Idioms from the Bible

15 Common Sayings About Body Parts

Part 1: Reading

Idioms, Meanings, and Historical Origins

An idiom is a group of words with a special meaning that is different from the literal meaning of each single word. Many everyday English phrases come straight from the Bible, especially from older translations like the King James Version (KJV). Learning these phrases is a great way to build vocabulary for ESL students, homeschool children, and anyone who wants to learn English with the Bible!

As you study the idiom, look up the related Bible verse. Most English speakers find the archaic text of the KJV to be too complex. Fortunately, the English Standard Version (ESV) of the Bible keeps many of the classic English words and metaphors that are in earlier translations like the KJV. If the language of the ESV is still not clear, the Easy-to-Read Version (ERV) translates the meaning of these ancient idioms into simple English so anyone can understand them right away. Use several translations as you try to understand these idioms. An online side-by-side Bible can be very helpful.

https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/

Directions:
Read each idiom, its meaning, and the short story about how the phrase began.

1. A Thorn in the Flesh / A Thorn in My Side

> **Meaning:** An ongoing pain or annoying problem that will not go away.

Bible Verses:

Numbers 33:55 and 2 Corinthians 12:7

Historical Origin:

Both versions of this idiom come directly from the Bible. In Numbers 33:55, Moses warned the Israelites that leaving enemies in the land would bring constant trouble, like "a thorn in your side". Centuries later, the Apostle Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 12:7 that God allowed him to suffer from a painful, ongoing struggle to keep him humble, which the ESV calls "a thorn...in the flesh" and the ERV explains simply as "a painful problem."

Examples:

- That noisy neighbor has been **a thorn in my side** all summer.
- My sore knee is **a thorn in the flesh** when I try to run.
- Our old computer is **a** constant **thorn in our side** at work.

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2. An Eye for an Eye

Meaning: A punishment that matches the exact harm someone caused.

Bible Verses:

Exodus 21:24 and Matthew 5:38

Historical Origin:

The "eye for an eye" law meant that a punishment had to match the crime. A person who caused an injury would receive that exact same injury in return. Before Moses wrote it down in Exodus, similar laws already existed in ancient Near Eastern cultures, such as the Code of Hammurabi. In the Old Testament, God gave this law to judges to make sure punishments were fair and did not go too far. Later, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught his followers not to take personal revenge, even if someone hurts them.

Examples:

- If we always demand **an eye for an eye**, the fighting will never stop.
- He wanted **an eye for an eye** after his brother broke his favorite toy.
- Modern courts do not usually follow **a** strict **eye-for-an-eye** rule.

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3. By the Skin of My Teeth

Meaning: Escaping danger or failure by the smallest possible amount.

Bible Verse:

Job 19:20

Historical Origin:

This phrase originated in the Bible. Job lost his children, his wealth, and his health, leaving him near death. Teeth do not actually have skin, so Job used this strange picture to show he had almost nothing left and barely survived his terrible suffering. While the ESV keeps the exact idiom, the ERV leaves out the teeth metaphor and describes Job's weak, thin body instead.

Examples:

- We ran through the airport and caught our flight **by the skin of our teeth**.
- He studied all night and passed the math test **by the skin of his teeth**.
- The deer jumped out of the road and missed the car **by the skin of its teeth**.

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4. Feet of Clay

Meaning: A hidden weakness in someone who seems strong and important.

Bible Verse:

Daniel 2:33

Historical Origin:

This idiom comes from the Bible. King Nebuchadnezzar had a dream about a giant, shiny statue with a head of gold and legs of strong iron. However, its feet were mixed with weak clay. A stone hit the weak feet, and the whole giant statue crashed down, showing that even great rulers have weak spots.

Examples:

- Many famous leaders turn out to have **feet of clay** when we learn about their private lives.
- The company looked rich on the outside, but it had **feet of clay** and soon went out of business.
- Even our greatest heroes are human and have **feet of clay**.

