

SESSION 3

WHEN YOUR UNDERSTANDING FALLS SHORT

Leader pages on pp. 104-107

THE POINT:
GOD CAN DO GREAT THINGS THROUGH YOU.

LUKE 1:26-38

- ²⁶ In the sixth month, the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth,
²⁷ to a virgin engaged to a man named Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary.
²⁸ And the angel came to her and said, "Greetings, favored woman! The Lord is with you."
²⁹ But she was deeply troubled by this statement, wondering what kind of greeting this could be.
³⁰ Then the angel told her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God."
.....
³¹ Now listen: You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus.
³² 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.
³³ He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and his kingdom will have no end."
³⁴ Mary asked the angel, "How can this be, since I have not had sexual relations with a man?"
.....
³⁵ The angel replied to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore, the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God.
³⁶ And consider your relative Elizabeth—even she has conceived a son in her old age, and this is the sixth month for her who was called childless.
³⁷ **For nothing will be impossible with God.**
³⁸ "See, I am the Lord's servant," said Mary. "May it happen to me as you have said." Then the angel left her.

MEMORY VERSE

KEYWORDS

Nazareth (v. 26)—A town in Galilee. People of Judah looked down upon the Jews there,

Throne of his father David (v. 32)—The promise is shown throughout the Old Testament (2 Sam. 7:12-16; Ps. 2:7-8; 89:29; Isa. 9:6-7; Ezek. 37:21-24; Dan. 7:14) showing the correlation of kingship and sonship.

The power of the Most High ... (v. 35)—Emphasized that the Holy Spirit would have an active, creative, life-giving role. The overshadowing depicted the powerful presence of God. Luke used the same word in the Transfiguration account describing the overshadowing cloud of God's presence (9:34).

WHAT CAN HAPPEN WHEN WE ALLOW GOD TO WORK THROUGH US?

"I can't do everything. But I can do something to help somebody. And what I can do I will do." These are the simple words of a humble servant by the name of Oseola McCarty from Hattiesburg, Mississippi.⁸ She lived her entire life in poverty. She spent most of her life doing laundry by hand. Despite earning very little, she lived frugally, saving all she could. In 1995, after her retirement at age eighty-six, Oseola shocked her community when she donated \$150,000 of her life savings to the University of Southern Mississippi. Her gift was aimed at providing scholarships for deserving African American students in need. Oseola, who never set foot in a college class, gave her best so that others could succeed.

As we celebrate Christmas every year, we are reminded of another woman. She, too, grew up in obscurity, but because she was willing to put her life on the altar of God's sovereignty, she found herself in the middle of God's greatest brushstroke of grace. Mary's life reminds us once again that God will use anyone who surrenders completely to Him, no matter how small or insignificant they might see themselves.

Unexpected Participation //

Luke 1:26-30

"Galilee! What a dump!" That phrase or something close to it was surely spoken time and time again by the Jews in Mary's time. It suffered the brunt of Herod's rule as the host of pagan games and idols. What self-respecting Jew would want to claim Galilee as her home? Zoom in a little closer and consider Nazareth, a little town in Galilee. We capture the long-held reputation of this town in the cynical question of Nathaniel when He would hear of Jesus thirty years later: "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" (John 1:46).

But in this small, disreputable town of impoverished, subjugated people, the angel Gabriel brought a message to a girl: Then the angel told her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God" (Luke 1:30). To the one who trusts in God, nothing is beyond Him to shower grace and purpose in the middle of obscurity. Both Joseph and Mary, though lacking social status, were from the royal line of David, according to the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. They were insignificant socially, but royal blood coursed through their bodies. Please note that the same is true for all believers. No matter how insignificant we might feel, we have



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God's image imprinted on our souls. Your life is eternally blessed and significant!

The oft ignored middle verse of "O Holy Night" celebrates this:

*The King of kings lay thus in lowly manger
In all our trials born to be our Friend
He knows our need, to our weakness is no stranger
Behold your King, before Him lowly bend.⁹*

We see this concept throughout the New Testament:

- "For all those led by God's Spirit are God's sons. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear. Instead, you received the Spirit of adoption, by whom we cry out, 'Abba, Father!'" (Rom. 8:14-15).
- "When the time came to completion, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons" (Gal. 4:4-5).
- "He predestined us to be adopted as sons through Jesus Christ for himself, according to the good pleasure of his will" (Eph. 1:5).
- "But to all who did receive him, he gave them the right to be children of God, to those who believe in his name" (John 1:12).
- "See what great love the Father has given us that we should be called God's children—and we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it didn't know him" (1 John 3:1).

