

# New Beginnings

A Sermon by Rev. Derek Elphick

*"I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh." Ezekiel 36:26*

## NEW BEGINNINGS

Our lives switch tempo at this time of year, with children going back to school

w/the summer waning  
and a new season approaching...

- the pace and rhythm of the day changes for all of us, whether or not we have a loved one going back to school.
- a change in season ushers in a "new beginning."
- outwardly our physical surroundings change – the days get shorter, the temperature drops, the leaves of the trees turn color
- and inwardly, in terms of our spirit, we experience a subtle shift, an opportunity for *reflection and change*.

This change might be a new routine,

a new resolve,  
a new job,  
a change in our work status,  
a reshuffle in the home (family members moving in or out),  
adjusting to an "empty nest"  
or a sudden illness or the lingering loss of a loved one or friend

## CHANGE - FRIEND OR FOE?

Not all "new beginnings" are equal.

We don't get to pick the ones that look favorable to us,  
and reject the others.

Sometimes change, new beginnings, can be hard.  
Change is like the march of time...

- it happens with or without our approval.

This is one reason why the Lord seeks to give us a new heart and spirit because our old "heart" and "spirit" is not very flexible or accommodating.

It doesn't like change.

It doesn't like surprises or giving up control.

And it isn't always kind or outward looking.

Our "old self" prefers the status-quo because this keeps things safe and predictable.

Besides, if you think about it, we spend years, decades, crafting and perfecting (and protecting) our daily routines

- which explains why we are often hesitant to "fix" something that doesn't appear broken.

*- also, studies suggest that about 90% of our daily routine is habitual which means if we're serious about forming better habits or making a "new beginning" we must recognize that we're competing against stiff competition, a busy schedule!*

## **WHAT DOES THE WORD SAY ABOUT CHANGE?**

The Word of the Lord is a book about change - "*Behold, I make all things new*"

- each page *breathes* change,
- *anticipates* change
- and *encourages* it
- you won't find a chapter or verse in the Scriptures or Heavenly Doctrine promoting the "status quo"

This is because the Word is one,

glorious attempt  
to move us  
...from a worldly point of view to a heavenly one.

Today's text is a specific example of this:

Buried within the comfort zone of our daily routine is a "heart of stone..."

we have certain thought patterns,  
attitudes and habits...

- that cloud our vision of a "better way forward" which, in turn, stunts our potential for growth.

And so the Lord helps us make a new beginning...

## HOW DOES CHANGE WORK?

I think it's fair to say, we all have a "complicated" (maybe even painful) relationship with change

- sometimes we seem to make strides in becoming a better person
- but then that progress gets wiped out with one unkind word or thoughtless deed...

The apostle, Paul understood this dilemma:

*"I don't understand my own actions. In my mind I serve God. But there is another force at work in my life. While I want to do what is right, I don't do it. When I want to avoid what is wrong, I still do it. I am stretched between the two. Here is my intention. Here is my performance. God, who will deliver me?" (Romans 7).*

Key concept about spiritual growth - "little by little." In the book of Exodus, the Lord told the ancient Israelites that He would drive out their enemies: *"little by little I will drive them out from before you..."* (Ex. 23:30).

This is the overriding message of the readings you heard today.

- spiritual change happens in *small, tiny, increments...*

**- we might get frustrated by the pace or apparent lack of progress but the Lord really knows what will work in the long run (we wouldn't accept the type of change we need any other way).**

We read:

-The Lord instills in us spiritual ideas *"not completely different from what we already have"* so that we can move closer and closer to the spiritual ideals of heaven (AC 3701)

- this is done in a miraculous fashion *"by countless means known to the Lord alone"* (AC 4063)

- we appreciate how our new self is *"entirely different from the old"* because natural, material concerns and worries are slowly getting pushed to the side in favor of heavenly delights

## THE LORD IN HIS WORD SPEAKS DIRECTLY TO OUR SPIRIT

Another important thing to remember about spiritual change is that the Lord doesn't try convincing our natural self/mind to change - he doesn't try reasoning with our fickle wants and needs.

Rather, the Lord speaks directly to our spirit because our spirit (rational mind) is willing to listen - as the Lord said to His disciples, "*The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak...*"

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I'd like to pause here for a moment to acknowledge how *profound* and *far-reaching* the teachings of the New Church are - they are given to the world to usher in a new era, both collectively and individually.

