

Back in October we spent a lot of time talking about what it means to be an Exile - that when we choose to follow Jesus, we actually become part of a totally different culture without moving anywhere. We become citizens of God's Kingdom. That means we have different values, a different way of life from the culture around us, the culture we used to call home. And when that happens, it's okay to grieve the loss of our former culture. There's a mourning that's good and necessary when we leave everything behind, when we count it all as lost for the sake of Jesus and his Gospel.



We're more familiar with loss and grief than we want to admit in our culture. On every level of our lives, we've all experienced loss. The world we grew up in isn't around anymore. The world that made us feel safe. We want to mourn that well. We want to mourn as followers of Jesus. So in this series, we've been looking to the Post-Exile Prophets, who helped Israel grieve the loss of their culture. We've explored the various reactions we have to grief: denial, anger and bargaining so far. Today, we deal with despair. So hang with me. It's going to get dark for a while.

At a huge level, we're trying to get our minds and souls around what we've lost. To really understand it, we're going to have to get a bit technical for a minute.

I brought these nesting dolls up here to help. If we think of these as layers of culture, then each of us would be this little guy in the middle. We're going to zoom all the way up to the biggest level for a while.

How many of you have heard of **Post-modernism**? That's what we're really talking about this morning. And while Post-modernity is a huge topic, there are some key ideas we can lean on to help us understand the grieving we're experiencing. So what is it? Well, *obviously*, Post-modernism is what comes after Modernism. Totally helpful, right? To understand Post-modernity, we need to know what Modernism is.

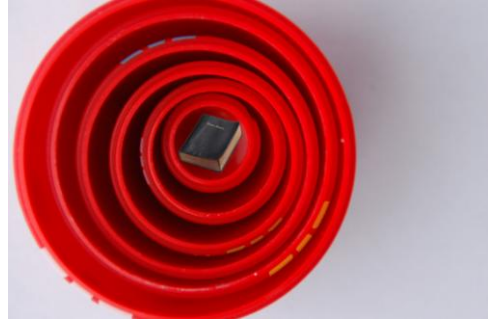
Basically, Modernism was a particular way of understanding the world. Modernism developed about 500 years ago. What was happening in the 1500s? Western culture was experiencing what we now call the Renaissance, which means Rebirth. When you think of the Renaissance, who comes to mind? Maybe Martin Luther and his 95 Theses, the Protestant Reformation? Maybe Copernicus and Galileo, the development of Science? Maybe Rene Descartes, Thomas Hobbs and the rise of philosophy? Probably it's the Ninja Turtles, right? Leonardo (da Vinci), Michelangelo, Raphael and Donatello?



The Renaissance was a major, massive cultural shift in *how we know things*. How we understand the world to work. Before the Renaissance, humans understood God to be the center of everything and the source of all knowledge. Everything was based on the Scriptures, with philosophers and thinkers supplementing or explaining what the Scriptures taught.

But the Renaissance replaced God as the center with

Humanity and Human Reason. Descartes said, "I think, therefore I am." What he meant by that was: the only thing I can really be sure of is that I am thinking. Everything else, even God, I can doubt. But I can't doubt that I'm doubting. So I know I exist. He made himself – human reason – the most basic way of *knowing*. And that kind of thinking led to the creation of the Scientific Method - allegedly an objective, purely rational way to learn. Of course, it wasn't long before the Scientific Method clashed with the Bible. Thinkers like Copernicus and Galileo saw that their rational, scientific findings didn't mesh with what the Bible taught. And because their center was Reason, not the Bible, they rejected the Church's teaching about the nature of the universe. That's the trajectory by which Science - and more specifically Human Reason - came to replace God as the source of all knowledge. Before too long, everything had to be an -ology. Biology, sure. But the study of the human brain? Psychology. How people act together? Sociology. Study of how languages developed? Morphology. Study of God? Theology. This is what we called Modernity or Modernism. In a pretty big nut-shell, that's Modernism. It's a system of knowing that puts Humans at the center of everything.



