

# Genesis 33: Reconciliation

By  
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*“Now Jacob lifted his eyes and looked, and there, Esau was coming, and with him were four hundred men. So he divided the children among Leah, Rachel, and the two maidservants.”*

*-Genesis 33:1*

One interesting thing that we see in the Biblical text is how fluently it moves from mythical storytelling to more historic biography. Meaning that many of the people we see in the book of Genesis, from Adam all the way down to Joseph function both as real historic people as well as symbols of divine patterns. For instance, Noah’s story begins with him as a more mythic figure who constructs the ark that preserves human civilization from a global flood. By doing this he participates in the pattern of the Messiah who saves the world by his faithfulness. But then directly after we read about him getting drunk in his tent. In the same way, we read about Isaac ascending the mountain with his father in order to offer himself to God in participation with the divine image of the Son of God offering His life as the perfect sacrifice to the Father, but then directly after he runs from a famine and lies about his wife in order to preserve his own life.

Now in Jacob’s story, we have seen him participate in the classic hero’s journey which is the very pattern of the life and ministry of Christ. This all culminates in Genesis 32 when he literally wrestles with God, boldly confronts his own death, and receives a type of resurrection in the form of a new name from God Himself. But this fantastical account is followed by a very mundane story of two brothers reconciling after years of bitterness and hostility. However, within this more historic account we can learn much about how to reconcile with someone that we have wronged as well as the ultimate fulfillment of reconciliation in Christ.

## Resolving Tension

*“And he put the maidservants and their children in front, Leah and her children behind, and Rachel and Joseph last. Then he crossed over before them and bowed himself to the ground seven times, until he came near to his brother. But Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept. And he lifted his eyes and saw the women and children, and said, “Who are these with you?” So he said,*

*“The children whom God has graciously given your servant.” Then the maidservants came near, they and their children, and bowed down. And Leah also came near with her children, and they bowed down. Afterward Joseph and Rachel came near, and they bowed down. Then Esau said, “What do you mean by all this company which I met?” And he said, “These are to find favor in the sight of my lord.” But Esau said, “I have enough, my brother; keep what you have for yourself.”*

*-Genesis 33:2-5*

With characteristic subtlety the author of Genesis is showing us the reason why reconciliation between these two brothers is possible. Without telling us outright it has everything to do with Esau’s final statement in verse 5: *“I have enough, my brother; keep what you have for yourself.”*

While it is possible for bitterness and contention to emerge only from sin or transgression, more often than not, any sins that emerge are themselves the result of an underlying tension created by disparate desires. While Esau and Jacob’s relationship ultimately fractures due to Jacob’s betrayal of Esau and his father by impersonating Esau and stealing his birthright, what motivated Jacob to commit this sin was the underlying tension between him and his brother that was created by both brothers longing for a singular blessing from their father. This concept is what the apostle James teaches us in his letter:

*“Where do wars and fights come from among you? Do they not come from your desires for pleasure that war in your members? You lust and do not have. You murder and covet and cannot obtain. You fight and war. Yet you do not have because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures. Adulterers and adulteresses! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Whoever therefore wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.”*

*-James 4:1-4*

In order to help us understand conflict in general, James first focuses on broader wars between nations. What primarily causes two nations to go to war? Even if one side is guiltless in this claim, the primary driver of conflict between nations is the desire for resources, whether the resource in question is land in general or a plundering of some resource within that land. This is why the old Sanskrit word for war is literally translated “a desire for more cows.”

If this is true at a macro level between nations, why wouldn’t it be true on a micro level between individuals? Sibling rivalries within the book of Genesis almost always have something to do with inheritance and/or a lack of love from a father figure. Cain slew

Abel because God received Abel's sacrifice and not Cain's, Ishmael quarreled with Isaac over the love of their father, Jacob fought with Esau over their father's blessing, and in this passage we see Jacob setting up a future rivalry between his own sons by favoring Rachel and her children over his other wife's children. Even in the female characters of Genesis we see the same pattern. Sarah and Hagar fight over Abraham's love and Rachel and Leah fight over Jacob's love.

