

## Man's Schemes, God's Sovereignty

2 Samuel 13-14

In 2009, Bernie Madoff pleaded guilty to 11 crimes involved in his oversight of the largest known Ponzi scheme in history. A Ponzi scheme is a fraudulent investment plan where investors are promised a quick return on their money. But instead of giving them a return on legitimate business earnings, the person managing the money simply takes money from new investors to pay older investors. The older investors are happy with the result, so they tell all their friends about this amazing opportunity, which then draws in more investors, and on and on it goes. This has been called “robbing Peter to pay Paul,” because it’s not a true profit. It’s just shifting money from some investors to others, with the manager taking a nice cut for himself in the process. Ponzi schemes collapse when they run out of new investors to keep the deception running. Bernie Madoff carried on a Ponzi scheme for 20 years that involved \$65 billion. The level of fraud and deception involved in something like that is impossible to comprehend. He was simply an evil genius. And he happened to have the name “Madoff,” which is telling, since he made off with everybody else’s money.

We live in a fallen world where men and women constantly scheme and manipulate to gain advantages over others. Bernie Madoff was a notorious schemer, but certainly not the only one. If we could pull back the veil and see what is really going on inside the halls of power, inside the board rooms of major corporations, inside the offices of major media outlets, I think we would all be shocked at how much scheming goes on in the world today. And a world full of the schemes of man requires wisdom of us who seek to follow Christ in it.

The Bible is not naïve about the schemes of man. In these two chapters alone, we see King David, in the aftermath of his great sin with Bathsheba and its coverup, being taken in by the schemes of men and women four different times. And in the process, he is being set up for a major challenge to his throne by his own son Absalom, which we will come to in chapters 15-19. In this story, David is a negative example for us, as he shows repeated failures of wisdom. But in the process, we also see how God’s sovereignty interacts with the wicked schemes of men. And so we have much to learn from these chapters about how to live wisely in a world of Bernie Madoffs.

First, I want to walk through the story of these chapters just to summarize and understand what is going on. You can divide chapters 13-14 into four sections, each one about the scheme of one of the characters to manipulate King David into getting what he wants. And all four times, David falls for it. And then after we walk through the story we will draw out two applications for our lives. So let’s walk through the four schemes of these two chapters first.

In the first half of chapter 13 we see

### **1. The first scheme: Amnon wants Tamar (13:1-22).**

Let’s get acquainted with our characters. Amnon was the firstborn son of David and heir apparent to the throne. He was born to David’s wife Ahinoam of Jezreel. Absalom and Tamar were David’s son and daughter born to his wife Maacah. So Absalom and Tamar are full brother and sister. Amnon and Tamar are half-brother and half-sister. Tamar is a beautiful woman, and Amnon her half-brother wants her, in spite of the fact that it would constitute incest and thus be

against the Law of God given through Moses (Lev. 18:9). He's so consumed with passion over her that he makes himself sick. But as a virgin daughter of the king, she would have been under her father's protection and therefore under the watch of chaperones at all times in the presence of other men. Amnon could not see an opportunity to get her alone.

So Amnon's friend and cousin Jonadab enters the story and supplies the missing piece. What Amnon lacked in wit, Jonadab offered in service to evil. "Amnon," he said, "pretend to be sick, and when your father comes to check on you, tell him you want Tamar to come to you and prepare cakes of bread before your eyes and feed you with her own hand." Maybe this plan involved Amnon pretending that his stomach was so weak that he couldn't eat unless he could actually see the food prepared and have it delicately fed to him by his caring sister. When Amnon executed the plan and made this appeal to the king, David suspected nothing. He sent Tamar to Amnon's house, where she diligently prepared the food for him as directed. But Amnon would not eat it. Instead, he ordered everyone out and then, pretending that he was so sick he needed to return to his bed, he asked Tamar to go back to the bedchamber with him where she could feed him from her hand. Suspecting nothing, she followed him, but instead of eating from her hand, he grabbed her and said, "Come, lie with me, my sister." She refused, begging and pleading with him not to commit this incestuous act. In a moment of desperation, she even threw out the suggestion that he should ask their father if he could marry her. It is unlikely that David would agree, but Tamar was trying everything to defend herself. Tragically, Amnon overpowered her and raped her. Then verse 15 tells us that after the deed was done, "Amnon hated her with very great hatred, so that the hatred with which he hated her was greater than the love with which he had loved her." He told her to get out and then ordered his servant to take her away and bolt the door after her. Tamar, who was now a violated woman, in that society was rendered unlikely ever to marry or have children. So as an act of lament, she tore the garment that dignified her as a virgin daughter of the king, put ashes on her head, and went away crying to her brother Absalom, who took her in.

