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Conducted by  
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**"Within its context, please explain John 3:8."**

THIS passage of scripture reads, "The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, or whither it goeth: so is everyone that is born of the Spirit". It is part of a profound discourse that Jesus had with one Nicodemus, a Pharisee and a leader of the Jews, and the context is to be found in the verses 1-21 of the third chapter of John's Gospel.

The whole passage is concerned with the new birth and the impartation of spiritual life, made possible by the sacrificial death of Christ, and effected by the operation of the Holy Spirit. In short, it is talking about a regenerative process; the replacement of spiritual death by the communication of spiritual life. But let us examine the text of this very important passage of scripture, so that the faith of the saints might be strengthened, and so that any reader who has *not* responded to Christ might be led to faith, obedience, and participation in that new life through Christ Jesus and the Word.

**The Context**

In verse three John records that Jesus said to Nicodemus, "Except a man be born again, he cannot see the Kingdom of God". To 'see', or to enjoy by discernment, is a condition which is made possible by a new birth. To see the Kingdom of God implies that the discernment is spiritual, because the Kingdom is spiritual. On one occasion Jesus said, to the Pharisees, "The kingdom of God cometh not with observation: Neither shall they say, Lo here! or, lo there! for, behold, the kingdom of God is within you" (Luke 17:20-21). It is quite evident that Jesus did *not* mean that the Kingdom of God was in the hearts of the Pharisees as a governing principle, but what He *was* stating as an uncompromising truth was that except one be born again, that one could not experience the reign of God over his heart and life. Yes, the Kingdom of God *is* spiritual, and one can only enjoy the blessings and privileges if one is spiritual; "Spiritual things", said Paul, "are spiritually discerned".

**The New Man.**

The dilemma of Nicodemus is both real and astonishing to Jesus, "Art thou a master of Israel and knowest not these things?" Nicodemus said to the Lord, "How can a man be born when he is old?" The trouble was, of course, that he was thinking about the *wrong man*, the man of the flesh. The student will no doubt recall that Paul taught, "Though our outward man perish, yet the inward man is renewed day by day" (2 Cor. 4:16). Jesus Himself made it clear to Nicodemus what He was referring to, "That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is Spirit". It is the *spirit* of man, not the *flesh*, which is regenerated, and surely this is the reason why unregenerate flesh will always war against the regenerated spirit until the flesh is brought into subjection, "For the flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh: and these are contrary one to the other" (Gal. 5:17). We must note here that the verb 'lusteth' is not used with respect to the Holy Spirit. The word 'lust' in English is always used

in a bad sense, so it is not a word we can use as indicating the nature of the Holy Spirit. The same Greek word EPITHUMEO is used by Jesus, "With *desire* I have desired to eat this passover with you before I suffer" (Luke 22:15), so it would perhaps be better to paraphrase the Galatian passage and say, "The *desire* of the Spirit is against the flesh".

### What is Regeneration?

The Greek word for regeneration is PALINGENESIA (palin, again; genesis; birth), so it literally means 'born again' or 'new birth'. When we think about 'birth' we think of the physical aspect of it and this is precisely what Nicodemus did; he didn't understand that the Lord was using a physical *figure* for a spiritual *fact*. Baptism, of course, is conterminous with regeneration. Paul wrote to Titus, "But after that the kindness and love of God our Saviour toward man appeared, not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewal of the Holy Spirit; which he shed on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Saviour; that being justified by his grace, we should be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life" (Titus 3:4-7). Paul explains to the Ephesian saints that the Word of God is the *instrument* of spiritual cleansing, "That he might sanctify it (the Church) with the washing of water by the Word" (Eph. 5:26). It follows, then, that if the Word is the instrument of cleansing, and the same Word is given by inspiration of the Holy Spirit, then *obedience* to the Word in all details is absolutely essential for salvation, hence Jesus, "Verily, verily, I say unto thee, except a man be born of water and of the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God". Also, the call of Peter on Pentecost, "Repent, and be baptised every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38).

God always has an objective in what He does and we must see regeneration as the objective expression of the Divine will. It is the desire of God that none should perish, and in order to achieve this He asks us to be obedient to His revealed will as expressed in Christ and in the Word. Why does He do this? Because all are 'dead' in trespasses and sins (Eph. 2:1). Paul goes on, "But God, who is rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he loved us, even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us (made us alive) together with Christ" (Eph. 2:4,5). So we see, the human spirit may be regarded as dead, even though it exists, if it has ceased to be the organ of the Divine Spirit. We must understand, of course, that the agent in regeneration is the Holy Spirit, but having said that, it is equally important to understand that He, the Holy Spirit, operates *through* the Word of God in salvation. Jesus made it perfectly clear to the people of His day, "It is the Spirit that quickeneth; the flesh profiteth nothing: the words that I speak unto you, *they* are spirit, and they are life. But there are some of you that believe not" (John 6:63-64). Indeed, and isn't that true today? We see and hear so-called Christian commentators on the media who are tearing the heart out of the Christian Gospel by presenting the Christ of God as merely a 'good' man, and the Word of God as a meaningless irrelevance in the twentieth century. They will assuredly find their place in the 'lake that burns with fire', but how many others will they lead into perdition?

We must *all* understand, Christian and non-Christian alike, that a spiritual change as envisaged in regeneration is necessary if we are to live lives acceptable to God. The acid test is as Paul put it, "As many as are led by the Spirit of God *they* are the sons of God" (Rom. 8:14).

### And so to John 3:8

I think we are now in a better position to explain the fundamental facts of this particular verse. The word translated 'wind' in this verse is the Greek word PNEUMA and the literal meaning as Jesus would know it would be, "the Spirit breatheth", and in this context would mean "the breath of life". Paul illustrated this quite well as he spoke about God from Mar's hill, he said, "Neither is worshipped with men's hands, as though he needed anything, seeing he giveth to all life, and breath, and all things" (Acts 17:25). There is an interesting passage in Acts 9:1, where it is recorded that Paul started out on the Damascus road 'breathing out threatenings and slaughter'; this seems to indicate that threatenings and slaughter were like the elements from which Paul drew and expelled his breath (See W.E. Vine). Therefore, following this reasoning, the elemental origin of the breathings of the Holy Spirit must be the Eternal Spirit Himself, God.

The phrase 'where it listeth' could be literally rendered 'where it (He) wills', and it implies volition and purpose. (See Matt. 17:12 for a further use of the word).

'Thou hearest the sound therof'. The word for sound is the word *phònè* and most frequently means 'a voice'. The operation of the wind as a physical force is likened by Jesus to the operation of the Holy Spirit as a spiritual force. He operates through the Word; He works mysteriously in the hearts and minds of men to bring them to repentance. He is the source of life, because He directs the seeker to the mainstream of Eternal Life through the Gospel.

Therefore, I believe we can paraphrase along these lines. "The Holy Spirit breathes the breath of life into those whomsoever He wills. He operates mysteriously but effectively in the hearts and minds of people to bring them into obedience to the Life-Source which is manifested in the Gospel of Christ. So is everyone that is born of the Spirit in this way".

I trust that these few words will be helpful to some who may be seeking the regeneration of their spirits. What Jesus is saying to Nicodemus is "hasn't it always been like this. Are you a master and yet you don't know?" God grant that we shall understand those fundamental truths which He so freely gives.