And with all these scientific advances came the progress of Western Culture. We spread all over the globe, taking our science and our reason and our religion to all the barely-human savages in other lands. By the 1800s, culture was advancing at a breakneck pace. Europe had come through the Napoleonic Wars and America survived the Civil War. Both were reaping the benefits of the Industrial Revolution. Because of our technological advances, our nations had become wealthy beyond previous generations' wildest dreams. Pundits everywhere were predicting that the 1900s would herald a new Human Golden Age led by the Western World. Several American Christian denominations predicted the Second Coming in the early years of the 1900s. It seemed that by placing humanity at the center of everything, we had finally managed to save the world. We had created the perfect human.

But that's not what happened. Instead it was just the opposite. Everything that we put our faith in gradually got peeled away. The 20th Century turned out to be a Frankenstein's monster. First, we saw the sinking of the Titanic in 1912. Science had created a supposedly unsinkable boat that sank on its maiden voyage. Two years later, the so-called War to End All Wars engulfed the world. We learned we couldn't trust Reason to bring us World Peace. A decade after the war ended, we faced crippling world-wide depression. We learned that the wealth we'd gained through all our advancement was fleeting, unreliable. Then a war *worse* than the war to End all Wars that introduced us to the horrors we now call the Holocaust and the Atomic Bomb. Science didn't make us enlightened, just better killers. The optimism of the fifties fell quickly to the despair of the 60s and the Cold War embodied in Korea, Vietnam and Afghanistan. JFK's assassination, Nixon's impeachment, Clinton's sex scandals taught us that politics can't protect us. Politicians aren't infallible. And thanks to the Televangelist scandals of the 80s and 90s, the Priest Abuse scandals in the last couple of decades, even religion isn't trustworthy. And of course that all culminated with the fall of Twin Towers: We were attacked inside our own borders – Guess we're not as strong as we thought. It's created political discord instead of unity. And a supposedly Christian nation was successfully attacked by people who claim to follow another god. In the last 100 years, all the strength and power of Modernity has been stripped away, one layer at a time. Until we're left with people.

The thinkers whose job it is to make sense out of all of this rightly claim that the problem is our reliance on human reason. They look back on the course of Modernity and point out that there's no such thing as person who can really be the center, an objective way to know anything. If you make human reason your source of knowledge, you're really making yourself the source of knowledge. And none of us is objective. We all have a history, biases. We've all been shaped by our past (like we talked about last week). So they take away even reason as a source of meaning.

When you get to the end of Modernity, when you get to what's *after* Modernism, you find out there's nothing. It's empty. And that's what we're really grieving. Because all of this grieving we're experiencing is really the loss of our center, the loss of certainty. As a culture, we feel like we can't know anything anymore. We can't trust Reason. We can't trust God. We can't trust ourselves. If that were true, then we'd expect to see a world where the Church isn't the center of culture anymore. And that's exactly what we see today:

Our laws are less and less Christian. The structure of the culture is becoming less and less Christian – Sundays are just another day for most of us.

Nuclear families aren't the norm anymore. Company loyalty is a thing of the past. We have nowhere to turn for belonging. For meaning. There's this huge hole in our culture where something used to be, but it's empty now. It's gone.



What comes *after* Modernism? What is Post-Modnerism? It's called **Nihilism**. It's emptiness, the philosophical position that ultimately, nothing has any inherent meaning. That when you get right down to the very essence of everything, there's no source of morality, no ultimate source of truth. It's the position we find in Ecclesiastes: "Eat, drink and party, for tomorrow we die." In watching Modernity crumble around us, we're grieving. We get angry. We want to bargain. And we face despair.

Nihilism is that hole that's in the middle of our culture. Just like that hole in the Manhattan skyline. And just like the hole in Israel's culture where the Temple used to stand. The hole they felt after the Babylonian Empire destroyed their country, their culture, their entire way of life.

