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JOHN 3:1-8 -- Jesus' Teaching of Spiritual Biogenesis

NOTES:

Vs. 1 -- *Nicodemus* -- We are told here that he is a Pharisee, that he is a "ruler", probably indicating that he was a member of the Sanhedrin, the governing body of the Jewish people. In vs. 10, Jesus calls him "the teacher of Israel", so he must have been a preeminent Rabbi in his own right. We see him appearing again in Jn. 7:48-51, and in 19:38-40.

Vs. 2 -- *this man came to him by night* -- Evidently, he did not wish to be seen conversing with Jesus. *...we know that You have come from God as a teacher* -- We are not given any more specific information as to who the "we" might be, but there were probably others among the Pharisees and rulers who were still pretty open to consider Jesus in this light. His words and actions had not alienated them, yet, and the evidence of God's presence in Jesus' life and ministry was very difficult to simply dismiss. *...for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him.* -- The import of the miraculous signs was very plain to Nicodemus. The fact that he refers to them in the plural is another indication that Jesus was performing many more miracles than those John chooses to record for us in this book (e.g., Jn. 20:30,31; 21:25).

Vs. 3 -- *Truly, truly, I say to you* -- Literally, "Amen, amen, I say to you...". The word, amēn, means "truly", or "may it be so". This particular word structure was an idiom used to point out a serious, solemn or very weighty saying. It served as a way of saying, "Listen up, now, this is important." *unless one is born again* -- A more primitive translation might be, "If ever anyone might not be born/begotten from above/again..." The first observation is that the spiritual begetting or birthing happens to the person, i.e., it is not done *by* them, rather they are the passive recipients of this change. Secondly, the Greek word anōthen can mean "from above, from a higher place" or "again". The definition must be determined by the context. (Cf. 3:31 -- Here the context strongly suggests that it mean "from above" to make the verse make the most sense.) It was Nicodemus who misinterpreted what Jesus had said as meaning "a second time" (vs. 4). It is obvious from the following explanation that Jesus gave that He had the former meaning in mind as the primary idea. *...he cannot see the kingdom of God* -- Literally, "he is not able to see...". The awareness and discernment of the reign of God must follow the impartation of life "from above". It is like one's faculties of spiritual perception are "turned off", "tuned out", or non-existent until this inner change occurs. (This is in agreement with what the apostle Paul wrote in I Corinthians 2:14 and II Corinthians 4:3,4.)

Vs. 4 -- *How can a man be born when he is old?* -- Nicodemus' question is sound. What is Jesus getting at? *He cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb...* -- Obviously not. Nicodemus heard the word anōthen as meaning "again". Jesus' statement sounded absurd to him.

Vs. 5 -- *Truly, truly, I say to you...* -- Again, the precursor to a solemn declaration of truth. *unless one is born of water and the Spirit* -- The Greek is "...if ever anyone might not be born (at a point in time) out from water and spirit/wind/breath...". There has been much debate over these words throughout the centuries. Some have seen the reference to water as baptism. Some have seen water as a symbolic reference to the Spirit, retranslating the verse as, "...born out from water, even the Spirit...". I think, however, if we were to put aside any theological preconceptions, or the need to defend particular liturgical practices, and if we were to approach the passage from the point of view of an everyday, common-sense listener, we would be more successful in grasping the simplicity of Jesus' words. Being "born out from water" to anyone who is aware of the prenatal environment of an unborn child, and the experiences surrounding birth, would be a clear reference to the natural process of physical birth. The womb is literally a bag of waters out from which a baby emerges at birth. These people were very familiar with this phenomenon. Not only did births take place in the home, but the average life of any person of that age would have been intertwined with the various animals that were raised for food, or used for work or transportation. Animals giving birth was a natural part of everyday life which they observed. The gush of waters from the womb was one of the first sure signs that the process of birth was underway. The baby, or calf or lamb, came out all wet, and would