This explains why Esau is now ready to forgive his brother. When they were young, they felt a rivalry over the blessing of Isaac and the land of their father, but we learn from this chapter that Esau has left the land of his father and conquered an area known as Seir, which today would be the eastern part of the Arabian peninsula. This is seemingly why Esau is traveling with a band of 400 men, not as a way of murdering Jacob, which is what Jacob feared, but instead Esau has become a successful warlord who needs to travel with a small army for his own protection. So when the author of Genesis records Esau's words for us: *"I have enough, my brother; keep what you have for yourself."* He is not just telling us of Esau's success, he is also telling us why Esau no longer feels a rivalry with his brother. They no longer want the same land, and therefore the underlying tension in their relationship has been resolved.

This point was brilliantly explored in my personal favorite book "East of Eden" by John Steinbeck. In this book Steinbeck looks at sibling rivalry through various generations in two families, the Trasks and the Hamiltons. In the Hamilton family these rivalries have a more playful dynamic to them, but in the Trask family these rivalries become as bloody and brutal as the biblical stories that they are based on.

In the beginning of the book, the main character Adam has a rivalry with his brother that mirrors Jacob and Esau. Both boys crave the approval and love of their father, but when their dad Cyrus starts to openly favor Adam, Charles turns violent and tries to murder his own brother. Cyrus has to send Adam away to the army in order to preserve his life. But over several years Cyrus dies and the boys are brought back together. Even though their relationship is strained and awkward, Adam instantly notices that Charles has softened to him and no longer means him harm. When he reflects on why he says this:

*"Adam knew that his brother was no longer dangerous. There was no jealousy to drive him."*

*-John Steinbeck - "East of Eden"*

A simple statement yet a profound one. With their father dead, the jealousy of his brother was no longer motivating him and because of this, the underlying tension that turned him murderous had gone out of the relationship. This is honestly why most siblings will contain rivalries within them. Even if the parents are not intentionally

favoring one child over the other, the desire that the children have to be more successful than one another, more attractive than one another, to have more control within the house, or more approval from their parents produces an underlying tension within the relationship which is usually not resolved until the kids move out. And herein lies the great wisdom of this story, to have any hope at reconciling a broken relationship, we must first resolve the underlying tension.

Even if steps are taken to seek forgiveness or to make amends for any transgression, if the tension remains, the relationship is doomed to repeat cycles of conflict. To repair the relationship, the point of contention has to be identified and resolved.

## How to Resolve Tension

*“Behold, how good and how pleasant it is For brethren to dwell together in unity! It is like the precious oil upon the head, Running down on the beard, The beard of Aaron, Running down on the edge of his garments. It is like the dew of Hermon, Descending upon the mountains of Zion; For there the LORD commanded the blessing— Life forevermore.”*

*-Psalm 133:1-3*

That being said, how can we effectively resolve tension in relationships? In order to answer this question we will look at it first from a spiritual perspective and then a more practical one.

*“Where do wars and fights come from among you? Do they not come from your desires for pleasure that war in your members? You lust and do not have. You murder and covet and cannot obtain. You fight and war. Yet you do not have because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures. Adulterers and adulteresses! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Whoever therefore wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.”*

*-James 4:1-4*

The wisdom that James is sharing with us is that we have tension in conflict in our relationships when we long after the same things. We fight over resources, love, power, acclaim, approval, treasure, and the like thinking that our needs will be met through the attainment of material goods. For this reason, our natural desires become idols and our pleasant wants become stressful needs. As a result, as James warns us: *“You lust and do not have. You murder and covet and cannot obtain. You fight and war.”* It is our desires that lust within our own souls that puts tension between us and those around us. And so ultimately the only solution is to find our needs met within an infinite source.

*“The backslider in heart will be filled with his own ways, But a good man will be satisfied from above.”*

*-Proverbs 14:14*

Contentment doesn't mean that we have no desire, but contentment does mean that we can desire things without needing them. This subtle but crucial difference is what makes the difference between normal small conflicts into massive violent ones. For a conflict to remain controlled and healthy, there has to be a sense of contentment between those who are fighting, but it is neediness that turns an otherwise healthy conflict into something that tears relationships apart. To take a simple example, if a couple are arguing about something mundane like the monthly budget or something like that, this conflict can remain controlled and reasonable as long as need and insecurity doesn't come into the picture.