Through Jesus's birth we are showered with grace, but even more than that, we are showered with belonging. We have a place at the table of eternity. God didn't just have pity on us and relent from His rightful judgment upon us. He signs the adoption papers and brings us home. It's one thing to be forgiven, but how much more overwhelming it is to be a part of His family!

Under the heavy-handed rule of a broken world without Jesus, we are slaves. But because of that night in Bethlehem, we were introduced to a new reality of grace.

HOW WOULD YOU EXPLAIN TO SOMEONE THAT NO ONE IS INSIGNIFICANT IN GOD'S EYES?

Unusual Potential // Luke 1:31-34

Through the years we've heard some crazy stories about how to conceive a child. Some ancient cultures believed that the phases of the moon could impact whether a woman could conceive.



DIGGING DEEPER AN EXCITING MESSAGE

In Luke 1:31, Gabriel begins his message to Mary by saying, "Now listen," which is the Greek word *idou*. It means "to see." It's often translated Behold! or Look! It functions as an interjection to let the listener know that something important will follow and often was used to emphasize significant moments like divine revelations or miracles.¹⁰ What's interesting about this word is that it carries with it a liveliness.¹¹ When we combine this word with Gabriel's initial salutation, we get a picture of a very excited angel delivering this exceedingly good news. It's almost like he was saying, "Just wait until you hear this!" Jesus's arrival is still good news today! We share, and Holy Spirit impregnates others with His total wholeness, restoration, and peace. This is news our world needs to hear, and we should be excited to share it!

When you share the Gospel, do you do so enthusiastically?



Some thought, and still do, that what you eat could give you a better chance of conceiving. In certain cultures, it's believed that if a woman touches the clothes of a pregnant woman she might conceive.

While there might be some things women can do to help them conceive, we all know by now the primary cause of pregnancy. Now think of Mary. She did nothing whatsoever. She didn't pray for it, she didn't seek it, and she didn't expect it. Everything was initiated by God. It didn't depend on her abilities. Let me be clear, I'm not saying that having a baby isn't an investment, isn't painful, and doesn't involve some labor, but every pregnancy is supernatural! Think about it. No woman ever says to her husband, "Just so you know, today I'm working on our baby's eyelashes and pancreas." Or, "I hope I do a good job giving my baby his elbows." Those things just happen. The body takes over without the mother having to do anything specific to form the baby. God isn't hampered by our abilities because the miracle happens in His workroom, not ours. We can lose confidence in our own abilities. It's all about God.

Mary had questions. Wouldn't you? The first one begins with how. All of us would like to know how.

For the Christ-follower, we must trust our how questions to the One who specializes in everything we face. I love the fact that Luke included Mary's question in his Gospel, because if she skipped the question and immediately started singing her legendary Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55), we would

all feel more intimidated. We all have questioning moments where we press God for the details and make it our duty to remind Him about all the cards that are stacked against us.

WHY MIGHT OUR LIMITATIONS BE THE VERY THING THAT BRINGS GOD GLORY?

God isn't limited by natural law, unworthy characters, underage servants, or imperfect settings. The more of these He has around Him as He works, only magnifies His sovereignty and grace. God isn't hampered in the least by our limitations.

Let's fast-forward to a gathering throng of more than five thousand hungry people and those hand-wringing disciples who rush to Jesus. The disciples panicked. "How are we going to feed all these people?" they asked Him. Jesus's answer was classic. "You give them something to eat" (Luke 9:13). Jesus involved common people to do uncommon things. He still does this. We bring our how questions to Him and He tenderly points back at us. He empowers us to do holy things even when our resources, talents, and circumstance aren't optimal. And by the way, our circumstances will never be optimal.

Unmatched Possibilities //

Luke 1:35-38

The angel provided three things for Mary.

1. **He showed her the process He would use.** "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore, the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God" (v. 35). Devoted followers of Christ have no problem with being overshadowed by the Almighty.
2. **Gabriel gave her a precedent.** Mary knew God had done a similar thing in her extended family. Aunt Elizabeth, well into her senior adult years, prayed for years that she would have a child. Gabriel challenged her to believe because miracles were breaking out all over her kin.
3. **Gabriel reminded her of God's power.** "For nothing will be impossible with God" (v. 37). He

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wanted her to make that holy pilgrimage out of the familiar plot line of ordinary life into the divine purpose of an all-powerful God.

In every circumstance that seems impossible, there is some One behind the scenes waiting to show up and show off! We can rest assured that no matter what we face, we have a traveling companion who can take the odds that are stacked against us and obliterate them. Nothing can stop His will and purpose.

We can be encouraged to believe in the glory of God to work limitlessly in our present struggle. He gives us strength to face every challenge and setback we experience in the days ahead.

