

# **Jeremiah**

## **Symbolic Acts**

Lesson #6 for November 7, 2015

Scriptures: Genesis 4:3-7; Numbers 21:1-9; Isaiah 29:16; Romans 9:18-21; Jeremiah 13:1-11; 19; Hebrews 5:14.

1. This lesson focuses on Jeremiah's use of symbols. A symbol is a pointer to an idea. The Bible is full of symbols. Symbols can have a powerful effect on our understanding of an issue.
2. Think of the earthly sanctuary, beginning with the tent constructed at the foot of Mount Sinai. How many symbols were included in the sanctuary service, buildings, and rituals?

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. 133.1.

3. Consider also the impressive symbols used by Daniel in Daniel 2, 7, 8, and 9-11. And what about all the symbols the book of Revelation? It is easier to remember a "picture."
4. Jesus Himself used parables and symbols at times to avoid being arrested. The meaning may have been quite clear; but, each person had to interpret the story or symbol for himself. Therefore, the Jewish leaders could not accuse Jesus of saying something bad about them. But, sometimes, Jesus apparently used parables and symbols to hide His intended meaning. (See Matthew 13:13; 21:45.)
5. Read Genesis 4:3-7. In this very early story in Scripture, we learn about the contrast between disobedience and obedience; the difference between doing things our way and doing things God's way. Do you think the meaning of those two sacrifices was clear in the minds of Adam, Eve, Cain, and Abel? Is it obvious to you? What was wrong with Cain's offering? The vegetables were just picked! They don't teach us anything about sin leading to death! The Lamb clearly had to be killed and had to die.
6. Read Numbers 21:4-9 and Deuteronomy 8:15. God had protected the children of Israel from the poisonous snakes that were common in the desert in that part of the world. But, when they began to complain about His guidance and leading, He temporarily removed His protection, and many of them were bitten. At some point, should parents take away the protection they provide for their children? He then instructed Moses to make a bronze serpent and put it up on a pole. Those who had faith enough to look at the bronze serpent were healed, recognizing that the bronze serpent itself could not do anything for them. What was that bronze serpent supposed to symbolize? To Christians familiar with the story of the crucifixion of Christ, it is a symbol of that crucifixion. But, what did it mean to the Jews in Moses's day? (John 3:14-15; 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. 431.1.

7. They actually preserved that bronze snake and worshiped it for 700 years! (2 Kings 18:4)

8. Turning now to the sanctuary service itself, what is the most important lesson that we can learn from that sandbox illustration? Is it “substitutionary atonement”? What are the implications of *substitutionary atonement*? *Atonement* originally meant “at-one-ment.”

**Contrasting Meanings of the Sanctuary Service**

<b>Substitutionary Atonement</b>	<b>Sin Leads to Death</b>
If I have enough lambs, I can keep on sinning.	If I keep on sinning, I will die in my sins.
Sins are transferred to the animal, and I do not need to worry about them any more.	Sins are transferred only symbolically. It is not possible to really make an animal guilty of my sins.
My sins are transferred by the priest into the tent or tabernacle.	God has a plan for my life - to help me stop sinning, leaving my sins behind and becoming more like Him.
My sins are carried by the scapegoat into an unknown land.	God wants to separate me from my sins permanently, not just symbolically.
My focus is on dealing with my sins.	My focus is on Jesus Christ so that I can crowd out my sins and forget about them.
Because the people were afraid of God, they begged Moses to stand as an intercessor between them and God. (Exodus 20:18-20)	God’s original plan was for each of us to be priest and not need someone else to represent us before God. (Exodus 19:5-6)

9. There are many lessons to be learned from the sanctuary and its services. Having recently come out of slavery, the children of Israel were probably only thinking in very concrete terms. Shouldn’t we be able to comprehend at a higher level than they did? To them, the sanctuary service meant God had made a way to take care of their sins.
10. There are even lives of biblical heroes in the Old Testament that were a kind of prophecy about the coming Messiah. For example, think of Moses and Joseph. In Daniel’s prophecies, we have the exact time spelled out for the coming, the ministry, and the death of Jesus as well as the time when the gospel would be spread to Gentiles in addition to Jews.
11. Read Jeremiah 18:1-10. What are we supposed to learn from this important visible parable? It should be clear to all of us that God created us in the beginning. (Genesis 2:7) And just as God molded us from clods of clay in the beginning, Jeremiah observed that the potter could do whatever he wanted to with the clay in his hands. But, that clay was to represent us! Does our behavior have its rewards? Isn’t it clear that sin leads to death? And that righteousness leads to life?
12. Read Isaiah 29:16. When a potter works with fresh clay, who is in charge? Does the clay have a right to ask the potter, “Why are you making me like this?” See also Isaiah 45:9.
13. A number of Bible writers recognized the symbolism of *a potter with his clay*. See Isaiah 64:8 and Romans 9:18-21. Romans 9:10-29 has posed much difficulty for interpreters. Read superficially, it might suggest that we have no freedom whatsoever, but rather, are merely malleable clay in the hands of God. However, understood in the light of Hebrew history, it is clear that God intended even from the beginning of His call to Abraham that

the Hebrew people would be the means of spreading the gospel to the entire world. He never intended for the Jews to consider it some kind of private property!

