

The New Birth

Dr. Steve Schell | Week 3 Essential Doctrines

Righteousness before God has been available since Adam and Eve. It didn't start after Jesus died on the cross. By repentance and faith Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Rebekah, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Rahab, Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, and the prophets are all listed as righteous and pleasing to God in the book of Hebrews (He 11:4-32). But the book of Hebrews also says there was something called a "new covenant" that these men and women didn't receive (He 8:6-13, 11:39-40), something that couldn't be given to the human race until the death and resurrection of Jesus.

This "new covenant" was promised as far back as the book of Deuteronomy, and elements of it were promised as far back as Abraham (Ge 12:3, 22:18, 26:4, 28:14; Ac 3:25). So what is this new covenant? It's more than forgiveness for our sins. It's more than going to heaven when we die. It's a miraculous transformation of the affections of the human heart that is performed by God Himself. And He does this work without any human help. Of course, there are conditions we must meet to receive this miracle, but once those conditions are met, and God who knows all things is the One who determines when we have met them, according to Moses He "circumcises the heart" (Dt 30:6). This means He severs the heart from the control of our flesh and causes that person to "love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul..." (Dt 30:6).

When he made these statements, Moses also prophesied that the people of Israel would rebel against the covenant God had made with them at Sinai and said they would end up scattered throughout the nations of the earth. But because of God's character, because He is faithful to His promises, and because He had promised to bless the children of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Moses said God would not forsake the nation that came from them but would wait for them to repent and turn back to Him. And when they did, God promised to regather them into their land and to perform this miracle inside them.

Over the following centuries, through His prophets, God continued to remind the people that He hadn't forgotten this promise but that He would perform it when He sent the Messiah. And the prophets explained that God would accomplish this miraculous change of heart by placing the Holy Spirit inside His people. Listen:

- Ezk 36:24-27, 37:1-14
- Jer 31: 31-34

Then when Jesus the Messiah finally arrived, He said that His cross and resurrection would make it possible for all of His followers to receive this promise. And He spoke about the miraculous transformation of the heart and the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit often. He

repeatedly declared that this amazing gift would come to all who believed in Him. Here are a few examples from the gospel of John:

- Jn 3:1-8
- Jn 4:9-14, 21-24
- Jn 7:37-39
- Jn 14:15-17
- Jn 20:21-22

After He was resurrected Jesus said this to His followers:

- Ac 1:4-8

So, in summary, there is a miracle which God wants to work inside of people. The promise was announced by Moses, restated and explained by the prophets and finally made possible by the death and resurrection of Jesus. And the entire New Testament is based on the assumption that those who repent and believe in Jesus Christ will genuinely and observably receive this miracle.

Application

1. Christianity is based on a miracle. It is not enough to believe in God, have good doctrine, attend church or do good deeds. Those are all good things, but by themselves they do not bring this inner miracle.
2. The miracle requires two elements: true repentance (full surrender; putting the apple back on the tree; renouncing rebellion to God; my ability to earn my salvation and selfishness). And faith (trusting Jesus Christ alone for forgiveness and all the gifts of God; “clinging” to His cross)
3. Then, joined to Jesus by faith, God gives us “every spiritual blessing in heavenly places” (Eph 1:3) and this certainty includes the promise of a new heart. Our stony heart is removed and a heart of flesh is put in its place. This is made possible by the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit.
4. God does this work in us by Himself. It is not something we produce by our own efforts, however He doesn't do it until we exercise our will to choose to surrender and believe.
5. The indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit is not necessarily received when we repent and believe, though the gift of the Holy Spirit is always offered by God immediately. He is with us, but not in us until we actually receive Him. And His arrival is not imperceptible or automatic. It is an observable encounter believers know they have had. Each of us has our own Pentecost.

6. The absence of this miracle (a new heart, a new power) helps to explain the ungodly behavior of people who are Christians by culture but not by inner transformation.

7. If the demands of the gospel are watered down to make it more appealing, those who respond to this partial gospel remain unchanged and soon realize it. The new life they were promised just isn't there, and as a result they are likely to grow disillusioned with Christianity.