

A couple months ago, I came across a New York Times article titled, “The One Where Matthew Perry Writes an Addiction Memoir.” The article says that in his book, *Friends, Lovers, and the Big Terrible Thing: A Memoir*, Perry chronicles “his decades-long cage match with drinking and drug use which led to a medical odyssey in 2018 that included pneumonia, an exploded colon, a brief stint on life support, two weeks in a coma, nine months with a colostomy bag, more than a dozen stomach surgeries, and the realization that, by the time he was 49, he had spent more than half of his life in treatment centers or sober living facilities.”

He recalls one time he had the misfortune of having to carry all of his front teeth to the dentist because they were so weak that they had fallen out when he took a bite out of a peanut-butter sandwich.

Now, here’s what I want us to see: “Friends” ran for ten years, won all kinds of awards, made a HUGE cultural impact (“How YOU doin’?”), and Perry & Co. were earning \$1 million per episode at its peak. And RIGHT as Perry was seemingly on top of the world, in his inner world, everything was crashing down.

Perry says, “I married Monica and got driven back to the treatment center—at the height of my highest point in ‘Friends,’ the highest point in my career, the iconic moment on the iconic show—in a pickup truck helmed by a sober technician.”

As Perry shows, it’s easy to lose ourselves. Of course, his is a case dealing with addiction (not to be diminished), but it didn’t start there. In all kinds of ways, we are liable to lose ourselves, too, finding ourselves at the apex, only to need a sober technician to help us. As we continue in our Unearthed series, we’re going to look at the life of Samson and this idea of “how to lose everything.” But first some context.

Samson’s story takes place in the days *after* the Israelites were freed from Egyptian slavery, but before Israel had a king. In this gap, Israel went astray.

Then the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord and served the Baals. They forsook the Lord, the God of their ancestors, who had brought them out of Egypt. They followed and worshiped various gods of the peoples around them. They aroused the Lord’s anger because they forsook him and served Baal and the Ashtoreths. (Judges 2:11-13)

That was a problem. So what did God do? He raised up judges. “Then the Lord raised up judges, who saved them out of the hands of these raiders. Yet they would not listen” (Judges 2:16-17).

As a judge, it was Samson’s job to be Israel’s leader, military commander, judicial judge/arbiter, and spiritual head. And up to this point, the judges of Israel had not been doing a good job. It started out okay. Early on, Othniel was good. He saved Israel. But then—and this is a common refrain throughout the book of Judges—“the people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord” (Judges 3:12).

So, God sent other judges: Ehud, Shamgar, Deborah. They’re *not bad*. But then we get to Gideon. He was a coward who led Israel into idolatry. Gideon’s son, Abimelech, was even worse. And then there was Jephthah, who also wasn’t great. And then there was Ibzan, Elon, and Abdon, who also weren’t great. And FINALLY, we come to Samson in Judges 13. And contra his judicial ancestors, Samson starts out *NOT* bad, actually.

- Judges 13:3-5: Samson is set apart for the Lord
- Judges 13:3-5: Samson will lead and deliver Israel
- Judges 13:24-25: Samson is growing, has grown, was blessed by the LORD; the Spirit of God began to stir in him.

But this optimism, dear reader, does not last long. Time and again, it seems as if Samson does what is evil in the eyes of the Lord. For example:

- Want a Philistine wife that you know you're not supposed to marry and that'll set a bad example for your people? Who cares! Samson gets what Samson wants!
- Want to eat honey out of a dead animal carcass which you're not allowed to touch because it's unclean? Who cares! Samson gets what Samson wants!
- Want to party and get drunk even though you are committed to not do that? Who cares! Samson gets what Samson wants!
- Want to take your vengeance on and kill your ex-wife's people for something that you instigated? Who cares! Samson gets what Samson wants!
- Want to divulge the secret of your great enemy-vanquishing strength to Delilah to still her nonstop questioning? Who cares! Samson gets what Samson wants!

And wouldn't you guess where this kind of life inevitably led Samson? Like Perry, it led Samson into a mess.