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5. Fell Flat on His Face

Meaning: To bow down low in deep respect, or to fail completely.

Bible Verse:

Numbers 22:31

Historical Origin:

This phrase comes from the Bible, with the exact wording "fell flat on his face" coming from the King James Version (KJV). A prophet named Balaam was riding his donkey when the Lord opened his eyes to see an angel blocking the road with a drawn sword. Terrified and full of respect, Balaam dropped straight to the ground with his face down. Today, people don't often use this phrase to show deep respect. Instead, they mostly use it when a plan fails badly.

Examples:

- I tried to tell a funny joke, but it **fell flat on its face** and nobody laughed. (failure)
- She tripped over the rug and **fell flat on her face** in the hallway. (failure)
- Their plan to sell winter coats in July **fell flat on its face**. (failure)
- When my son was arrested, I **fell flat on my face** and prayed to God for help. (respect)

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6. Flesh and Blood

Meaning: A real human being, rather than God or a spirit, or a close blood relative.

Bible Verse:

Matthew 16:17

Historical Origin:

While ancient Jewish writers also used this phrase, it became popular in English through the Bible. When Peter declared that Jesus was the Messiah, Jesus explained that no ordinary human ("flesh and blood" in the ESV, or "no one" in the ERV) could have taught Peter that truth. Only God the Father showed it to him. Today, people also use "flesh and blood" to talk about their close family members who are related by genetics.

Examples:

- Seeing the old photos reminded me that my grandparents were real **flesh and blood** people. (human)
- I cannot forgive him easily because I am only **flesh and blood**. (human)
- She loves her adopted son just as much as her own **flesh and blood**. (genetic family member)

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7. Harden His Heart

Meaning: To become stubborn and refuse to listen or care.

Bible Verse:

Exodus 4:21

Historical Origin:

This phrase originated in the Bible. In ancient Hebrew thought, the heart was the center of a person's mind and choices, not just feelings. When Pharaoh refused to free the Israelite slaves even after seeing mighty miracles, his stubbornness was described as a hard heart that nothing could soften, which the ERV translates plainly as "very stubborn."

Examples:

- Do not **harden your heart** when a friend asks you for forgiveness.
- Years of living alone on the streets had **hardened his heart** toward strangers.
- She refused to **harden her heart** even after people treated her unfairly.

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8. In the Twinkling of an Eye

Meaning: Happening very fast.

Bible Verse:

1 Corinthians 15:52

Historical Origin:

This idiom comes from the Bible. The Apostle Paul wrote about the future day when Jesus returns and God gives believers new, eternal bodies. Paul wanted readers to know this amazing change will happen instantly, faster than a flash of light in a blinking eye (which the ERV explains as "the time of a second" and "as quickly as an eye blinks").

Examples:

- The children ate all the warm cookies **in the twinkling of an eye**.
- Summer vacation always seems to pass **in the twinkling of an eye**.
- The magic trick was over **in the twinkling of an eye**.

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9. Put Words in Her Mouth

Meaning: Tell someone what to say, or claim they said something they did not.

Bible Verse:

2 Samuel 14:3

Historical Origin:

This idiom comes from the Bible. King David was angry at his son Absalom and refused to see him. David's army commander, Joab, wanted to bring the father and son back together, so he hired a clever woman to tell David a story. Joab planned her exact speech ahead of time so she would convince the king.

Examples:

- Stop **putting words in my mouth**; I never said I hated your cooking!
- The lawyer tried to **put words in the witness's mouth** during the trial.
- He was so nervous before his speech that his friend had to **put words in his mouth**.

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10. See Eye to Eye

Meaning: To see something clearly and agree completely with someone.

Bible Verse:

Isaiah 52:8

Historical Origin:

This phrase originated in the Bible. In Isaiah's vision, guards standing on the broken walls of Jerusalem watch the Lord return to rescue his people. In Hebrew, seeing "eye to eye" meant seeing something clearly right in front of you, face-to-face. Over time, English speakers began using the phrase to mean two people looking at an issue the exact same way.

