

**Luke 1:26-38**  
**It's Impossible! - 2020**

If any of you have an iPhone, take a look at the face. You will see a little detail in the graphics that you might not have noticed before today. But, it's something that Apple's top software designer thought was impossible to do.

If you look at the corners of those icons, you'll notice that they are not square. They're rounded. Those rounded corners were impossible to produce. At least that's what **Bill Atkinson**, told Steve Jobs when Steve gave him a task.

Bill Atkinson was Steve Job's top software designer. Back in the 90's he proudly showed Jobs how they could not produce circle and oval shapes on their Mac computers. It wasn't easy to do. It required implementing a really clever algorithm.

But something was bothering Steve Jobs. *"Well, circles and ovals are good, but how about drawing rectangles with rounded corners? Can we do that now, too?"* Bill replied, *"No, it's impossible! It can't be done." Besides, I don't think we really need it".*

That's when Steve suddenly got more intense. *"Rectangles with rounded corners are everywhere! Just look around this room!"* And when you looked around the room, there were lots of them: the whiteboard, the desks and the tables.

Then he pointed out the window. *"And look outside, there's even more, practically everywhere you look!"* Steve took Bill on a quick walk around the block with him to point out every rectangle with rounded corners that he could find.

When they passed a no-parking sign with rounded corners, it did the trick. That's when Bill told Steve, *"OK, I give up. I'll see if it's as hard as I thought."* He went back home to work on it.

Today, if you look at the icons on your iPhone, you will see that they are rectangles with rounded corners. It was impossible to do, until it wasn't.

A lot of the conveniences that we enjoy today would not have come about if someone had thrown up his hands and said, *"It's impossible! It can't be done."* Even something as simple as a frosted light bulb.

Years ago when a new engineer would be hired on to General Electric, they would assign him the task of designing a light bulb that was frosted on the inside. It was kind of a prank. Because all the seasoned engineers knew that it couldn't be done. It was impossible.

**Marvin Pipkin** was a new engineer and didn't know it was a joke. So he persevered to design a light bulb frosted on the inside. He not only found a way to do it, but he also developed an

etching acid that gave minutely rounded pits instead of sharp depressions. Fortunately, no one had told him it couldn't be done, so he did it.

There's a case to be made for tenacity and perseverance. They are the tools used to accomplish impossible tasks. Or at least to accomplish what seems like impossible tasks.

But how does tenacity and perseverance accomplish a virgin birth? That's something that's biologically impossible. And, yet, a young peasant girl living in a remote Judean village pulled it off. Was it Mary's tenacity and perseverance that enabled her to accomplish the impossible? Or was it something else?

This morning, I want to focus in on the final words of the Angel Gabriel to Mary when he announced that she would give birth to a baby while still a virgin. He told her: *"For nothing will be impossible with God."*

What was it about Mary that allowed her to do the impossible?

There are those theologians who say that Mary was unique, that she was born different from all other human beings. They teach the Doctrine of the Immaculate Conception – that when Mary was born sinless. So that when she conceived, she was sinless – immaculate. After all, only a pure, sinless woman would be suitable vessel to bear the sinless Son of God.

The problem with the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception is that it conflicts with Scripture. The bible tells us that ALL have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.

That's important for you to know. Because it means that Mary was not born any differently from you and me. She was born a sinner just like us. Having said that, let me go on to say that even though Mary was born a sinner like you and I, there was something unique about her.

Look how Luke tells the story. He says: *In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendent of David.*

In this first sentence we learn more about Joseph than Mary. He is **named**. He is **noble lineage** - a descendent of Israel's greatest king. And he has concluded a **contract** to marry a virgin from Nazareth.

It's only after all the build-up about Joseph, that Luke finally gets around to tell us something about this virgin. *"The virgin's name was Mary."* That's it. Nothing else going on for Mary at this point. A very ordinary girl from a modest little village north of Jerusalem.

The angel Gabriel greets Mary saying, *"Hail favored one."* It's nice to be favored by someone, isn't it? Favored ones go to the front of the line, they sit in First Class. Favored ones get the good

tables at restaurants. There's a difference here, though, between the favoring Mary receives and the favoring we might enjoy from someone else.

When we are favored by someone, it's usually because of something intrinsic to us. A politician favors a big donor because that donor gave his campaign a lot of money. A man favors a woman because she's beautiful. A coach favors an athlete because he is talented.

What was the "because" for Mary? What was intrinsic to Mary that would trigger God's favor? The bible reveals absolutely nothing intrinsic to Mary that would earn God's favor. Again, Luke describes her as: *A virgin – whose name was Mary.*

God did not chose Mary because he highly favored her, Just the opposite. Mary was highly favored only because she happened to be chosen by God. And this favored one would do something impossible.

Mary wasn't the first in the bible chosen to do the impossible. When all of Israel was threatened by the Philistine nation, God chose a young shepherd boy tending sheep in the wild. That shepherd boy stepped in to do what King Saul and all of his armies couldn't. He defeated the Philistine nation not with an army and suit of armor. But with a rock and a sling.

*That's impossible!* But not for God's favored one.

Gideon was God's reluctant general chosen one to defeat the Midians. God called him to conquer a coalition of several nations. Gideon stepped up with his army of 32,000. But then God slashed that number to just 300. Gideon defeated the coalition of nations with just 300 men armed with nothing but clay-jar lanterns.

*That's impossible!* But not for God's favored one.

To be favored by God to do impossible things. Now that sounds pretty good, doesn't it? But think again.

Before God revealed to Mary her unique place in the world, she was on a different track altogether. She was just starting out to build a new life. She and Joseph made their plans for their wedding and the future life together. Then God interrupted.