For the Israelites, it was the Exile. For us, it's Post-modernism.

Is it hard for you to believe that as a culture we're all becoming Nihilists? That our culture is experiencing Despair right now? Did you know that more than 1 in every 10 Americans over the age of 12 is taking anitdepressant medications. And only about 1/3 of people who show symptoms for severe depression are actually taking any kinds of medication?

Did you know that those anti-depressant medications are the third most commonly prescribed drug of all, and they're rising? And most people taking antidepressants haven't seen a medical professional in the past year, which means we just FEEL depressed and decide we need to self-medicate.

Did you know that in this country, someone commits suicide every 15 minutes? Is there any stronger statement that life has no meaning, that reality is empty, hopeless, than the decision to take your own life?

When we talk about Despair as a reaction to grief, *this* is what we're talking about. More and more, we as a culture are convinced that life isn't going anywhere, that there's no hope, that there's no ultimate, actual source of meaning.

This is the same despair the Exiled Israelites felt. They experienced the same loss, the same death of culture. The Kingdom of Judah was conquered by another Empire - the Babylonians. After the Israelites watched Jerusalem destroyed, they were forcibly deported to Babylon where they were reeducated in the ways of Babylon. This included religious training - they were strongly encouraged to worship Marduk, the Babylonian god, instead of Yahweh, Israel's god.

Psalm 137 is a worship song composed during the Exile. And in this song we experience all the despair Israel felt in the loss of their culture, their way of life, their world.

Beside the rivers of Babylon, we sat and wept as we thought of Jerusalem. We put away our harps, hanging them on the branches of poplar trees. -- Psalm 137:1-2 (NLT)

The Exiles are sitting on the shores of their new reality and weeping. They remember what they've lost and they're grieving. They say this isn't a time for song. They've hung their harps on some nearby trees, refusing to sing worship songs. Why?

For our captors demanded a song from us. Our tormentors insisted on a joyful hymn: "Sing us one of those songs of Jerusalem!" But how can we sing the songs of the LORD while in a pagan land? - Psalm 137:3-4 (NLT)

Apparently, the Babylonians taunt them. They mock the Exiles, asking them to sing hymns to Yahweh like they would've sung in the Temple. This would be like Al Queda broadcasting themselves singing *The Star Spangled Banner* or *America the Beautiful* on 9/12. Horribly offensive. Enraging. And the Exiles are powerless to resist. They're conquered. Captive.

If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget how to play the harp. May my tongue stick to the roof of my mouth if I fail to remember you, if I don't make Jerusalem my greatest joy. -- Psalm 137:5-6 (NLT)

But here the Exiles resist their despair. They will not forget what they've lost. They cling to their memory of Jerusalem. But then their memory takes a dangerous turn:

O LORD, remember what the Edomites did on the day the armies of Babylon captured Jerusalem. "Destroy it!" they yelled. "Level it to the ground!" O Babylon, you will be destroyed. Happy is the one who pays you back for what you have done to us. Happy is the one who takes your babies and smashes them against the rocks! -- Psalm 137:7-9 (NLT)

The Edomites were a neighboring country that betrayed Israel when the Babylonians invaded. Sort of like if Canada had trained the 9/11 pilots or something like that (which is NOT what happened. That's a hypothetical situation, you conspiracy buffs). So Israel's grief turns to rage at

those who've put them in this place - the Edomites and the Babylonians. This hymn of grief ends with a cry for vengeance.

Before we move too far in evaluating this song, let's pause to acknowledge that we feel those same feelings. We know despair. That cultural loss pervades our everyday lives. It's hard *not* to feel that sense of helplessness as we watch the world around us. How many of us are living lives that didn't turn out quite the way we expected them to? How many of us aren't in the job we'd always imagined? Or haven't advanced though the ranks like we always figured we would? How many of us have felt the pain of downsizing in our own families? How many of us live in houses we can't quite afford? How many of us live paycheck to paycheck, and always get nervous the day or two before the next check is due, crossing our fingers that nothing *too* bad happens before Friday?

You know the feeling that you're just treading water? *That's* what we're talking about.

How many of us worry? And not just a little bit, but enough that we might consider worry a habit?

Anyone here want to admit that they've had a few sleepless nights because of anxiety? Or even if you're sleeping, you feel constant fatigue? You're always exhausted, it doesn't seem like there're enough hours in the day for you to feel truly rested?

Anyone here feel alone, isolated? As though no matter how many people are around, you're not really connected to any of them?

Are you a person who cuts? One of the major motivations for self-harm is the bleak hopelessness of life. Cutting provides feeling, it drags you into the moment, so that you *feel* something real, even if it's pain.

Anyone in here have an addiction? Alcohol? Work? Shopping? Over- or under-eating?

I'm starting to sound like a drug commercial. I'm selling you life in the wake of modernism: side effects may include a loss of purpose, emptiness and general despair.

(And I do need to offer a proviso here: I am *not* a trained medical or counseling professional. In no way am I advocating some sort of cure for clinical depression. I'm speaking theologically, and to a general sense of despair we're feeling at a cultural level. If you're suffering from depression, *please* seek qualified professional help. There's no shame that. If I could, I'd make counseling mandatory for every person in the world.)

You may be starting to wonder if there's any good news in here anywhere. I know, I know... you didn't come to Church today to get depressed. But here's the thing: our culture, our way of life is changing.

And for too long the Church has tried to hide our head in the sand and deny that anything is different. We've been dragged to Babylon and we're trying our hardest to pretend we're still in Jerusalem.

We've been refusing to grieve the loss we're experiencing. And that's so dangerous because it's actually *good news* that this change is happening. Just like it was good news for the Israelites. It's

hard to believe, but it's true. For the Israelites, their way of life, their worship of God centered on the Temple, had become an idol. You can see it in all the pre-Exilic prophets. Over and over they told the Israelites, You are just going through the motions at the Temple. Your lives aren't being transformed. Your worship is hollow, empty. These things you're doing don't honor God.

Can you imagine that? Israel had created this false god that they thought was the real God. We did the same thing. In Modernity, we set ourselves up as gods. We looked to ourselves as the source of all truth, meaning and knowledge. We created a god in our own image and thought it was the true God. But the children of modernity are wars, genocides, atom bombs. Religious division. Global poverty. These do not honor God.

One of the most famous Post-modern thinkers was a guy named Nietzsche. He's the one who infamously proclaimed that "God is Dead". The thing is... he was right. Because Nietzsche was talking about the god of Modernity. All those things that gave us safety and security, but weren't actually the true God.

And that's good news for us, just like the destruction of the Temple was good news for Israel. Because it clears the way for us to move forward. The true God promised the Exiles that something new was coming (more on that next week). Now that their idols had been destroyed, they could reconnect with the true God. They could be transformed in a way their old world never could produce. The same is true for us. Something new is coming. Something unlike anything we've ever seen. It's going to blow our minds.

That's why we *must* grieve well. We can't afford to be trapped in these stages we find ourselves in. Consider with me how we respond when we reach a place of despair:

1. Some of us just want to deny that anything's happening, that culture or life has changed in any way. We want to pretend that we can still find meaning in those old structures that have been proven to be empty. We continue to live as we always have, actively, forcefully ignoring the problem.

The danger in that is that those old ways aren't reliable anymore. We're still putting our hope and faith in something we've discovered is an idol.



2. Others of us will seek to return to those old patterns and habits. In war, they call it retrenchment: you redig your trenches deeper and more fortified because you *will not* give up your position. We see a lot of Christians doing this in the Take America Back for Jesus movements. We want to return to gender roles of the 1950s or put Prayer Back in School. We're



willing to *fight* to get things back to the way they were. Retrenchment is past-focused. We see this in the Psalm, where the Exiles long to go back to the Temple. They want to get back to the way things were. The problem is that the ways and institutions we're fighting to get back are the same ways and institutions that failed in the first place. Putting them back in place won't fix anything; it'll just set up another crash.

3. Finally, others of us will take that dangerous turn we find at the end of the Psalm. Our despair leads to a push for action. We get tired of sitting around depressed and we want to *do*. Both the Tea Party and Occupy movements are manifestations of this angst. Both groups feel powerless, both have felt the despair, the loss of control and they're reacting. They want things to change. Unfortunately, this is not a desire for justice or equality, but revenge. Revenge isn't about justice or fairness. Revenge is about making the other person suffer like we're suffering. It's about bringing them down to our level.



Just as we saw in the Psalm: the Exiles aren't even pining for home by the end. They just want their enemies to suffer like they are suffering.

It's probably not a shock that as Exiles who follow Jesus, we are called to more than this. The book of Hebrews gives us the clearest picture of what our response to despair should be. Hebrews calls us to live by our Faith, not by our Feelings. Hebrews 11:1 says this: **Faith is the reality of what we hope for, the evidence of what isn't seen.** -- Hebrews 11:1 But then the author goes on to give us a whole chapter's worth of people who *live out* a faithful life. These are all people who are part of God's Kingdom, who have the same promise of a better day coming that we do. And every person in the list died without seeing that better day. In verse 13, he tells us,

All these people died still believing what God had promised them. They did not receive what was promised, but they saw it all from a distance and welcomed it. They agreed that they were foreigners and [EXILES] here on earth. -- Hebrews 11:13 (NLT)

He goes on at the end of the chapter to say of them:

All these people earned a good reputation because of their faith, yet none of them received all that God had promised. For God had something better in mind for us, so that they would not be completed without us. -- Hebrews 11:39-40

All those models of faith, all those people who followed God even when it seemed crazy? They did it for us. Because God wanted you and me to be a part of what God's doing too! That's what Faith is. Faith is living as though God's promises are true, even when you can't see them. Living as though God is real, as though we have a reason to hope, even when we don't feel it. When we *feel* like despairing.

It's choosing to live by faith, not by feeling. By what we believe is before us, not what's behind us. Just like all those Exiles who lived before us. The author of Hebrews says it this way:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a huge crowd of witnesses to the life of faith, let us strip off every weight that slows us down, especially the sin that so easily trips us up. Hebrews says it's like we're running a race. And we're to that point where we've got a stitch in our side and it looks like we've lost and we just want to quit.

But all those believers who came before us are in the stands cheering us on. Don't give up! I know it looks hopeless right now, but you can do it! We know you can because *we* were there too! You're doing great! Keep it up! Don't quit!

And let us run with endurance the race God has set before us. We do this by keeping our eyes on Jesus, the champion who initiates and finishes our faith. Because of the joy awaiting him, he endured the cross, disregarding its shame. Now he is seated in the place of honor beside God's throne. -- Hebrews 11:39-12:2 (NLT)

Of course, our ultimate model is Jesus. Because Jesus knew Death wasn't the end, he could endure even the Cross. He believed in the promise of Resurrection. He knew there was a better world on the other side of Death.

There's no doubt we live in a world that's despairing. And for good reason. Things are bad. Let's quit denying it. All the things that used to give us hope, that made us feel safe and secure are being stripped away. It's good to grieve that. It's good to be angry. Good to feel that it's not fair.

It's even good to feel that despair. To wonder if there's any hope, any meaning anywhere. It's good because until we confront it, we can't move past it into the new Goodness that's coming.

But don't turn to rage. Don't seek revenge in your despair.

Instead, let it motivate you to live not by your feelings, but by faith. Find your comfort, your security in the practices where the Church has always turned to lead us to God. In reading the Scriptures, prayer, generous giving, fasting and Sabbath keeping. Let these be how we run the race.

We will not give up. We will not let despair be the final word. We will run this race. We will finish strong. Because we are confident that God is about to do something totally unprecedented.

<prayer>