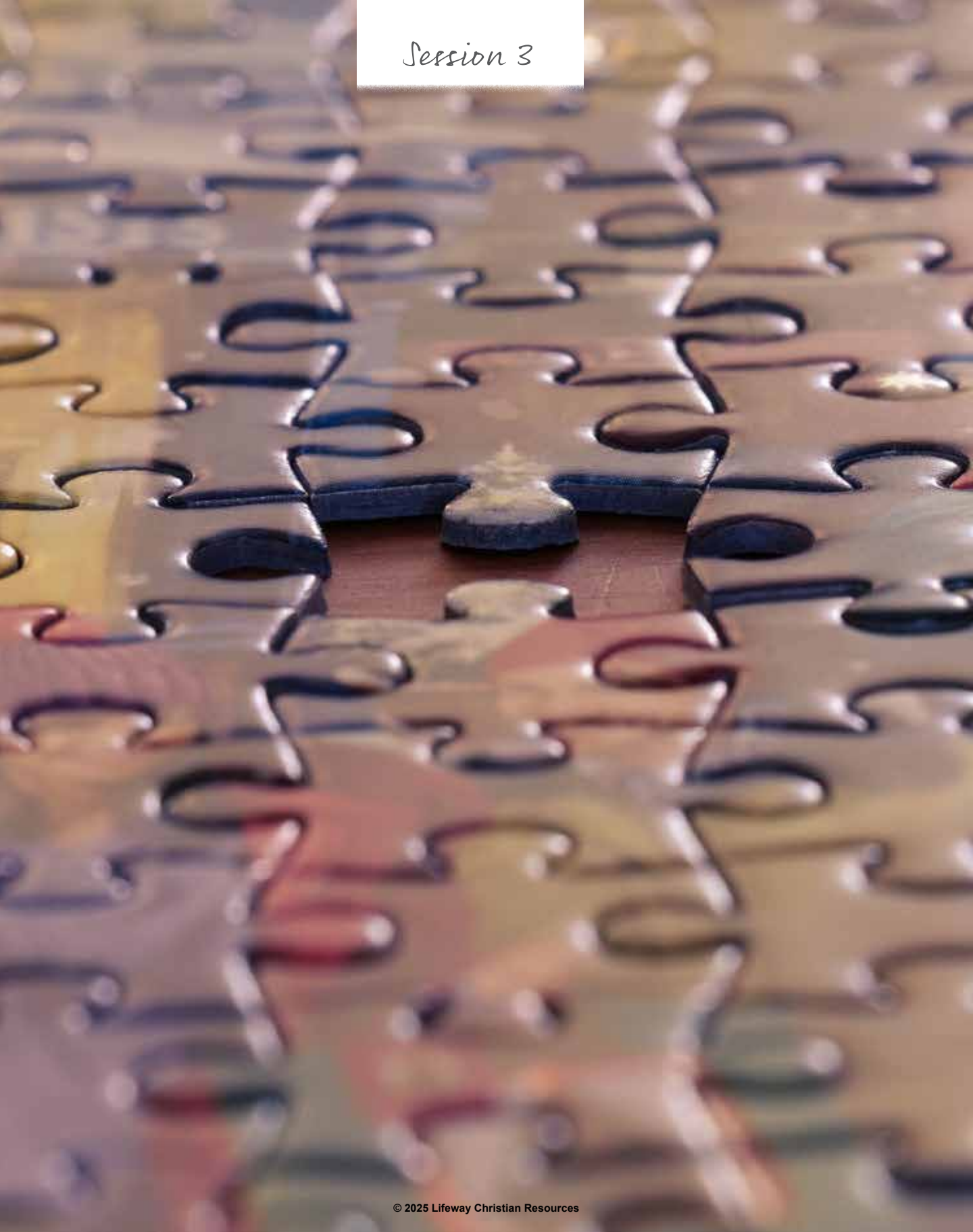


## *Session 3*



# When Your Understanding Falls Short

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## THE POINT

*God can do great things through you.*

## THE BIBLE MEETS LIFE

*"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.<sup>1</sup> 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.

### QUESTION 1:

***When have you been surprised by a feel good story in the news recently?***

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## WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

### LUKE 1:26–30

<sup>26</sup> In the sixth month, the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, <sup>27</sup> to a virgin engaged to a man named Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. <sup>28</sup> And the angel came to her and said, "Greetings, favored woman! The Lord is with you." <sup>29</sup> But she was deeply troubled by this statement, wondering what kind of greeting this could be. <sup>30</sup> Then the angel told her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.

"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 town's reputation in the cynical Nathaniel's question about Jesus thirty years later: "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" (John 1:46).

But in this small, disreputable town of impoverished people, the angel Gabriel brought a message to a girl that would change history: "Then the angel told her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God'" (Luke 1:30). In God's presence, even the most unexpected places and people become vessels of His divine purpose. To the one who trusts in God, nothing is beyond His power to transform with grace and purpose—even in obscurity.