need to be dried off. Being "born out from water" was a very natural and descriptive way of referring to the normal birth experience. The unusual addition that Jesus made, "and spirit" would have been what caught Nicodemus' attention. It is also what Jesus expanded on in the following verses. It was a reference to a different kind of birth experience. ...*he is not able to enter into the kingdom of God.* -- Not only is it impossible to discern, or see, the kingdom of God, but entrance into it is not possible apart from this other kind of birth. The concept of the kingdom of God is a primary theme of the synoptic gospels. John tends to prefer to talk about eternal (aiōnion = "age-type", an adjective derived from the Greek word for "age", aiōn) life. The thrust of the message about the kingdom of God is that it presents the larger picture of our relationship to God in terms of a much bigger enterprise, the entire scope of His reign as King. We are clearly His subjects among a host of subjects. Believing upon the name of Jesus is tantamount to offering our allegiance to Him as our King. The picture painted in the other Gospels also presents the kingdom of God as infiltrating and reclaiming subjects from the kingdom of this world, an evil kingdom of force, domination, and oppression which has held humankind in bondage. The message of Jesus and the early disciples was that the kingdom of God has come to set us free from the dominion of darkness (Mk. 1:15; Matt. 9:35; 12:28; Lk. 9:1-6; 10:1-20; Col. 1:13). There are many "big picture" ramifications that come with this image of the kingdom of God. John's preference for the phrase, eternal life, or "age-type life", as I will describe it, seems to emphasize more of the quality of life that comes with being a citizen of the kingdom. It is more personal, less cosmic to our ears, in a sense, though it does refer to an age, ...the kingdom of God that is here now but is also yet to come. Age-type life is the spilling over of the power and vitality of the Age to Come into this present evil age in the lives of those who have believed in Jesus.

Vs. 6 -- This verse summarizes the principle that Jesus is teaching about in this passage concerning where spiritual life must come from. In the history of science, there was a theory that was popular for some time known as spontaneous generation. People used to think that life came from non-living materials all by itself, spontaneously. Maggots would suddenly appear on meat that had been lying out for a time. Mice would be found within a pile of old rags or other litter within a short period of time. We now know that maggots came from the eggs of flies that had landed on the meat. Mice did not magically appear in the rags, rather they were attracted to nest in a comfortable environment which they discovered in their endless foraging for food. This was not at all apparent to the casual observer in earlier days, however. It took extensive work by people like Joseph Lister and Louis Pasteur to conclusively demonstrate that life can only come from life, and to disprove the popular theory of spontaneous generation. This has become a fundamental principle of biology which we are all taught in school. There is a parallel to this principle in the area of spiritual birth. *The (thing) having been begotten out from the flesh is flesh...* -- What is from natural, physical origin or from self-effort can only produce what is of like nature, i.e., natural, not supernatural or spiritual. Hence, physical birth, or any earthly effort, cannot produce spiritual life. ...*and the (thing) having been begotten out from the Spirit is spirit.* -- The Spirit must produce a spiritual birth.

Vs. 7 -- *Do not marvel that I said to you...* -- The logic of Jesus' statement becomes quite apparent. ...*You must be born again.* -- An interesting distinction comes out in the Greek between the two parts of this verse. The first time the word "you" occurs it is in the singular form, i.e., He is speaking to Nicodemus. In the second half of the verse, the word "you" is plural, meaning that you-as-a-group (i.e., all people) must be born from above (Gr. - anōthen). This has the effect of universalizing the statement. Also the word translated as "must" is quite strong in Greek. It means "it is necessary" or "it is bound". A more literal translation of this phrase would be, "It is necessary y'all to be born/begotten from above/again".

Vs. 8 -- ...*so is everyone who is born of the Spirit.* -- This is a comparison with the word picture in the first half of this verse. As you observe the effects of the wind/spirit, but don't know where it is coming from or going to, *in this same manner, or, like this* is everyone having been begotten/born out from the Spirit. In other words, there is something unpredictable or mysterious about those who have been born from above. ...*who is born of the Spirit...* -- The Greek for this would be more literally translated as, "the (one) having been begotten/born out from the Spirit". The significance of the verbal form is that it means that the birth has happened in the past and has ongoing results, in other words the person remains changed as a consequence of this spiritual birth/begetting.