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JOHN 3:9-21 -- How Can New Birth Come To Be?

Jesus had just explained to Nicodemus that to perceive or enter the Kingdom of God, a person must be born from above. In addition to natural physical birth, "out from water", one must also be born "out from" the Spirit. All that flesh is capable of producing is flesh. It is not capable of producing spiritual life. Natural and human efforts can only produce natural and human results. In the same way, it is only possible for a spiritual source to produce spiritual life. It is not possible for the natural life to create supernatural or spiritual life. Spiritual life must be infused or injected into us from the outside from a greater source of spiritual life. Much like seed from a living plant must be deposited in otherwise lifeless ground in order for plants to grow up, so our souls are spiritually lifeless and undiscerning apart from this influx of life from outside ourselves.

NOTES:

Vs. 9 -- Nicodemus' response to Jesus, "*How can these things be?*" Literally, the Greek is, "How/in what way is it possible these (things) to become/to happen/to come to be?" Nicodemus' response is not a statement of rejection, or a dismissal of what Jesus had said, rather it appears that he was sincerely attempting to grasp how a spiritual birth might come to pass.

Vs. 10 -- *the teacher of Israel* -- Jesus' words indicate that Nicodemus must have been a prominent Rabbi, as well as a member of the ruling council (vs. 1). *...and do not understand these things?* The word translated as "understand" means more the idea of knowledge by personal acquaintance, experience, or self-discovery. It is not a statement putting down Nicodemus' mental abilities, rather Jesus recognizes his stature as a teacher and student of the Bible and is saying "Haven't you perceived these things in your studies of the Scriptures?" The statement is really a lead-in for the Bible study Jesus is going to initiate in the next few verses.

Verse 11 -- *Truly, truly, I say to you* -- Jesus is going to say something important. *we speak that which we know...* -- Literally, "What (thing) we know (by observation, or intellectually) we speak, and what (thing) we have seen we testify..." Jesus is saying that His teachings are not simply from the study of the Scriptures, but also from His own observations and personal experiences. He presents Himself as an eyewitness in a courtroom. Jesus' use of the word "we" is interesting. Who else is testifying with Jesus? *... and you do not receive our witness.* -- Or, "and the our testimony y'all do not take/receive/accept." Notice that He is not speaking only concerning Nicodemus, but to a larger group of which he is a representative, i.e., the other leaders.

Vs. 12 -- If they will not believe or trust Jesus as a reliable witness when He refers to things that have an obvious earthly parallel in their experience, how will they hear what He might tell them about spiritual things that have no reference point in their experience?

Vs. 13 -- *and no one has ascended into heaven* -- This remark reminds us that previous to Christ's death and resurrection those who were the righteous dead did not go to heaven upon their passing. Rather, they went to Hades (Greek) or Sheol (Hebrew), meaning the grave or the nether world, as did the unrighteous who died. There the two groups were clearly separated and had very different experiences. The righteous dead were gathered in a place of rest and peace, referred to as Abraham's bosom, while the unrighteous dead were in torment (Lk. 16:19-31). Since the time of Christ's victory, those who die in Jesus will immediately "be with Christ" (Phil. 1:20-23; II Cor. 5:1-9), who has taken the righteous with Him to heaven (Eph. 4:8-10). This new arrangement is possible because now the payment for sins has been made, whereas before it was only promised (cf. Rom. 3:24-26). *but He who descended from heaven* -- The Greek is a little more specific, "except the one coming down (at a point in time) out from the heaven". *...the Son of Man.* -- This is a significant title from the Old Testament. It is by far the most favorite way that Jesus chose to refer to Himself. In fact it is almost exclusively His title for Himself. Only Stephen, when he is being stoned to death (Acts 7:56), and the

