

Central Study Hour – Lesson 6 on Jeremiah: “Symbolic Acts”

*INTRODUCTION: The Bible is full of symbolism.

What are the most familiar symbols in the Bible? Below are some samples.

- 1.) Sacrificial lamb, Ark of the Covenant and other Sanctuary items – symbols of salvation.
- 2.) Lion with wings, four headed leopard (Dan. 7), metal man (Dan. 2), beast of Rev. 13 – symbols of prophecy.
- 3.) Lost coin, sowing the seed, the wicked husbandmen, the mustard seed – symbols in Jesus’ parables.

Why are there so many symbols in the Bible?

- 1.) Symbols are easier to remember, 2.) are more simple, and 3.) better reach the heart.

The symbols in Jeremiah may not be as well known, but some of them really stand out because God asked Jeremiah to act them out.

What are these? 1.) The smashed jar, and 2.) The buried loincloth. In addition to these two acted-out parables or prophecies, the potter and the clay symbolism is also prominent in Jeremiah.

*SUNDAY: THE TRUTH IN SYMBOLS – Sunday’s lesson covers two symbols that are not from the book of Jeremiah (Sacrifices of Cain & Abel and the bronze serpent). We’ll deal with these at the end of the lesson if there is time.

*MONDAY: THE POTTER’S CLAY

Read Jeremiah 18:1-4. *What difficulty did the potter have?* The clay vessel was marred, damaged or not coming out correctly.

What did the potter have to do? The potter had to start over. (Personal experience or observation of a potter at work would be helpful here.)

Jeremiah watched a potter come to be dissatisfied with his work and decide to ball up the clay, plop it down on the wheel and start over again to get it right.

Read Jer. 18:4, 5. *Who does the potter represent?* God. *What does the clay represent?* Israel/Judah - God’s people.

God is asking why He can’t just start over again with them as a potter restarts with a lump of clay.

What was God asking His people to do? To be pliable in His hands, to cooperate, to let Him mold and shape their lives.

But were God’s people pliable and cooperative? No!

In **Isaiah 29:16** God describes them as though they were clay speaking and denying that the potter even made them. Shall the thing made say of him who made it, “He did not make me.”

Did Judah act like that? Do people act like that and even say this today?

Clay can’t really have an attitude, but Isaiah uses personification of clay to show how ridiculous people can be toward God.

Read Is. 45:9. (After reading, repeat the following part of the verse) **“Woe to him who strives with his maker.”** *Can clay seriously question the potter and ask “what are you making?”* No!

What can clay really know about the potter? Nothing.

How can clay question the potter? After all, the potter can just ball up the clay, plop it down again and start over.

Who’s really in control? The potter. See mem. verse at beginning of the lesson on p. 46. **Read Romans 9:21.**

So what should be the attitude of the clay?

Isaiah 64:8 is a verse worth memorizing. **Read Is. 64:8. "But now, O LORD, thou art our Father, we are the clay, and thou our potter, and we all are the work of thine hand."**

Since the potter, that is, God, has full control, how can we learn to trust ourselves completely into His hands, to mold and shape us as pliable clay? How do we learn to trust God like that?

1st) *Don't we first have to learn to not think we are so smart? Cain was like clay trying to tell his maker how it should be, right? So we need true humility so we really will listen to God...and to those who God uses to guide us in specific situations.*

2nd) *To learn to trust God, we must come to know Him personally. When we really know Him, we can't help but trust Him. But how can we know Him? To come to know and trust God it is essential to talk to Him and to read His words written to us.*

***TUESDAY & WEDNESDAY: THE DEGENERATION of A NATION and SMASHING THE JAR.**

Jeremiah 19 details much of the wickedness of Judah. In response, God directs Jeremiah to do a symbolic act here to show what's going to happen. It's an acted out prophecy or like an acted out parable.

Read Jeremiah 19:1-5.

What does Jeremiah have in his hand? A clay flask or pitcher for pouring water.

Why does Jeremiah take some of the elders from among the priests? The priests are corrupt and are to be witnesses of God's message and tell other leaders what they saw Jeremiah do.

God sends Jeremiah and the delegation of priests to the Potsherd Gate that goes out into the Valley of Hinnom. This location is meaningful for two reasons: 1.) The Valley of Hinnom was where child sacrifices had been done during the reigns of the most wicked kings of Judah (Ahaz, Manasseh) and was likely being repeated under Jehoiakim, 2.) The Potsherd Gate was the dumping off area for broken pottery and other junk. It's basically the city dump. This is a fitting scene to be looking at when considering the catastrophe that Jeremiah prophesies will be coming upon them. It's in plain view of the place of the most vile practices of their idolatry.

*Why does Jeremiah say a catastrophe will come upon them? See **verses 4 & 5** again.*

Read Jer. 19:7-9.

What bad things will happen? Vs. 7 Sword and death, vs. 8 the city made desolate, vs. 9 siege and cannibalism.

Read Jer. 19: 10, 11.

So Jeremiah smashes the clay jar and basically says that's what will happen to this people and this city; Jerusalem and Judah.

Why do you think God had Jeremiah break the clay flask instead of only using words? Words can be misconstrued and twisted when these elders go back to share with others. The smashing of the flask and the location conveyed a message that would be hard to miss. "Actions speak louder than words," and more clearly as well.

Was Jeremiah's prophecy of Judah and Jerusalem's destruction final and irrevocable or, was it conditional?

According to the potter and clay message it was conditional. See **Jer. 18:6-8**. If they would heed God's messages through Jeremiah, total destruction would not be necessary.

Were they listening to Jeremiah? No! What were they accusing him of being? A false prophet.

