

‘Jehovah Has Made His Face Shine Toward Them’

THERE are over 30 muscles in the human face. It takes 14 muscles working together just to make you smile! Imagine what your conversations would be like without these muscles. Appealing? Hardly. For those who are deaf, though, the facial muscles do much more than animate conversations. When combined with physical gestures, they are a significant means of conveying thoughts and ideas. Many people have marveled at how sign language is able to express even complex thoughts along with every nuance.

In recent times, deaf people worldwide have come to see a face that is richer in expression and color than any human face. Figuratively speaking, they have come to see “the face of Jehovah.” (Lam. 2:19) This has not been by chance. Jehovah has long shown great love for those who are deaf. He did so even as far back as in the ancient nation of Israel. (Lev. 19:14) In modern times, his love for the deaf has also been very evident. “[God’s] will is that all sorts of men should be saved and come to an accurate knowledge of truth.” (1 Tim. 2:4) By gaining accurate knowledge of the truth about God, many of the deaf have, in effect, come to see his face. How has this happened without the advantage of the spoken word? Before answering that question, let us consider why sign language is important to deaf people.

Seeing *Is* Hearing

There are many misconceptions concerning deaf people and sign language. Let us clear up some of them. Deaf people can drive automobiles. Lipreading is extremely difficult for them. Sign language has nothing in common with Braille, and it is not simply pantomime. There is not one universal sign language. Moreover, deaf people do have regional accents when signing.

Can deaf people read? While some read well, the truth is that *the vast majority* of the deaf struggle with reading. Why? Because what is on the printed page originates from a spoken language. Consider how a child with the ability to hear learns a language. From the moment the child is born, he is surrounded by people who speak the local tongue. In a short time, he is able to string words together and form sentences. This comes naturally just from *hearing* the language spoken. Thus, when hearing children begin to read, it is a matter of learning that the black marks on the page correspond to the sounds and words they already know.

(Now imagine yourself in a foreign country in a soundproof room made of glass. You have never heard the local language spoken. Each day, the local people come to you and try to speak to you through the glass. You cannot hear what they are saying. You see only that their lips are moving. Realizing that you do not understand them, they write those same words on a piece of paper and show you through the glass what they have written. They think that you must be able to understand it. How well do you think you would do? You would find communication nearly impossible in this situation. Why? Because what is written represents a language that you have never heard spoken.) This is precisely the situation in which most deaf people find themselves.

Sign language is a perfect vehicle for deaf people. A person uses signs to set up concepts in the space surrounding his body. His movements in that space along with his facial expressions follow the rules of grammar of sign language. Thus emerges a visual language that makes it possible to convey information to the eyes.

In fact, almost every move a deaf person makes with his hands, body, and face while signing has meaning. Facial expressions are not made just for the sake of dramatic impact. They are an integral part of the grammar of sign language. To illustrate: Asking a question with the eyebrows raised could indicate either a rhetorical question or one that elicits a yes or no answer. If eyebrows are lowered, this could indicate a who, what, where, when, why, or how question. Certain mouth movements may suggest the size of an object or the intensity of an action. The way a deaf person moves his head, lifts his shoulders, twitches his cheeks, and blinks his eyes all add subtle shades of meaning to the thought being conveyed.

These elements combine to create a linguistic feast for the eyes. Using this rich form of expression, deaf people who know sign language well are equipped to convey any concept—from poetic to technical, from romantic to humorous, from concrete to abstract.

Sign-Language Publications Make a Difference

When the knowledge of Jehovah is expressed visually in sign language, a deaf person is, in effect, able to hear the message and “put faith” in the Originator of the message. Hence, Jehovah’s Witnesses have made a diligent effort to preach to deaf people worldwide and to provide material for their benefit. (Rom. 10:14) Currently, there are 58 sign-language translation teams around the world, and sign-language publications on DVD are now available in 40 sign languages. Has all this work been worthwhile?

Jeremy, whose parents are both deaf, says: “I can remember my father spending hours in his bedroom poring over just a few paragraphs of an article in *The Watchtower*, trying to understand them. Suddenly he burst out of the room and excitedly signed: ‘I got it! I got it!’ He then proceeded to explain the meaning of the material to me. I was only 12 at the time. I took a quick glance at the paragraphs and signed: ‘Dad, I don’t think that is the meaning. It is . . .’ He made a motion for me to stop and went back into his room to figure out the meaning of the written text for himself. I will never forget the look of disappointment on his face and the admiration I felt as I watched him walk back into the bedroom. However, having sign-language publications on DVD has now made it possible for him to understand the information much better. Seeing his face light up when he expresses how he feels about Jehovah is something I do not take for granted.”

Consider also the experience of a Witness couple who spoke with Jessenia, a young deaf woman in Chile. After being given permission by her mother to show Jessenia *My Book of Bible Stories—On DVD* in Chilean Sign Language, they reported: “When Jessenia started to watch the story, she started to laugh and then gave way to tears. When her mother asked her why she was crying, she responded that it was because she liked what she was watching. Her mother then realized that she was able to understand everything on the DVD.”

A deaf woman living in a rural territory in Venezuela had one child, and she was pregnant with a second. She and her husband felt that they could not afford to have another child for economic reasons, so they were contemplating an abortion. Unaware of these developments, Jehovah’s Witnesses stopped by and showed them lesson 12 of the video *What Does God Require of Us?* in Venezuelan Sign Language. This lesson explains God’s view of abortion and murder. Later, the woman told the Witnesses how grateful she was to have studied that lesson. She said that as a result they had decided not to have an abortion. A life was spared with the help of a sign-language publication on DVD!