God chose Mary to get pregnant out of wedlock in a small village in the 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine.

Today, there is no longer a social stigma attached to single motherhood. But for a 13 year old girl in a little first century Palestine village, the Mosaic penalty would be stoning.

So sometimes, to be chosen by God might give some pause. It might be inconvenient. It might complicate life. And it might cost you.

I'm reminded of a scene in Fiddler on the Roof. You remember Tevia, a poor Jewish milkman with strong-willed wife and five daughters living in the small Russian town of Anatevka in 1905. For Jews living in Russia at that time, life was as precarious as the perch of a fiddler on a roof. At one point, Tevia in his frustration with life says to God: *I know, I know. We are Your chosen people. But, once in a while, can't You choose someone else?*

Here is where Mary was unique, special, different from a lot of us. When the Angel announced the news of her pregnancy, look how she responded. She received the radical news of an impossible role that God has asked her to play. And she responded with radical trust in the Lord. *"Be it unto me according to your will."*

For Mary: Trusting God meant that one day, she and Joseph will have to abruptly **pick up stakes** to hide out in a foreign land for a time. Trusting God meant that one day she would experience certain **heartbreak** when Jesus would seem to disown her. He would tell crowds that his mother and his brothers are those who do his will. Trusting God meant that one day she would **watch** her son die on a cross.

For Mary, being favored by God graced her to be the bearer of Christ. But it didn't guarantee her a life of privilege and ease. Quite the opposite, trusting God promised her a life of challenges and changes. That's why her response was so remarkable. *"Here I am the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."*

It was a response of *reckless abandon* to the will of God. It was radical trust.

It's the same radical trust that pitted David against a Giant. It's the same radical trust that led Gideon into war with just 300 men carrying lanterns. Radical trust fueled each one of them to do impossible things.

When was the last time you trusted God enough to live in reckless abandon for him? Some would say that it's impossible for blind people to ski through a slalom course. Well, the world was treated to an impossible sight on a television program aired before the 1988 Winter Olympics.

The program featured blind skiers being trained for slalom skiing. Paired with sighted skiers, the blind skiers were taught on the flats how to make right and left turns. When that was mastered, they were taken to the slalom slope. They pointed those skis downhill and took off. But skiing right beside them were their sighted partners shouting, "Left!" and "Right!"

**As they obeyed the commands**, they were able to negotiate the course and cross the finish line. But to do it, they had to depend solely on the sighted skiers' word. For those blind skiers, it was either **complete trust or catastrophe**. Those who trust the voices in the dark – "left! Right!" – were successful. Would you have that kind of trust?

There are some tasks in life that seem impossible to complete. But in reality, they're not. They're difficult, but not impossible. They just require tenacity and perseverance.

The Wright brothers accomplished the seemingly impossible it at Kittyhawk. Neil Armstrong accomplished it on the moon.

But then there are other tasks in life which really are impossible to accomplish – even with tenacity and perseverance. Like changing someone's heart so they might reconcile with you. Like living with purpose again when the one you love has been taken from you. Like knowing Jesus is real - even in the midst of all your doubt. Like a virgin conceiving and giving birth to God in the flesh.

For the God who created the universe, how can anything be impossible?

The bible says that Mary was chosen to be highly favored of God. And as the chosen one, she did the impossible. But she is not the only one highly favored by God.

*The Bible says: You are a royal priesthood, you are a chosen generation.* Because God gave his Son to die for you and then rise again. Each of you has been chosen by God. So each of you has been highly favored by God.

God has done his part. He wants to do the impossible in your life. But, he needs your consent. And to do the impossible, He needs your radical trust.

You won't always know where He's leading you – Mary sure didn't. And you might not always find him to be convenient in your life. It wasn't convenient for Mary to leave her home and travel to Egypt with a toddler.

But God was faithful to provide even as Jesus was dying on the cross. Remember how Jesus looked down at Mary huddled with John. He told Mary, "Dear woman, here is your son." And to John he said, "Behold your mother."

And, finally, for God to do the impossible in your life, you must be willing to be his servant. To do the work he has called you to do. To wash feet. Even then, you might not see your impossible work completed in this life. None of the disciples did.

But I am encouraged by something I read by Pastor Tim Keller. Tim Keller followed God's call to do the impossible – to plant an evangelical church in the heart of Manhattan. So he picked up stakes and moved his family to New York. That church grew from 50 to 5000 in a few short years.

Yet even Pastor Tim says that sometimes he gets discouraged because he doesn't see results from his work. As he puts it: *I very often feel like I'm barely getting a leaf out, in spite of the fact that my church is vastly more successful than I ever thought it would be,*"

He was making reference to a short story by J.R.R. Tolkien about a painter named Niggle who spent his whole life trying to paint a tree, a beautiful tree, and behind it snowcapped mountains, and forest marching off. When Niggle dies, he's only finished painting one leaf. He's going into the afterlife, and he sees something off in the distance and jumps off the train. Then he runs to the top and there's the tree, his tree that he had always felt.

What Tolkien was telling us through his story is that we might have a vision for something in this life that we strive for. For some it might be justice. For others it a vision for beauty. Different things for different people.

In this life we might only ever get out as much as a leaf. But we are actually being inspired by some vision that God's going to make it a reality. So what you're working on, and what you're hoping to get, you will get. It will come in the resurrection, in Christ.

But in the meantime, you need to be willing to live with the reality that in this life you're probably only going to get a couple of leaves out."

I find that image of a leaf very helpful. God has favored you, he's chosen you. He has called you to trust him to do the impossible. Even if it's just painting one leaf.