Examples:

- My sister and I do not always see **eye to eye** on what movies to watch.
- It is great to work with a partner when you see **eye to eye** on the goals.
- The two managers finally saw **eye to eye** after a long meeting.

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11. The Apple of His Eye

Meaning: Someone who is loved and cared for above all others.

Bible Verse:

Deuteronomy 32:10

Historical Origin:

This idiom comes from the Bible. In ancient times, people called the dark center of the eye (the pupil) the "apple" because it was round like a small fruit. This is why the ERV translates the phrase as "the pupil of his eye." Because your eyes are so delicate, you protect them instinctively. Moses used this picture to show how carefully God watched over and protected the people of Israel in the desert.

Examples:

- Little Emma is **the apple of her grandfather's eye**.
- My dog follows me everywhere because I am **the apple of his eye**.
- She loves all her nieces, but the youngest one is **the apple of her eye**.

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12. The Blind Leading the Blind

Meaning: A person who does not know what they are doing tries to guide someone else.

Bible Verse:

Matthew 15:14

Historical Origin:

Similar proverbs existed in ancient Greek and Roman writings, and Jesus used this vivid word picture in his teaching. Jesus was talking about religious leaders called Pharisees who did not understand God's true word. Since they could not see spiritual truth themselves, following their teaching would only lead people into trouble.

Examples:

- Asking me to help you fix your car is like **the blind leading the blind**!
- Neither of us knew how to read the map, so it was **the blind leading the blind**.
- When two new workers try to train each other, it often becomes **the blind leading the blind**.

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13. The Spirit is Willing, but the Flesh is Weak

Meaning: You want to do the right thing, but your body gets tired or tempted.

Bible Verse:

Matthew 26:41

Historical Origin:

This saying comes directly from the Bible. Right before Jesus was arrested in the garden of Gethsemane, he asked his disciples to stay awake and pray with him. Even though the disciples truly loved Jesus and wanted to support him, they were exhausted and kept falling asleep. Jesus spoke these gentle words to show he understood their human weakness, which the ERV translates simply as "your body is weak."

Examples:

- I planned to wake up at 5:00 AM to exercise, but **the spirit is willing and the flesh is weak**.
- She wanted to finish reading the book tonight, but **the spirit is willing and the flesh is weak**.
- Trying to skip dessert at a birthday party proves that **the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak**.

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14. Turn the Other Cheek

Meaning: Stay calm and refuse to fight back when someone insults or hurts you.

Bible Verse:

Matthew 5:39

Historical Origin:

This idiom comes from the Bible. During Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught his followers how to live differently from the world. In ancient times, a slap on the right cheek was a deep insult. Instead of hitting back or taking revenge, Jesus told his followers to respond with patience, grace, and self-control. Both translations express this idea clearly, though neither uses the exact modern four-word phrase "turn the other cheek."

Examples:

- When the angry customer yelled at him, the clerk smiled and **turned the other cheek**.
- It is hard to **turn the other cheek** when someone spreads mean rumors about you.
- Teaching children to **turn the other cheek** helps stop playground fights.

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15. Wash Your Hands of It

Meaning: Refuse to take responsibility or blame for something.

Bible Verse:

Matthew 27:24 and Deuteronomy 21:6

Historical Origin:

Washing hands to show innocence was an old Jewish custom mentioned in Deuteronomy 21:6, and this Gospel story made the phrase famous in English. The Roman governor Pontius Pilate knew Jesus had done nothing wrong, yet the crowd demanded Jesus's death. In Matthew 27:24, to show he was not responsible for killing an innocent man, Pilate "washed his hands" in front of everyone, which later grew into the modern phrase "wash your hands of it."

Examples:

- After trying to help his friend for months, he finally **washed his hands of the whole mess**.
- The manager refused to fix the mistake and **washed his hands of the project**.
- You cannot just **wash your hands of the problem** when you helped cause it.