Lorraine, a deaf Witness, explains: “Learning the Bible has been like putting together a large puzzle. There were gaps—missing pieces—in my understanding of the overall picture. When Bible truths became more available in sign language, though, the gaps got filled in.” George, who is deaf and has been a Witness for 38 years, says: “There is no question that the ability to understand a matter for yourself gives you a measure of self-respect and confidence. I feel that the sign-language DVDs have had the greatest impact on me in terms of my own spiritual growth.”

“A Meeting in My Language!”

In addition to sign-language publications, Jehovah’s Witnesses have organized congregations where meetings are conducted entirely in sign language. Currently, there are over 1,100 sign-language congregations worldwide. The deaf audience is addressed in their language, and Bible truths are presented in the way a deaf person thinks—in his language. They are conveyed in a way that shows respect for his culture and life experience.

Has the formation of sign-language congregations been of value? Consider the experience of Cyril, who was baptized as one of Jehovah’s Witnesses in 1955. For years he studied written publications as best he could and attended Christian meetings faithfully. Sometimes interpreters were available and sometimes not. When there were none, he relied on Witnesses who lovingly tried to help by writing notes about what was being said from the platform. It was not until 1989, when he had been a Witness for some 34 years, that the first sign-language congregation in the United States was formed in New York City. As a member of that congregation, how did Cyril feel? “It was like coming out of the forest, out of a dark tunnel into the light. A meeting in my language!”

Sign-language congregations of Jehovah's Witnesses are places where deaf people can come together regularly to learn about God and worship him. They are places where God's people can thrive emotionally. Amid a world where deaf people may be linguistically and socially isolated, these congregations are havens of communication and association. In that environment, deaf people can learn, grow, and reach out in their service to Jehovah. Many deaf Witnesses have been able to serve as full-time evangelizers. Some have moved to other countries to help the deaf learn about Jehovah. Christian men who are deaf learn to be effective teachers, organizers, and shepherds, and many are then able to qualify to care for responsibilities in the congregation.

In the United States, there are over 100 sign-language congregations and about 80 groups. In Brazil, there are approximately 300 sign-language congregations and over 400 groups. There are close to 300 sign-language congregations in Mexico. Russia has over 30 sign-language congregations and 113 groups. These are but a few examples of the growth taking place worldwide.

Jehovah's Witnesses also hold assemblies and conventions in sign language. Last year, over 120 conventions were held around the world in many different sign languages. These events enable deaf Witnesses to see that they are part of a worldwide Christian brotherhood benefiting from timely spiritual food.

(Leonard is deaf and has been one of Jehovah's Witnesses for over 25 years. He relates: "I have always known that Jehovah is the true God. Still, I never clearly understood why he has allowed suffering. At times, this caused me to feel angry with him. But during one particular talk at a sign-language district convention, I finally understood the issues involved. When the talk was over, my wife elbowed me and asked, 'Are you satisfied?' I could honestly say yes! After 25 years, I am thankful that I never left Jehovah. I always loved him but could not fully understand him. Today I do!")

Grateful at Heart

What "expressions" on Jehovah's face are deaf people seeing upon learning about him? Love, compassion, justice, loyalty, loving-kindness—and many more.

The international deaf community of Witnesses is seeing the face of Jehovah and will continue to do so even more clearly. With love in his heart for the deaf, 'Jehovah has made his face shine toward them.' (Num. 6:25) How grateful such deaf ones are that they have come to know Jehovah!

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Be Alert to Finding Deaf People in Your Territory

¹ Jehovah is extending the invitation: "Come! . . . Let anyone that wishes take life's water free." (Rev. 22:17) A growing number of deaf people are among those responding to this call. As a result, during the last 13 years, 27 sign-language congregations and 43 sign-language groups have been formed in the United States branch.

² Although sign-language congregations and groups focus all their preaching efforts on contacting deaf and hearing-impaired people in their respective territories, there are many such ones who are yet to be found and witnessed to in this country.

³ **How Can You Help?** While in public places, have you observed people using sign language? Do you know someone at your workplace or at your school who has a deaf family member? Be alert to finding those who are deaf as you carry out your daily activities. But how can you ensure that they will receive a Kingdom witness?

⁴ **Giving a Witness:** Inform the nearest sign-language congregation or group of the deaf person's whereabouts. Many deaf ones make faster progress in learning the truth when they are able to associate with deaf Witnesses at congregation meetings conducted in American Sign Language. Therefore, if there

is a sign-language congregation or group in your locality, your congregation secretary should forward to it information about all deaf people in your territory.

⁵ (What if there is no one nearby to give spiritual assistance to deaf people in your community? How might you help? Why not make a return visit and talk to any hearing members of the household? Offer to show a sign-language video to arouse the interest of the deaf person.) Some publishers have even learned American Sign Language so as to reach the deaf more effectively. (Acts 16:9, 10) The *Require* brochure and the *Knowledge* book are available in American Sign Language on video. Conducting Bible studies using these tools has already yielded many positive results.

⁶ By being alert to finding deaf people in your area, you can give them the opportunity to take life's water free.—Matt. 10:11.

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When you come across a deaf person at the door, providing them with a written publication is giving them a publication in a different language than their own.

Several publications are available in American Sign Language at jw.org, including the entire Greek scriptures of the NWT. There are also many different Languages of sign to choose from.