



SILENT BLESSINGS

DEAF MINISTRIES

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A World We Never Even Knew Existed – Marshall Lawrence

(Recorded live at Barryton Church of God, Barryton, MI)

How many of you are parents or children of parents? *[laughter]* Had to think about that one for a minute didn't you?

We have two children. We have a 25-year-old who now knows all that is knowable. You know the type, yeah, and then we have a 17-year-old who is deaf. So for years in our family we've said we have two daughters, one who can't hear and one who won't listen. *[laughter]* I love both of my daughters greatly. I don't love the one more than the other. I certainly love them differently, that's only human nature, but I love both of them and I cherish them both. But I have to admit that the younger one changed my life a lot more than the older one. The older one is hearing, the younger one is deaf. I was amazed how different your life is without the tether of sound. When you can't call your child, you have to get their attention visually. That was the one of the biggest changes. There are a lot of changes that have happened in our lives but I will tell you, if the Lord had sent me a business reply card, "Please spell out the

qualities you want your child to have.” I would never have asked for a deaf child, but her deafness has opened up a world to us we didn’t even know existed.

When we found out that Rachael was deaf we talked first to the doctors and they have ideas and then you talk to other people and they have ideas and when it comes to the education of your children it’s hard to know what to do. I really felt that she needed a language to think in. A language with which to be able to manipulate ideas. That’s how you use your language most, you know -- for yourself, not for other people. You talk to yourself all the time. And don’t you sit there and tell me you don’t talk to yourself, I know better. You talk to yourself far more than you talk to other people. So you need to have some linguistics system in place that you really own so you can start doing that. I knew that our daughter had to have some kind of linguistics system, and I didn’t know how to give her one because the best she could probably ever do with English, in that setting, was to borrow my language. She didn’t have the tools to really be able to speak English or to learn it in the same way you and I do. How do you tell a deaf child to sound out a word? You can learn that language as a second language and then own it later, but as your first language how do you do that?

So I felt that sign language was the best for her, but was I going to take her to a sign language tutor, maybe an hour a day or something. You don’t learn language very well if all you have is an hour a day. So we decided that the best thing to do would be to put her in the deaf school and that was a really hard decision to make. Our deaf school was three hours from home and I hated that idea. I hated to do that. We kept knocking on the door to find opportunities to move down to Indianapolis where the deaf school was located, but God never opened up those opportunities and it wasn’t that we didn’t try. And it was hard for us for many years to understand that. Why would God want us to do that? Why wouldn’t he make it possible for us to live together as a family cause I felt that that was the best alternative, but I think God had some other purpose in mind for us. So we took her down to the deaf school. I’ll never forget the first day we got into the deaf school. She looked around and she saw these other kids with hearing aids on and she ran to me and she could only speak two or three word sentences at that time. She was almost five years old, but that’s all she could do. But she saw these other kids with hearing aids and she ran to me and she was so excited and she said, “Look same me, same me.” I’d hoped she hadn’t

noticed. Of course she'd noticed. Then when it came to leave her there she thought she was abandoned and it took several weeks of her coming home on the bus on the weekends to realize that, no, this is school and they still love me.

She started in the second semester of the year. By the time summer came around I saw her one morning signing in her sleep and I thought, *She has a language of the heart now. She has the language to dream in and think in. Now we can start to communicate.* Of course I had to acquire that language too. That was the hard part. She drank it in like a sponge. For an old tired dad whose brain isn't elastic anymore, that was a hard job. But I felt like I had to do that because this was my child. I had to have a relationship with my child. I had to find a way to do this. So I worked hard and I learned sign language. I don't do it great, but I learned it.

I think the journey that we've been on has been surprising because it changed the direction of our ministry so totally. And the reason for that is after Rachael was born we found that it's not the matter of coping with our own child and the communication issues that we have. But I started to see how other families in a similar situation were dealing with these issues themselves.

