



NOTHING IS IMPOSSIBLE WITH GOD

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Luke 1:26-38

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Our home fellowship has just finished reading the powerful little book, *Green Leaf In Drought*. Arthur and Wilda Matthews, missionaries with the China Inland Mission, were trapped in China when the Communists took over power in the 1950s. Over the next two years this couple faced impossible situations. Their lives were in constant danger: surrounded by enemies, their little baby in harm's way, their pantry empty. Yet they committed every situation into the Lord's hands. Miraculously, in God's timing, all the CIM missionaries got out of China. Not a single one was lost. The last missionary to leave was Arthur Matthews.

In the book the Matthews share four anchors that kept them steady during those terrible days:

1. God brought me here. It is by his will I am in this difficult place, and in that fact I will rest.
2. He will keep me here in his love, and give me grace to behave as I should.
3. He will make the trial a blessing, teaching me the lessons he intends for me to learn.
4. In his good time he can bring me out again – how and when, he knows.¹

One great delusion that accompanies wealth, power and status is that people think they are in control of their lives. A difficult lesson to learn is that God values our heart, not our possessions. Everything we have is on loan to us. We are merely stewards of his possessions. God is not interested in appearance, performance or status.

And God is sovereign. He has a purpose and a plan. But it is not at all predictable. As Darrell Bock writes, "When God promises, He will perform—only He will do it in His time and sometimes in surprising ways. When the time of fulfillment comes, we realize that His timing was better than ours. Perhaps we sometimes wish we could be in the boardroom of heaven, telling God how to make His plans...The Creator of the universe knows what He is doing."²

I want to begin and end our message with this thought in mind.

We return this morning to the first chapter of the gospel of Luke, to the account of the preparation of four Israelites whom God would use in his eternal plan of redemption. Last week we looked at the angel Gabriel's announcement to Zechariah the priest concerning the birth of John. John would grow up to be filled with the

Holy Spirit, and through his preaching Israel would be prepared for the coming of Jesus Christ.

In the story that we will study this morning the location shifts from the temple in Jerusalem, in the province of Judea, northward to a home in Nazareth, in the province of Galilee. Here we come to the unique announcement to Mary by the angel Gabriel, concerning the birth of Jesus. By this time, Elizabeth is in the sixth month of her pregnancy.

Now in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the descendants of David; and the virgin's name was Mary. (Luke 1:26-27, NASB)

These opening chapters of Luke record the most significant events in human history. The birth and life of the Lord Jesus is the pivotal point in the history of the world. For centuries, the prophets foretold of and awaited the coming of the Messiah, the day when the glory of the Lord would be revealed. Yet what stands out in these verses is God's method of operation: the way he works, the places and the people he chooses, and the circumstances he creates.

From a human perspective, the places that God chose are questionable. He chose Galilee, not Judea, Nazareth, not Jerusalem. Judea was the geographical heart of Israel, the place where God had dealt with his people down through the centuries. Judeans were very proud of their identity and where they lived. Galilee had been infected with pagan religion and had long been disregarded. Yet God chose Galilee over Judea. He didn't choose Jerusalem, the city of David, the heart of religious influence in the nation.

Nazareth, located seventy miles northeast of Jerusalem, stood on a hillside, next to a great highway. Many who passed along that road—Roman soldiers, Greek merchants, travelers, pilgrims and merchants—stopped to spend the night there. Under these influences, immorality and corruption had become commonplace. When Nathaniel asked, "Can anything good come from Nazareth?" he wasn't referring to its size. Even in this hotbed of corruption, God had his chosen servants. In the darkest days of human history, God has always had his elect remnant ready to accomplish his will and purpose—and our day is no exception.

Even the people that God chose are surprising, at least from our perspective. According to Matthew's gos-

pel, Joseph was a lineal descendant of King David, through Solomon. Joseph is described as a “righteous man” — a man of fairness and justice. He was a carpenter; he worked hard for a living. He was engaged to Mary. The name is a Greek translation of the Hebrew name Miriam. Luke’s genealogy of Jesus has Mary as a direct descendant of King David, through his son Nathan.