What hope is there when people won't listen to God's messages? Are we listening today?

***THURSDAY: THE LINEN BELT**

Read Jeremiah 13:1, 2.

KJV calls it a linen girdle, the NIV a linen belt, NKJV a linen sash, Interlinear Bible a linen band.

What exactly is it? The Brown, Driver Briggs Hebrew Lexicon says it's a loincloth. The other meanings used by the above Bible translations were not even given as possible definitions in the BDB Hebrew Lexicon.

When you hear the word loincloth what do you picture? I picture a Native American Indian in summer at the time of the early settlers or a jungle warrior from an old missionary story book with just a cloth wrapped around his waist and upper thighs. That's a loincloth.

What's the closest thing to a loincloth in the clothing of our society? Underwear – it's an undergarment.

Jeremiah is about to do something symbolic with a loincloth or underwear!

What does God ask Jeremiah to do?

Read Jer. 13:3-5. He wasn't to wash the loincloth (vs. 1) and he was to walk all the way to the Euphrates River (vs. 3) which was 350-400 miles away. The loincloth would surely become very sweaty, dusty and smelly by then. Then Jeremiah was to bury the loincloth in the rocks and dirt of the river bank and walk back to Judah.

Why the Euphrates River? The Euphrates River was where the Babylonians were and many people of Judah had already been taken there as prisoners by this time. Daniel had already been in Babylon 8 years. Thousands of other Judeans were taken to Babylon as prisoners the same year that Jeremiah buried the loincloth.

Jeremiah was probably being closely watched as most of the leadership in Jerusalem considered Jeremiah to be a traitor on the Babylonian's side because of his prophecies that Babylon would destroy them. If Jeremiah met with any Babylonian, he'd be charged with being a spy.

Just imagine when reports came back to the king and other leaders in Judah.

Who did Jeremiah meet? Who did he talk with? Nobody.

Why did Jeremiah walk all the way to the Euphrates River? We don't know.

Well, he must have done something? Well, he buried his underwear in the riverbank.

What?

Then what happened?

Read Jer. 13:6, 7. Okay, so he digs up the loincloth or underwear and finds the cloth is rotting. It's ripped and tattered with holes.

What does this mean? **Read Jer. 13:8-10.**

What does the rotten loincloth represent? It symbolizes the ruin and humiliation of Judah who followed other gods and refused to hear the words of Yahweh. Many were taken into captivity in Babylon along the Euphrates River and left as a useless rotting loincloth. The loincloth or underwear represented God's people.

There is a positive side to the loincloth. **Read Jer. 13:11.**

Just as undergarments are the closest to the body, God wants His people close to Him, to cling to Him. But if they will not hear Him; if they will not cling to God, then the rotting, discarded undergarment better fit them as a symbol.

Will you be more likely to remember this lesson because of the symbol of the loincloth?

What's the lesson for us? Stay close to God, listen to Him and cling to Him!

*SUNDAY: TRUTH IN SYMBOLS

Genesis 4:3-7. *What is the story of Gen. 4?* Cain and Abel. The symbolism involves their two different sacrifices. Cain brought his crops as a sacrifice to God, and Abel sacrificed an animal.

What do these two different sacrifices mean? What do they symbolize?

First, **Abel** obeyed God in offering a lamb or goat.

What did the animal symbolize? The coming Redeemer, who would die and shed His blood for the sins of lost humanity. The sacrificial lamb that prefigured Jesus' death on the cross is the basis for our hope of eternal life. It represents that salvation is a gift of God. Humans could never earn it or demand it. It's a gift! When Abel brought his sacrifice, it showed that he knew he was a sinner in need of God's great gift.

Second, **Cain** didn't bring an animal as God had instructed to be done. Since he was a gardener or farmer, he thought it would make more sense for him to bring a nice sample from the fruit of his labor, his own hard work. Is that so bad?

So, what does Cain's sacrifice symbolize? Did Cain's sacrifice show the future death of Jesus on the cross for our forgiveness and salvation? No! No shedding of blood, no penalty of sin being paid.

Did Cain's offering show that salvation can only be a gift from God? No.

What did Cain's sacrifice symbolize? What does it show? Cain was basically saying, "Just accept my hard work, God." And "You must approve of me." Cain's sacrifice symbolizes working to earn credit/merit with God – salvation by my own works.

Isn't that an insult to God's gift? Yes! Cain's offering actually represents a rejection of the gift of salvation offered through the incredible sacrifice of Jesus. "I don't need it. My way is better." Therefore, it also represents trust in human reasoning over trust in God.

Abel's sacrifice was an acted out prophecy of Jesus' sacrifice. It gave hope for the future.

What could Cain's sacrifice reveal about the coming Messiah? Nothing! It wasn't any different from the idols and false gods that were later developed by all the counterfeit religions of the ancient world. So Cain concocted the first counterfeit religion; either trying to appease God or prove yourself to God.

Do you ever find yourself trying to appease God or prove yourself to God?

When one experiences God's grace, it sets him or her free from that trap.

Read Numbers 21:4-9. This bronze serpent is a strange symbol.

Summary: When poisonous snakes were biting the people, God had Moses make a serpent out of bronze and put it up on a pole. If bitten persons would just look at the bronze snake, they'd live.

What did the snake symbolize? It actually represents Jesus.

Why is that so surprising? A snake is connected with Satan in the story of the fall of Adam and Eve in Gen. 3 and clearly a symbol of the devil in Rev. 12.

How can a snake be a fitting symbol of Jesus? According to 2 Cor. 5:21, Christ became sin for us when He died on the cross.

What is the lesson for how we are to be healed or saved? We must look to Jesus.