Now glance down a few verses to Mary's song we call "Mary's Praise" or "The Magnificat" in some versions (Luke 1:46-55). This is where we come into the story. Every verse is a proclamation of God's strength in our lives. His mercy stretches from generation to generation, including ours. He exalts the lowly; He vindicates us among the proud. He satisfies the hungry. That's us every day! These are the things we can remember when our faith falls short.

IN WHAT WAYS HAVE YOU SEEN GOD DO SEEMINGLY IMPOSSIBLE THINGS IN YOUR LIFE?

DID YOU KNOW?

When Mary was a baby, her mother, Anna, and her father, Joachim, dedicated her to God. They wanted her to know God for herself, so they ensured that her formative years were spent learning about God. In doing so, her parents were already preparing her heart for a life dedicated unto God.¹² It's no surprise, then, that when the angel came to her to deliver the message of her soon-to-be conception, she didn't doubt or argue. In fact, her only question concerned how she'd conceive without having "relations" with a man (Luke 1:34). Because of her parents' investment in her spiritual growth, she already knew God for herself and was prepared to accept her assignment. God has a kingdom assignment for all of us, and it doesn't carry an age requirement. Like Mary, He will use anyone willing—including children, including you.

Biblical Truth: God is trustworthy, even when it doesn't make sense (Prov. 3:5-6).

How will you respond when God gives you an assignment that does not make sense?

LIVE IT

How can I be more intentional to recognize the hand of God in my life this week?

Faith opportunities occur every day. We have the choice to trust in the Lord with all our hearts or lean on our own understanding. We can live in philosophic pessimism or limitless faith, which looks for the presence of God in everyday life. As the Lord to give you eyes to see and ears to in the spirit beyond natural circumstances.

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- **Pray.** Ask God to strengthen the faith of those around you who may be discouraged as well as yourself.
- **Journal.** Write your testimony of how God has surprised you through unique circumstances that strengthened your faith. Share your gratefulness to God and His mercy with a friend or post your story on social media.
- **Retreat.** Both Mary's and Zacharias's encounters with God happened in solitude. Plan a silent retreat where you get away from all the noise of your life and enter into fellowship with God. Listen closely for His guidance.

DAILY READINGS

1. "WHEN GOD'S PLAN DOESN'T MAKE SENSE" // PROVERBS 3:5-6

God may require us to follow directions that are hard to understand. This could include taking a different route, submitting to a certain order or receiving a blessing that may not make sense. Think of Mary, who did not know how she could carry the Son of God but had faith. Proverbs warns against trusting our "own understanding" Consider where God may be guiding you that seems inconsistent with logic. Faith moves ahead without knowing what is around the corner. Remember, God's view is much larger than our own. When you have no idea what is coming up next, lean on His guidance. He knows the larger picture and His plans for you are positive and purposeful.

Trust God—He will always direct your path.

2. "CHOSEN FOR MORE" // JEREMIAH 1:5

God chose Moses to guide Israel out of Egypt, yet Moses shared his uncertainty right away. We must replace our feelings of inadequacy with the understanding that God operates through His perfect plan. God chose even though he lacked the "necessary skills." Before birth, God chose us to carry out the precise mission He had previously planned for our lives. Our focus should shift from asking "Why me?," to speaking "Lord, use me." God has provided all essential tools and guidance needed for success because He has not overlooked any detail.

Trust Him and move forward with confidence.

3. "FAITH OVER FEAR" // 2 TIMOTHY 1:7

God's plan faces an insurmountable obstacle when fear enters the picture. Mary would have missed her opportunity to say yes if fear had controlled her actions. Moses would have failed to lead Israel if fear had successfully discouraged him. Your call will always face opposition from fear which seeks to discourage you. God provides us with a spirit which empowers us to love while giving us a sound

mind. Faith should counter every doubt that fear tries to tell you. You should identify your fears yet maintain control over your direction. You should advance courageously because God's power exceeds all else. Every act of faith creates the potential for transformative results.

Accept your mission with confidence because God's love and spirit empowers you.

4. "GOD'S YES IS GREATER" // ROMANS 8:31

Have you ever received doubts about your life purpose from other people? Others thought you lacked mental capacity or physical strength or sufficient ability. Mary probably heard many negative comments. The divine affirmation God gives you about life makes all negative opinions from others meaningless. Romans 8:31 God states that His support for us makes all other opposition meaningless. During times of discouragement, remember that heaven is backing your mission. Your divine purpose remains unchangeable because no power in existence can remove it from you. Maintain your stance on His promise while moving ahead with confidence.

Your loving God knows your potential and will support you every step of the way.