Before we proceed, I just want to address two matters that are not the main concern of this text but are relevant to us today. One is how utterly selfish sexual immorality is. In this story, Amnon reduces Tamar, his own half-sister, to nothing but an object for his own pleasure. And the moment he is done with her, he hates her, speaks to her harshly, and sends her out and bolts the door. He is a man ruled by his passions, not by wisdom. It is obvious that rape is a selfish act that dehumanizes the other person, but to some degree, so is any form of sexual sin. If you go to bed with your boyfriend or girlfriend outside the covenant of marriage, what you are essentially saying is, "I want to get pleasure from you without the total self-giving commitment of marriage. I want your body, but I'm not willing to share my life with you." Sexual immorality is inherently selfish, and Amnon is the epitome of it.

The other matter is that I know that in a room this size I am likely speaking to a number of victims of sexual abuse. And I know that it is not uncommon for victims of sexual abuse to blame themselves for what has happened to them. If you can create blame for yourself, then at least you can try to make sense of your pain. It may be too terrifying to face the alternative, which is that wicked people sometimes do terrible things to innocent people, and that's just the way the world is. But if you are a victim who struggles with blaming yourself or feeling worthless for what someone has done to you, I want you to see that in these two chapters, Tamar

is the only character who is morally upright. She obeys her father willingly. She serves her brother diligently as requested. Unlike Batsheba in chapter 11, Tamar tries to refuse participation in an illicit sexual act. Nothing in this text indicates that she is to blame for anything that happens to her. And while she is not the focus of the rest of the story, we can trust that the God who cares for his precious children did not leave Tamar alone in her desolation, nor will he leave the crime against her unanswered for on the Day of Judgment. If you are a victim of sexual abuse, don't blame yourself, and if you still suffer today from your past, don't suffer alone. Let a pastor, or a trusted Christian friend, or Christian counselor help you face the past and heal from it.

Now, as we follow the story along, we come to

## **2. The second scheme: Absalom wants revenge (13:23-39).**

As the full brother of Tamar who loves his sister, Absalom patiently and methodically schemed to avenge her. He executed a carefully planned, premeditated act of murder. For two years, Absalom patiently waited for the opportunity, and then one day he approached his father King David to ask the king to attend a sheep-shearing at Baal-hazor, fifteen miles away from Jerusalem. Sheep-shearing was not a spectator sport, but it was typically a festive occasion to celebrate with feasting. David refused to go. Fifteen miles was a long way to travel, and David, now getting older, didn't have it in him to travel that distance for a party, but he gave Absalom his blessing.

Of course, Absalom never wanted David to go in the first place, and he expected his father to refuse. He knew that if David refused his first request, he would feel more pressure to grant to Absalom a kind of consolation prize. "Well, if you won't go, please let Amnon go with us." At first that sounded strange. "Why should Amnon go with you?" David asked. But Absalom kept pressing and pressing. Parents, you know exactly what that feels like. At last, Absalom prevailed and persuaded his father to let Amnon and his other sons accompany Absalom to the sheep-shearing party.