14. Jeremiah 18 goes on to say that while the potter can make the clay into almost anything he chooses, human beings have basically two choices when they respond to God's will. They can accept God's guidance, and He will care for them, bless them, and make them prosper. Or, on the other hand, they can reject His guidance, and they are choosing destruction for themselves. What does God need to do to convince us that sin is self-destructive?
15. Does the story of the potter and the clay teach us about the ultimate sovereignty of God? Doesn't it seem like that? But, then Jeremiah went on to say that we may respond or we may choose not to respond. Is that a part of God's ultimate sovereignty? Does God's ultimate sovereignty eliminate human freedom? In Romans 1-8—before talking about the potter and clay—Paul had already described how God runs His universe and saves people. But, some of the Jewish Christians were unhappy that Paul was apparently offering Gentiles salvation without first having to become fully Jews.
16. God has blessed us by showing us the only correct way to live our lives. God has designed His universe to run on love, selflessness, and trust. If we choose to operate contrary to those principles, we are the losers.
17. If the main emphasis in the Bible is God's sovereignty, the questions should be: "Why hasn't He exercised it long ago? Why is He allowing sin, evil, suffering, and warfare to go on and on? Why are we still on this sinful planet?" Does that sound like He is sovereign?
18. The Devil does not doubt God's power; (James 2:19) but, it is not God's power that is in question, anyway. **What matters is who is telling us the truth.** What lessons are we supposed to learn about the great controversy from our study of Scripture?

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 (Jeremiah 19:4, *KJV*).

Compare Deuteronomy 13:1-3.

19. Are we tempted to worship other gods instead of Jehovah? What are the most important things in our lives? Instead of trusting exclusively on God, do we depend on our 401(k)s? Our bank accounts? Our nice homes? Our new cars?
20. In Jeremiah's day, the children of Israel had turned to other gods by burning incense even in the temple grounds to those other gods; they had gone to the extent of offering their own children in sacrifice to heathen gods. As recorded in Deuteronomy, God had warned them what the results would be. How far had they departed from God's original plan for them? See Exodus 19:5-6. Instead of being excellent examples to those around them, showing the advantages of living a Godlike life, the children of Israel were becoming like the pagans as fast as they could!
21. How different are Seventh-day Adventists from their neighbors and associates in the world today? Are we becoming more like them? Or, are we representing God to them? How many of us have had the opportunity of actually witnessing for the truth to another human soul, bringing him closer to God? Here is what the children of Israel were doing.

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. (Jeremiah 19:5, *KJV*) Compare Jeremiah 7:31.

22. Why would someone offer his child as a sacrifice? In many of the ancient pagan religions, it was regarded as the ultimate sacrifice. But, to God such a sacrifice was forbidden. (Deuteronomy 18:10) God reminded Jeremiah that He had never had such an idea! But, what about Abraham offering Isaac? Did God ever intend for Abraham to offer Isaac? God just wanted to show the onlooking universe that Abraham—despite having persuaded his wife on two different occasions to lie about their relationship, and after taking Hagar as a secondary wife and fathering Ishmael—still was God’s devoted and faithful follower. Abraham was willing even to offer the most important thing in his life if God asked for it. It was a lesson to the entire universe. (See *Patriarchs and Prophets* 153-154.) Even some sinful human beings are repulsed by the idea of human sacrifices. So, what effect must it have on the holy angels and on God? Had the children of Israel really become so blinded by the cultures around them that they could not see how evil that was? Are we being blinded by the prevailing culture around us? Or, are we in tune with God and His Word?
23. Read Jeremiah 19:1-15. God through Jeremiah next took on the responsibility of gathering witnesses, proclaiming a message of doom to the people of Jerusalem, and then shattering a clay jar into small pieces. Clay jars were used for almost everything in ancient times. They were used for storage, for cooking, for transportation, etc. But, a shattered clay jar is almost useless. Jeremiah called some of the leaders from Jerusalem to the Potsherd Gate and told them that Judea and Jerusalem were becoming as useless as a smashed clay pot. What impact did that acted-out parable have? Is there any possibility of repairing a smashed clay pot? Virtually none. What was God trying to say to them? Was He suggesting that all of His efforts over hundreds of years to get them to be true witnesses for Him to the world had failed? Could that illustration ever apply to us today? How many of us are actually carrying out the mission God intends for us to carry out?
24. Read Jeremiah 13:1-11. In this parable Jeremiah was to get a loincloth. A loincloth is generally something similar to a pair of shorts, even a kind of underwear. Jeremiah was to take those shorts and wear them and take them to the Euphrates River which was four months travel away and bury them along the banks of the river. Later, he was to go back and to uncover them only to find that they were then useless rags.
25. And what was all that supposed to mean? God’s original plan, of course, was for the children of Israel to remain very close to Him in all their activities just as underwear are worn close to the body. (Jeremiah 13:11; Deuteronomy 4:5-8)
26. What is supposed to be our response to God’s actions? Are we supposed to understand everything He does? (Isaiah 55:8) But, compare Isaiah 1:18. Isn’t it God’s plan for us to spend the rest of eternity learning more and more about His behavior and His actions? So, understanding God’s character, His behavior, and His love may be the most important thing we can do in life! We are going to spend the rest of eternity studying God’s behavior. Shouldn’t we get started with that task now?
27. In the fields of philosophy and logic, there are many conundrums which have no possible answers. If you were to ask someone if God can do anything, his initial response would probably be, “Yes.” But, can God make a rock so large that He cannot move it? That is just one of many internally contradictory questions that could be asked.
28. Of course, to human beings the greatest conundrum of all is the existence of sin. If we do not understand the story of the great controversy from the point of Satan’s rebellion in heaven to his final destruction after the third coming, it is very likely that we will be

