

Apologetics in an Age of Despair

By Gavin Ortlund

In C. S. Lewis's [That Hideous Strength](#), the character Mark describes his life as “the dust and broken bottles, the heap of old tin cans, the dry and choking places.” Along with his wife, Mark functions as a personification of modernity, and his beliefs represent many secular people today. Yet through the events of the plot, Mark becomes awakened to transcendence. While imprisoned and subjected to psychological torture, he has a profound moral experience:

There rose up against this background of the sour and the crooked some kind of vision of the sweet and the straight. Something else—something he vaguely called the “Normal”—apparently existed. He had never thought about it before. But there it was—solid, massive, with a shape of its own, almost like something you could touch, or eat, or fall in love with. It was all mixed up with Jane and fried eggs and soap and sunlight and the rooks cawing at Cure Hardy and the thought that, somewhere outside, daylight was going on at that moment.

In my writing, I've [used this passage](#) in the context of making a moral argument for the existence of God. But more generally, it's a wonderfully creative literary expression of how modern despair can be punctured by the doctrine of God (or even one implication of the doctrine of God, like the notion of objective goodness). For many late-modern people, coming into contact with the gospel will be experienced as a transition like that from the “dry and choking places” to “fried eggs and soap and sunlight.” It will feel like a transition from flatness to fullness, from disenchantment to reenchancement, from a gray and drab world to one teeming with life and color.

Exploring the nature of modern despair can open up fresh and exciting ways to make the hope of the gospel visible to those around us who so desperately need it.

Understand Modern Despair

In his acclaimed book [A Secular Age](#), Charles Taylor draws attention to the problem of disenchantment and the loss of meaning in the modern era. This phenomenon is historically recent—while most modern people intuitively understand the problem, it would be difficult to explain to those who lived 500 years ago. While premodern people certainly could feel despair, the sense of generalized despair that characterizes the

late-modern West is a unique historical development. For Taylor, such despair is the result of other developments, especially the eclipse of transcendence and changes to the notion of the self. It's the feeling that "our actions, goals, achievements, and the like, have a lack of weight, gravity, thickness, substance."

So we could say we inhabit a world that has progressively cut itself off from traditional sources of transcendence, with the result that our experience is now characterized by a sense of barrenness and disenchantment—often more than we're even aware of. It might sound strange to think we could be experiencing despair without being fully aware of it, but we fail to discern how the surrounding culture influences us. Our culture generally feels normal to us—it's the glasses we look through, not the landscape we look on. Thus, like a teenager who doesn't realize her family is dysfunctional until she goes to college, we often don't realize we live and move among "the dry and choking places" until we've experienced the alternative. In his [Making Sense of God](#), Tim Keller even proposes most modern people are so unhappy that it takes years to fully realize the nature of their unhappiness:

On the whole, we are in denial about the depth and magnitude of our discontent. The artists and thinkers who talk about it most poignantly are seen as morbid outliers, but actually they are prophetic voices. It usually takes years to break through and dispel the denial in order to see the magnitude and dimension of our dissatisfaction in life.

The problem of despair is one of the central preoccupations of existentialist philosophy. Many of the "new atheists" (e.g., Sam Harris) have a more buoyant, upbeat atheism—claiming we can lose belief in God while retaining objective morality and values like compassion and human rights. The older existentialist philosophers, by contrast, generally saw atheism as unleashing moral and psychological despair.

In his famous essay on existentialism, for example, Jean-Paul Sartre rejected the efforts of earlier French atheists to retain objective morality apart from God, [stating](#) that "the existentialist . . . finds it extremely embarrassing that God does not exist, for there disappears with Him all possibility of finding values in an intelligible heaven." For the existentialist philosopher Albert Camus, the loss of transcendent meaning entailed the absurdity of life. Camus [compared](#) human existence to the character Sisyphus in Greek mythology, bound for all eternity to roll a stone up a hill—only to watch it fall back down every time.

The sense of chaos and disintegration introduced by atheism is powerfully conveyed in Friedrich Nietzsche's [famous parable](#) of the "madman." This character (generally regarded as representing Nietzsche) runs to the marketplace and cries out,

"Whither is God?" . . . "I will tell you. We have killed him—you and I. All of us are his murderers. But how did we do this? How could we drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there still any up or down? Are we not straying, as through an infinite nothing? Do we not feel the breath of empty space? Has it not become colder? Is not night continually closing in on us?"