I found the Lord when I was five years old and while I haven't been a perfect person (there was the time I shot my brother out of the tree with a BB gun, [laughter] and the time I was throwing darts and he jumped in the way and we had to get the pliers to get the dart out). No, I haven't been a perfect kid and I admit to that, but ever since I was five years old I knew Whose I was. I was His and He's had to take me to task sometimes and thump me in the head. I've had to be corrected by the Holy Spirit, but I've been His ever since. And I knew and still know today that the most precious thing in my life, the most precious gift I have to share, is not money because I don't have any money. And it's not some fancy estate and it's not things; I don't have any things worth passing on to my children. But I have this treasure, this divine treasure in a lump of clay that He wants to give to my daughter and to your daughters and your sons and you. That's the most precious thing I have and I had to find a way to let my kid know that God loves her and He knows her.

The first thing we tried to do after Rachael started to acquire some language skills was to try to find Christian materials in sign language for children. And I asked

my pastor and he didn't have a clue. And I asked other people in the community -- Christian leaders -- and they had no clue. And I went to the Christian bookstore and they had no clue. Nobody had a clue. It was when I went to Anderson to the television complex there to visit because I was thinking, *You know, if nobody else is putting these things together I'm going to get some prices and I'm going to find some interpreters and we're going to figure out how to do some Bible stories for deaf kids.* And wouldn't you know it, the day that I got in there to get the nickel tour, I swear this is the truth, you remember the video that was showing when you came in tonight with the sign language to the Christian songs? That's what they were editing when I walked in the room and I said, "I've got to talk to the people in the control room." And I barged right in and I met these wonderful people. And that's how I began the process of being involved in some of these projects that some of these people were doing.

So I write my little songs for these projects. And the first one we did was *Special Me*. It was just a few months after that that I was up in Wisconsin doing a service very much like this. And in the back row there was this family of five, three children and a mother and a father, and one of the children apparently was deaf. After the service we came out and we talked and so forth and I gave this little girl one of these tapes. She was the same age as my little girl, Rachael. But her mother wrote me a letter three weeks later and in the letter she said, "You know our daughter knows who Jesus is and at night we all try to sign the prayer around the dinner table and if we forget she reminds us. But, whenever we asked her to pray she wouldn't do it. And then she saw this tape you gave us and there's the one part where there's a little boy kneeling beside his bed and he's praying with his hands only, no voice, no talking, just his hands. And when my daughter saw that she ran into the kitchen and she signed, so excitedly, 'Mommy, Jesus knows sign language.' She didn't know before that he would know her language. She had never seen a prayer only signed. The only prayer she'd ever seen were either talking prayers or talking and signing. So she assumed that Jesus was hearing; I can't talk, so how can I pray? He wouldn't understand me." And when I read that I just started to cry. And at the bottom it said, "P.S. Now she won't let anybody else pray." *[laughter]* Wow!

Listen, every little girl needs to know that Jesus knows her language. [Amen]
Every little boy needs to know that God knows what he need, knows their heart and

knows their language, that every child has access to Jesus, every child. And that was probably the first event on my journey to becoming involved in this full-time.

Rachael and I took a visit one time out to Gallaudet University. Gallaudet is the deaf university in Washington, DC. You have to be deaf to be a student there. So we went out there to see this because I thought, *Here's a deaf child, this is part of her heritage, and she needs to know about this place. She might wind up going there someday.* So she was about, oh I'd say maybe eight, and a woman came up to me, who was hearing almost with some kind of tears in her eyes. And she said, "I just wanted to tell you how special it is, how rare it is, to see a father sign to his child." She said, "I've worked at this deaf school for 18 years and you're only the second dad I've ever seen do that." And I couldn't believe that! It just broke my heart. So we're both standing there in the middle of the commons area sniveling, you know. I couldn't even conceive that a dad wouldn't learn sign language. I have since found out that fewer than 2% of fathers ever learn to sign to their children, to their deaf kids.

