

The Wired Word

Student Handout

Heart Language: Why a Bible in Sign Language

Sunday, October 11 2020 --- from 9:00-9:45am

Zoom: Meeting ID: 860 8980 7220 -- Passcode: 195152

Dear Class Member,

It was recently announced that after 39 years of effort, the entire Bible is now available in American Sign Language. This opens the help of God's Word to many for whom it was previously a closed book. We use this opportunity to explore why this resource was needed and to remind ourselves of the ways the Bible impacts our lives. So that will be the topic of our next class.

During this time of social distancing to control the spread of the virus, *The Wired Word* is including in the TWW student version the full lesson, with all the biblical commentary and additional discussion suggestions normally available only in the teacher's version.

How To Participate:

We are offering The Wired Word as a hybrid class. However, due to building renovations, this week will be by Zoom **ONLY**.

You can join in the Zoom discussion using a landline or cell phone by calling 1-301-715-8592, and you can also participate using a computer or smart device at: [https://us02web.zoom.us/j/86089807220?](https://us02web.zoom.us/j/86089807220?pwd=eStWa0ZZK0hOTVdwU0pjZlMrdk5ydz09)

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Please Note, due to renovations:

The Sunday, October 11 Wired Word Class will be by Zoom **ONLY** (No In-Person)

The Sunday, October 18 Wired Word Class is **CANCELLED**

The Sunday, October 25 Wired Word Class will be Hybrid (In-person and Zoom)

To subscribe or unsubscribe to the weekly mailing of The Wired Word student handout, please contact the church office at Office@sprucc.org.



Full Bible Now Available in American Sign Language

The Wired Word for the Week of October 11, 2020

In the News

"Answered Prayer! Sign Language Bible Complete After 39 Years." That's the way the American Bible Society headlined its news about the release of the full Bible in American Sign Language. (See [here](#) for a sample from Genesis 1:1-2:4a.)

But those of us who are not deaf may wonder why a sign language Bible might be desirable since deafness itself does not preclude the ability to read regular printed text. Melanie Clinton, writing for the Southern Baptist Church's International Mission Board, tells why the Sign Language Bible is needed:

"Written language is not a deaf person's heart language," Clinton says. "Our heart language is the one we feel most comfortable speaking, especially when we're having deep conversations. It's typically the first language we learned and the one we think and dream in. Deaf people's heart language is signed, not written," she says.

Clinton acknowledges that many deaf people have learned to read, but adds that "the linguistic structures of written languages are so different from signed languages, it was like learning a foreign language while simultaneously learning to read. The foreign, written language will generally never feel as natural as sign," she

says.

Ruby Greene, a deaf missionary in Central Asia, explains: "Sign language is how we process things, view things, understand ourselves, and understand God. ... If we can receive the Word in sign language, the barriers are gone; it goes straight to the heart, to our spirit. The Word then comes alive. ... It's vivid and real."

"Many deaf do not read, or prefer not to read," Clinton says. "Some deaf choose not to read, just like many English speakers choose to never learn a second language. Some can read things like text messages, signs and basic instructions, but they struggle to read more complex works, like the Bible." And many other deaf persons, especially in developing nations, are ostracized by society and are never given a formal education, Clinton explains..

Christianity Today tells how Renca Dunn, a deaf person, talks about having the Bible in her own language for the first time, and notes that she emphasizes the adjectives. "In English, she has no problem understanding the people, places, and things of Scripture," CT says. "But in her own language, the nouns vibrate with life and emotion."

"The clapping trees. The singing birds. The dancing meadows," Dunn says. "The persistent Esther. The revengeful Saul. The weeping Magdalene. Most of all, our loving Jesus."

American Sign Language (ASL) is not English turned into hand motions. Rather, it's a full language developed by deaf people with its own vocabulary and grammar. Thus, creating the ASL Bible was a lengthy project requiring effort from a skilled group of deaf people trained in biblical languages.

Harold Noe, a Hebrew and Greek scholar who worked with Deaf Missions, said in a 2004 interview that the translation can be difficult because ASL has a different syntax from English.

"The same sign used for 'resurrection' is the sign for 'stand up,'" Noe said. "I recall working with some children at the Iowa School for the Deaf. When I signed that sign for resurrection, the kids would stand up. I kept saying, 'No, it's not time to go yet.'"

The work on the ASL Bible translation began in 1981, when Duane King, a minister in the Independent Christian Church, who was a hearing person, realized that English was not the heart language of deaf people in America. Although a hearing person, King had previously started a church for the deaf and had learned to sign. But many deaf people didn't attend because they couldn't understand what was going on. So King decided the Bible needed to be translated into ASL. Working with [Deaf Missions](#), he helped start the project. Other Bible translation agencies, including the Deaf Bible Society, DOOR International, Deaf Harbor, American Bible Society, Wycliffe Bible Translators, Seed Company and Pioneer Bible Translators provided additional support.

We note that some announcements of the completion of the ASL Bible describe it as the "first" such Bible. That overlooks the fact that in March of this year the Jehovah Witnesses announced that [their ASL Bible was complete](#) and ready for use. We suspect, however, because the Jehovah Witnesses have their own translation of the Bible -- the New World Translation -- which sometimes renders key passages, such as those about the nature of Jesus Christ, differently from other English-language Bible translations that many orthodox (mainstream) Christian groups discount the Jehovah Witnesses' ASL Bible. Thus we can probably say that the new Bible just completed is the first mainstream ASL Bible.

The [ASL Bible is available online free](#).