So, if one party finds most of their security within financial control, that underlying tension might make them less reasonable to hear their spouses desires and might turn them aggressive in the argument if they feel that they aren't getting what they want. Or, if one party is insecure about being heard, they might misunderstand their spouses arguments as a dismissal of their desires and become overly defensive in the argument. While these are subtle and difficult to control emotions, at their core they descend from this type of neediness that we are talking about. The discipline of the Christian should be to learn to find their ultimate needs met in God so that their desires can stay in their proper place. I love how the Christian poet Thomas Traherne put this:

*“This is a lesson long enough: which you may be all your life in learning, and to all Eternity in practising. Be sensible of your wants, that you maybe sensible of your treasures... Be present with your want of a Deity, and you shall be present with the Deity. You shall adore and admire Him, enjoy and prize Him; believe in Him, and Delight in Him, see him to be the Fountain of all your joys, and the Head of all your Treasures.”*

*-Thomas Traherne - “Centuries of Meditations”*

God is the fountain and the end of all my needs and pleasures, as long as I can see that clearly, my wants will never turn into idols that put me in defensive need within my relationships. This is what we see happen between Rachel and Leah. When they are fighting for the attention of Jacob they are bitter rivals who seek Jacob's favor by trying to bear him the majority of sons. However, there is one brief period in which, at the very least, Leah is able to lay down her resentment and live in harmony with her sister. What creates this peace:

*“And she conceived again and bore a son, and said, “Now I will praise the LORD.” Therefore she called his name Judah. Then she stopped bearing.”*

*-Genesis 29:35*

This does not mean that Leah stopped desiring Jacob’s affection, but it does mean that this desire was put in its proper place. She no longer lusted after her husband’s attention, but instead found her ultimate love met in God which allowed her to stop fighting with her sister. Unfortunately, as Traherne also notes, this is a lifelong process and we will have seasons that are better than others, which means that this season of peace was unfortunately short lived, but it still proves the overall point: tension in relationships is best resolved in finding our needs met in God.

Just because this is the ultimate way to resolve relational tension, it doesn’t mean that practical things are not necessary. For Jacob, he has learned to find his needs met in God, which is why he is so open to offering up vast amounts of wealth to his brother and why he was so willing to face his brother in the open, but Esau has found his needs met in conquering a land that was not in contention. While we should be looking to find ultimate joy and satisfaction in God, we should still be diligent in seeking practical ways to alleviate tension. This is how Abraham and Lot resolve tension in their relationship when they experienced conflict over land. While Lot’s failure to achieve spiritual maturity prevented them from fully reconciling, a practical solution was more than enough to stop the conflict between them:

*“And there was strife between the herdsmen of Abram’s livestock and the herdsmen of Lot’s livestock. The Canaanites and the Perizzites then dwelt in the land. So Abram said to Lot, “Please let there be no strife between you and me, and between my herdsmen and your herdsmen; for we are brethren. “Is not the whole land before you? Please separate from me. If you take the left, then I will go to the right; or, if you go to the right, then I will go to the left.”*

*-Genesis 13:7-9*

If money is a source of tension in my marriage I should learn to negotiate finances with my wife, how to budget better, and possibly make the decision to find a better career path. If there is an adult child in the home who constantly butts heads with the authority of their parent, it might be good if that child moved out. If two siblings are constantly fighting over the same toy, it might be a good idea to remove the toy. There are hundreds of examples just like this but I hope you get the point. The best way to practically resolve tension is to remove the point of contention.

However, I do want to add one more clarifying point before we move on. Taking my last example of removing a toy that siblings fight over. Every now and then this might be the wise choice as a parent, however, it is actually a good thing to sometimes let children fight and learn to resolve conflict on their own. We live in a culture that fears conflict to the point where a young person is more likely to ghost a romantic partner or quit a job rather than have a moderate negotiation. This is partly the result of many adults trying to artificially alleviate all tension within their kids' relationships.