After Samson divulged the secret of his strength to Delilah, he fell asleep, she cut his hair and then "the Philistines seized him, gouged out his eyes and took him down to Gaza. Binding him with bronze shackles, they set him to grinding grain in the prison" (Judges 16:21).

Now the rulers of the Philistines assembled to offer a great sacrifice to Dagon their god and to celebrate, saying, "Our god has delivered Samson, our enemy, into our hands." When the people saw him, they praised their god, saying, "Our god has delivered our enemy into our hands, the one who laid waste our land and multiplied our slain." While they were in high spirits, they shouted, "Bring out Samson to entertain us." So they called Samson out of the prison, and he performed for them. (Judges 16:23-25)

What Samson's story shows us is that while you can be on top at one time in your life, it does not take much to lose it all and wind up in chains, metaphorical or otherwise. So, how do you lose yourself like Samson? Well, make certain that you...

1. Don't think about the nature of Sin.

Seriously: DO NOT think about it. Specifically, what I mean by not thinking about the "nature" of sin, is not thinking about Sin's tyrannical nature. Sin is a tyrant. It wants to enslave you.

Here's what I mean: There's a scene in John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* that has always stuck with me. In the beginning of the book, Steinbeck describes how the banks are kicking people off their land because they can't afford to stay because of the dust bowl and their inability to grow crops. The banks would send

representatives to kick people off the land in big tractors and send them packing with nowhere to go and no work to be found. The people would cry out, "Stop! You don't have to do this to us!" The reply? "We're sorry. It's not us. It's the monster. The bank isn't like a man."

The tractors came over the roads and into the fields, great crawlers moving like insects, having the incredible strength of insects...The man sitting in the iron seat did not look like a man; gloved, goggled, rubber dust mask over nose and mouth, he was a part of the monster, a robot in the seat...The driver could not control it – straight across country it went, cutting through a dozen farms and straight back. A twitch at the controls could swerve the cat', but the driver's hands could not twitch because the monster that built the tractor, the monster that sent the tractor out, had somehow got into the driver's hands, into his brains and muscle, had goggled him and muzzled him – goggled his mind, muzzled his speech, goggled his perception, muzzled his protest.

This is a picture of Samson. When you look at Samson's story, it seems as if it's always Samson asserting himself, getting his way. Samson gets what Samson wants, right? In his mind, he's thinking, "Look at me vanquishing my foes, acquiring women, eating unclean foods and no one knowing. I'm doing great! Lose myself? I've never been freer! I've never been more me!"

Only that's not true at all. If we look a little closer we see that Samson is *lost*. How so? Because Samson's life isn't really "Samson gets what Samson wants." No, instead of "Samson gets what Samson wants," it's more like "What *WANTS* Samson, *GETS* Samson." Think about it. Samson is time and again overtaken by:

- *Anger*: He bubbles up with vitriol. It controls him.
- *Vengeance*: He can't say no to vengeance. He HAS to follow it.
- *Misogyny/lust*: He's a womanizer. He's *driven* by sexual desire.
- *Rivalry*: He wants to one-up, be better than his companions.
- *Pride*: He mocks, taunts, and plays with his enemies.

There he was, big, strong Samson, vanquishing the enemies outside of Israel, but unable to control the enemies inside his heart. He was in bondage. Just like the men from the banks, so too, Samson was given to the monsters in his heart. They dehumanized him. Made him lesser. He couldn't control them. They got into Samson's hands, "into his brains and muscle, had goggled him and muzzled him—goggled his mind, muzzled his speech, goggled his perception, and muzzled his protest," as Steinbeck says.

But it doesn't just happen to Samson, it happens to us too. So, let me ask: *What has gotten into your hands? Into your mind? What's controlling you? Muzzling your speech? Goggling your perception? Muzzling your protest? What just lurches out of you?*

Oh, wait, we want to lose ourselves. And if you want to lose yourself, don't think about your slavery to sin. Don't think about any of that. And now that you're not thinking about those questions, make absolutely certain you...

