

"An Encounter of Possibilities"
Adventist Possibility Ministries Sabbath Sermon 2024

By Pastor Julio Cesar Ribeiro¹

Introduction

Adventist Possibility Ministries is a mission movement where the inclusion and appreciation of people with disabilities are priorities and foundational pillars. "All are gifted, needed and treasured!" Today, on Possibilities Ministry Sabbath 2024, we will explore the story of Jacob and his transformative encounter with God. We will review his spiritual struggle with Christ. We find not only a powerful example of spiritual transformation but also a profound message about the importance and purpose of people with disabilities in biblical history and our lives today. This historical moment in the Old Testament invites us to reflect on the depths of divine grace and inclusion. As we explore the three transformations in Jacob's life - his character, his name, and his physical condition - we are challenged to reconsider our own understanding of the dignity and purpose of people with disabilities. We will see how each aspect of Jacob's life reflects God's inclusive work in our earthly journey.

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1 The Encounter at the Jabbok River (Genesis 32:22-32)

The most striking moment in Jacob's life occurs when he wrestles with a mysterious man during the night. This man, later identified as the Angel of the Lord (Christ Himself in person), challenges Jacob in a physical and spiritual battle. Jacob emerges from this struggle with a new identity and a new purpose. He receives a new name, Israel, which means "one who wrestles with God." This name change symbolizes not only a change in Jacob's identity but also a change in his character and his relationship with God. Furthermore, it clarifies the mission God was giving him and the heart needed to carry it out.

1.1 Jacob's journey: from deceiver to Israel

Jacob's story begins with him being portrayed as a cunning man, willing to deceive to achieve his goals. His name, which means "deceiver" or "one who supplants," reflects his initial nature. However, throughout his journey, Jacob faces a series of challenges and divine encounters that lead to a profound transformation.

1.2 Character transformation

Jacob was a man marked by cunning and relentless pursuit of his interests. He did not hesitate to use tricks and manipulations to achieve his goals, even if it meant deceiving

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his brother and father. However, when confronting God in an intense struggle during the night, Jacob faced not only a physical opponent but a spiritual crisis that would forever change his perspective and his life. In this divine encounter, Jacob was confronted with his fragility and limitation in the face of God's holiness and power. He could no longer rely on his abilities or schemes but had to surrender completely to God's grace and sovereign control. Just like Jacob, people with disabilities are often marginalized and underestimated by society due to their physical or mental limitations. They face stigmas and prejudice.

However, it is precisely in these limitations that God's grace manifests most powerfully. People with disabilities teach us the importance of humility, perseverance, and trust in God. They challenge us to rethink our standards of value and success. We are reminded that the true meaning of life lies in our relationship with God and our ability to recognize the dignity of every person and to love and serve others. To support this reflection, we can consider Paul's words in **2 Corinthians 12:9-10**: "But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong."

1.3 Name change

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After the struggle, Jacob received a new name: Israel, which means "one who wrestles with God." This name change was not only a sign of his spiritual transformation but a profound declaration of his identity and purpose before God. The name Israel marked a definitive break with his past of deceit and manipulation and introduced him to a new reality of blessing and responsibility as the leader of God's chosen people.

Similarly, people with disabilities are often labeled and defined by their physical or mental limitations. However, in God's eyes, they are precious and endowed with a divine purpose. God sees their potential! God sees the possibilities of each person! Just as Jacob received a new name and a new identity, God empowers people with disabilities to fulfill their calling and to fully participate in the community of the Kingdom. Their testimony challenges our limited concepts of value and dignity, inviting us to recognize God's image in each person, regardless of their abilities or limitations.

We can find support for this reflection in Isaiah 43:1b: "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine." These words emphasize the importance of the name given by God and the unique identity of each person before Him.

1.4 Physical condition

During the struggle, Jacob was injured in the hip joint and became lame. This physical injury not only marked his life but also symbolized his human frailty and dependence

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on God. Despite his physical wound, Jacob persevered in the struggle and refused to let go until he received God's blessing. This wound became a mark of his experience with God, a constant reminder of his continuous need for divine power and grace. Similarly, people with disabilities face daily physical challenges that are often misunderstood by society. However, it is important to recognize that physical frailty does not diminish a person's intrinsic value nor the mission God has for them. On the contrary, God uses even our weaknesses to manifest His glory and power. People with disabilities are living witnesses of God's redeeming grace and the hope we find in Christ. Their presence in our community challenges us to be an inclusive church, where all people are valued, respected, and empowered to contribute according to their gifts and abilities. The passage from 1 Corinthians 12:22-26 reminds us of the importance of each member of the body of Christ, regardless of their physical condition: "On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has put the body together, giving greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it."

