

2 SAMUEL—WEEK 8

PAYBACKS



F. Michael Slay

A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

*The Cover Picture is Bathing Bathsheba by Artemisia Gentileschi (1593 – 1656)
On display in the Neues Palais in Potsdam, Germany*

Amnon's rape of Tamar sets off a horrible sequence of events. Absalom plots revenge, and gets it. Then Absalom flees from the justice of an avenger of blood. David grieves Absalom's absence, not to mention the other tragedies.

But Joel invents a clever ruse to get David to see a path towards reconciliation with Absalom.

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1 2 Samuel 13:1–11 (ESV)

Now Absalom, David's son, had a beautiful sister, whose name was Tamar. And after a time Amnon, David's son, loved her. And Amnon was so tormented that he made himself ill because of his sister Tamar, for she was a virgin, and it seemed impossible to Amnon to do anything to her. But Amnon had a friend, whose name was Jonadab, the son of Shimeah, David's brother. And Jonadab was a very crafty man. And he said to him, "O son of the king, why are you so haggard morning after morning? Will you not tell me?" Amnon said to him, "I love Tamar, my brother Absalom's sister." Jonadab said to him, "Lie down on your bed and pretend to be ill. And when your father comes to see you, say to him, 'Let my sister Tamar come and give me bread to eat, and prepare the food in my sight, that I may see it and eat it from her hand.'" So Amnon lay down and pretended to be ill. And when the king came to see him, Amnon said to the king, "Please let my sister Tamar come and make a couple of cakes in my sight, that I may eat from her hand."

Then David sent home to Tamar, saying, "Go to your brother Amnon's house and prepare food for him." So Tamar went to her brother Amnon's house, where he was lying down. And she took dough and kneaded it and made cakes in his sight and baked the cakes. And she took the pan and emptied it out before him, but he refused to eat. And Amnon said, "Send out everyone from me." So everyone went out from him. Then Amnon said to Tamar, "Bring the food into the chamber, that I may eat from your hand." And Tamar took the cakes she had made and brought them into the chamber to Amnon her brother. But when she brought them near him to eat, he took hold of her and said to her, "Come, lie with me, my sister."

The Hebrew word for love (אהב, ah-hav) is imprecise and can refer to a wide range of affections. Amnon's "love" for his beautiful half-sister is anything but what we would call love. And, just to be clear, Leviticus 18:11 absolutely prohibits union between siblings, half-siblings, or even step-siblings.

You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father's wife's daughter, brought up in your father's family, since she is your sister. — Leviticus 18:11 (ESV)

This whole thing is an elaborate scheme to evade the protections around Tamar. As a virgin of marriageable age, she would be kept under close watch. Jonadab's scheme is for Amnon to fake illness and maneuver Tamar into his room alone.

The plan works—to the extent that any evil plans work.

This is the dawning of Nathan's prophecies coming true. David's family will soon be a royal mess.

It's fitting that lust is at the heart of the action here. Lust was at the heart of the evil that gave rise to this nightmare in the first place.

David's chickens are coming home to roost.

2 2 Samuel 13:12–19

But she answered him, “No, my brother, do not force me, for no such thing should be done in Israel. Do not do this disgraceful thing! And I, where could I take my shame? And as for you, you would be like one of the fools in Israel. Now therefore, please speak to the king; for he will not withhold me from you.” However, he would not heed her voice; and being stronger than she, he forced her and lay with her.

Then Amnon hated her exceedingly, so that the hatred with which he hated her was greater than the love with which he had loved her. And Amnon said to her, “Arise, be gone!”

So she said to him, “No, indeed! This evil of sending me away is worse than the other that you did to me.”

But he would not listen to her. Then he called his servant who attended him, and said, “Here! Put this woman out, away from me, and bolt the door behind her.” Now she had on a robe of many colors, for the king’s virgin daughters wore such apparel. And his servant put her out and bolted the door behind her.

Then Tamar put ashes on her head, and tore her robe of many colors that was on her, and laid her hand on her head and went away crying bitterly.

This scene is just dripping with evil. Amnon’s “love” for Tamar is a horror movie. He forces himself on her, and then immediately rejects her with all the cold harshness he can muster.

Tamar is ruined. So is the whole family. They were supposed to protect her from exactly this kind of thing. She is now damaged goods. Her marriage prospects are greatly diminished.