Both Joseph and Mary, though lacking social status, were from the royal bloodline of David, according to the Gospels of Matthew and Luke.

Their worldly insignificance didn't diminish their divine significance. Though they didn't fully understand God's plan, they trusted Him, and His presence opened doors they never could have imagined.

The same is true for all believers. No matter how small or insignificant we might feel, we have the spark of the Divine, and God's image is imprinted on our souls. Your life is eternally blessed and significant! This is the miracle we celebrate every Christmas. 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).

Through Jesus’s birth we are showered with grace, but even more than that, we’re 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!

The classic novel *Les Misérables* beautifully reflects this as a poor orphan named Cosette is discovered at eight years old, enslaved by a brutal innkeeper. Everything in Cosette’s life

revolved around work, even as a child. She had no concept of family and rest. She cowered under the brutal hand of her owners. Suddenly, Jean Valjean enters the inn and purchases her freedom. From that moment on, she had a place of joy, rest, and hope. Jean Valjean opened up a world of grace that she had never experienced.

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.

#### QUESTION 2:

***How would you explain to someone that no one is insignificant in God’s eyes?***

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## LUKE 1:31–34

<sup>31</sup> Now listen: You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus.

<sup>32</sup> 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. <sup>33</sup> He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and his kingdom will have no end.” <sup>34</sup> Mary asked the angel, “How can this be, since I have not had sexual relations with a man?”

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 conception. 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. My wife never said to me, “Just so you know, today I’m working on our baby’s eyelashes and pancreas.” If she did, we would have probably tried to find a counselor to

help her work through her issues. 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 inadequacies because the miracle happens in His hands, not ours. We may lose confidence in our own abilities or understanding, but it was never about us. It's all about God.

Mary had questions. The first one begins with *how*. All of us would like to know how.

- How am I going to pay off the house before I retire?
- How will my agnostic son rise to faith?
- How can I possibly do everything on my schedule this week?
- How can I get my health back?
- How can I live up to my own self-imposed standards?

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 lack understanding. As a result, we press God for the details and make it our duty to remind Him about all the cards that are stacked against us.

God isn't limited by natural law, unworthy characters, underaged servants, or imperfect settings, nor are His plans limited by our inability to understand them. The more weaknesses

He has around Him as He works, the more His sovereignty and grace are magnified. God isn't hampered in the least by our limitations.

Let's fast-forward to a throng of more than 5,000 hungry people and those hand-wringing disciples who rushed 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 circumstances aren't optimal. And by the way, our circumstances will never be optimal.

#### **QUESTION 3:**

***What are some obstacles to understanding God's plan for our lives?***

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#### **QUESTION 4:**

***When have you been confused about what God was doing in your life?***

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## Engage

### GOD'S GREAT THINGS

God can do great things through you. Use the acrostic below to list some things you believe God can do through you. Then write a prayer thanking God for the great things He has already done.

**G** -

**R** -

**E** -

**A** -

**T** -

**My Prayer:**

## LUKE 1:35–38

<sup>35</sup> 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.

<sup>36</sup> 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. <sup>37</sup> For nothing will be impossible with God.” <sup>38</sup> “See, I am the Lord’s servant,” said Mary. “May it happen to me as you have said.” Then the angel left her.

The angel provided three things for Mary.

- 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. We realize that everything belongs to Him. He is the consistent theme, the main character, and the sole author. When we realize the supremacy of Christ, we can joyfully rest under the shadow of His presence.
- Gabriel gave her a **precedent**. Mary knew God had done a similar thing in her extended family. Elizabeth, well into her senior adult years, prayed for years that she would have a child. This miraculous occurrence tuned Mary’s heart to embrace miracles. Gabriel challenged her to believe because miracles were breaking out all over her kin.
- Gabriel reminded her of God’s **power**. “For nothing will be impossible with God” (v. 37). He wanted her to make that holy pilgrimage out of the familiar plotline of ordinary life into the divine purpose of an all-powerful God.

In every circumstance that seems impossible, there is Someone 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.

Now glance down a few verses to Mary’s song we call the Magnificat (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! We look into the story and realize that God wrote us into it and there are wonderful things ahead, things worth living for, things worth celebrating and, yes, things worth dying for. These are the things we can remember when our faith falls short.

### QUESTION 5:

***What are some lessons you take away from Mary’s example of faithful following?***

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## LIVE IT OUT

In every circumstance, sit back and enjoy the opportunity. 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. Choose one of the following applications:

- **Pray.** Ask God to strengthen the faith of a discouraged friend.
- **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.** Mary's encounter with God happened in solitude. Plan a retreat where you get away from the noise and spend time with God. Read the first two chapters of Luke. Listen closely for God's guidance.



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1. "Oseola McCarty," *PhilanthropyRoundtable*, <https://www.philanthropyroundtable.org/hall-of-fame/oseola-mccarty/>.