More on this story can be found at these links:

[Sign Language Bible Complete After 39 Years. *Christianity Today*](#)

[Answered Prayer! Sign Language Bible Complete After 39 Years. *American Bible Society*](#)

[First Complete Sign Language Bible Available After Nearly 4 Decades. *Christian Post*](#)

[Three Reasons the Deaf Need Scripture in Sign Language. *IMB*](#)

The Big Questions

1. What do you think is meant by one's "heart language"?
2. Which do you think would be the more difficult: to be unable to see or to be unable to hear? Why?

3. If you speak more than one language, which one, if any, would you identify as your "heart language"? In which one is it easier to describe how you feel? Why?
4. How does your reading of the Bible help you connect with God? To what degree might you find that connection more difficult if the only interaction you had with the Bible was what others told you about it?
5. If you have been a hearing person but then became deaf, what sounds do you miss the most? If you've not lost your hearing, what sounds do you imagine you might miss if you became deaf?

Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

Isaiah 29:18

On that day the deaf shall hear the words of a scroll, and out of their gloom and darkness the eyes of the blind shall see. (For context, read 29:17-22.)

Isaiah spoke the prophecy in Isaiah 29 in about the year 701 B.C. while Jerusalem was under siege by the Assyrians. But Isaiah tells the people that after a time of tribulation and judgment God would save Jerusalem, and at that time, those who had turned a deaf ear to God's word previously would now hear it. But in a literal sense, verse 18 above sounds like a prophecy fulfilled by the ASL Bible.

Questions: Does "hear" in the verse above need to refer to sound waves being received by one's ear? What are some other ways we "hear" things? What are some impediments that keep people with normal hearing from receiving what is being said?

Mark 7:32-35

They brought to [Jesus] a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him. He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, "Ephphatha," that is, "Be opened." And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. (For context, read 7:31-37.)

This is a report of Jesus freeing a man from two communication blockages -- deafness and a speech impediment. As far as we know, there was no formal sign language in that day, but Jesus used his hands and his own saliva to communicate to the man what he intended to do.

We may overlook that Jesus performed an additional miracle as well: Assuming the man had *never before been able to hear*, just having his ears opened would mean that the words he was suddenly hearing would sound like nonsense to him. For example, he might understand the concept of "blue" -- the color of the sky -- but the first time he heard the word "blue" how would he be able to connect that to the color he had seen? How would a person who has never before heard be able to distinguish the word "blue" from the sounds of other people talking nearby?

But since the healed man immediately began talking, we can conclude that Jesus not only opened his ears but also enabled him to *understand* the words he was hearing, and then begin employing those words himself.

Questions: Jesus didn't always indicate to people he was going to heal what he was about to do. Why do you think he did this time? What do you think was the man's first reaction to hearing sounds? Why?

Isaiah 55:12

For you shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands. (For context, read 55:10-13.)

In Isaiah 55, the former exiles from Judah are invited to sustain themselves on God's nurturing word, something that would be difficult if they couldn't hear it. This verse from that chapter is likely the one that Renca Dunn, a deaf person mentioned in "In the News" above, had in mind when she spoke of "the clapping trees."

Questions: What does the imagery in this verse of clapping trees and singing mountains and hills communicate to you about joy and peace? What, if anything, does that imagery make you feel?

Proverbs 4:23

Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life. (No context needed.)

This verse may help us think about what is meant by a "heart language." As Melanie Clinton, quoted in the "In the News" section above, explained it, "Our heart language is the one we feel most comfortable speaking, especially when we're having deep conversations. It's typically the first language we learned and the one we think and dream in."

Questions: What does it mean to "keep your heart with all vigilance"? In what sense do "the springs of life" flow from it? What are the springs of life? What things make it easier to understand and embrace what is in your heart?

For Further Discussion

1. Discuss this, from TWW team member Malia Miller, who in her work as a high school guidance counselor has encountered several deaf or nearly deaf students: "Some who use assistive devices to hear have shared that there are times when being deaf is a blessing. For example, I worked with one student who was raised in a home that was dysfunctional, and there was constant strife among family members. Removing her hearing aids allowed her to more easily navigate this difficult environment and focus on more positive thoughts. She was a Christian, and she said that this truly allowed her the 'peace that surpasses all understanding' even if it was temporary. I have a current student with cochlear implants who said to me recently, that there is beauty in the quiet, and although he is thankful for this technology that allows him to hear, sometimes he misses the quiet world he enjoyed as a child. Sometimes disabilities are not always disabling ..."
2. Can you be a Christian if you haven't read the Bible? Must you have read the *whole* Bible? Must you be continuing to read it even if you've already read it all before? Explain your response to each question.
3. Comment on this: J.B. Phillips, a British scholar and Bible translator, once said that while paraphrasing some Old Testament books from Hebrew into English that it sometimes seemed to him as if he were working with bare wires without the electricity being turned off! How might seeing the scriptures in ASL be electrifying?
4. What role, if any, did the Bible play in your coming to faith to begin with? What role, if any, does it play in your ongoing Christian journey?
5. Respond to Ruby Greene's comment that "Sign language is how we process things, view things, understand ourselves, and understand God. ... If we can receive the Word in sign language, the barriers are gone; it goes straight to the heart, to our spirit. The Word then comes alive. ... It's vivid and real."

Responding to the News

To learn more about ASL, see [this site](#) from the U.S. Department of Health.

This would be a good time to reach out to someone who is deaf or hard of hearing to learn more about how the inability to hear impacts their life, relationships and spiritual journey.

If possible, ask a person who uses ASL to explain how that helps him or her in ways that printed text does not.

Prayer

Thank you, Lord, that the Bible is now accessible to people who rely on ASL. May it be as much a source of joy, challenge and guidance as printed and audio versions are to hearing persons. In Jesus' name. Amen.