When this happened to Dinah in Genesis 34, Dinah’s brothers responded by killing every male in an entire city—and that situation wasn’t as bad as this one. In Genesis 34, Shechem wanted to marry Dinah after forcing himself on her. There was at least a hint of him trying to do the right thing. Here, Amnon is perfectly dishonorable.

Frankly, his actions don’t even make sense. His crush on Tamar ends instantly for no apparent reason. It’s like he’s possessed or something.

As bad as Nathan’s prophesy was, it wasn’t as chilling as the reality.

What makes this especially bad is that this isn’t all on Amnon. He conspired with his cousin, Jonadab. In fact, this was all Jonadab’s idea.

So, we not looking at just one bad apple. The rot is already widespread.

But it all did start with one bad apple—David. However, importantly, David isn’t really a bad apple, he just had a bad apple day (or month, really). And look at the train wreck that led to (which is about to get even worse).

Never underestimate the power of sin. Overconfidence is a ticket to disaster.

3 2 Samuel 13:20–29

And Absalom her brother said to her, “Has Amnon your brother been with you? But now hold your peace, my sister. He is your brother; do not take this thing to heart.” So Tamar remained desolate in her brother Absalom’s house.

But when King David heard of all these things, he was very angry. And Absalom spoke to his brother Amnon neither good nor bad. For Absalom hated Amnon, because he had forced his sister Tamar.

And it came to pass, after two full years, that Absalom had sheepshearers in Baal Hazor, which is near Ephraim; so Absalom invited all the king’s sons. Then Absalom came to the king and said, “Kindly note, your servant has sheepshearers; please, let the king and his servants go with your servant.”

But the king said to Absalom, “No, my son, let us not all go now, lest we be a burden to you.” Then he urged him, but he would not go; and he blessed him.

Then Absalom said, “If not, please let my brother Amnon go with us.”

And the king said to him, “Why should he go with you?” But Absalom urged him; so he let Amnon and all the king’s sons go with him.

Now Absalom had commanded his servants, saying, “Watch now, when Amnon’s heart is merry with wine, and when I say to you, ‘Strike Amnon!’ then kill him. Do not be afraid. Have I not commanded you? Be courageous and valiant.” So the servants of Absalom did to Amnon as Absalom had commanded. Then all the king’s sons arose, and each one got on his mule and fled.

Some commentators suspect that Absalom was in on this from the very beginning. Amnon was first in line for the throne, and Absalom was third. So, it’s not absurd to think that Absalom could have thought up the whole plan for Amnon to rape Tamar so that he would then have an excuse to kill Amnon and get one step closer to being the heir to the throne. His actions later fit this theory quite well.

But the scripture doesn’t. There is no mention anywhere of Absalom’s involvement prior to Tamar coming to him after the rape.

Scripture must not have such serious errors of omission. It cannot be both inspired and yet flawed by the normal standards of a historian.

But as soon as Absalom found out about what Amnon did to his sister, he started plotting his revenge. Sisters hold a special place in their brothers’ hearts. So, for two years, Absalom was just biding his time, waiting for the right opportunity.

But plan A isn’t a go. David declines Absalom’s invitation to the shearing party. So Absalom goes to plan B—invite just Amnon. But, instead, all of David’s sons go. That’s okay; Absalom still gets the shot off.

For the second time, sexual sin leads to murder.

4 2 Samuel 13:30–39

And it came to pass, while they were on the way, that news came to David, saying, “Absalom has killed all the king’s sons, and not one of them is left!” So the king arose and tore his garments and lay on the ground, and all his servants stood by with their clothes torn. Then Jonadab the son of Shimeah, David’s brother, answered and said, “Let not my lord suppose they have killed all the young men, the king’s sons, for only Amnon is dead. For by the command of Absalom this has been determined from the day that he forced his sister Tamar. Now therefore, let not my lord the king take the thing to his heart, to think that all the king’s sons are dead. For only Amnon is dead.”

Then Absalom fled. And the young man who was keeping watch lifted his eyes and looked, and there, many people were coming from the road on the hillside behind him. And Jonadab said to the king, “Look, the king’s sons are coming; as your servant said, so it is.” So it was, as soon as he had finished speaking, that the king’s sons indeed came, and they lifted up their voice and wept. Also the king and all his servants wept very bitterly.

