

New Beginnings

A Sermon by Rev. Brian W. Keith

Life can seem terribly dreary. Familiar patterns are repeated over and over again. Ruts appear. Dishes keep getting dirty. Bills keep coming. The house always needs something done to it. And as we grow older, our bodies signal the rapid passing of time. Energy levels decline. Aches and pains come from nowhere. From being unthinkable, one's own death is seen as a real possibility.

Emotionally we can feel trapped by what has gone before. Previous actions, mistakes, and evils close in on our minds. We can be haunted by what has happened. The depressing patterns of petty frustrations and useless arguments scar and desensitize us. We can become numbed wandering through the day trying not to feel anything.

Ezekiel had a vision addressed to such a lifeless and hopeless frame of mind. He saw a valley full of dried out bones. As he prophesied, the bones came together, flesh was put upon them, and breath entered them. From dry bones came a great army. And the Lord said to Ezekiel,

"These bones are the whole house of Israel. They indeed say, 'Our bones are dry, our hope is lost, and we ourselves are cut off!' Therefore prophesy and say to them, '... Behold, O My people, I will open your graves and cause you to come up from your graves, and bring you into the land of Israel. Then you shall know that I am the Lord when I have opened your graves, O My people, and brought you up from your graves'" (37:11-13).

Our bones are dry. Our hope is lost. How pitiful! And how false! Life is repetitive and dreary only if we choose to look at it that way. For all around us there is a renewal of life. New beginnings are taking place constantly.

Consider the natural world. Plants and animals are constantly reproducing, much more than this world could support. Every day the sun comes up anew. Each new year is ushered in with festivity. Even in the fall when the leaves turn and life seems to drain away, there is the promise of rebirth. "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it produces much grain" (John 12:24).

Consider also some events in the life cycle. A child leaves home for school. A person leaves school for a job. Single life is given up for marriage. Children grow up and establish their own homes. Retirement comes. Each of these changes involves loss and gain a new beginning. Even death itself is growth. The Heavenly Doctrines show that when a person awakens in the other world, "at this point his life begins" (AC 186), and his entrance into his eternal heavenly home "marks a new beginning" in his life (AC 1273).

Even as natural life has changes new beginnings so spiritually there can be a constant renewal of life. Above our consciousness the Lord is gently guiding our thoughts and feelings. While we are unaware of it, He is inspiring new ways of looking at life, stimulating new feelings of warmth and concern (see AC 6645e). The Lord is working with our spirits so that we are renewed every moment of every day. The fact is, there are new beginnings in our lives all the time. The Lord is raising up our apparently dry bones, putting flesh upon them, and breathing life into them.

We can choose to feel trapped by the past or dulled by routines. Or we can look at what is happening as the opportunity for one of the many new beginnings in life. For the Lord does not control what happens to us. Yes, His Providence is overseeing all that happens, but that does not mean He is causing specific events to occur good or bad. In one sense He is not concerned for what happens; rather He is concerned with how we respond, for that determines what good He can then bring about. Retirement, for example, is not important, but how a person then uses his or her time is. The response can be gloomy, for the loss of co-workers, status, or income; or it can be of renewal more time for friends, family, church work, or others. A newness of life can be born in any situation any time, anywhere.

Our participation in renewal is critical. The Lord never forces us to grow. He never forces us to change our minds or actions. While He is always working, urging and pressing to influence us in heavenly ways, He will not change our outlook if we do not want Him to. We can remain in the trenches. We can look upon life as a deterioration of our physical and mental abilities. We can see the dark side of every event, pessimistically awaiting the next cruel blow of fate. We can cry about dry bones and hopelessness. But those dry bones can have flesh on them, breath in them.

Regardless of what has occurred in the past, new beginnings are possible if we are willing. They do not start outside of ourselves. They start with our thoughts and intentions (see AC 1317). We have the freedom to think about life in any way we wish. We can think negatively or positively. We can desire, intend, anything we wish. We can want what is good. We can want what is evil. We are not trapped by previous choices or patterns of behavior. We are trapped only by our fears and refusals to think and try.