Engagement in that first century day was much different from today. Engagement, or betrothal, lasted a year, and it was much more serious and binding. Consecrated before a priest, it was so binding that a couple had to divorce in order to break it. Betrothal usually took place shortly after puberty, so Mary was probably thirteen, fourteen, or possibly fifteen years old at this time. Luke says she was a virgin. The passage mentions that fact three times. Mary was a pure woman, despite the environment she lived in.

Luke records the angel’s announcement.

And coming in, he said to her, “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.” But she was very perplexed at this statement, and kept pondering what kind of salutation this was. The angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary; for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name Him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David, and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and His kingdom will have no end.” (Luke 1:28-33)

Gabriel’s greeting is beautiful and powerful: “Hail, O favored one, the Lord is with you!” “Hail” is a greeting, but it has the same root as the word favor, or literally, grace. So his greeting could be rendered, “Grace, O graced one.” Mary is favored because she is the recipient of God’s grace. Some would suggest that Luke is implying a certain grace in Mary’s character. But the only other place this word is used in Scripture is in Ephesians 1:6, where we read that God’s glorious grace has been freely bestowed, or favored, upon us. God had given Mary his free and unmerited grace in choosing her to be the mother of his son.

“The Lord is with you,” is a statement of the mighty power of God being present with and upon Mary. God will be the source of this great event, and he will be her protection and security in the difficult years ahead. She is merely the recipient of grace, not its dispenser.

Notice Mary’s modest reaction to the greeting. She is agitated by the words of the angel; she feels that such a greeting isn’t suited to her. But the angel reassures her with the same words he used to reassure Zacharias, “Fear not!” She has no reason to be afraid, because she is the special object of God’s favor. Her poor circumstances and feelings of personal unworthiness do not deter God.

Then the angel begins to unfold the mystery for which God had chosen her. She will conceive, and following her pregnancy she will give birth to a boy. And the angel names the baby; the birth announcement is dictated even before the baby is conceived: “You are to name him Jesus (Y’shua).” Jesus, the Greek word for Joshua, means Jehovah-Salvation. Matthew’s gospel records that Gabriel later appeared to Joseph and gave him the reason for the name. He said, “You shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins” (Matt 1:21). Though that name was common in the first century — many little boys were called Jesus — finally, after centuries of waiting, there would come One who would bear that name perfectly and fulfill its meaning completely. Just as Joshua delivered Israel from their enemies and brought them out of slavery and into the Promised Land, so the new Joshua — Jesus — would deliver his people from their enemies, out of the slavery of sin, and bring them into the land of promise.

Yahweh is salvation: Jehovah saves. That name focuses on one of the central themes of Christmas, the universal need for a Savior. Jesus Christ brings deliverance from the bondage of sin. People don’t focus much on this part of the Christmas story. We talk so much about the birth and all the sentiment that goes along with that — and there is much legitimate sentiment — that we miss the important things. The story is treated quite simply in Scripture, however. The focus is on the fact that the Lord Jesus came to die. The Lord Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God, took a human body in order that he might die for our salvation. The apostle Paul would write Timothy many years later, “The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ came into the world to save sinners” (1Tim 1:15).

But this baby is more than a Savior. The amazing claims that the angels make for this unborn baby would have staggered Jewish readers of this gospel. The son of Mary will be a colossal figure. He will be the greatest ruler that not only Israel, but the whole world has ever seen.

First, *he will have unqualified greatness.* “He will be great,” says the angel. And, unlike John the Baptist, whose greatness is qualified with the words, “in the sight of the Lord,” Jesus’ greatness is unqualified and absolute.

Second, *he will be the Son of God.* He will be “called the Son of the Most High,” meaning, he “will be the Son of God.” The “Son of the Most High” is a parallel expression of “Son of God.” Some thirty years later, this was confirmed as Jesus was being baptized by John at the Jordan. The heavens were opened, the Spirit of God descended upon him like a dove, and a voice from heaven said, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.”