2. Don't think about the character of Sin.

Part of the reason that he continuously puts himself in precarious situations is because he thinks nothing of sin, but the other reason is perhaps because he thinks nothing of the character of sin. What do I

mean? Well, sin is seductive. Sin *nags* you. It badgers you until you relent, until your willpower dies off. It's like the high-energy dog that keeps scratching at the back door to be let in.

Imagine this with me. It's midweek. You work from home and you're watching what you eat. But it's lunchtime now, and much to your chagrin, someone in your house bought a pie from Kroger last night and now it's sitting on your counter. Go ahead, picture it. But because it's lunchtime, you're able to get your regular food without too much thinking about the pie.

Now, imagine it's about an hour later, and you need to refill your water. So you head to the kitchen, and there's the pie, in all its glory. But you're fine. You just had food. Still, now you've seen it twice and it's firmly rooted in your subconscious.

Now, it's 2:30pm, dinner is forever hours away, but you want a little snack. But because you're doing low-carb, you've got to bypass the pie and have the almonds. Boring. So, you go to the kitchen. You look at the pie. Tantalizing. You lick your lips. And you also notice that this pie is already half-eaten! Who's the pig? Now you feel the scarcity. What if it's gone by the time dinner comes? What if there's none left? What if the others get to it first? Your heart pounds. You're on a decision precipice. What do you do?

Significantly, I think, the text tells us of two instances where this happens, where Samson is goaded by Sin to the point where he gives in.

- In chapter 14, Samson put a riddle to the Philistines at he and his Philistine wife's seven-day wedding. They couldn't figure out Samson's riddle, so they were about to owe Samson a lot! They make his wife tell him to tell them. "She cried the whole seven days of the feast. So on the seventh day he finally told her, because she continued to press him. She in turn explained the riddle to her people" (Judges 14:17).
- The second instance was with Delilah. Samson had a supernatural source of strength—his hair. The Philistines wanted to know the secret of his strength, so they tasked Delilah with coaxing it out of him. Initially Samson resisted. But eventually, because he kept placing himself in her company, he gave in. "With such nagging she prodded him day after day until he was sick to death of it. So he told her everything" (Judges 16:16-17a).

Not sure who said it, but here's the truth: "Whatever doesn't kill you. . . is probably circling around for another try." So, *what has been sneaking up on you? Where are you caught on a decision precipice? What's nagging you? Badgering you? Scratching at the door of your heart? What's enticing you away from obedience to the Lord?*

Oh, dang, I did it again! Never mind, *don't* think about those things.

If you want to lose yourself: (1) Don't think about the nature of sin, and (2) Don't think about the character of sin. Now, here's #3:

3. Don't think about the trajectory of Sin.

When I was in high school, I'd always get home around 3 pm. I always had chores to do between that time and when mom got home from work at 5 pm. But, alas, my sinful nature prevailed. I loved the lowest things, instead of the higher. I delighted in depravity, not duty. Really, I always had two problems when it came to doing what mom told me to do: (1) I did not do what I was supposed to do (my chores) and (2) I did the

things I was *not* supposed to do (play video games). Because of this when mom came home at 5 pm, I faced the penalty of my wickedness. The wrath of mom was unveiled upon all my unrighteousness.

In other words, my sin led me down a path I ultimately didn't want.

Think about Samson's life. Where did he wind up? In bondage. In chains. Eyes gouged out. Performing in front of the Philistine elite.

Ronald Rolheiser writes,

Western culture today is so powerful and alluring that it often swallows us whole. Its beauty, power and promise generally take away both our breath and our perspective. The lure of present salvation – money, sex, creativity, the good life – has, for the most part, entertained, amused, distracted and numbed us into a state where we no longer have a perspective beyond that of our culture and its short range soteriology.

So much in your day-to-day experience wants to keep you spiritually disillusioned, keep you from thinking about the existence of a God, from thinking about that God maybe having moral standards, from thinking about where rebellion to those good standards might lead you.

And, again, I just have to ask: *Where is your life leading you? Where does your sin lead? What's the trajectory of your decisions, your desires, your habits?*

They might lead to momentary gratification, momentary happiness, but as Paul says, "A man reaps what he sows. Whoever sows to please their flesh, from the flesh will reap destruction; whoever sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life" (Galatians 6:7-8).

