**18 Everyday Expressions Borrowed From the Bible**

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ISTOCK

The *Oxford English Dictionary* credits [The Wycliffe Bible](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wycliffe%27s_Bible), a 14th century Middle English translation of the Bible, with more early citations of English words than the works of Dickens, Ben Jonson, Jane Austen, Thomas Hardy, Samuel Pepys, and John Milton combined. The Bible even outranks William Shakespeare in the OED, with evidence of a grand total of 1547 new words compared to Shakespeare’s 1524.

But it doesn’t stop there. The numerous English translations and editions of the Bible produced over the centuries have likewise given us countless proverbs, sayings, and expressions, many of which have dropped into everyday use. Some are quite clearly religious—like [*O ye of little faith*](http://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/262250.html), *a fall from grace,* and*love thy neighbour*—but the Biblical origins of others, including the 18 explained here, are a little more surprising.

**1. AT THE ELEVENTH HOUR**

Do something at the eleventh hour, and you do it at the very last minute. It’s possible that [this phrase might have appeared in the language without any Biblical intervention](https://www.mentalfloss.com/article/49435/whats-origin-phrase-eleventh-hour), but the OED nevertheless credits it to the Parable of the Labourers in the Gospel of St Matthew (20:1-16), which metaphorically advises that no matter what time you start work the reward will always be the same.

**2. AT YOUR WIT’S END**

The earliest reference to *being at your wit’s end*in English dates back to the late 14th century. The phrase comes from Psalm 107, in which “they that go down to the sea in ships,” namely sailors and seafarers, are described as being thrown around by a storm at sea so that, “they reel to and fro, and stagger like a drunken man, and are at their wit’s end” (107: 23-27).

**3. THE BLIND LEADING THE BLIND**

The Roman poet Horace used his own version of *the blind leading the blind* in the 1st century BC, suggesting that it was already a fairly well known saying by the time it appeared in the New Testament: “Let them alone: they be blind leaders of the blind. And if the blind lead the blind, both shall fall into the ditch” (Matthew 15:14). Nevertheless, its inclusion in early editions of the Bible no doubt popularized its use in everyday language—[and even inspired a famous painting by Pieter Brueghel](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Blind_Leading_the_Blind#mediaviewer/File:Pieter_Bruegel_the_Elder_(1568)_The_Blind_Leading_the_Blind.jpg) literally interpreting the original quote.

**4. BY THE SKIN OF YOUR TEETH**

The Old Testament Book of Job records how Job is put through a series of trials, but eventually escapes “with the skin of my teeth” (19:20). Although precisely what Job meant these words to mean is debatable (and not helped by the fact that teeth don’t have skin), the usual interpretation is the one we use today—namely, that he escaped only by the narrowest of margins.

**5. TO CAST PEARLS BEFORE SWINE**

Meaning “to offer something of value to someone unable to appreciate it,” *to cast pearls before swine* comes from the New Testament: “Give not that which is holy unto the dogs, neither cast ye your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet” (Matthew, 7:6).

**6. EAT, DRINK AND BE MERRY**

This popular sentiment is outlined several times in the Bible ([Luke 12:19](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=luke+12%3A+19&version=KJV), [1 Corinthians 15:32](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1+Corinthians+15%3A32&version=KJV)), but appears first in the Book of Ecclesiastes: “man hath no better thing under the sun, than to eat, and to drink, and to be merry” (8:15).

**7. TO FALL BY THE WAYSIDE**

If something *falls by the wayside* (i.e. by the side of the road), then it fails to be seen through to completion or is side-lined in favor of some other project or endeavor. The earliest use of this phrase in English comes from William Tyndale’s translation of the Bible in 1526, and in particular his version of [the Parable of the Sower](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=luke+8&version=KJV), who “went out to sow his seeds, and as he sowed, some fell by the way side; and it was trodden down, and the fowls of the air devoured it” (Luke 8:5).