Now let me give you the stats a little bit here. 90% of all deaf children have hearing mothers and fathers. Only about 8% of those parents ever learn enough sign language to have a conversation with their children. It's unbelievable to me, but I've seen too many incidences where it's happened. I remember one time my wife happened to be at the doctors office and there was a little girl there who was on the bus, who rides the bus that Rachael rides back and forth to school. So she was deaf and my wife knew this girl, so she said hi when she came in and signed a little bit to her. She was sitting there in the waiting room with her dad. She had to have a physical for school. So they needed to get a specimen from this girl. They didn't know how to tell her that so they turned to the dad and they say, "We don't know how to sign to her, can you explain to her what we need?"

He said, "I don't know that hand jive stuff." He had no idea, no way in the world, how to talk to his child; he had no clue how to have a conversation with her. Thank God my wife was there. She was able to sign to the girl what needed to happen and everything was fine after that, you know. Of course they didn't give my wife a discount on the prescription, I don't know why. *[laughter]*

Then I remember another time I dropped Rachael off at one of her friend's house for the weekend. (She was in high school by this time.) And then when I picked her up I said, "How did things go?"

And she said, "Well, I had a great time, but it was kind of weird." (We're doing all this in sign language understand. I'm paraphrasing it here for you.)

I said, "What do you mean, weird?"

And she said, "Well, all weekend long I was interpreting between my friend and her mom. They were having some disagreement about something and her mom doesn't sign and my friend doesn't hear. Her mom kept trying to talk to her, so they talked to me because I could read lips better and then I would sign it to my friend and then my friend would sign to me and I would explain it to her mom. After while I started calling her mom my mom. It was just really weird."

I said, "Wow!"

We drove in silence for a little bit and that kind of sunk in and then all of a sudden she popped up and she said, "I wonder what they do when I'm not there?"

Here's a 17-year-old girl at a time in her life when she needs probably the most depth of support by mom and dad, and her parents have no tools to communicate with this child. That's the norm in the deaf community.

If you were deaf would you be here today? No, probably not. If you were deaf would you know Christ? Probably not. How would you find out about him? Through your parents? Well, we already know that most of the parents don't know sign language. If the children are going to learn about Jesus, it's not going to be at home because mom and dad don't have the tools. Through the church? Honestly, my church was of very little help at all. It wasn't that the people didn't know us or love us or care about us, but they had no tools, no resources and no knowledge. They couldn't help much. The biggest problem, the biggest handicap that deaf people have in the United States today, isn't that they don't hear, it's that they don't know Jesus. Only 2% know Christ as savior. But most deaf people today will be born, will grow up, will live and will die without ever once having seen the gospel presented to them clearly in their own language. The question is, What do we do?

The more we've gotten into this the more we've found that deaf people have their own society. They don't hang out with hearing people. There are 750,000 severe to profoundly deaf people in the United States. That's a lot of people. You don't see all these deaf people hanging around all the time do you? And it's rare that you see a deaf person. Why? Because they're not going to hang out with hearing people. We're heareries. Now, does that mean that they don't like hearing people? Well, no, but I mean, it's kind of hard to communicate if you don't know sign and they don't know how to speak fluently. Why would they do that? So they hang out in their own clusters. And they have their own social order and their own poetry and their own language and their own jokes.

Would you like to hear a deaf joke? This is the first deaf joke my daughter ever told me. She was about seven. She had learned this the first semester she was at the deaf school in Indianapolis.