Our attitude makes all the difference in how we view the world and how easy we make it for the Lord to renew us. From a negative, doubting viewpoint we see the world and ourselves through a warped lens. We reject or give up on the ideals the Lord has shown us in His Word. But if we attempt to trust in what He has said, if we will be positive, affirmative to Him, then wonders can be worked (see AC 3913:5). "If you have faith as a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you" (Matthew 17:20).

Our basic assumptions can never be proven. And if we assume, have faith, that the Lord speaks to us in His Word, and our lives will be improved if we listen, then a new beginning can occur. For regeneration is the new creation of life spiritual life. It begins when a person affirms the truth and intends to live according to it. This is the start of regeneration. It does not occur at any set time in life, nor does it happen only once. Each and every time we positively turn our minds to the Lord's way, a new beginning occurs.

Such beginnings are like seedlings. They are planted in the soil of our lives. With watering, with light and warmth, they take root. As they grow, as we walk in the Lord's way, the earth of our life is made more secure. The interlocking root systems stop the erosion of false ideas, evil desires. The more that take root the better, for the roots hinder the washing away of good by selfishness.

But for seedlings to grow strong they need weathering. The storms and bitter cold which could harm the trees actually serve to strengthen them. So in regeneration. Each new beginning of spiritual life will be challenged. Where honesty is growing, the harsh wind of theft will blow and try to destroy it. Where compassion is developing, cold disregard for others and apathy will also be present.

Spiritual struggles ensue. These raging storms are painful, as the new beginnings of spiritual life are threatened and buffeted. Yet, as we endure, as we resist the forces of hell, a greater strength is acquired. More spiritual life grows perhaps a clearer idea of His ways, a deeper appreciation of our need for the Lord's presence, or a greater intensity of affection for His good (see AC 2272). Whatever is gained, our spirits are growing flesh upon dry bones, breath giving life. As the Lord promised:

"I will bring the blind by a way they did not know; I will lead them in paths they have not known. I will make darkness light before them, and crooked places straight" (Isaiah 42:16).

The Lord leads us through all the many byways of life, through the valleys up to the peaks. He would have each day be a new beginning for us, not in a dramatic sense, for we are not meant to have radical changes often. The new birth, or regeneration, is not a series of sudden changes in direction. Yes, it can begin with that when a person first realizes the importance of spiritual values, when a person experiences the grief of repentance. But rebirth is an evolving process. It is made up of many small beginnings.

The small beginnings of regeneration are a series of purifications the regular washing away of evils in the spirit, of saying, "No, I won't do that because it is wrong." And as the Heavenly Doctrines note, "... such purification ought to go on all the time and so always to be taking place as if from a new beginning" (AC 2044).

"As if from a new beginning." In one sense, each time we resist an evil, each time we intend on doing something good, it is a new beginning. Something new has started in our lives. But in another sense, every positive step is a continuation of what was begun before. It is a resurfacing of the seeds planted years before from parents, from teachers, from whatever good we had willingly done. The Lord keeps working with the good He has established in everyone's life. While it may not be seen for a time, it is carefully preserved, awaiting the occasion to be seen again. Hellish choices and life styles shut it up, but it is still there. The Lord is very patient, always leading us so that the good we have might be protected, develop, and eventually blossom in the fruit of an angelic life.

What this means is that life is never pointless. While we will certainly go through times when we feel our life is dry or our lot hopeless, the Lord can put flesh on our bones, breath in our lungs. All our patterns which seem so fixed and limiting, all the painful baggage we carry from the past, need not defeat us. For every day the Lord is providing us with new beginnings small, almost imperceptible opportunities to renew our lives. If we are not utterly downcast, if we have not given up if we will be open and affirmative to what He has said then new life may grow. Seedlings are planted which, though they may not bear visible fruit until the next life, will give us strength, will renew our spirits. And the prophecy of Isaiah will come true for us:

"But those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not be faint" (40:31).

Amen.

Lessons: Ezekiel 37:1-14; John 3:1-8; NJHD 173-182 (portions)