

# BIBLICALLY SPEAKING

Have you ever heard someone say, "I wash my hands of it," but they were nowhere near water? Or maybe you heard someone say, "He was burning the midnight oil," and you wondered if perhaps they had an oil lamp they used for that purpose?

Expressions or idioms are groups of words, which when used together have different meanings than the individual words have. For example, when someone is frustrated with a certain situation and says, "I wash my hands of it," this doesn't mean that the person has literally washed his hands. This saying is rooted in the account from the Bible where Pontius Pilate washes his hands after Jesus' trial, symbolizing that he did not desire to take any responsibility for Jesus' crucifixion. (Matthew 27:24) Therefore, when someone uses this expression, he is saying he does not wish to have any part in what is going on.





Many expressions and idioms that are frequently used today originated from the Bible. The next time you hear someone use one of the following expressions, you'll know where it came from, and will be able to point people to its origin.

⌘ Coming to understand that something is doomed to failure or defeat can be expressed as "the handwriting on the wall."

**Basis: Daniel 5:5-6.** "Suddenly the fingers of a human hand appeared and wrote on the plaster of the wall, near the lampstand in the royal palace. The king watched the hand as it wrote. His face turned pale and he was so frightened that his knees knocked together and his legs gave way." (NIV)

King Belshazzar and his court were feasting and drinking wine, using goblets and tableware from the temple of God. In the middle of this revelry, the fingers of a hand began writing on the wall. The writing read "MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN" (Daniel 5:25 KJV). Belshazzar called for Daniel to interpret this strange writing: "MENE; God hath numbered thy kingdom, and finished it. TEKEL; Thou art weighed in the balances, and art found wanting. PERES; Thy kingdom is divided, and given to the Medes and Persians. ... In that night was Belshazzar the king of the Chaldeans slain" (Daniel 5:26-28, 30 KJV). And that's how that phrase became associated as a harbinger<sup>1</sup> of doom. Read the full account in Daniel 5.

<sup>1</sup> harbinger: somebody or something that foreshadows or anticipates a future event

⌘ Doing more than is required is known as “going the extra mile.”

**Basis: Matthew 5:41.** “And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles.” (ESV)

This verse was part of the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus taught us how to live according to His new Law of Love. To do more for another, out of love, is the point Jesus was making in this verse. Other verses in this chapter that express core elements of God’s Law of Love are “Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you” (Matthew 5:42 ESV), and “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matthew 5:44 ESV).

⌘ If you had a narrow escape from a dangerous situation, you could say, “I escaped by the skin of my teeth.”

**Basis: Job 19:19–20.** “All my intimate friends abhor me, and those whom I loved have turned against me. My bones stick to my skin and to my flesh, and I have escaped by the skin of my teeth.” (ESV)

Since teeth don’t have skin, we can assume that Job was using “skin” to express an imaginary, minimal amount by which he escaped death.

*Look up the following references for some more well-known expressions:*

- Blind leading the blind: Matthew 15:14
- Scattered to the four winds: Jeremiah 49:36
- A fly in the ointment: Ecclesiastes 10:1
- Scapegoat: Leviticus 16:10
- The patience of Job: James 5:11
- Turn the other cheek: Luke 6:29
- To cast the first stone: John 8:7
- My brother’s keeper: Genesis 4:9
- Prodigal son: Luke 15:11–32

- Listen for or spot one of the expressions listed on this page, either in your daily conversations or in something that you read this week.
- Use one of these expressions in your conversation or in your language arts creative writing exercises.
- Ask someone who speaks a language other than your native tongue to teach you an idiom or an expression from their mother tongue, and how to use it correctly.