And so she signed me this little joke. And she said, "There were these two guys who went out to chop down a tree. So they went up to the first tree, it was a big tree. And so they went, chop, chop, chop, chop. Chop, chop, chop, chop. Chop, chop, chop, chop. Then they yelled 'timber' and the tree fell. Wow. So then they walked over to the next tree -- big ole tree. They go, chop, chop, chop, chop. Chop, chop, chop, chop, chop. Chop, chop, chop, chop, chop. 'Timber.' Tree falls. Doing pretty well. They see this other great big ole tree, so they go over -- big strong tree. They go over and, chop, chop, chop, chop, chop, chop. Chop, chop, chop, chop. Chop, chop, really working hard, chop, chop, chop, chop, chop. Finally it's ready, 'Timber.' The tree won't fall. 'Timber' The tree won't fall. And they think, *Ah*. And they sign T-I-M-B-E-R and the tree falls. [*laughter*] It's a deaf tree. [*applause*]

And they have lots of stories and jokes and so forth. They have their own poetry. One of the forms of poetry that they use is A-B-C story, so they tell the whole story and every sign is the next sign in the alphabet. They have their own jokes, they have their own friends, they have their own poetry, they have their own language, and they have their own culture. And their culture is different than what we think it might be. How they feel about the world, how they feel about themselves. Deaf people are different. I mean, we're all the same, but we're all different too. And deaf people see the world differently than you do.

For example, deaf people can't hear behind them. They can only hear for here in front. If you see two people across the room and their talking away and every now and then they glance in your direction and maybe they giggle, you might think that they're talking about you if you don't know what they're talking about, if you can't hear them. But you know how we hearing people are: We'll talk and then we'll kind of gaze somewhere else as we continue to talk and then we might look at you again. Sometimes we do that. We just kind of gaze off into nowhere as we collect our thoughts and then we get to the punch line and then we laugh. These people over here who are deaf don't know that you are not talking about them. If you don't know what's going on you get a little paranoid sometimes.

Why would deaf people come into a narthex full of people in a church and everybody's talking and they're out there and they're all alone. And then they come down to the cheap seats, down here, where nobody sits except Brother Glen, [laughter] because that's where the sign interpreter is. They don't have a sense of community when they come to church 'cause they don't really know anybody here and it's very hard for them to understand what's going on. You might love the music. They're not getting any of the melody or harmony. And if they do see the words up on the screen they may understand those words and they may, because those words may be written in some...well, generally they're written in rhyme, which is two words that sound alike. That's a hearing thing right there. And sometimes you use terms that are idioms, expressions that don't really translate word for word to the deaf. In the past I always thought, *Well, having a sign language interpreter is pretty good.* Now I think, *That's a little start, but if they're not doing something else to build community, to build a sense of belonging, to really go that extra mile to make sure that things are communicated properly, to start some kind of a small group ministry, to be involved in that deaf community – it's not enough.* Those are some of the issues that we began to discover, and my very favorite verse of scripture, taken from II Corinthians chapter five, really began to say even more to me as Paul writes about the ministry of reconciliation.

Therefore if anyone is in Christ he is a new creation. The old has gone. The new has come. All this is from God who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of

reconciliation. That God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ not counting men's sins against them and he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors as though he was making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf, be reconciled to God.

Well, what do we do? The first thing we need to do is pray for deaf people and their families. That's vital. And what that means is to become aware and to pray actively for them that God will raise up leaders in the deaf community, that God will send out missionaries to the deaf community that they will have an opportunity to overcome what problems they have in communicating with hearing people so that they will know Jesus Christ. That's the first thing that we need to do, pray for deaf people. Become aware of them and pray for them.

The next thing that we have to do after we begin the process of being aware of them and praying and caring about them is to begin to learn some more about their world. If we're going to reach these people for Christ, we have to learn about that world. We need to find out where these people are. We need to find out what they feel and how they think and how they are and how their lives are. What we're going to have to do is to create a whole new paradigm for deaf ministry, break out of this idea that we are ministering to these poor pitiful deaf people. That it's a benevolence ministry of some kind. What we have to do is think in a missionary way. Think as a missionary effort to develop a deaf church, to train indigenous deaf leaders, to support that kind of activity, to grow a deaf church so these deaf people don't just come into a room filled with hearing people and feel isolated, but they can develop a deaf church where they can begin to feel that they can worship together and understand one another.