Okay, so we've said if you want to lose yourself, do these three things: (1) Don't think about the nature of Sin, (2) Don't think about the character of sin, (3) Don't think about the trajectory of sin.

BUT if you want to...maybe, perhaps...*find* yourself, to NOT lose yourself, how do you do that?

I recently read Daniel James Brown's *Facing the Mountain*, about Japanese American soldiers fighting in WW2. In Hawaii, the Japanese attacked American aircraft, immobilizing an American air response, leaving a "maelstrom of flames, shattered glass, twisted metal, and scattered bodies." Before the Americans knew what was happening, the Japanese aircraft turned to their principal targets, seven enormous battleships lined up next to Ford Island. One was the USS Oklahoma. In rapid succession, two torpedoes smacked the hull of the ship. Then a third hit, and "minutes later it rolled over entirely, trapping hundreds below decks, its great grey hull turned to the sky like the belly of a dead whale." Any men able and trying to escape were strafed. The rest were trapped.

This is BOTH Israel AND Samson—caught unaware, attacked by the enemy, trapped with no way out. And this is us. ***What are we to do??***

As blind, beleaguered Samson was ridiculed and mocked, paraded, and laughed at by the Philistine overlords, he was put in between two pillars, and in a final moment of faithfulness, here's what Samson did:

Then Samson prayed to the Lord, "Sovereign Lord, remember me. Please, God, strengthen me just once more, and let me with one blow get revenge on the Philistines for my two eyes." Then Samson reached toward the two central pillars on which the temple stood. Bracing himself against them, his

right hand on the one and his left hand on the other, Samson said, "Let me die with the Philistines!" Then he pushed with all his might, and down came the temple on the rulers and all the people in it. Thus he killed many more when he died than while he lived. (Judges 16:28-30)

Samson, as the ruler, leader, and judge of Israel was, earlier in his life, said to be the one who would "begin" to save Israel (Judges 13:5), and here he did that. Israel, who while not in bondage to Egypt, was in bondage to Sin. Israel, who was too daft to see the seduction of sin. Israel, who was too blind to see the future of their life of sin. Here, Samson *begins* to save Israel.

But it's also here we need to begin to move past Samson's story and ask not only, "Who would *begin* to save God's people?" but also ask, "Who would *finish* the salvation of God's people?"

Who would save you and me? How do you and I not end up like Israel? How do we not give in to the slavery of sin? To sin's constant nagging? To sin's evil trajectory? What are we to do?

It's simple: **Think about the Savior of sinners.**

What we need is what Thomas Chalmers calls "the expulsive power of a new affection." You need something to change your heart. To change your wants! To reorder your desires! To take your sinful heart and make it clean! Look, if you want to clean out a sponge, you don't do that by wringing it out as hard as you can (the religious person's path) and you don't do it by saying, "Ah, who cares? It's good as it is!" (the secular person's path)—no, no, no. To clean that sponge, you need fresh water to pour into it, to force the dirty water out of it!

And friends, that's what Jesus does for us! You need to behold the true and better Samson. For the 1st time or for the 1000th time, you need to *marvel* at Christ crucified to redeem you from the power of sin through his blood on the cross. Look:

- Christ is the better Samson, holy unto the Lord, righteous in heart and deed.
- Christ is the better Samson, self-controlled, not given to anger or lust or vengeance.
- Christ is the better Samson, when pressed, when vexed unto death, was faithful and true.
- Christ is the better Samson, vanquishing our spiritual overlords – Satan, Sin, and Death – not in between two pillars, but on a cross in between two thieves.
- Christ is the better Samson, slaying more with his death than he killed in his life.
- Christ is the better Samson, triumphing over death by death and bringing freedom from Sin to all hidden in him.

So, here' what I'll say: You need not be enslaved by the power of sin. You need not be dismayed by the character of sin. You need not fear the trajectory of sin. Behold Jesus. Believe on him. Receive his love for you anew this morning.