Specifically, New Church teachings help us (1) change the way we think; (2) change our attitude; and (3) change our direction:

### (1) Change the way we think:

*"Now I am being allowed to describe what I have heard and seen, in the hope of shedding light where there is ignorance, and of dispelling skepticism..." (HH 1).*

*"And the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations" symbolizes rational truths by which people caught up in evils and the accompanying falsities are led to think soundly and live decently..." (AR 936).*

(2) **Change our attitude** (typically we think of "attitude" as just getting into the right frame of mind but New Church teachings speak about attitude as being intimately tied w/loves & delights):

The danger of a negative attitude:

A negative attitude leads to "*no faith at all...*" (AC 1072)

A negative attitude makes a person "*argue about the truth of everything...*" (AC 3394)

*"When we are under the sway of the world and our bodies, we say in our hearts, 'As for faith and matters of religion, if my senses do not teach me to see, or if facts do not teach me to understand, I refuse to believe.' So we want our physical senses to teach us about heavenly and Divine matters. This is as impossible as it is for a camel to go through the eye of a needle. The more we rely on sensory evidence to gain wisdom, the more we blind ourselves, to the point that we stop believing in anything, even the existence of a spiritual dimension or of eternal life." (AC 128).*

## **This is why it's so important to pay attention to our attitude for...**

A positive attitude *"is the first means and first dwelling place for the good which flows in from the Lord."* (AC 3913).

Those with a positive attitude *"affirm the teachings of the Word, that is, they think and believe within themselves that these things are true because the Lord has spoken them...this attitude leads to perfect intelligence and wisdom."* (AC 2568).

*"People who conquer in temptation still experience feelings of doubt, but since they allow themselves to be filled with hope they stay firm in their positive attitude."* (AC 2338).

### **(3) Change our direction (of our spirit)**

*'Paths' in the Word means truths that lead to what is good, or in the opposite sense, falsities that lead to what is evil. This is also why 'going,' 'walking,' and 'traveling' in the Word mean progressions of life.*

*'Walking' is a customary expression to mean living, as in the phrases, 'walking in the law,' 'walking in the statutes,' 'walking in the truth.' Strictly speaking, walking has regard to the path of truth..."* (AC 519).

*Present in an angelic character is a knowledge of the way from having walked in it...The spiritual world has in it actual paths which lead to every society of heaven and to every society of hell. Everyone sees their own path because there are paths for every love, and love reveals the path and leads a person to his or her companions. No one sees any other paths than those of their own love. (DP 60).*

### **Profoundly important implications here:**

So, as we contemplate new beginnings, let us remember how change, real change, lasting change works.

It begins with our thoughts,

w/the types of things we choose to think about.

these thoughts, in turn, will affect our attitude (positively or negatively)

and the type of attitude we choose to adopt about everything (particularly our attitude toward what the Lord says in His Word) will...

point our spirit in a specific direction.

## WHAT'S IT LIKE TO HAVE A NEW HEART AND NEW SPIRIT?

It's the little things that count...letting the Lord ever-so-slowly switch out our heart of stone w/a heart of flesh.

Such strong, vivid images: "heart of flesh" compared to a "heart of stone" (*in the Word, "stones" typically represent truths but, depending on context, they can also represent falsity or "bad ideas"*).

**- hard, rigid, inflexible, intolerant, cold, distant, detached, highly resistant to change, unwilling to take risks**

**vs.**

**- soft, warm, flexible, expansive, encompassing, willing to change, willing to take a "risk" by trusting what the Lord says in His Word** (opening ourselves up to the Lord involves risk - we're stepping into the unknown - trust, faith, confidence in the Lord)

Small, tiny, new habits.

**Literally have to "trick" our brain into new habits**

- smile
- text or call a friend
- write a personal note
- pay attention to what comes out of your mouth
- work on the quality of your conversations

May the Lord give us a *new* heart and *new* spirit...

- by changing the way we think
- by changing our attitude
- and by pointing us in a new direction.

May we recognize that this is not a one-time event, but a life-long journey of permitting the Lord to take us through many "new beginnings."

*"Then He who sat on the throne said, 'Behold, I make all things new.' And He said to me, 'Write, for these words are true and faithful.' And He said to me, 'It is done' I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the End."*

**AMEN.**