If you were deaf would you know Christ? Probably not. We've got to do a better job. We've got to find ways to do it that we haven't done in the past.

We were doing the Finger Food Café last year. Have you heard about that? I think I told you about that in the past and I've got some clips I'm going to show you in a minute. We'd had a little disagreement on the set focused around my signing of a

phrase, a line in the show. I was signing it wrong, according to some deaf people, and honestly I wanted to sign it the best way I could. Whatever they thought was right, that's what I was willing to do, but somehow or another the deaf people all started arguing about what's the right way to sign it. They were all were using different ASL or sign language colloquialisms. After we finished the taping session for that night I had to drive Rachael back to the dormitory. We were doing a taping in Anderson, IN. Rachael's school was in Indianapolis, IN, so that's about a 40-minute drive. I was driving back to Anderson and I was depressed because if I had known my job better, if I could sign better, we would have been all set. But I know that I don't sign as well as I'd like to. And God and I were having a little argument.

"I know You're sovereign and I know You're Lord, but You messed up this time because You chose me to do this and I don't have the skill to do this and I don't know what I'm doing and You've got to find somebody else who knows what they're doing 'cause I'm not doing a very good job of it. I don't have the talent, I don't have the skills, I don't have the patience, and I don't have the wisdom. You've made one mistake, but this was it. And now I've got to get gasoline at \$1.50 a gallon."

I was not happy!

So I had to pull into this gas station. I was out in the middle of no place. It was like "Cricket City", you know what I mean? All you heard was the crickets; that was it. I pulled up to get this gasoline and right behind me, in the middle of no place, pulls up a car with a deaf couple in it.

Now what are they doing there? *[laughter]*

I pump the gas. I thought, "I'll go in there, pay real quickly, and I'll get on the road."

I went in there and got in line, but while I'm waiting there (and wanting to get out of there), sure enough, here these deaf people come right behind me signing to one another. Now, I know what they're saying. It's really rude for me not to let them know that I know what they're saying. Don't you think that would be rude?

And I felt really stuck and so I signed to the guy and his wife sees this and comes up to say, "You're hearing?"

I said, "Yeah, I'm hearing. My daughter is deaf. She's in the deaf school."

"But you sign so skillfully."

Thank you Lord; I needed that. I really needed that.

So I said, "Well, thank you."

She said, "How did you learn that, how?"

I said, "Oh, I go to classes and I talk with deaf people a lot and I try to learn, I have video tapes -- whatever -- 'cause I really love my daughter and I need to have a relationship with my daughter."

And she started to cry. She said, "My mom and dad are hearing. Sign language? They know nothing -- relationship, nothing!"

Now I'm crying. How many times have I heard that story? My mom and dad don't know how to talk to me and we have no relationship.

She said, "You work where?"

"I'm a minister."

And she turned to her husband and she made this sign. *[making sign]* Do you know what that means? Goose bumps. Apparently they had just been talking about religion in the car. And she said, "You have a deaf church near here?"

And I said, "No, I'm sorry." And I explained a little bit about what we were doing. So we talked a little bit and then I left.

I got in the car and started driving back to Anderson and I said, "Okay, God, You did it to me again. You had to put me there in that place in the middle of 'Cricketville', at that moment in time, to meet that couple who didn't live near there, who just happened to get gas in 'Cricketville' too, who had to have a conversation with a minister that night to be reminded that God loves them and is pursuing them just as You needed to use them to remind me that I needed to shut up and do my job. That I am right where you want me to be and, while I don't get it and I don't understand and I feel so inadequate and I know that there are other people who could do this better, You've chosen me and I'm just going to say, 'Yes, Sir! Whatever You say, Sir; okay, Sir.'"

And that's why I'm doing this. If I'm going to be His ambassador and be involved in the ministry of reconciliation, and I see families who can't communicate with one another around the dinner table, and I see people who don't know who Jesus is, how can I *not* do this? I've got to do this; I have to do this! Thank you very much.
[*applause*]