Instead of allowing conflict in picking teams for games, we force kids to let everyone play, instead of letting kids fight over the tv, we buy two tv's, and so on. In order to make life easier for us, we have removed normal conflict from our kids. The big problem here is that fighting, within certain bounds, is a normal and healthy thing. Conflict teaches us how to compromise, to listen to what other people have to say, to learn to give up things we want to better others, and how to control our emotions in tense situations. As a matter of fact, when conflict is approached correctly, it can lead to two people coming together and agreeing on a solution that creates mutual benefit and carries more wisdom than either person had before they fought. Meaning, that while fighting is difficult, it can lead to many goods. And unless we see fighting this way, we will avoid it at all costs, or approach it with anxiety and tension before anything is said.

This leads to a zero-sum mentality of fighting. Meaning that I approach fights with a goal to "win" the argument as opposed to seeing the conversation as something that can achieve mutual benefit. As long as Jacob and Esau were arguing over Isaac's blessing they could only see it as a matter of winning and losing, but as each brother found success in their differing gifts, they realized that they could benefit each other. Jacob didn't need to steal from his brother, he had found a way to "create" wealth through his skills as a shepherd. And Esau realized that he didn't need the riches of his brother when his skills as a leader allowed him to rule over large amounts of land that he could defend and benefit through his strength.

Both brothers in their own way had learned that they didn't need to take from each other in order to succeed which meant that they could find success in their own lane without comparing themselves to the other. This is a key point that many never learn. I don't have to be in a constant rivalry with other people, I am not competing against everyone around me, I am living my own life and I can help other people in their lives as they can help me in mine. I don't need to compare myself to others or "beat" them in order to gain success or value. This mature perspective of life will mitigate fighting in general, but it will also help make conflict far more productive if and when it comes up.

## Making Amends

*“And Jacob said, “No, please, if I have now found favor in your sight, then receive my present from my hand, inasmuch as I have seen your face as though I had seen the face of God, and you were pleased with me. “Please, take my blessing that is brought to you, because God has dealt graciously with me, and because I have enough.” So he urged him, and he took it.”*

*Genesis 33:10-11*

I do like how the New King James version of the Bible renders the above verses. When Jacob offers up these flocks to Esau he specifically says to him: *“Please, take my blessing that is brought to you...”* Some translations unfortunately render that word “gift” instead of blessing and therefore miss a crucial detail about how Jacob saw this action. He is not merely giving his brother a peace offering, he is specifically trying to make amends with him for stealing Esau’s blessing. Remember the blessing of the firstborn was for a double portion of the inheritance. By giving Esau this massive gift of his herds, in his heart, he was reimbursing Esau for the blessing that he stole from him.

This is important because many believers throughout the ages have tried to justify Jacob’s theft by pointing out that God had already promised him the blessing. However, it is Jacob himself that acknowledges the wrong of his action and offers restitution to his brother. This teaches us another important point, making amends with someone requires sincere sacrifice:

*“A brother offended is harder to win than a strong city, And contentions are like the bars of a castle.”*

*-Proverbs 18:19*

I love this Proverb because it paints such a realistic picture of what reconciliation is actually like. Some believe that reconciliation is an easy and painless process, but nothing could be further from the truth. When the writer of Proverbs tells us that reconciling with a brother is harder than conquering a fortified city, he is setting our expectations correctly. Back in the day, the only way to conquer a fortified city was through the brutal process of siege warfare where the attacking army camped outside a city and literally starved them out.

This is not to say that we are to afflict or annoy someone into reconciling with us, but it is to say that this process is difficult and takes time. If the invading army charges the walls, they will be assaulted by the defenses of the city, but if they run away they lose all chances of winning the city, they must camp out and wait for the defenders to emerge. If



I want to reconcile with someone that I have offended, I can't force them into talking with me, but I also can't avoid them. I have to make my sorrow known to them, make it clear that I am open to talk things out, and seek any means of making things as right with them as I can.