Third, *his kingdom will have no end.* “The Lord will give Him the throne of His father David.” He is the Messiah! “He will reign over the house of Jacob forever,

and His kingdom will have no end." "The house of Jacob" is another messianic description used to designate Israel (Exod 19:3). Jesus is the long awaited King of Israel who will enjoy an eternal rule. This was the promise given to David in 2 Samuel 7:13-16, and put to song in Psalms 2:7; 89:4, 26-29; 132:12. Isaiah said of this coming king,

**There will be no end to the increase of His government or of peace,
On the throne of David and over his kingdom,
To establish it and to uphold it with justice and righteousness
From then on and forevermore. (Isa 9:7)**

The angel declares this baby will be the last Davidic King, the Messiah, who will reign forever and ever. Once his kingdom is established it will never end. Jesus Christ enjoys an everlasting kingdom. That kingdom of God that was realized in the coming of Jesus and will be consummated at the Second Coming will continue forever!

Jesus Christ is the Coming One hoped for and expected in the Old Testament, and realized and proclaimed in the New. He will reign forever and ever. He will always be the sovereign king.

*When we've been there ten thousand years
Bright shining as the sun,
We've no less days to sing God's praise
Than when we first begun. (John Newton)*

It is not surprising then that so great a person will have no ordinary birth.

And Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" The angel answered and said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; and for that reason the holy Child shall be called the Son of God. And behold, even your relative Elizabeth has also conceived a son in her old age; and she who was called barren is now in her sixth month. For nothing will be impossible with God." (Luke 1:34-37)

There is a big difference between Mary's response and that of Zacharias, which we looked at last week. In unbelief, Zacharias asked for a sign. Mary timidly explains a simple fact, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" She doesn't ask for proof; she simply wonders about the process, since she is the subject. There is a transparent simplicity in her question. She is not responding theologically, but realistically. "I've never had sexual intercourse. How can this happen?" she asks. It is interesting to think that, despite all the theological volumes that have been written about the virgin birth, Mary herself is the first one to raise the issue. "How can this be, since I am a virgin?"

The angel responds to Mary's question with beautiful poetry, describing how God will mysteriously provide for conception in her virgin womb.

There is wonderful parallelism in the first part of verse 32. The angel says that the power of the Holy Spirit of God will come upon Mary. God will overshadow, literally, will envelop her. The imagery harkens back to Exodus 40, where the cloud that enveloped the tent symbolized the presence of God. It is a beautiful, sensitive, clear statement of divine activity that will result in conception. This active, creative, productive overshadowing presence of God brings about the conception within Mary's womb. This pre-existent person will be conceived by a direct divine act, without a sexual activity or substitute of any kind.

The angel then announces to Mary that this Jesus, as a result of his divinely instituted life, his supernatural conception, will be free from all taint of sin. The angel says, "Therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God."

Two important truths in verse 35 are difficult to hold in tension. The angel says, first, that the Savior of the world will be born of a woman. The Scriptures say that it was necessary for Jesus to be of the same nature as those whom he came to save. Remember the apostle Paul's words in Galatians 4:4-5, "But when the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons." Jesus was fully human. But the Scriptures also say that it was necessary for the Savior to be holy and sinless, because a sinful being could not achieve reconciliation for others.

Gabriel's announcement is that both of these conditions would be realized in the life of Jesus. Jesus is fully man, yet fully God. This is the mystery of the incarnation.

So this birth would be both miraculous and unique. The birth of Isaac to Abraham and Sarah in their old age certainly was miraculous, and the birth of John to Zacharias and Mary's cousin Elizabeth was miraculous. But the birth of this baby was more than miraculous. Jesus was unique. He would be conceived without a human father. He would be human and divine. He would be the Son of God and the son of a humble Nazarene girl.

The "holy offspring shall be called the Son of God," for that is who he is. This is the only way to account for Jesus. Don't make any apology for believing in the virgin conception and birth of Jesus. Because Jesus was a very special person, Immanuel, he would have to have a very special entry into the world.