And it was at this party, where Amnon was away from normal protections he had in Jerusalem, and at a moment when he would be merry with wine and his guard would be down, that Absalom knew he would have his opportunity. So Absalom prepped his servants in advance, and at the opportune moment, he ordered them to murder Amnon. They dutifully carried out his request, murdering Amnon at the party (probably by stabbing), and then chaos ensued. All the king's sons who witnessed the murder assumed they were next, and they fled the scene. In all the commotion, a rumor found its way back to Jerusalem reporting that Absalom had murdered all the king's sons. For a time David believed that, and he tore his garments and lamented the total annihilation of his house and the future of his throne. But then that scoundrel Jonadab, Amnon's cousin and friend who hatched the plot against Tamar, entered the picture again. Notice 13:32-33: "But Jonadab the son of Shimeah, David's brother, said, 'Let not my lord suppose that they have killed all the young men, the king's sons, for Amnon alone is dead. For by the command of Absalom this has been determined from the day he violated his sister Tamar.'" How does Jonadab, who wasn't at the scene, know this information? He knows it because he is shrewd and observant. He suspected the tension between Absalom and Amnon would lead to this. So then why does the narrative report this detail about Jonadab's insight into the situation? I think it is because this detail of the story highlights how David failed to see what he should have seen

ahead of time. Jonadab could discern Absalom's intention better than David could, and it was David's lack of discernment that opened him to deceit from one of his sons now for the second time.

After the murder of Amnon, Absalom left Israel and fled to Talmi, king of Geshur. King Talmi was Absalom's grandfather, the father of his mother Maacah. And there Absalom remained for three years. So we come to the last verse of chapter 13, verse 39: "And the spirit of the king longed to go out to Absalom, because he was comforted about Amnon, since he was dead." There is a footnote on the verb "longed to go out," indicating that it could be translated "ceased to go out," and I believe that is a better translation. The spirit of King David eventually "ceased to go out against" his son Absalom as his grief over Amnon's death subsided.

And as David's anger against Absalom subsided, slowly the door of possibility for a return from his exile opened more and more. And that is what chapter 14 is about, which brings us to another section:

### **3. The third scheme: Joab wants resolution (14:1-24).**

Joab was David's nephew and the commander of his army. In 14:1 we read that Joab "knew that the king's heart went out to Absalom." Again, that is a tricky verse to translate. It might better be rendered "the king's heart was concerned with Absalom," meaning that the king was concerned about the fact that his son Absalom was now both the heir apparent to the throne and a murderer who deserved death. How could this situation be resolved? David didn't see a clear pathway forward, so Joab wanted to give him one, for the sake of the future of the kingdom.

So Joab brought a crafty woman from Tekoa, a town ten miles south of Jerusalem. She was not a local, so David wouldn't recognize her. Joab instructed her to dress like a widow and act like she had a case to bring before the king. And so she did. With some dramatic flair, this woman told King David that she was a widow who had two sons. It happened that both sons were alone out in a field one day and got into a fight. There were no witnesses around to say exactly what happened, and no one around to restrain them, and tragically one brother ended up killing the other. And now her relatives want to avenge the blood of the slain son by putting his brother to death. But they stand to gain financially from that, because if they put to death the surviving brother, the last surviving heir of this woman's family, the inheritance will pass to them. And so this poor widow needed a guarantee from the king that her son can be protected from blood avengers. David agreed to her request, and she even made him swear an oath to it in 14:11: "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.'" And then, just like Nathan the prophet saying, "You are the man!" in chapter 12, the woman of Tekoa turned her story back on David. Read verse 13: "And the woman said, 'Why then have you planned such a thing against the people of God? For in giving this decision the king convicts himself, inasmuch as the king does not bring his banished one home again.'" David was smart enough to suspect that Joab had something to do with this, so he asked her if Joab had put her up to saying that. She confirmed it, and David told Joab to go to Geshur and bring Absalom back, with one caveat: Absalom would not be allowed into the king's presence.

So how should we understand this incident? It is striking how similar it is to the prophet Nathan's confrontation of David in chapter 12. But on that occasion, Nathan spoke the word of

the Lord to David to lead David to repentance. Here, we don't have a prophet speaking. We have a gifted woman giving to David the words of Joab. And while Joab apparently means well, in the long run we will see clearly that the decision to bring Absalom back was a foolish one that almost leads to the loss of David's throne. Once again, David is led astray by the schemes of man.