confused.

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. 492.1.

29. Do you have problems in your thinking when you consider God's absolute sovereignty and the question of the origin of evil? If God is absolutely sovereign, shouldn't He have prevented evil? Why didn't He? (See the handout entitled "Love" on our website, [www.theox.org](http://www.theox.org).)
30. What are the advantages and disadvantages of using symbols? Symbols can be powerful ways to teach lessons. But, as we mentioned in the case of Jesus earlier, they can also be misunderstood.
31. Do we have a clear understanding of how bad things had become in Jerusalem and in Judea in Jeremiah's day? What would have led them to offer their own children as sacrifices to a pagan god? What would have led God to finally step back and allow them to be conquered by the Babylonians?
32. How well do we understand the extent of our own sins today? Might God have to do something remarkable in dealing with us?
33. As we approach the end of time, do we need to be more blunt in telling things like they are instead of using symbols? Using physical symbols makes more profound impressions on visually-oriented people.
34. We are more than 170 years past the Great Disappointment in 1844. Sometime soon, probation will close, and there will be no changing after that. Everyone will have made up his own mind about God; God does not preemptively judge us until we have been given that opportunity.
35. Do you think the people of Jerusalem really understood the symbols of the smashed clay pot and the rotten linen shorts?
36. The bronze serpent that Moses made following God's instruction recorded in Numbers 21 can be a challenge for us to understand. Of course, Christians have compared it to Christ's crucifixion. But, throughout Scripture from Genesis 3 to Revelation 12:9, serpents and dragons have been symbols of Satan.
37. We know that Satan has been doing everything possible down through history to imitate Christ and make it appear that he is the true Christ. In the case of the ancient Israelites, the snakes were an ever-present evil; but, God protected them until they began complaining once again about God's plans and His leadings. See Deuteronomy 8:15.
38. The ancient pagans sometimes had insight enough to believe that their idols were merely symbols of their gods. When talking about symbols, do we need to remember the second commandment? Why is it that some large Christian groups have chosen to leave out the second commandment when teaching about the Ten Commandments?
39. Unfortunately, as we mentioned earlier, the children of Israel preserved the bronze snake that Moses had put together, and it was being worshiped as an idol in Hezekiah's day 700 years later! (See 2 Kings 18:4.)

40. In our times, it might seem that our lives are dominated by sound bites, symbols, abstract images, etc.
41. Review again the history of the children of Israel from the time of Moses to the time of Jeremiah. There was a partial conquest of Canaan in the days of Joshua, and then there were the crazy times of the judges. That was followed by the united monarchy including Saul's apostasy, David's success in bringing the nation together, and then his adultery, and Solomon's idolatry. Then, the divided monarchy, and almost nonstop deterioration with bad kings and only a few exceptions down to the point of Assyrian captivity of the northern tribes, and finally, Babylonian exile for Judah. Think of all the attempts God made through prophets, judges, priests, kings, men, and women in different kinds of positions to remind them of His role and what His plan was for them.
42. Look at the following list of symbols used by Jeremiah at different times in his ministry: Jeremiah 13:1-9; 19:1-15; 27:1-15; 28:10-17; 32:1-15; 42:8-13; and 51:59-64. In these passages we have the stories of the potter's broken vessel, the linen belt, the yoke which Jeremiah wore on his neck, the field he purchased in Anathoth, the large stones that were to be buried in the brick pavement in Tahpanhes in Egypt, and finally, the scroll that contained a prophecy about Babylon's doom.
43. Often, those prophecies involved some important thing that the prophet himself had to do.
44. Symbols may play a big part in our lives. What symbols are important in our church lives today? Do we spend time thinking about the latter rain? The sealing? The time of trouble? The second coming? Or, do we try to put those things out of our minds? What symbols would you like to see have a more prominent role in the church today?

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