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Name: _____ Date: _____

Part 2: Origin Matching

Directions:
Match each idiom from Part 1 with its historical background detail.

Idiom	Match	Historical Origin Clue
1. A Thorn in My Side	_____	Someone who is special and deeply treasured more than anyone else.
2. An Eye for an Eye	_____	A real person (not God or a spirit), or a biological family member.
3. Apple of His Eye	_____	Paying someone back with the exact same harm they did to you.
4. By the Skin of My Teeth	_____	Having the same opinion and thinking the exact same way as another person.
5. Feet of Clay	_____	Choosing peace and not getting even when someone treats you badly.
6. Fell Flat on His Face	_____	A constant bother or painful trouble that keeps hurting you.
7. Flesh and Blood	_____	A secret flaw in a person who looks powerful and successful.
8. Harden His Heart	_____	Walking away and saying a problem is not your fault anymore.
9. In the Twinkling of an Eye	_____	Being cold and refusing to change your mind or show kindness.
10. Put Words in Her Mouth	_____	Barely making it out of trouble or almost failing by just a tiny bit.
11. See Eye to Eye	_____	Having good intentions in your heart, even though your body gives in to tiredness or sin.
12. The Blind Leading the Blind	_____	Telling someone exactly what to say, or lying about what another person said.
13. The Spirit is Willing, but the Flesh is Weak	_____	Happening instantly, in just a split second.
14. Turn the Other Cheek	_____	Someone who lacks skill or knowledge trying to teach or help another person.
15. Wash Your Hands of It	_____	Kneeling down to show great honor, or having a plan go completely wrong.

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Name: _____ Date: _____

Part 3: Context and Application

Directions:
Complete each sentence using each of the 10 idioms from Part 1 once.
Change the pronoun or verb form if needed. Some words may be used twice.

1. When the storm hit, the sky went dark _____.
2. Even when my brother and I argue, I will always help him because he is my own _____.
3. My boss and I _____ on how to run the store, so we make a great team!
4. After being pushed on the playground, Leo decided to _____ instead of fighting back.
5. Neither of us knew how to fix the printer; it was _____.
6. Please do not _____ when your little brother says he is sorry.
7. When the beloved community leader was arrested for dishonesty, his followers realized their hero had _____.
8. When the king saw the messenger from God, he _____ in deep respect.
9. I love my grandfather very much, and he always tells me that I am the _____.
10. The reporter tried to _____ by claiming I hated the new park.
11. This annoying toothache has been _____ all week long!
12. You cannot just _____ when you are the one who broke the window!
13. Marcus scratched my car, so I wanted revenge, believing in _____.
14. I wanted to stay up late and finish my homework, but I fell asleep at my desk. _____.
15. Angels do not have real human bodies like we do; they are not made of _____.
16. The goalkeeper dove across the net and blocked the soccer ball _____.
17. Sarah spent three weeks planning a surprise party, but her plan _____ when her sister accidentally told the secret.

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Name: _____ Date: _____

Part 4: Writing

Question 1:
Choose one idiom from the reading and explain in 2–3 sentences how its historical story connects to its meaning today.

Question 2:
Write a dialogue using at least 2-3 of the idioms from the reading

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Answer Keys

Origin Matching

1. F
2. C
3. A
4. J
5. G
6. O
7. B
8. I
9. M
10. L
11. D
12. N
13. K
14. E
15. H

Context and Application

1. in the twinkling of an eye
2. flesh and blood
3. see eye to eye
4. turn the other cheek
5. the blind leading the blind
6. harden your heart
7. feet of clay
8. fell flat on his face
9. apple of his eye
10. put words in my mouth
11. a thorn in my side
12. wash your hands of it
13. an eye for an eye
14. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak
15. flesh and blood
16. by the skin of his teeth
17. fell flat on its face

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