Heb 12:17 Too late to repent?

Abstract: *This short article discusses whether changing the mind (repentance) refers to Esau or Isaac. Context and Greek analysis suggest it primarily concerns Isaac's decision, making it too late for him to revoke the blessing. This raises broader questions about the timing and nature of repentance and forgiveness.*

Different translations have made different choices in Hebrews 12:17 concerning whether it was Esau or Isaac that did not repent or change their mind. Let me quote some of the English ones here:

KJV: For ye know how that afterward, when he would have inherited the blessing, he was rejected: for he found *no place of repentance*, though he sought it carefully with tears.

RSV: For you know that afterward, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found *no chance to repent*, though he sought it with tears.

NIV84: Afterward, as you know, when he wanted to inherit this blessing, he was rejected. He could bring about *no change of mind*, though he sought the blessing with tears.

NJB: As you know, when he wanted to obtain the blessing afterward, he was rejected and, though he pleaded for it with tears, he could find no way of *reversing the decision*.

NIV2011: Afterward, as you know, when he wanted to inherit this blessing, he was rejected. Even though he sought the blessing with tears, *he could not change what he had done*.

KJV is so literal that it does not communicate any clear meaning in English.

RSV indicates that it was Esau who found no way to repent or change his mind.

NIV84 suggests that Esau tried to make Isaac change his mind through his tears (and pleading).

NJB (New Jerusalem Bible) is similar to NIV84 where it is Isaac who cannot or would not change his mind or the decision already made. In other words, the blessing of the firstborn had been given to Jacob and that could not be reversed.

NIV2011 goes back to Esau as the one who could not change, but they talk about a change of fact rather than a change of mind.

Let us look at the Greek text:

ἴστε γὰρ ὅτι καὶ μετέπειτα θέλων κληρονομῆσαι τὴν εὐλογίαν ἀπεδοκιμάσθη, μετανοίας γὰρ τόπον οὐχ εὗρεν καίπερ μετὰ δακρύων ἐκζητήσας αὐτήν.

A very literal translation could be:
After all, you-all know that he indeed afterwards, while wishing to be given the blessing (of the firstborn), was rejected, for he did not find room for a change of mind, although with tears he desperately sought it.

Traditionally, *metanoia* has been translated as “repentance” without much consideration for the context. But the word itself basically refers to a *change of mind*. The RSV and related translations interpret the text to mean that it was Esau who found no room for a change of mind. This can lead to the general theological interpretation that there is a time when repentance is no longer an option and it is too late to be forgiven. Many would reject this option for theological reasons. One option is to take the final feminine pronoun αὐτήν (it) to refer all the way back to the feminine τὴν εὐλογίαν (the blessing) rather than to the closer feminine word μετάνοια (change of mind).

For grammatical reasons my preference is to accept that the pronoun ”it” does refer back to μετάνοια, but seeking it would mean that it was Isaac that should change his mind. It is clear from the context and the Old Testament story that Esau has regretted that he sold his birthright and he was seeking with tears to make his father change his mind. What he was desperately seeking was to receive a blessing. Therefore, I think the translations that understand the change of mind not to refer to Esau, but to Isaac make better sense in the context. It was too late for Isaac to undo what he had done and withdraw the blessing he had already given to Jacob and the result was that Esau could not get the blessing he sought after with tears. With this interpretation it is possible to keep the reference of ”it” to the change-of-mind, and at the same time clarify that it was the blessing and also his father's change of mind rather than his own repentance that Esau sought and could not be given.

How people interpret this illustration in a broader theological context can vary. Is there a time or a situation where it is too late to repent or be forgiven? I doubt that this text alone gives a clear answer to that question. In my view the crucial point is the willingness of the person to repent rather than God’s willingness to forgive. I believe the second part is constantly available, but the first part may not be present.