apostle John, describing what he sees in the visions in Revelation (1:1:13; 14:14) employ this title for Jesus. All the other 84 occurrences in the New Testament are upon Jesus' lips in reference to Himself. This is already the second time it is recorded upon Jesus' lips in this Gospel, the first being in 1:51. The special advantage that this title offered to Jesus was that it could be interpreted in two very different ways. Thus, He could make some very definite claims, and still remain somewhat obscure or detached from them. It kept people from pinning Him down too easily. They had to listen more to *what* He was saying about this Son of Man in order to really understand what He was getting at. The other titles, such as Christ, Son of David, etc., presented problems to Jesus, in that the people had some very specific preconceived ideas of what they meant. If Jesus were to openly call Himself by one of these other titles, the common people would tend to suppose that He was going to be a political Messiah, a warrior-king who would conquer the Romans and liberate Israel. This would have plummeted Him into direct conflict with the Roman authorities, and would probably have precipitated an earlier death before His training of the twelve had opportunity to be completed. Part of the background for this title came from the book of Ezekiel, where it was used in reference to the prophet (almost 90 times in the book). The thrust of the title from this perspective was in His identity as a true human being. The other place that the title occurred in the Old Testament was from the book of Daniel. Here the title takes on a very powerful, supernatural imagery. According to Daniel's vision, "One like the Son of Man" will come before God, "the Ancient of Days" and will be given dominion, glory, and an everlasting kingdom, one which extends over every nation (Dan. 7:13,14). Another key image from Daniel's vision is that this Son of Man will come on the clouds of heaven. This word picture could not help but be called to mind by Jesus' words here in Jn. 3:13, "the (one) coming down out from heaven, the Son of Man".

Vs. 14 -- *And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness* -- The word for "as" has the nuance of "according as", meaning it is a comparison of the way in which Moses lifted up the serpent. According to the Old Testament account from Numbers 21:4-9, the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people in judgment for their sin. Many were dying from their poisonous bites, so the people came to Moses, admitting their sin and asking for him to intercede on their behalf. In response to God's direction, Moses made a bronze serpent and set it upon a standard, or pole, so that if ever anyone was bitten, he might look upon it and "he shall live". *even so must the Son of Man be lifted up* -- Literally, "as this/in this same manner it is necessary/it is bound the Son of Man to be lifted up". The implication would be that somehow like the serpent was put on a pole and held up before all, the Son of Man will also likewise be "lifted up".

Vs. 15 -- *that whoever believes may in Him have eternal life* -- The word "that" in Greek signifies a purpose clause. The Son of Man will be lifted up, as the bronze serpent had been lifted up, in order that "the (one) believing in Him might have/possess age-type life", or "Kingdom-quality" life. In answer to Nicodemus' question, "How is it possible [for] these things to come to pass?", Jesus cites the miraculous healing that came to those who heard of the provision of God (in the bronze serpent) and looked in hope and faith at this symbol upon the pole for salvation from the serpent's venomous sting. In similar fashion, God will make provision by "lifting up" the Son of Man in order that the one who trusts in this promise of deliverance might look in faith to Him and receive life of the quality of the coming kingdom of God. In other words, it would only happen by a gracious, miraculous work of God in the lives of those who put their trust in this Son of Man.

Vs. 16 -- *For God so loved the world* -- Lit., "For as this/in this manner God loved (at a point in time) the world". The word "world" is *kosmos* in Greek. It generally means "an organized system of things". (Interestingly enough, we get the derivative "cosmetics" from this word. To "make up, put together, or organize" one's face continues to convey the meaning of the verbal form of this term.) Often it can refer negatively to a spiritual system affected or organized by evil (e.g., I Jn. 2:15-17; Eph. 2:2). This spiritual system of influence permeates all aspects of our political and social structures and is pervasive, if apparently subtle, in the extent of its reach and in its effect upon mankind. We are all touched by and influenced by its shadow. It is set against the knowledge of God, and attempts to distract us from walking in the light by its allurements and propaganda. Part of the process of spiritual maturation is developing the discernment to recognize and disregard its deception. The other primary meaning of this word is in reference to the organized system of nature around us. In this sense, it would refer to the inhabited planet, the universe, and the natural order. The derivative, "cosmos", would faithfully carry this meaning for us today. When God loved the world, it is this latter