The angel explains that God's power had already been evidenced in the life of Mary's elderly cousin Elizabeth. Already she was six months pregnant, though she was old and barren. God is not restricted to the natural order. He is totally free to do the extraordinary. Here the angel is saying to Mary that Elizabeth's own miracle will help convince and strengthen her in her own struggle to believe, to understand and absorb this.

And his final word of encouragement to Mary summarizes all he has been saying, "For with God nothing will be impossible." Literally, "For no word from God will be impossible." When God speaks, things happen. Just as it was in the beginning, when God spoke reality into being and the first Adam was created, so now the Word will become flesh and dwell among us. God can and will do anything that he determines. That is the point of Gabriel's final word to Mary.

Before we read Mary's final response, I want to pause for a moment. Let us examine what would happen if Mary submitted to God's will for her life. That angelic announcement that brings us such joy would bring extreme hardship to Mary. First of all, she would be a pregnant, unmarried teenager. Her predicament loses some of its force for us in this country where each year more than a million teenagers become pregnant out of wedlock. But in a closely-knit Jewish community of the first century, the news announced by the angel would have been most unwelcome. The law regarded as an adulteress a betrothed woman who became pregnant. She was subject to death by stoning. Luke said that Joseph, her fiancé, was a righteous man. Joseph planned to divorce Mary quietly rather than press charges, and he would have done that had not the angel Gabriel appeared to him as well. Mary had to live her life with false rumors about her character. When Jesus called the Pharisees "sons of the devil," their cold retort was, at least "we were not born out of fornication."

In the next scene, Mary hurries off to the one person who could possibly understand what she was going through: her relative Elizabeth. Elizabeth believes Mary and shares her joy, and yet these two women's worlds are very different. The whole countryside was talking about the miracle of Elizabeth's healed womb, while Mary will have to hide the shame of her miracle. In a few months, John the Baptist's birth will take place with great fanfare. The midwives, the doting relatives, the whole village will celebrate the birth of a Jewish male. But months later, Jesus was born far from home, with no midwife and no extended family in attendance. Mary would have an unassisted delivery in a cold and dirty cave. Then there came the perilous flight to Egypt to escape Herod's fury. All of this was just the begin-

ning of many sorrows that would culminate at the foot of the cross when, as Simon prophesied, a sword was thrust into Mary's soul.

But her response is one of humble submission:

And Mary said, "Behold, the bondservant of the Lord; may it be done to me according to your word." And the angel departed from her. (Luke 1:38)

That was Mary's secret. She knew that her circumstances were ordained by God, and she humbly accepted his will: "I am the Lord's servant. May it be done to me according to your word."

I pray that at this Christmas we will respond like Mary to our own circumstance. Perhaps you face the daily stresses of parenting a difficult or rebellious child. Maybe your marriage is lifeless and nothing you do relieves your loneliness. Maybe you are out of work, and the prospects for finding another job look bleak. Some of you face the difficult task of living with the pain of losing someone you love. Others of you have learned that you have a disease that could be fatal.

Listen to these words of David Roper:

If we plan to move into intimacy with Jesus we must abandon our whole existence, offering it up to him. We must believe that every circumstance of our life—every moment of our life as well as the course of our entire life, anything and everything that happens to us—has come to us by God's will and by his permission and is exactly what we need. We need to know that God's will is "good, acceptable and perfect," and to accept day by day the conditions and circumstances he permits; to lay down our will and patiently submit to his will as it is presented to us day by day in the form of the people with whom we have to live and work, and in the things that keep happening to us.³

That was the secret to Mary's life. That, too, was the secret to the Matthews' life in China. The Creator of the universe knows what he is doing, so we can trust him. The grace given to Mary is available to us as well. "Behold, the bondservant of the Lord; may it be done to me according to your word."

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1. Elizabeth Kuhn, *Green Leaf In Drought* (OMF International, 1997).
2. Darrell L. Bock, *Luke: Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, Vol I* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994).
3. David Roper, *Exactly Right* (E-Musing, Idaho Mountain Ministries, December 5, 2001).