5. "GOD WORKS THROUGH ORDINARY PEOPLE" // 1 CORINTHIANS 1:27

Mary entered the world without royal status or social power according to human standards. God prepares ordinary people like David the shepherd and Peter the fisherman to fulfill His greatness. The Bible reveals that God takes pleasure in elevating ordinary individuals who society overlooks. Your past does not eliminate your potential because it provides the special qualities needed to achieve God's glory. All your life experiences lead you toward God's divine plan. Your life path holds great importance because God uses it to create a stunning work of faith.

Your everyday existence is a platform where God performs remarkable work.



Limitless

BY DR. MARK CROSTON

We live our lives with limits. We are limited by time and space, so we can only be in one place at a time. Almost as old as Methuselah was Jeanne Calment (1875–1997), the oldest person in the modern era, whose age has been verified at 122 years and 164 days.¹

We are limited! The longest anyone has ever stayed awake is 11 days and 25 minutes (264.4 hours).² The longest anyone has survived without water is 18 days.³ The longest without air is 24 minutes and 37.36 seconds.⁴ Surely, one thing that is limitless is the number of our limitations.

As much as we would like to deny them, limitations are a part of our human condition. Psalm 90:10 says, “Our lives last seventy years or, if we are strong, eighty years. Even the best of them are struggle and sorrow; indeed, they pass quickly and we fly away.”

In response to Job’s questions, God reminds Job that he is only one among the Lord’s vast, limited creations. God says to Job, “Where were you when I established the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. Who fixed its dimensions? Certainly you know! Who stretched a measuring line across it? What supports its foundations? Or who laid its cornerstone while the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy?” (Job 38:4–7).

In the 2011 movie *Limitless*,⁵ Bradley Cooper plays Eddie Morra. Eddie has fallen on hard times. He is being rejected by his girlfriend and at the same time is potentially losing his job. As his limitations are crashing in on him, a friend gives him a drug that removes all limitations on his mental acumen. With this ability, he can solve all the issues of his life and turn his circumstances completely around. The problem in this fictitious tale is that the effects are only temporary, the supply of the drug is finite, and others want to take what he has.

Maybe the movie ***Limitless*** represents our desire to live beyond our limited being.

Here's where God steps in. God is limitless. The Bible lets us know that He and He alone is omnipresent, omniscient, and omnipotent. He is present everywhere at the same time, including in the past, present, and future. He knows everything there is to know, even our thoughts before we think them. He possesses all power and authority; even that which we possess emanates from Him. God indeed is the only thing in all of creation that has no limits!

God is not only limitless in His essential characteristics, He is also limitless in His moral attributes. He has limitless mercy (Lam. 3:22), understanding (Isa. 40:25), grace (Eph. 6:24), and

love (Jer. 31:3). Further, Romans 11:33 cries out, "Oh, the depth of the riches and the wisdom and the knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments and untraceable his ways!"

How amazing it is that a limitless God seeks to be involved with us, His limited creation. God's limitless strength gently cares for us: "For he knows what we are made of, remembering that we are dust" (Ps. 103:14). God's limitless sight watches over us when we are unable to watch out for ourselves: "Indeed, the Protector of Israel does not slumber or sleep" (Ps. 121:4). God's limitless strategy allows Him to work through us despite our utter weakness. Matthew 19:26 declares, "Jesus looked at them and said, 'With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.'"

It's hard for us to wrap our finite minds around the whole idea of our infinite, limitless God. Maybe this is why many have a difficult time putting their full trust in Him. Our ability to love and forgive—even ourselves—is so shallow. We feel the frailty of our bodies as the years go by. Our memories fade so quickly we shudder at the thought of a God who never forgets. Yet, in our own broken way we seek to pull into our weak embrace the one who holds us firmly in the palm of His hands. The old hymn, "He Giveth More Grace," says it all.

***When we have exhausted our store of endurance,
When our strength has failed ere the day is half
done, When we reach the end of our hoarded
resources, Our Father's full giving is only begun.***

***His love has no limits, His grace has no measure,
His power no boundary known unto men; For out
of His infinite riches in Jesus. He giveth, and giveth,
and giveth again.***⁶

1 "List of the Verified Oldest People," Wikipedia. Accessed June 21, 2025. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_the_verified_oldest_people.

2 "Randy Gardner Sleep Deprivation Experiment," Wikipedia. Accessed June 21, 2025. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Randy_Gardner_sleep_deprivation_experiment.

3 Ibid.

4 "56-Year-Old Freediver Holds Breath for Almost 25 Minutes Breaking Record," Guinness World Records. Accessed June 21, 2025. <https://www.guinnessworldrecords.com>.

5 *Limitless*. Directed by Neil Burger. Relativity Media, 2011. IMDb. <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1219289/>.

6 "He Giveth More Grace As Our Burdens," Hymnary. Accessed June 21, 2025. https://hymnary.org/text/he_giveth_more_grace_as_our_burdens.

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