

Eventual grace: The long path to reconciliation

by [Frank G. Honeycutt](#) in the [March 7, 2012](#) issue



Rubens, *Reconciliation of Jacob and Esau*

My mother and her sister (my favorite aunt) recently saw each other across a row of elliptical machines at the local YMCA. After not speaking for almost 20 years, they agreed to meet for coffee. The details of their estrangement are too many and complex to name. Ours has always been a volatile family. We claim generations of unusual behavior—we're a cast of characters both charming and erratic.

When I was a young pastor, I heard Lutheran liturgical scholar Gordon Lathrop say, "You don't have to knock very hard on any door in your parish to find some sort of agony behind that door." That's true for the pastor's door as well.

After more than a decade of prayer, I'd almost given up on my mom and aunt ever getting back together. But there they were meeting at Starbucks one afternoon, and there they now meet faithfully every week, catching up on the lost years. What were they thinking in the gym that day when they agreed to meet? What had God been hatching all these years to set up this reunion?

We need only turn a few pages of Genesis to find out. You'd think a bestseller like the Bible would get under way with a nice soufflé of general principles, sweet rules to live and mend by. But only a couple of chapters in we bump into fratricide—an old story reminding us all that siblings have it in them to kill each other.

The Bible has had staying power over the millennia not because it describes valorous people who have summoned their very best behavior to overcome life's obstacles—not even close. Let's face it: we humans are known for our bad behavior.

When Timothy was a young pastor, he was shocked by the bad behavior of people in the congregations he oversaw. Paul wrote to his young protégé, reminding Timothy of his leadership role: "All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness" (2 Tim. 3:16).

From Paul, Timothy learned what all the baptized learn sooner or later. The Bible is our book not because it tells the story of perfect people and how "you better become one or else," but because it tells the story of how God looks at the world, sees a mess of enmity and strife, then chooses not to leave us on our own. The Bible is our book because we see the details of our fallen lives all over its pages; we see in its old stories the stories of our lives.

In one of those Bible stories, a man who hasn't spoken to his brother in years is sitting next to a campfire. If we look closely, we can tell that he is afraid. What was Jacob thinking about in the hours before he was reunited with his brother Esau? We have hints. He moved his entire family—15 people, including children—across a river in the middle of the night in an effort to protect them. Once they'd made it safely to the other side, Jacob recrossed the river and settled down to think about what was ahead.

A reminder: Esau had 400 men with him. Twenty years had passed since Jacob had tricked Esau for the birthright and their father's blessing. Whenever I think about the Honeycutt family's problems, I turn to the book of Genesis and read a bit. The perspective never fails to brighten my day.

Jacob had already given Esau a Noah's ark of animals as a gift—540 goats, sheep, camels, cows and donkeys were sent ahead in waves. (Imagine Esau's stunned reaction. It must have been like the Heifer Project catalog coming alive.) Now Jacob prayed the foxhole prayer: "Deliver me, please, from the hand of my brother, . . . for I am afraid of him; he may come and kill us all" (Gen. 32:11). Then he lay down. But he did not sleep. Jacob began to wrestle with the real and the fabricated in his dreams. Maybe this is why reconciliation takes so long; that first meeting of two estranged people is just so difficult to imagine.

In 1659 Rembrandt painted the Bible scene of Jacob wrestling with an angel. I love Rembrandt, but in this case I think he gets the story wrong. The angel who wrestles with Jacob seems to be gently embracing him. Jacob's eyes are closed, his head almost resting on the angel's shoulder. There is sympathy oozing from the eyes of

the divine visitor. The angel seems to be saying, "You've been through so much, Jacob."

I don't see gentleness in this wrestling match; I see sweat. I see grunting and shouting. I see an old cheater coming to terms with his past. I see Jacob walking with a limp.

True reconciliation always involves naming and owning up to the past. On the path to reconciliation God can be both our advocate and our adversary. We need both because we're so skillful at reassigning blame and culpability. "It's her fault. No, it was his." Because we are masters of revision, reconciliation takes time. We need time to recognize our sinfulness—to measure what true repentance and change will cost—and time to see ourselves in the biblical narrative.

In Daniel, chapter 10, Daniel prays for a solution to a troubling problem. He prays faithfully every day for weeks but hears no answer. An angel finally assures Daniel that his words were heard "from the first day that you set your mind to gain understanding," but the angel had been tied up over the airspace of Persia with an evil prince until Michael arrived and released his angelic pal to go help Daniel.

This tag-team tale of tardiness is the sort of story my skeptical friends love to lampoon. But I love it as a metaphor that may reveal why prayer goes "unanswered" and why reconciliation can take so long. There are forces beyond our knowledge or understanding that seek to keep people and nations apart. Even God may need time to work it all out.

But reconciliation happens. After 20 years of separation, Esau ran across the field to hug his wayward brother in an action that foreshadows the parable of the prodigal son. My mother and aunt met next to the Y's elliptical machines and set a date for coffee. In my mind, those machines create a looping ellipsis, one that brought Esau to Jacob—and my mother to my aunt. It's an ellipsis that suggests the ongoing, "to be continued" nature of God's reconciliation.