meaning that is intended. He loved mankind, the inhabited earth, and the natural systems of the universe that He created (cf. Rom. 8:19-25). The word, "for", indicates that this verse is meant to be an explanation of why the Son of Man had come, and why this offer of eternal life was being made available. The "as this" refers to the statement to come, i.e., God loved the world in this way... *that He gave His only begotten Son* -- The word for "that" here means "with the result that". In other words, this is the way in which God loved the world. The result of His love was that He sent His unique (only-kind) Son for us. The word translated as "gave" describes action that happens at a point in time, a one-time, complete, start-to-finish act. The full implication of the word has not yet been fully revealed by Jesus, or by John the author, namely that He would be the "lamb that is led to slaughter" which Isaiah had spoken of, the One to bear sin for us all as our substitute (Isa. 53:4-12). *that whoever believes in Him should not perish* -- This time the word "that" means "in order that", the indicator of a purpose clause. God's purpose, or intention, was that "the (one) believing into/towards" Jesus might not be lost/perish/be ruined (at a point in time), rather they might have (ongoing present action) age-type life.

Vs. 17 -- God's purpose in sending His Son is more clearly stated. Literally, "For God did not send (at a point in time) the Son into the world in order that (purpose clause) He might judge (point in time) the world, rather in order that (purpose clause) the world might be saved/delivered/rescued by means of Him." -- Not to judge, but to save.

Vs. 18 -- Lit., "The (one) believing into/towards Him is not judged; but the (one) not believing already has been judged (action completed with continuing effect), because he has not believed (action completed with continuing effect) into/towards the name of the only-kind Son of the God". The real problem is not judgment for disbelief, but the effect and consequences of sin in the heart, as explained in the next couple of verses.

Vs. 19 -- *This is the judgment* -- The further explanation of vs. 18. *the light is come* -- The Greek tense of the word means that the light came and its coming still has an effect. The world remains changed or impacted by its coming. *men loved the darkness rather than the light* -- This is the real cause of judgment, the disregard for and suppression of truth (cf. Rom. 1:18-32). *for their deeds were evil* -- The motive for their affinity for darkness and their aversion to light.

Vs. 20 -- *who does evil* -- The emphasis of this language is on habitual sinning. The more one is invested in evil, the more extreme the reaction against truth will be. *hates the light, and does not come to the light* -- The verbs describe present and continuing action. *lest his deeds should be exposed* -- This is classic avoidance. The Greek actually says, "in order that (purpose clause) the works/deeds of him might not be exposed/shown up for what they are/shown to be faults or errors/rebuked/reproved (at a point in time)." What this reveals is that at some level these people know that what they are doing is wrong, but they don't want to consciously face the responsibility of that knowledge. They hate to be corrected or made responsible for their own sense of morality. As a result, they tend to dislike and avoid situations or people who make them take a good look at themselves and their actions. It is interesting that the light doesn't really change the situation, it just makes visible what is already true.

Vs. 21 -- *he who practices the truth comes to the light* -- Lit., "the (one) doing (habitually, continually) the truth/reality". It is not enough to know the truth, it is the one who consistently lives out the truth, who is real, genuine, and unhyprocritical in the actions of his life, who will willingly come again and again to the light. *that his deeds may be manifested as having been wrought in God.* -- This is another purpose clause in the original language. Literally, "in order that it might be evident/be made visible of/about him that it is in/with/by God (that) the works/deeds have been being worked/produced." In other words, not only do these people have nothing to hide, and therefore they have confidence to "come out into the light", but they have as their *purpose* to let it be known that it is because of God's influence in their lives that they have made the choices that they have. Instead of hiding from the truth and attempting to ignore their responsibility to God, they desire to give glory to Him by letting others clearly see that it has been His activity in their lives that is behind their actions.