For all conflicts, the minimum sacrifice that is necessary is a sincere apology. Without this, any attempts at rectifying the wrong will be seen only as an attempt to buy off the other person's forgiveness. This is what king David came to realize when he sinned against God:

*"For You do not desire sacrifice, or else I would give it; You do not delight in burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, A broken and a contrite heart— These, O God, You will not despise."*

*-Psalm 51:16-17*

So many of our conflicts remain unresolved because we lack the humility to sincerely admit our wrong and seek forgiveness on that basis. We might be good at seeking to make things right, but we ignore the first and most basic step, showing a broken and contrite heart. But, after genuine sorrow is offered, than the practical means of making amends become acceptable, this is why David ends his Psalm by saying this:

*"Then You shall be pleased with the sacrifices of righteousness, With burnt offering and whole burnt offering; Then they shall offer bulls on Your altar."*

*-Psalm 51:19*

In the earlier verses he wasn't saying that God doesn't desire sacrifice, making amends through physical means has its time and place, and that is only after the apology has been made and received. Jacob's offering is only received by Esau after Jacob makes it clear that it is not a mere gift, but a restitution for the blessing that he stole. Once again, this point seems subtle, but this order is of the utmost importance.

## True Forgiveness

Which leads to Esau's part in this, which is to forgive his brother. While the relationship between Jacob and Esau is never fully restored, and we will talk about that point in a second, in this particular meeting, they do achieve a level of reconciliation that began before the brothers even met. For Jacob this happened during his time with Laban when he was taken advantage of in a similar way to the way that he deceived his own father and robbed his brother. Recognizing the wrong in this action clearly produced a genuine sorrow in Jacob and a sincere desire to make things up to his brother. But a similar thing has happened in Esau. While Esau doesn't really show remorse for his treatment

of Jacob, he does show that he has genuinely forgiven his brother and desires to be reconciled to him. Notice how he meets with Jacob:

*“But Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept.”*

*-Genesis 33:4*

Esau doesn't wait for Jacob to come to him, he runs to meet his brother and weeps over him. This rare show of affection from Esau shows that he had actually forgiven his brother during their time apart, and this too is a process that requires sacrifice. In order to truly forgive another person, it isn't that we are forgetting what someone did, nor are we treating their behavior as if it wasn't wrong or doesn't need to be addressed, after all, Esau does receive Jacob's offering. But it does mean that we are giving up our right to take personal vengeance upon someone and that we are open to reconciling with the person who wronged us. This is how Jesus spoke about forgiveness:

*“Take heed to yourselves. If your brother sins against you, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. “And if he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times in a day returns to you, saying, ‘I repent,’ you shall forgive him.”*

*-Luke 17:3-4*

Although this passage gives us a supremely high view of what is required of us when it comes to forgiveness, there are elements of this passage that we sometimes overlook. First, Jesus does say that we are to rebuke the sin of our brother. Meaning that forgiveness is not at odds with calling out behavior and even going so far as to rebuke it. We also know from other passages that forgiveness is also not at odds with seeking justice for what happened to us, both from God as well as other, legitimate, human authorities.

*“Repay no one evil for evil. Have regard for good things in the sight of all men. If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men. Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, “Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,” says the Lord.”*

*-Romans 12:17-19*

Notice again that Paul doesn't say that we aren't free to acknowledge wrong, only that God is the One who is the righteous judge of all sin, not us through acts of personal vengeance. Then Paul extends this view of justice to civil authorities a few verses later:

*“Therefore whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgment on themselves. For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to evil. Do you want to be unafraid of the authority? Do what is good, and you will have praise from the same.”*

*-Romans 13:2-3*

Also notice in Jesus' earlier statement that the prerequisite for complete forgiveness is the repentance of the one who committed the wrong. Jesus explicitly says: “...*if he repents, forgive him.*” That is a conditional statement. True forgiveness and reconciliation is dependent on the other person repenting, which includes sincere sorrow over the wrong and an earnest attempt to make amends. This is why it is right that Esau doesn't run over to embrace his brother until Jacob has both sent the gift and bowed seven times in acknowledgement of his wrong. All that being said, even under these conditions, true forgiveness requires a heavy sacrifice from the one who was wronged.

It is far easier to stay mad at someone, and to keep people out of our lives when they have genuinely wronged us and taken advantage of us as Jacob has done to Esau. To put it another way, the call to forgive wrongs is just as burdensome and costly to the one forgiving as it is to the one who is seeking forgiveness. It takes an awful lot of humility and it requires a large amount of vulnerability in order to open ourselves up to someone who is seeking our forgiveness. It also requires us to be open to the possibility of being wronged again and having to forgive again. This is why Jesus pushes His followers to consider the possibility of someone who:

*“...sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times in a day returns to you, saying, ‘I repent,’ you shall forgive him.”*

*Luke 17:4*

This is a hard saying and one that is almost impossible to fathom. And while I do think that Jesus is speaking in hyperbole, since it is impossible to imagine a person who is able to genuinely sin against you and repent seven times in a single day, the message is still infinitely high. While I would always counsel caution in reconciliation, especially depending on what kind of sin we are being asked to forgive, the message here is clear: if someone seeks forgiveness from us and approaches us in the spirit of true repentance, we are called to seek the strength of God to forgive them.

While this is a hard concept to contemplate, it is also a liberating one. To use an extreme example, Corrie Ten Boom (a woman who hid Jews during the Holocaust and was herself placed in a concentration camp) speaks in her book, “The Hiding Place”,

about working with survivors of the Holocaust and helping them find true healing. In her time with these people she noticed something really interesting about their path towards true healing:

*“Among themselves they tended to live and relive their special woes; in Bloemendaal they were reminded that they were not the only ones who had suffered. And for all these people alike, the key to healing turned out to be the same. Each had a hurt he had to forgive: the neighbor who had reported him, the brutal guard, the sadistic soldier.”*

*-Corrie Ten Boom - “The Hiding Place”*

Part of the reason why these people were trapped in their past was their inability to forgive those who had hurt them. And it was only through this path of genuine forgiveness that they could find the path towards genuine healing. But this lesson turned personal for her when, one day when she was preaching the gospel a man approached her who was one of her former guards at the concentration camp she served in. This man expressed a genuine sorrow for his past actions and had expressed a sincere faith and repentance towards God as well. But when he tried to shake her hand she had the following experience:

*“His hand was thrust out to shake mine. And I, who had preached so often to the people in Bloemendaal the need to forgive, kept my hand at my side. Even as the angry, vengeful thoughts boiled through me, I saw the sin of them. Jesus Christ had died for this man; was I going to ask for more? Lord Jesus, I prayed, forgive me and help me to forgive him. I tried to smile, I struggled to raise my hand. I could not. I felt nothing, not the slightest spark of warmth or charity. And so again I breathed a silent prayer. Jesus, I cannot forgive him. Give Your forgiveness. As I took his hand the most incredible thing happened. From my shoulder along my arm and through my hand, a current seemed to pass from me to him, while into my heart sprang a love for this stranger that almost overwhelmed me. And so I discovered that it is not on our forgiveness any more than on our goodness that the world’s healing hinges, but on His. When He tells us to love our enemies, He gives, along with the command, the love itself.”*

*-Corrie Ten Boom - “The Hiding Place”*

While God calls us to be open to this process and submit ourselves to it, it is beautiful to know that when we sincerely pursue forgiveness, God gives us the ability to do it. The fascinating thing about Esau is that even though he is described as a godless man, this is something that even he understood. And therefore it was Jacob’s willingness to repent and Esau’s willingness to forgive that brought about the reconciliation between these brothers. Unfortunately though, as much as I would like to end this study on this point, the chapter continues.

## Incomplete Restoration

*“Then Esau said, “Let us take our journey; let us go, and I will go before you.” But Jacob said to him, “My lord knows that the children are weak, and the flocks and herds which are nursing are with me. And if the men should drive them hard one day, all the flock will die. “Please let my lord go on ahead before his servant. I will lead on slowly at a pace which the livestock that go before me, and the children, are able to endure, until I come to my lord in Seir.” And Esau said, “Now let me leave with you some of the people who are with me.” But he said, “What need is there? Let me find favor in the sight of my lord.” So Esau returned that day on his way to Seir. And Jacob journeyed to Succoth, built himself a house, and made booths for his livestock. Therefore the name of the place is called Succoth. Then Jacob came safely to the city of Shechem, which is in the land of Canaan, when he came from Padan Aram; and he pitched his tent before the city. And he bought the parcel of land, where he had pitched his tent, from the children of Hamor, Shechem’s father, for one hundred pieces of money. Then he erected an altar there and called it El Elohe Israel.”*

*-Genesis 33:12-20*

This ending has perplexed many people throughout the millennia. Throughout the chapter there seems to be a genuine reconciliation between Esau and Jacob, but at the moment when Esau invites Jacob to see his new home, Jacob seemingly tricks Esau and goes in a different direction. And since the author of Genesis gives us no explicit reason for Jacob to not follow through on the promise he makes to his brother, many possible explanations have been offered. The simplest explanation is that Jacob falls back into his old patterns and simply tricks his brother because he is fearful that their relationship might turn contentious again.

While this explanation is plausible, I find it unlikely since the chapter ends in the same pattern as stories of Abraham and Isaac end when they have returned to God, and that is erecting an altar unto the Lord. He even buys land in Israel and names the altar “El Elohe Israel”, which roughly translates to “El is the God of Israel”. Which is first an acknowledgement of his new identity, a commitment to God’s calling on his life to possess the land, and a commitment to serve God not just as the God of his fathers, but as *his* God. The reason why this is important is that if Jacob was truly acting in deception here, we wouldn’t expect the author of Genesis to end the chapter with a look at Jacob’s faithfulness towards God.

Some other more probable explanations are that while Jacob apologized for his wrongs, Esau never apologized for his and did show up with a band of soldiers. So, perhaps Jacob did make a pledge to meet with Esau, but was waiting for a sign that Esau had

seen the error of his ways and would repent. Remember that in the ancient world, one does not conquer land bloodlessly, Esau was certainly a man of war and had throughout his life shown himself to be violent and impulsive.

Another possibility is that Jacob always intended to meet with Esau, but due to extraneous circumstances, never made it out to see him. His original excuse is valid, a shepherd can't drive his flocks at a reasonable pace, especially when he had already given away the lion share of his flock to Esau. Also, he was traveling with women, old and young, and he had just had his hip put out of socket. All of these factors make Jacob's original reasoning sound. But once he came into the land and spent some time there, it is possible that things kept coming up that prevented him from keeping his promise. For instance, in the following chapter a pretty brutal event happens between his sons and some of the other inhabitants of Israel which would make travel a little difficult. Then Rachel dies, Joseph is sold into slavery and the land enters into a massive famine. All of these events might have prevented Jacob from keeping his word.

Regardless of the historical reason for Jacob's failure to fully reconcile with his brother, I believe that there is a narrative purpose to this incomplete reconciliation. Throughout the Bible, and throughout the book of Genesis, reconciliation is, possibly, the biggest theme throughout. Remember that since the fall in the garden of Eden, the main curse that afflicts mankind is "enmity". Man is at odds with God, nature, and even with himself, and it is God's intended purpose that the "seed of the woman" will somehow bring about a great reconciliation. However, this disharmony and pain is shown throughout the book of Genesis both in societies as shown in the civilizations before the flood, as well as the false, tyrannical harmony that was produced by the tower of Babel. But it is more acutely shown in the family rivalries shown throughout the book. And the fascinating thing about Genesis in particular is that there seems to be a pattern of increasingly successful reconciliation.