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2 Divine inclusion: the importance of People with Disabilities in the Bible

Jacob's story not only highlights individual transformation but also sheds light on divine inclusion in the biblical narrative. Throughout the Scriptures, we find numerous stories of people with disabilities who play significant roles in history and the mission of God. Here are three examples of how God equipped, called, and included people with possibilities in mission leadership!

2.1 God Includes People with Possibilities in Mission Leadership

Moses: Although he had a stutter, Moses was chosen by God to lead the people of Israel out of slavery in Egypt. (Exodus 3:10-12) Moses was chosen as a leader of God's people!

David: Despite his youth and seemingly inadequate physical stature, David was anointed by God as king of Israel and became one of the greatest leaders of God's people. (1 Samuel 16:11-13) David was chosen by God for His mission!

Paul: Even suffering from a "thorn in the flesh," Paul was used by God to spread the Gospel throughout the known world. (2 Corinthians 12:7-10). Paul was chosen by God for His mission!

2.2 The lesson of inclusion in Christ

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In addition to the examples mentioned, Jesus' own life is a supreme testimony of divine inclusion. Jesus welcomed and healed people with disabilities, showing us that each person is precious in God's eyes. He taught that in the Kingdom community, there is no distinction between people with or without disabilities; all are loved and valued by God. (Mark 10:46-52). All are gifted, needed, and treasured! All have an important contribution to make within the Body of Christ!

3 The role of People with Disabilities in the faith community

The stories of these men and many others in the Bible remind us that God does not see people with disabilities as incapable or inadequate. On the contrary, He includes them in His redemptive plan and assigns them important roles in His work. As a faith community, we are called to follow God's example and actively value and include people with disabilities in our worship, ministry, and fellowship.

3.1 The challenges of inclusion in the faith community

Although divine inclusion is a central theme in the Bible, we often face challenges in our faith community. That's why this Possibility Ministries Sabbath is so important! Possibility Ministries has a 3 A strategy – Awareness, Acceptance, and Action. First, we need to be **aware** of the physical, emotional, and spiritual barriers that can hinder the full participation of people with disabilities in our churches. Secondly, through God's

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grace, we can have a change of heart and mindset to think differently and have **acceptance**. To think possibilities! And the third A of the Possibility Ministries strategy is **Action**! As followers of Christ, we are called to be agents of change and to work actively for inclusion and equal opportunities for all members of our community, regardless of their physical or mental ability.

3.2 Lessons for our spiritual journey

Just like Jacob, we all face struggles and challenges in our spiritual journey. It is in moments of greatest difficulty that we are shaped and transformed by God's grace. Jacob's transformation reminds us that, regardless of our failures and weaknesses, God is always willing to give us a new identity and a new purpose in His work. Jacob's journey teaches us that true character change comes through an intimate encounter with God. We must constantly seek the presence of the Lord in our lives, allowing Him to transform us from the inside out.

Conclusion:

Jacob's encounter with God results in a profound transformation of his character. He goes from a selfish and deceitful man to a spiritual leader, someone who seeks God's

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will in all things. The experience at the Jabbok River shaped Jacob and prepared him to fulfill the role that God assigned to him as the father of the twelve tribes of Israel. In light of Jacob's story, we are confronted with God's radical inclusion in our broken humanity.

May we open our hearts and our communities to receive and value all people, including those with disabilities. May we recognize that each person is created in the image and likeness of God and is called to fulfill a vital role in His Kingdom. May we be agents of love, compassion, and justice, building an inclusive community of faith where everyone can flourish and contribute fully to the glory of God. All are gifted, needed, and treasured! Just as Jacob was transformed by his encounter with God, may we find inspiration and hope in his story.

May we be a community that actively values and includes people with disabilities, recognizing that they too were created in the image of God and have a vital role in His redemptive plan. May the example of Jacob and divine inclusion in the Bible motivate us to be agents of change and love in our world, promoting the inclusion and dignity of all God's children.