The aura of modern despair is well captured by these metaphors—wiping away the horizon, unchaining the earth, plunging into empty space, and so on. Many modern people can relate to the emotions involved in such imagery—even if they're not sure why. Indeed, there are good reasons to believe that secular thought in the 21st century hasn't surpassed the basic struggles reflected in 19th- and 20th-century existentialist thought. Even if we don't think about despair as much, it's still a deeply rooted element of modern culture.

To illustrate, consider the following thought experiment: Imagine a 21st-century Manhattan banker traveled in a time machine to a monastery in Western Europe 1,000 years ago, and one of the monks from the monastery traveled in the time machine to 21st-century Manhattan. The two swap places for a season. Which person would have greater culture shock? Which would be more repulsed and offended? Which would be more likely to survive and flourish in his new environment?

Doubtless it'd be a bracing experience for both. There's much the banker would miss about the 21st-century world and much he'd struggle to come to terms with. We don't want to romanticize the past. But I suspect that in several crucial respects—particularly in matters concerning the human heart—the monk would find our world more impoverished than we'd find his. We're more connected but lonelier. We have longer lifespans but higher suicide rates. We have more opportunities but spiking anxiety and depression. Our world is flashier, but his has a meaning and richness we don't even know we've lost.

To summarize, modernity is characterized by the loss of transcendent meaning. This influences our lives profoundly—yet often unconsciously or semiconsciously. We live

under the cloud of a vague sense of barrenness but are uncertain of its cause, perhaps unaware there's any alternative. We may not articulate our struggles with the word "despair." And yet underneath our loneliness, our addictions, our restlessness, our depression, our overbusy and distracted lives, there lies a deep, churning emptiness. Like Mark, we live among "the dust and broken bottles, the heap of old tin cans, the dry and choking places."

What does this mean for how we experience and communicate the gospel? How do we do apologetics in an age of despair?

How the Gospel Meets Despair

When the Russian writer Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn was awarded the Templeton Prize in 1983, he [recounted](#) the full horrors of 20th-century violence and then famously blamed them on the loss of faith in God: "If I were asked today to formulate as concisely as possible the main cause of the ruinous revolution that swallowed up some 60 million of our people, I could not put it more accurately than to repeat: 'Men have forgotten God; that's why all this has happened.'" What's true of 20th-century violence is equally true of 21st-century despair: all this has happened because people have forgotten God.

This isn't to say that in addressing despair, the church has a simple or formulaic task. On the contrary, it'll take wisdom and dependence on the Holy Spirit's help to bring the gospel to bear on modern people in meaningful and authentic ways. Here are two ways, in particular, we can make the gospel compelling in an age of despair.

1. Proclaim the Fullness of the Gospel

The heart of the gospel message is, as Paul relayed it, that "Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures" ([1 Cor. 15:3](#)). Yet Paul himself communicated this gospel differently in different contexts. In [Acts 13](#), when preaching the gospel in a Jewish synagogue, he essentially quoted various Scriptures, declared they're fulfilled in Christ, and then called everyone to repentance. But in [Acts 17](#), at the Areopagus in Athens, he took a different approach. In this pagan environment, Paul began further back, with the doctrines of God and creation. Along the way, he quoted their own poets and found creative ways to build bridges to their world.

Today we increasingly live in an [Acts 17](#) culture. We can therefore learn from Paul's example of explicating the gospel in the larger context of God and creation. If we simply assume these background beliefs, our message won't be intelligible or compelling to

many modern people. It'll be like preaching an [Acts 13](#) message in an [Acts 17](#) context. John Stott, [commenting](#) on Paul's speeches in the book of Acts, put it like this:

Many people are rejecting our gospel today not because they perceive it to be false, but because they perceive it to be trivial. People are looking for an integrated worldview which makes sense of all their experience. We learn from Paul that we cannot preach the gospel of Jesus without the doctrine of God, or the cross without the creation, or salvation without judgment.

As apologists in an age of disenchantment and despair, we must bring the full implications of the gospel to bear on the deepest longings and troubles of modern hearts. Most basically, we must identify God himself as the answer to modern despair. As [Augustine taught](#), God is the only ultimate source of rest and fulfillment for the human heart. God is to modern despair what food is to hunger. Only in relation to him do we emerge from the dry and choking places. This is why forgiveness of sins is such good news—it brings us into fellowship with God himself. But in the modern world, as in [Acts 17](#), we cannot assume listeners will be able to connect these dots.

Preaching the gospel in an age of despair will therefore require patience and long-term perspective. Evangelism will often be a longer and messier process. Consider C. S. Lewis's Mark again—it's only after his encounter with the "Normal" in his prison cell that he's positioned to respond to Christ. Lewis's own conversion is similar—he compares [his journey to theism](#) to losing a long, slow chess match, and it was still two more years after becoming a theist in 1929 that he eventually became a Christian in 1931. The message that "Christ died for your sins" wasn't yet what Lewis thought he needed in 1925 or 1927. Nor is it where we can start with many of our friends, coworkers, family members, and neighbors.

We must therefore appreciate the enormity of the task in front of us. Apologetics in an age of despair involves attempting to help others awaken to a sense of God, a sense of eternity and glory. We're beckoning people out of the dry and choking places. We're saying to them, as Paul said, "What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you" ([Acts 17:23](#)). We'll need to depend on the Spirit every single moment along the way.

2. Proclaim the Beauty of the Gospel

The Greek philosophers spoke of the three transcendentals: the good, the true, and the beautiful. While modern apologetics often focuses on showing Christianity is true, historically Christians have emphasized the goodness and beauty of the gospel as well.

This apologetic more comprehensively relates to the human person. For example, in an oft-cited passage in his famous [Pensées](#), Blaise Pascal proposed a threefold strategy for commending belief in God:

Men despise religion. They hate it and are afraid it might be true. The cure for this is first to show that religion is not contrary to reason, but worthy of reverence and respect. Next make it attractive, make good men wish it were true, and then show that it is.

To summarize, Pascal is saying we must show Christianity is respectable and then desirable before we show it's true. This is necessary because of the innate, natural resistance to the gospel in the human heart ("They hate it and are afraid it might be true").

This Pascalian approach is profoundly relevant for apologetics in the age of despair. Our great challenge is more often apathy and distraction than sharp counterarguments. We live in a time of [constant clicks and constant noise](#), dulling us to the matters of the soul. Thus, many modern people aren't even interested in whether the gospel is true. We have to start further back, helping people understand why the gospel is worth considering in the first place. To this end, the beauty of the gospel is a profoundly useful tool. It can cut through apathy to arrest the attention of our hearers.

For example, even in an age of despair, people often experience deep religious longings when looking at the stars, listening to music, or reading literature. Charles Taylor, after describing how modernity tends to discourage faith, nonetheless notes,

All this is true, and yet the sense that there is something more presses in. Great numbers of people feel it: in moments of reflection about their life; in moments of relaxation in nature; in moments of bereavement and loss; and quite wildly and unpredictably. Our age is very far from settling in to a comfortable unbelief. . . . The unrest continues to surface.

This means apologetics must engage the "unrest" that occasionally surfaces in modern hearts. We must situate the gospel in relation to the deep longings of the human heart. Our work will be less like winning an argument and more like breaking a spell. As [Lewis put it](#) in his day, after referring to the deep human yearning for something beyond this world, "You and I have need of the strongest spell that can be found to wake us from the evil enchantment of worldliness which has been laid upon us for nearly a hundred years. Almost our whole education has been directed to silencing this shy, persistent, inner voice."

Apologetics in an age of despair will also mean showing the drabness of secular explanations of human desire. For example, most secular people aren't willing to part ways with the innate human perception that love and justice have transcendent value. But in a secular worldview, it's very hard to see where they get that value. They're reductively explained as the products of evolutionary psychology—we value love and justice because such values helped our animal ancestors survive. They have no objective reference in the nonbiological world and will have no final resolution or significance.

Charles Taylor calls tensions like these “the unquiet frontiers of modernity.” Simply put, secular people long for religious qualities that no longer make sense within secularism. This may explain the recent rise in various forms of “religious nontheism.” Part of the task of apologetics is to press on these points of inconsistency. We must help our listeners experience the barrenness and confinement that results from secular worldviews and the enchanting happiness and wonder of the gospel as an alternative. For, in the gospel, all that the human heart longs for with respect to love and justice—and so much else—has a glorious meaning and fulfillment.

In the gospel, we have the message for which modern hearts ache. We have the food for which the world is perishing with hunger. We're offering to people an ancient tradition to join, a transcendent cause for which to strive, and an eternal glory to enjoy forever. Once again, to help our friends understand the magnitude of what's at stake, we'll need the Holy Spirit's help every step along the way.