Now we come to the last section:

#### **4. The fourth scheme: Absalom wants access (14:25-33).**

Absalom came back to Jerusalem. And before the story proceeds, we get a description of him in verses 25-27: "Now in all Israel there was no one so much to be praised for his handsome appearance as Absalom. From the sole of his foot to the crown of his head there was no blemish in him. And when he cut the hair of his head (for at the end of every year he used to cut it; when it was heavy on him, he cut it), he weighted the hair of his head, two hundred shekels by the king's weight. There were born to Absalom three sons, and one daughter whose name was Tamar. She was a beautiful woman." When the author describes Absalom as distinctively impressive in his appearance, we should remember the last time he made reference to a distinctively impressive man. That was in 1 Samuel 10:23-24, where King Saul's appearance is described as outwardly impressive. That would be the same King Saul who became paranoid about David and descended into the madness of increasing wickedness as a result. These verses sound an ominous note about Absalom.

For two full years Absalom lived in Jerusalem with no access to the king, and he grew impatient with that arrangement. He knew his key into the king's court was Joab, so he sent for Joab twice, but Joab did not respond. Joab probably didn't want to try to push anything further on David. So Absalom was frustrated, and he decided to execute yet another scheme. It just so happened that Joab owned a field of barley that was next to Absalom's field, so he commanded his servants to set Joab's field on fire. I don't recommend this, but I will say that if you feel like you are being ignored by somebody, setting his property on fire is one way to get his attention. So Joab came to Absalom, and Absalom said to him, "You brought me back here from Geshur, but I haven't had any access to the king. What's the point of my being here then? It would have been better for me to remain in exile with my grandfather." Verse 33 then ends the story of Absalom's exile and return from these two chapters: "Then Joab went to the king and told him, and he summoned Absalom. So he came to the king and bowed himself on his face to the ground before the king, and the king kissed Absalom." You could read this as a beautiful picture of reconciliation between an estranged father and son, but it is nothing of the sort. Yes, Absalom and David followed official protocols. Absalom bowed low to the ground, and David kissed him to signal his acceptance back into the royal court of Israel. But this is not reconciliation. The very next chapter will show Absalom plotting to overthrow his father. David has been taken in yet again.

Now that we have seen the story of 2 Samuel 13-14, what does it have to say to our lives today? I have two words of application for us. One is a warning from David's lack of discernment with all four of these schemes. The other is a look at the bigger picture of what God is up to in this story.

And so here is my first word of application:

**(1) Don't be led astray by the schemes of men, but use biblical discernment.**

You may be able to excuse David for being deceived by Amnon regarding his request to have Tamar feed him from her hand. That may have been a strange request, but David likely had no clear reason to expect anything nefarious. But two years later, when Absalom asked David to send Amnon with him to the sheep-shearing party, David clearly lacked discernment about Absalom's intention that he should have been able to pick up on. Jonadab picked up on it, but David was not tuned closely enough to the heart of his son Absalom to know what was really going on. And then when the woman of Tekoa pulled on his heart strings with her story about a threat to her lone surviving son, David saw the similarities between the son in that story and his son Absalom. But he also failed to appreciate the significant differences. The woman's story was about a spontaneous scuffle that went tragically wrong. You could classify it as manslaughter, not premeditated murder. Absalom, on the other hand, patiently waited for two years as he crafted a plan to murder his brother. David simply did not discern well enough the fact that Absalom was too dangerous to bring back into the kingdom.

Now, contrast the naivete of David with the shrewd wisdom of Jesus. In John 2:23-25 we read, "Now when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing. But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people and needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in man." Jesus knew that many who would profess faith in him one day would quickly turn against him the next, so he did not entrust himself to them, so as not to leave himself vulnerable to being taken in by their ungodly aims and pushed toward their earthly agendas instead of the mission his Father sent him to fulfill. Or consider how Jesus handled it when his opponents tried to trap him with their question, "Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?"<sup>1</sup> Jesus knew that the strongly pro-Israel faction of leaders would be offended if he said "yes," and the pro-Roman faction would be offended if he said "No" (and possibly even arrest him), so they wanted to force him to offend one group or another with a simple "yes" or "no" answer. But he didn't play their game. Instead, he asked to see a coin, showing them Caesar's image and inscription, and then masterfully concluding, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's." His knowledge of Scripture and of the true depths of evil in the human heart equipped our Lord to evade all the schemes of men that were meant to trap him.