But Absalom fled and went to Talmai the son of Ammihud, king of Geshur. And David mourned for his son every day. So Absalom fled and went to Geshur, and was there three years. And King David longed to go to Absalom. For he had been comforted concerning Amnon, because he was dead.

By this point, David knows that he’s watching Nathan’s prophecy come true. He’s interpreting everything that happens through the lens of that knowledge. He sees everything as all his fault. In a sense, it is all his fault.

David is living Murphey’s law—if anything can go wrong, it will. He has the ultimate case of the yips. He’s always waiting for the next shoe to drop. So, when the news comes that Absalom has killed all of his sons, he instantly believes it. He jumps right into intense mourning.

But Jonadab doubts the news. He has inside information that Absalom was only plotting to kill Amnon. But how does he know this?

The answer comes from the Hebrew word that was translated as “crafty” back in 2 Samuel 13:3 (כַּחֲמַם, kha-kham). It literally means wise, learned, skillful in technical work. Jonadab was very wise. That was his reputation. He was the family “brain trust.”

So, folks often sought his advice. That’s exactly what Amnon did back when this whole bruhaha started.

But kha-kham can be used for evil as well as for good. It isn’t always wise in the purest sense of the word.

Jonadab hatched the plan to get Tamar and Amnon alone together. That was clever but lacked wisdom.

So we get an important lesson—smart isn’t the same as wise. Even conventional wisdom can be foolish.

But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, — 1 Corinthians 1:27a

5 2 Samuel 14:1–11(ESV)

Now Joab the son of Zeruiah knew that the king's heart went out to Absalom. And Joab sent to Tekoa and brought from there a wise woman and said to her, "Pretend to be a mourner and put on mourning garments. Do not anoint yourself with oil, but behave like a woman who has been mourning many days for the dead. Go to the king and speak thus to him." So Joab put the words in her mouth.

When the woman of Tekoa came to the king, she fell on her face to the ground and paid homage and said, "Save me, O king." And the king said to her, "What is your trouble?" She answered, "Alas, I am a widow; my husband is dead. And your servant had two sons, and they quarreled with one another in the field. There was no one to separate them, and one struck the other and killed him. And now the whole clan has risen against your servant, and they say, 'Give up the man who struck his brother, that we may put him to death for the life of his brother whom he killed.' And so they would destroy the heir also. Thus they would quench my coal that is left and leave to my husband neither name nor remnant on the face of the earth."

Then the king said to the woman, "Go to your house, and I will give orders concerning you." And the woman of Tekoa said to the king, "On me be the guilt, my lord the king, and on my father's house; let the king and his throne be guiltless." The king said, "If anyone says anything to you, bring him to me, and he shall never touch you again." Then she said, "Please let the king invoke the LORD your God, that the avenger of blood kill no more, and my son be not destroyed." He said, "As the LORD lives, not one hair of your son shall fall to the ground."

David and his sons are Amnon's closest relatives. David (or maybe a son) is supposed to be the avenger of blood for Amnon's murder. Everyone expects Absalom to be put death in accordance with Mosaic law.

But David doesn't want that. He loves Absalom, plus he's sick and tired of all the family drama. He knows that the curse of Nathan's prophesy is permanent, but he wants to avoid contributing to it.

Joab doesn't want Absalom to die either. So he devises a plan to convince David to stand up to the peer pressure to be the avenger of blood. Joab invents a story designed to make David declare an exception to the Mosaic law on murder. Thus, by analogy, David will see the grounds for pardoning Absalom.

Joab sends a woman to David with a tale of woe in which her relatives want to follow the Mosaic law and kill her son, to avenge his killing of her other son. However, if they do, she will be completely bereft.

It works. David declares that he'll protect her remaining son, in defiance of the mob that wants to kill him.

This ruse is so similar to how Nathan confronted David that one has to wonder if that incident has become common knowledge. Of course, it has now because it's in the Bible, but might David have not kept it under his hat during his lifetime? Might David have wanted others to know about it—as an object lesson?

Well, he wrote Psalm 51. So, he definitely wasn't covering it up. It sure seems that Joab knew about it.

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. What is the cleverest evil scheme you've seen?
2. When has overconfidence proved disastrous?
3. What's the most extreme case of paybacks you've seen?
4. When have you seen apparent wisdom turn out foolish?
5. What's the best humble/humiliating object lesson you've seen taught?

Items for prayer: