wireless, cell phone, and otherwise. An apple with a bite chewed out of its right side—one can stop here, the picture by now being clear—this exercise is not a test in answering computer trivia but one in recognizing the power of the symbol.

Our lives seem to be increasingly governed by small abstract images, blinking and glowing in vivid colors that communicate to us what to do, where to go, when to push, and what to expect after we have pushed. A symbol is usually an object that represents something else. A symbolic act is able to communicate a complex and abstract reality in a very condensed and simplified way. As a class, think about some of the symbols and/or

symbolic acts that are important in your culture. The bronze serpent pointed symbolically to Christ's death on the cross. How was it possible that the Israelites were healed by just beholding the bronze serpent?

►STEP 2—Explore

Just for Teachers: It is important to understand the time of Jeremiah within the context of the wider history of Israel, which was characterized by seemingly endless repetitions of apostasy and rebellion. Those rebellious repetitions included a partially completed conquest; the time of Judges with all its atrocities; the united monarchy with Saul's apostasy; David's adultery and Solomon's idolatry, followed by the divided monarchy, with endless lists of bad kings, interrupted by a few good ones; the Assyrian captivity of the northern tribes; and the degradation of Judah that finally led to the Babylonian exile. During all these times, God had sent men, women, judges, prophets, priests, and kings to bring about Israel's repentance and return to the Lord, but without success. It should not surprise us that God finally used symbols and messages that pointed to the irreversibility of His judgments.

Bible Commentary

Although the symbolic acts in the book of Jeremiah are mostly negative in character, pointing to the irreversibility of God's judgment, the symbol that God chose also communicates powerfully positive aspects of His character. Judgment and mercy are ultimately two sides of the same coin.

I. Symbolic Acts in Jeremiah (Review *Jeremiah 13:1–9, 19:1–15, 27:1–15, 28:10–17, 32:1–15, 43:8–13, 51:59–64 with your class.*)

Besides the potter's broken vessel and the linen belt, Jeremiah, under divine inspiration, employed a number of other symbolic acts: the yoke he had to carry around on his neck showed that Judah and the surrounding nations should serve Nebuchadnezzar (*compare Jer. 27:1–15, 28:10–17*); the field in Anathoth that the prophet was to buy from a relative, while the Babylonian army was already besieging Jerusalem, pointed to a future restoration (*compare 32:1–15*); the large stones that he was to bury in the brick pavement of pharaoh's palace, in Tahpanhes, announced Egypt's fate (*compare 43:8–13*); and then there was the scroll that contained a prophecy about Babylon's doom, read by Seraiah, a brother of Baruch, who was to read it to the Babylonians, tie a stone around it, and then submerge it in the Euphrates on the way to Babylon (*compare 51:59–64*).

While all these symbolic acts were good attention getters, they primarily served to communicate God’s message in a tangible, often visually dramatized, and always very personal way. The prophet himself became part of the prophecy, sometimes with painful consequences—just think of Hosea buying back his wife in the red-light district. Jeremiah’s life was inseparably connected to his message, and the symbolic acts he performed often communicated more thoroughly than words could have done.

Consider This: Think of some important symbols in your Christian experience. What is the importance of these symbols for your life?

II. The Potter’s Smashed Flask (*Review Jeremiah 19:1–15 and Romans 9:18 with your class.*)

This symbolic act takes the potter image one dramatic step further. The Hinnom Valley, south of Jerusalem, just outside of the Potsherd Gate, where Jeremiah assembled the leadership of Judah, was a historically sensitive site, as it was a place where child sacrifices had been offered (later desecrated by Josiah, *compare 2 Kings 23:10*). Jeremiah’s introductory speech was an ear-tingling and blood-curdling account of what had taken place in this valley through the centuries; in other words, idolatry in its most debased form, including child sacrifices, all under the auspices of the kings of Judah. Then the symbolic act was performed, and Jeremiah took the flask, which is *baqbuq* in Hebrew, possibly indicating the gurgling sound it made when one drank from it. It was used to store water or honey, precious commodities in ancient Israel.

The dramatic turn of imagery here is that the flask is smashed and irreversibly destroyed. While the potter, in Jeremiah 18, could still change the shape of the vessel—in other words, the fate of the nation and individual, depending on repentance or unrepentance—the shattered flask here is rendered useless and “cannot be made whole again.” Jerusalem and Judah were to become like the Valley of Hinnom, places of stinking decay and rotting corpses under the Babylonian attack, which no longer could be averted.

Consider This: Harsh as His punishment may have seemed, why was God’s judgment on Judah at this very moment just and even merciful, given the historical context?

III. The Rotten Linen Belt (*Review Jeremiah 13:1–11 with your class.*)

The symbolic act of the rotten linen belt probably preceded the potter’s smashed flask chronologically. However, it serves as a good reminder of what

God had originally intended for His relationship with Israel.

If taken literally—and there is no compelling reason to take it figuratively—Jeremiah would have made two extensive trips on foot to the Euphrates, once more demonstrating how involved the prophet’s life had become with God’s message. The retrieved rotten linen belt again pointed to the irreversibility of judgment that was to take place through the Babylonian exile. Yet, the belt, disposed in, and recovered from the Euphrates (the city of Babylon was located on the Euphrates), foreshadowed a glimpse of hope in that there would come a day when Israel would return from exile.

Consider This: How do you feel about these symbolic acts that underline the inevitability of God’s judgments on Judah? How do they reveal God’s mercy and justice to you?

►STEP 3—Apply

Just for Teachers: It is amazing to what extent Jeremiah as a person was involved in the message he preached: four hikes of about three hundred fifty miles (ca. five hundred sixty kilometers) each; walking around town with a yoke on his neck; smashing jars before the authorities at a smelly garbage dump. Jeremiah stayed true to his mission even when he was given the chance to opt out of it. True Christianity is something that should penetrate all areas of our lives.

Thought/Application Questions:

- ❶ How far does your personal involvement in God’s church and its message go? How could it go further?
- ❷ Why didn’t Jeremiah abandon the sinking ship after God demonstrated that the Babylonian exile was sure to come?

►STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: Symbols play a big part in our lives, as well as in the church. It would be good to become aware of their presence and meaning in our class discussions and more consciously use symbols in the proclamation of God’s message.

Class/Individual Activities:

- ❶ Invite the class to create or find an existing symbol of their faith during the week and bring it to next Sabbath’s lesson study.
- ❷ Think, as a class, of a symbolic act that could be used in a church event to illustrate God’s message of salvation. Then perform this symbolic act in front of the church.