As Christians, we must be loving, open, hospitable people. We must not give in to cynicism about others. But at the same time, nothing in the Bible requires us to be naïve. We can be loving, open, and hospitable and still recognize that not every person we encounter or every sob story we hear should be taken at face value. We can love our children without letting their immature desires manipulate us into acting against our better judgment. Parents, you must be shrewd observers of your children's hearts, for only by knowing them well can you know how to guide their hearts well, in contrast to David, who apparently couldn't see what Absalom was up to and let himself be manipulated by his son. We can respect governing authorities without assuming that they will never lie to us or oppress us. At times even those in our lives who mean well, such as a Christian friend, or even a spouse, may seek to lead us in a direction that is simply foolish, just as Joab did to David. We must know the Bible and the human heart well enough to walk with discernment through these challenges to the best of our ability. Naivete is not a virtue.

And then here's a second word of application for us:

**(2) Don't be unsettled by the schemes of men, but trust in God's sovereignty.**

What we see in these two chapters is moral chaos. Amnon and Jonadab conspire to plan an incestuous act that becomes a rape. Absalom plans a retaliatory murder of his brother. Joab plans a ruse to lead David to do something foolish, and David gets taken in by all of them. The only admirable character we read about in these two chapters is Tamar.

And yet, in all this moral chaos, the word of the Lord is being fulfilled. Look back one page to an earlier incident in chapter 12. When Nathan the prophet confronted David about his sin with Bathsheba and his murder of Uriah, he delivered this word from the Lord in verse 10: "Now therefore the sword shall never depart from your house, because you have despised me and taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife." When Absalom took up his sword against Amnon, that prophecy began to be fulfilled. God does not commit sin or approve of it. He hates sin and stands resolutely opposed to it. And yet, the Bible is clear that God is sovereign over sin, directing it to the fulfillment of his own purposes. All the moral chaos happening in the house of David in chapters 13-14 is in fulfillment of the judgment foretold by the word of the Lord in 12:10.

That should be a comfort to us, because we live in a world where wicked men and women are constantly scheming. When the FBI raids the homes of those who protest at abortion clinics but does nothing about the vandalism of pro-life pregnancy centers, you know they are trying to intimidate one group and encourage the other. When some governors in 2020 were telling churches they could not gather to worship but did nothing to stop BLM riots, you know that stopping the transmission of a respiratory virus was not their true motive. When it seems that overnight all our leading institutions suddenly decided that we no longer know how to define the word "woman," and people like you might get fired if you dare object to this new way of thinking, a moment's thought will tell you that such a crazy switch to this new way of thinking could not have been pulled off without some scheming and manipulation behind the scenes.

The people who hold the most power and influence in the world today are wicked people who have wicked agendas. We are surrounded by the wicked schemes of men. But you know what? The world has always been this way since the fall in Genesis 3. And through all the wicked schemes of men, God has always accomplished his good purposes. So how should we respond to the times in which we live? Should we cower in fear over what powerful people are doing to our country? Should we vent our anger and frustration relentlessly on social media? Let's do neither. Instead, let us trust the Lord. Yes, we are surrounded by wicked schemes of wicked men, but all of them are being directed by the sovereign hand of God to the fulfillment of his will. The schemes of man cannot overcome the purposes of God. They can only serve them. Don't be unsettled by the unsettling times in which we live. God has it all in his hands.

After all, the most wicked scheme in human history, the scheme perpetrated by the powers of this age against the Son of God, led to his murder on a Roman cross. And yet it all happened according to God's plan from before creation, and it was at the cross of Christ that God crushed the head of the serpent in fulfillment of his ancient promises (Gen. 3:15). For it was through the murder of his own Son that God made atonement for the sins of all who would believe in Jesus. And by raising him from the dead, God showed that all the schemes of man in this present age do not have last the word. Amen.

---

<sup>1</sup> This question is posed to Jesus in Matthew 22:15-22; Mark 12:13-17; and Luke 20:19-26.