

Nothing is Impossible with God

Luke 1:26-38

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I'd invite you to turn with me to chapter one, as we continue to work our way through the Book of Luke. We're in the passage which is known as the annunciation; that is, where the angel Gabriel comes to announce to the Virgin Mary God's purposes. It is a well-known passage to us.

Luke is of course pointing to the greatness of Jesus in all of these stories. It is important that we not lose sight of that fact. He is clearly paralleling the story of the birth and the life of John the Baptist and of Jesus Christ at this point, but it is not so much the similarities that he wants us to focus on, but the differences. Yes, they are two cousins. Yes, they are both born in the wake of miraculous pregnancies. Yes, there are two hymns of praise sung after their birth. Yes, there are two great lives to be lived. But Jesus is the greatest. John the Baptist is called great before God, and the greatest born from among women, but Jesus Christ is called the very Son of God. John the Baptist's birth — his conception — was miraculous in that his mother was very old when she gave birth to him. Mary, however, had “known not a man,” and His birth was a great miracle... (Jesus' birth was a great miracle). And so Luke is concerned to focus our attention on Jesus Christ himself. So in whatever we learn about our own selves, our own Christian lives, in this passage, let's remember that the focus of Luke is on Jesus.

Now let's pray before we read and hear God's word.

Heavenly Father, we bow before You now acknowledging that this is Your word to us. We pray that You would cause our ears to be open and our hearts to reverently receive it. We pray, O Lord, that we would hear it in faith, believing; that You would open our eyes to behold wonderful truth in Your word; that You would exalt Christ in our hearts in and by Your word and Spirit, and that You would receive all the glory for it. In Jesus' name. Amen.

This is the word of God. Luke 1, beginning at verse 26:

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary. And he came to

her and said, 'Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!' But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be. And 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 call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of His father David, and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end.'

"And Mary said to the angel, 'How will this be, since I am a virgin?'

"And the angel answered her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God. And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.' And Mary said, 'Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.' And the angel departed from her."

Amen. And thus ends this reading of God's holy, inspired, and inerrant word. May He write its eternal truth upon all our hearts.

At Christmastime we are perhaps more conscious as Christians than at any other time of the year of how the world shapes us, and we are also perhaps longing more than at any other time of the year to be shaped rather by Christ and His word and Spirit than by the world.

Well, how can that happen? How can we see encouragement in our desire to be shaped more by Christ and His word and Spirit than by the pervasive influences of the world around us and in which we swim? How can we see some encouragement in this area? Well, it does begin with desire, doesn't it? Desiring to be shaped by Christ, by His word, to live according to His word, to walk according to the Spirit and not according to the flesh. It begins with desire, but it moves on to prayer, doesn't it? Those desires show themselves in our prayers: "Lord, I want to be a Christian in my heart. I don't want to be a worldlyling. I want to be a Christian in my heart. I want to think like a believer; I want to live like a believer; I want to act like a believer; I want to love like a believer; I want to desire like a believer desires. I want to exalt You. I want to exult in You, and not in the trinkets that the world has to offer. I want to treasure Christ, and I don't want to treasure the world."

It begins and continues from desire to prayer, and then it involves some self-examination, doesn't it? "Lord, where in my life has the world, flesh, and God forbid, even the devil gotten a foothold? Where has my thinking been conformed to this world rather than my mind being transformed by the renewing of my mind according to His word? Where has my thinking been gotten hold of by this world?"

Where have my desires been gotten hold of by this world? Where have I begun to treasure the world more than I treasure You?" It continues in self-examination, doesn't it?

But then it goes into giving attention to Scripture, because if we're going to be like Christ, if we're going to march to the beat of a different drum than the world is marching to, then we've got to go to God's word itself and be in the word daily and weekly on the Lord's Day giving attention to Scripture, that we might walk in accordance with the word, not in accordance to the world.

But then we're going to have to do some repenting, aren't we? It continues in repentance. We've got to confess, "Lord, we have not loved You as we ought. We've loved the world and the things of this world more than we've loved You and the things of God. We've sinned in thought and word and deed." It requires some repentance.

And then it's going to require some new resolutions, isn't it, to live according to the resurrection of Christ and by the power of His Spirit instead of according to the flesh? And that resolve, of course, is going to be in utter dependence upon the grace of the Holy Spirit working in us. And then that new resolution that's depending upon the grace of the Holy Spirit to work change in our life is going to issue forth in a greater treasuring of Christ.

Well, where do we get encouragement in the word in these things? Well, for one thing, in this passage. I want to reiterate as I said in the beginning, this passage is about Jesus first and foremost. And it's about God's redeeming purposes first and foremost. But even as we exalt God and Christ, as we see the redeeming purposes of the Lord and the work of the Lord Jesus Christ unfolded in this passage, we also learn some things about how to live to Christ and die to self and the world in this passage. Five words, I think, sum up some of these lessons that we learn: *Humility; Privilege; Mystery; Sovereignty; and, Submission*. Let me look at these five things with you briefly in this passage this morning.

I. Humility.

The first one is *Humility*. Look at verses 26 -27. It's an amazing announcement that's given to this young woman, isn't it? You remember we said when we were talking about Gabriel's message to Zachariah that the last time that we had seen the angel Gabriel was in Daniel 9, and here's Gabriel speaking to Zachariah. Now Gabriel is speaking to Mary and saying to this young woman, 'You are going to be the mother of the Messiah. You are going to be the mother of the one for whom your people have been waiting for millennia.' Not just days and weeks and months and years for centuries, but for millennia: since God said to Eve and Adam, 'Behold, he will bruise His heel, but He will crush his head,' the people of God have been looking for the seed of the woman for the Messiah to come into

this world. And God has sent Gabriel to tell this young woman, 'You're going to be the mother of that Messiah, and God is sending Him into this world.' Even as Gabriel told Daniel in Daniel 9 that in answer to Daniel's prayer the Messiah was going to come into the world, it wasn't just that the children of Israel were going to be relieved of their captivity, but the Messiah was going to come into the world in answer to Daniel's prayer. So also Gabriel says to Mary, 'You are part of that story of the Messiah coming into the world, and you are going to be the mother of the Messiah.'

It's an amazing passage, isn't it? Look at verse 26: "In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God..." We're expecting all of that. We're expecting that because of the Old Testament. We're expecting that because of what has happened in Luke before that point, but this we're not expecting. Look at the next phrase: "...to a city of Galilee named Nazareth." Now that we weren't expecting. An angel from God with a big announcement...Gabriel...yes, that we're expecting. To a city in Galilee named Nazareth? No! And doesn't that very fact point to the amazing, loving condescension of God?

I want you to think for a minute, my friends, about how the humble circumstances of Mary and the humble condition of our Savior's birth set forth something of God's condescension and Jesus' humility. Joachim Jeremais, the great scholar of early Christianity, tells us that in the day of Jesus and Mary that the average age of betrothal for young women was 12 or 13. Now I don't know how old Mary was, and you don't either. But chances are she was a very, very young woman. Maybe barely a teenager. God had not appointed Gabriel to go into Jerusalem to the family of the high priest and say to Caiaphas, 'Caiaphas, your daughter, fair as she is, well-heeled as she is, excellently educated as she is, beautifully garbed in gold embroidery as she is, she will be the one who will bear the Messiah.' No, He had sent the angel Gabriel into Galilee, of all places, and to Nazareth, of which there was an axiom: "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" That's where God sends Gabriel. That's the girl that God chooses. Kent Hughes says, "Mary was a nobody from a nothing town in the middle of nowhere." Do you see the amazing, loving condescension of God in this?

Think about it for a moment, parents. Parents, out of love, want the best for their children. They want to clothe their children in a way that the children won't be embarrassed. They want their children to go to the best schools. They want their children to be raised in a safe and secure and a warm and loving environment. They want to give their children the best. Now I want you to pause and contemplate this, my friends: your heavenly Father for your salvation gave your Savior less by way of earthly privileges than any of you have given to your children. This is the humble condition into which the Lord Jesus Christ was born. I do not say this so that you will feel guilty because of the bounty that God has given you; we ought to give God praise. But I do say this so that we will appreciate the humiliation of the Lord Jesus Christ. From before His birth it was appointed that He would be born to this obscure maiden from an obscure city, in

an obscure region, into a relatively poor family, for your salvation...because of His amazing, loving condescension in His redeeming work. And doesn't that point to something about God's purposes in Jesus' own humility? So that later on He would say, "The foxes have holes, the birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay His head." And doesn't that tell us something about how we ought to be marching to the beat of a different drum? Instead of worshiping status and stuff, to having received much, to becoming generous in our humility?

I am fascinated by the statistics that have been done on evangelical giving. I'm not talking about general giving, but evangelical giving. And the statistics that I have been told of run like this. Over the last fifty years in America, evangelicals (those who believe the Bible, who believe in the second birth, who believe in the gospel and the necessity of preaching the gospel and responding to the gospel) have become more wealthy. And as they have gotten more wealthy, they've given less. Isn't that interesting? The wealthier we've become, the less we've given. Not just to the church, by the way, but to charities in general. Our income has gone up, and our giving has gone down. I want to suggest to you that that's not very humble. "To whom much is given, much is required." And if we had the spirit of our Lord, who did not give His Son status and privilege for our sake, so ought we to use the resources that the Lord has given to us for His glory rather than for ourselves. Now there's something to learn about humility from this passage; Jesus' humility, to be sure, but our humility in emulating Him as well.

II. Privilege.

A second word: *Privilege*. Christians for hundreds of years have meditated upon the privilege that Mary had as the one who was going to be the mother of the Messiah. But as you think about the privilege of Mary in bearing and mothering the Messiah, God's only Son, you ought also to think about the privilege that you have in being children of God through faith in Him.

Look at verses 28-30. The angel comes to Mary and says to her, "Greetings, O favored one. The Lord is with you. You have found favor with God." That's an extraordinary privilege. This very young woman is told that she is going to have the responsibility of birthing and rearing the Messiah. I cannot imagine what was going through her head. Totally apart from the announcement that she was going to have the child without benefit of a father in conception, to be told alone that you're going to be the mother of the Messiah must be an overwhelming thing even for the most mature of godly women. But he says to her, "You have been favored," and Christians for hundreds of years have thought about the enormous privilege that Mary had. Martin Luther in his little Christmas book said, "No woman has ever lived on earth to whom God has shown such grace." And of course there's a sense in which that is true, but I want you to think for a moment, believer, about another privilege that is in fact greater than the privilege of Mary. It is the privilege of being a child of God through faith in Jesus Christ, because in

this case there is a relation which is thicker than blood. You remember what John says in John 1:11-12?

“He came [Jesus came] to His own, and His own people did not receive Him. But to all who did receive Him, who believed in His name, He gave the right to be the children of God.”

Do you realize that, my friend? That as you trust in Jesus Christ alone for salvation as He is offered in the gospel, you are given a status and a privilege, the greater than which cannot be conceived: to be called a child of God, a brother or sister of Jesus Christ, a joint heir with Him. Such that, later in Luke (Luke 8:21) when Mary and His brothers were looking for Jesus, do you remember how Jesus responded to the crowd? [‘Ah...Jesus! Your mother and your brothers are looking for you!’] You remember what Jesus says? Luke 8:21 — “Who are My mother and My brothers?” And then what does He say? “Those who hear My word and do it, they are My mother and brothers.” Do you realize that by grace through faith every believer has the privilege of being the brother or sister of Jesus and the son of His heavenly Father?

My friends, do not discount your gospel privileges! It is totally appropriate for us to honor this godly young woman whose charge it was to nurture the One who would be our Savior, the Messiah promised of God. But, my friends, we must not do it at the discount of the heavenly promise that is given to all those who by faith in Christ have become children of God. Those words come from Jesus himself, and we must meditate upon the privilege that we've been given.

III. Mystery.

Third word: *Mystery*. The virgin birth — mystery. Perhaps you've stumbled over it. If so, join the club. So did Mary. After the angel Gabriel in verses 30-33 has explained to Mary what is going to happen, her response is, ‘How? How is this going to happen? I don't understand. I'm a virgin. How am I going to have a baby? I mean, it's miraculous, Gabriel, that cousin Elizabeth is going to have a baby. She's up there in years. But she's got something that I don't have. She's got a relationship with a husband. How am I going to have a baby?’

My friends, if you believe in an infinite God, then there are going to be mysteries in your religion. If you believe in a God who has no bounds, no limits, no finitude, and is all-powerful and all-knowing, then there are going to be things that are beyond your knowing in His display of His power. And this is not a problem for faith; it is a proof of it. The mystery of the virgin birth, far from a problem for faith, proves the worthiness of God to be worshiped and the importance of our walking by faith and not by sight.

Maybe you're sitting out there today and you're struggling with the virgin birth.

You've kept it to yourself, because you know the circles you run in...not good to question those things in those circles. But let me ask you a question. If you can't conceive how a virgin can conceive, then what about this? Christians believe that Mary gave birth to the sinless Son of God. Now which is harder to believe, that God came in the flesh in Jesus and He was without sin? Or that He came in the flesh miraculously? Maybe you're one of those people who has struggled with the story of Noah...just can't believe that God got all those animals in the ark. Or you've struggled with the miracles of the Bible. My friends, Christians worship a God who brought the world into being by speaking. It does not surprise them that He does mighty miracles that display His power. This is not a surprise and it's not a problem. It's a proof of His infinity and His omnipotence. "How will this be, since I am a virgin?" If you're struggling with the virgin birth, let me just say take a ticket and stand in line. You're behind Mary. Mary didn't have any idea how this could happen either. And yet in this, God's sovereignty is displayed. Do not despise mysteries. In a religion in which we worship an infinite, omnipotent God, there are going to be mysteries.

IV. Sovereignty.

So that leads us to the fourth word that I want to speak with you about, and that's the word *Sovereignty*. You'll see in verse 37 the angel Gabriel's response to Mary's query: "For nothing will be impossible with God." The sovereignty of God is seen in the angel Gabriel's answer regarding the virgin birth and the birth of John the Baptist to Mary's cousin Elizabeth. And the answer is simply this: 'Mary, this is how you know: because there's nothing He can't do! The way you know this will happen is because there's nothing He can't do. He's sovereign. He's all-powerful, He's omnipotent, He's God! That's how you know.'

And, my friends, there's a huge message for the Christian life in this, and it's simply this. Faith rests on the sovereignty of God...faith rests on the sovereignty of God. Our favorite Anglican bishop, J.C. Ryle, says, "Faith never rests so calmly and peacefully as when it lays its head on the pillow of God's omnipotence." And that's the angel Gabriel's answer.

And there's a huge message in this for us, both for the gospel and for the Christian life. First of all, at the very outset of Jesus' life and ministry, notice how God intervenes in His all-powerfulness with this miracle in order to show us that our salvation must be all of God and all of grace. It begins with the miracle of the virgin birth. It begins with the miracle of God in the flesh. What does this tell you? It tells you that salvation is all of God and all of grace, but it also tells you something about how we are to live the Christian life, trusting God and His sovereignty just like Paul says Abraham did, in Romans 4. He believed God despite all evidence to the contrary. He believed the promise of God because of the sovereign power of God. There's something important for us to learn about living the Christian life. It's not only that we're not going to, like the world, worship

status and stuff; but we're going to live in humility emulating our Savior. It's not only that we're not going to treasure the world; we're going to treasure the privileges that we have in Christ Jesus by faith more than the trinkets of the world. It's not only that we're going to listen to God's wisdom even in the mysteries of the faith, rather than worldly wisdom. It's not only that we're going to be trusting in God's sovereignty over against the self-reliance of this world. There's another thing that we're going to learn as well, and you'll see it in verse 38 in Mary's response.

V. Submission.

This is our fifth word. Not just *Humility* and *Privilege* and *Mystery* and *Sovereignty*, but *Submission*. And I want to suggest to you that we learn a lot about the nature of the Christian life from Mary's response to the angel: "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord," she says. "Behold, the bondslave of the Lord. Be it done to me according to your word. Let it be to me according to your word." There is a bravery and a faith and a humility displayed by Mary in this word that shows that she understood that the burden that she was going to carry, dangerous as it was going to be, was in fact going to be freedom for her. Her bondage, her service, her servitude, was going to mean freedom. And there is a submission that understands this that is the very heart of the Christian life.

Take your hymnals out and turn with me to No. 559. One of my favorite hymns in the hymnal is Anna Waring's song, "*Father, I Know That All My Life* [is portioned out for me]." And I often think of the incredibly mature response of Mary when I read the words of this hymn, but it's especially the fourth stanza that grabs my attention. In the fourth stanza, Anna Waring has us sing this:

"In service which Thy will appoints there are no bonds for me...."

[Lord, when You call me to do something, there's no burden in doing it. I'm not in bondage. In Your bondage, there is no bondage.]

"My secret heart is taught the truth that makes Your children free...."

[Oh, I want to know that truth! What is it? Here it is:]

"A life of self-renouncing love is one of liberty."

In doing the will of God, there is freedom. In obedience to the word of God there is liberty. In responding to the command of God — "Yes, Lord. Make it so. Be it done to me according to Your word. Fulfill Your word, O Lord. I will do Your word" — there is no craven bondage; there is freedom.

The Christian life can be summarized in Mary's response to Gabriel. It is a God-

centered believing, thinking and living that she manifests, and a self-renouncing service that she evidences. And, my friends, this is at the very heart of a believing response to the gospel. If you believe the gospel and your whole life has been reoriented around God and His word, and you begin to serve others in self-renouncing love, and when you do it you find that it is not burdensome. It's freeing. And all the freedom that the world promised you in violation of God's word is in fact bondage. And you're the only one around you who's free.

So you want to live and act and think like a Christian this Christmastime? This is a pretty good place to start.

Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, thank You for Your word. Open our eyes to Jesus. Grant that we would trust the gospel and respond to Him in gracious, loving self-denial.

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