

Bite Size Bible Study

Idioms #91

By Pastor Lee

Idioms are a peculiar part of a language. They don't say what they mean and so when we try to translate them to another language or culture, they become nonsense.

If I told you that the police questioned me and I spilled my guts, you wouldn't think that my stomach split open and all of my intestines fell out would you? In our culture we would interpret it as I told them everything.

Our Bibles were written in the Jewish culture and it contains many idioms. Sometimes we are able to tell what is meant, but other times we need to know that idiom or the verse is nonsense and we label it as a "difficult scripture".

Case in point: *Then thine **heart be lifted up**, and thou forget the Lord thy God, which brought thee forth out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage;* Deuteronomy 8:14, KJV

If I were the translator translating each word it would not yield the intent of the writer, because it is a Hebrew idiom for being "proud." Once you know the idiom the sentence makes perfect sense, but without that knowledge you are "left in the dark" (an English idiom) as to its meaning.

An idiom is defined as a manner of expression peculiar to a given language, culture or people whose meanings cannot be understood through the context of the words alone. That means an idiom is a phrase that has no real meaning and is only understood because of the culture from which it is derived. We use idiomatic words and phrases all the time without realizing that we are doing it.

Here are just a few of our American English language idioms

Let me give you a hand. (Let me help.)

I put my nose to the grindstone. (I worked hard.)

You're pulling my leg. (You're joking.)

Break a leg. (Good luck.)

My ears are burning. (Someone is talking about me.)

My head is spinning (This is too much for me to think about.)

I'm dragging my feet (I'm procrastinating.)

When someone from another culture hears or reads these idioms, there is no way for them to comprehend the meaning unless they consult an outside source for interpretation.

To demonstrate how difficult it is to interpret an idiom, consider the following idiom from Mexico, "The farmer went into the field and hung up his tennis shoes."

When we read this, we see a farmer going out into the field and hanging his shoes up in a tree, fence post or something like that. There is no possible way for us to understand this passage without an outside source.

The phrase "hung up his tennis shoes" is equivalent to our idiom, "kicked the bucket." In other words, he died.

We have the same problem with Bible idioms.

His face fell = He was sad as in Genesis 4:5

He knew no quiet in the belly = He was greedy as in Job 20.20

Open the ear = inform as in Job 33.16

The right hand = mighty as in Psalms 89.13

To hide the face = to refuse to answer as in Psalms 102.2

Have a bad eye = to be stingy as in Proverbs 28.22

Have a good eye = to be generous as in Proverbs 22.9

Have a hard forehead = being stubborn as in Ezekiel 3.7

You have probably never noticed first idiom to be found in the Bible in Genesis 1:1. The phrase, "heaven and earth," is a Hebrew idiom meaning "all things." Remembered that the ancient Hebrews who wrote the Biblical text did not have a conception of the Milky Way Galaxy or the universe. They saw the heavens and stars as a canopy or tent covering the earth.

Genesis chapter one is not meant to be a scientific discussion on the origins of the solar system, but rather a poetic story about God's involvement with his whole of creation.

It is quite possible that there are many Hebrew idioms in the Bible, but because we do not know them from the culture of that day, we would never recognize them to be idioms. Therefore, we often understand them as literal when they were never meant to be literal. Some idioms are known only because they have survived as idioms. In Israel, the expressions "good eye" and "bad eye" are still used to mean "generous" and "stingy." Both can be found in both the Old and New Testaments. (Proverbs 22:9, Proverbs 23:6, Matthew 6:22,23).

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