**8. FEET OF CLAY**

*Feet of clay* has been used in English since the 19th century to refer to a fundamental weakness that has the potential to lead to the downfall of something (or someone) otherwise great and powerful. It comes from the Book of Daniel (2:31-45), in which the prophet Daniel interprets a dream that the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar has had of an enormous, imposing statue. “This image’s head was of fine gold,” Daniel writes, “his breast and his arms of silver, his belly and his thighs of brass, his legs of iron, his feet part of iron and part of clay.” As the dream continues, suddenly a huge stone strikes the clay feet of the statue, causing it to collapse and break up into pieces. Daniel interprets the golden head of the statue as representing Nebuchadnezzar’s kingdom, while the silver torso represents an inferior kingdom that will follow his. The brass stomach and thighs represent a third and even more inferior kingdom that will follow that, and a fourth and final kingdom, partly strong like iron but partly weak like clay, is represented by its legs and feet. And it is this weakness, Daniel predicts, that will lead to the downfall of the entire structure.

**9. A FLY IN THE OINTMENT**

“Dead flies cause the ointment of the apothecary to send forth a stinking savour,” advises the Book of Ecclesiastes (10:1). The modern wording, *a fly in the ointment*, first appeared in the language in the early 1700s.

**10. HE THAT TOUCHETH PITCH**

The old adage that *he that touches pitch shall be defiled* advises that anyone who has even the slightest contact with someone who’s up to no good cannot avoid becoming corrupted themselves. The line comes from Ecclesiasticus, a book in the Biblical [Apocrypha](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Biblical_apocrypha) written in the 2nd century BC that warns that, “He that toucheth pitch shall be defiled therewith, and he that hath fellowship with a proud man shall be like unto him” (13:1).

**11. THE LAND OF MILK AND HONEY**

In Exodus (3:1-22), Moses is told by the vision of the burning bush to lead the Israelites out of Egypt and into Canaan, “a land flowing with milk and honey.” The phrase has since come to be widely used of any location promising great prosperity, respite, and comfort.

**12. THE LAND OF NOD**

Another famous Biblical land is *the Land of Nod*, lying “east of Eden” according to the Book of Genesis, to which Cain is exiled after he murders his brother, Abel (4:16). As a metaphor for falling asleep however, *the Land of Nod*was first used by Jonathan Swift in 1738 and is probably nothing more than a pun on a drooping or “nodding” head.

**13. A LEOPARD CANNOT CHANGE ITS SPOTS**

Implying that you cannot alter who you are innately meant to be, the old saying that *a leopard cannot change its spots*is a rewording of a verse from the Book of Jeremiah (13:23), that asks “Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots?”

**14. LIKE A LAMB TO THE SLAUGHTER**

If someone is blissfully unaware of the disaster about to befall them, then they’re *like a lamb to the slaughter*. The phrase is touched on a number of times in the Bible, most notably in the Book of Isaiah: “He is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth” (53:7).

**15. A MILLSTONE AROUND YOUR NECK**

The image of having *a millstone around your neck*, in the sense of having some kind of oppressive burden or responsibility, has been a cliché in English since the early 18th century. It comes from a famous New Testament speech in which Jesus explains that anyone who takes advantage of a child would be better of having “a millstone … hanged about his neck and be cast into the sea” than to try to enter into Heaven (Luke, 17:2).

**16. TO MOVE MOUNTAINS**

The idea that *faith can move mountains* is repeated a number of times in the Bible, including in one of the letters of St Paul: “though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains … I am nothing” (1 Corinthians 13:2). His words have been used as a familiar expression of achieving something impossible since the 16th century.

**17. THERE IS NOTHING NEW UNDER THE SUN**

As an expression of world-weariness and a tiredness of a lack of new ideas, the old adage that *there is nothing new under the Sun* is often wrongly attributed to Shakespeare, who used a similar line as the opening of his [59th sonnet](http://www.shakespeare-online.com/sonnets/59.html). In fact, the phrase comes from the Old Testament Book of Ecclesiastes, which explains “that which is done is that which shall be done, and there is no new thing under the Sun” (1:9).

**18. THE WRITING ON THE WALL**

In English, *the writing on the wall* has been a proverbial omen of misfortune since the early 18th century. It comes from the Old Testament tale of Belshazzar’s Feast, a grand banquet hosted by the Babylonian king Belshazzar for a thousand of his lords. As recounted in the Book of Daniel (5:1-31), in middle of the feast a ghostly disembodied hand supposedly appeared behind the king and wrote on the wall “*mene mene tekel upharsin*.” Unable to interpret the text himself (the words are literally a list of different Hebrew measurements), Belshazzar called on the prophet Daniel, who quickly explained that the message meant the king’s kingdom was soon to be “numbered, weighed, and divided.” That night, Belshazzar was killed, and Babylon was claimed by the Persians.

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