In the first rivalry between Cain and Abel, we see the worst possible outcome when Cain kills his brother. But in the next big rivalry we see between Lot and Abraham they do a lot better, since neither one kills the other, but after they separate, they never see each other again. Even Hagar and Sarah have a partial reconciliation, but the end of their relationship is Hagar being sent out into the wilderness. Next we see a partial reconciliation between Isaac and Ishmael when they attend their father's funeral, but that is as far as it goes. Then in Jacob's family, we see more pronounced versions of reconciliation in the relationship between him and Laban, yet still their relationship is pretty fraught at the end. Then with Rachel and Leah, they seem to have buried the hatchet, but even in this chapter we see the favoritism of Jacob and how it is currently driving a wedge in the family and setting up the eventual betrayal of Joseph by his

brothers. And now with Jacob and Esau we see the closest version of reconciliation yet, but still, it is incomplete.

This all seems to be leading up to the most pronounced version of betrayal in Genesis, followed by the most complete version of reconciliation, and that is Joseph and his brothers. Joseph is treated to a fate worse than death as his brothers sell him into slavery and then tell Jacob that Joseph was killed. In many ways this betrayal is even worse than Cain murdering Abel in a fit of rage, this was a premeditated betrayal that was calloused and even sadistic in its details. But this betrayal is followed by the first true reconciliation that we have seen in the Bible when Joseph fully forgives his brothers and brings them into his palace in Egypt and saves them from the famine.

As such, Joseph's story becomes a beautiful picture of Christ and sets up the ultimate pattern of reconciliation that was finally fulfilled in the ministry of Christ.

*“For it pleased the Father that in Him all the fullness should dwell, and by Him to reconcile all things to Himself, by Him, whether things on earth or things in heaven, having made peace through the blood of His cross. And you, who once were alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now He has reconciled in the body of His flesh through death, to present you holy, and blameless, and above reproach in His sight— if indeed you continue in the faith, grounded and steadfast, and are not moved away from the hope of the gospel which you heard, which was preached to every creature under heaven...”*

*-Colossians 1:19-23*

God puts such a heavy emphasis on reconciliation in our own relationships since this is the pattern of all history. God's plan for the universe revolves around this principle of reconciliation in which mankind who was previously cast out and participated in the execution of the Son of God can be fully reconciled to God the Father through the sacrifice of the Son and even participate in the total reconciliation of the creation itself:

*“For the earnest expectation of the creation eagerly waits for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it in hope; because the creation itself also will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God.”*

*-Romans 8:19-21*

This is why this pattern of reconciliation is so vital, and its connection to the larger story of redemption is something that is fairly overt in this story. Take for instance how reconciliation is described, first in this story, then in Joseph's story and finally in Jesus'

parable of reconciliation, what is commonly referred to as the parable of the prodigal son.

*But Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept.*

*-Genesis 33:4*

*“Then he fell on his brother Benjamin’s neck and wept, and Benjamin wept on his neck. Moreover he kissed all his brothers and wept over them, and after that his brothers talked with him.”*

*-Genesis 45:14-15*

*“And he arose and came to his father. But when he was still a great way off, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him.”*

*-Luke 15:20*

The similarities in these verses doesn’t seem to be a mistake. These all participate in this larger pattern of redemption and therefore gives divine significance to acts of reconciliation. This also explains one of the strangest verses in this chapter and it’s when Jacob says to his brother:

*“No, please, if I have now found favor in your sight, then receive my present from my hand, inasmuch as I have seen your face as though I had seen the face of God, and you were pleased with me.”*

*-Genesis 33:10*

Jacob is not saying that his brother *is* God, but by participating in this pattern of reconciliation Esau (of all people) is actually acting in participation with God in His own reconciliation with Jacob after Jacob wrestled with Him in the previous chapter. When someone seeks to reconcile a relationship, or to keep it harmonious amidst tension, they are actively participating in this pattern and glorifying God in this world. In fact, Jesus makes a statement that reconciliation is in some ways seen as a higher good than even direct offerings made to God:

*“Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, “leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.”*

*-Matthew 5:23-24*



This truth should encourage us in our relationships knowing that even if our relationships go through difficulties, reconciling with those we love can participate in God's pattern of reconciliation with the world. But this should also give us encouragement in our relationship with God when we see that with the same fervency that Jacob and Esau met and wept over one another, so God longs to reconcile with us and be united fully to us.

*"I say to you that likewise there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine just persons who need no repentance."*

*-Luke 15:7*