

“Return to Eden”

Knowing Christ through Experiencing the Godforsakenness of This World

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Abstrak

Artikel ini berusaha menggali signifikansi soteriologis dari keserupaan dengan Kristus dengan menjadikan konsep kesia-siaan sebagai titik awal pembahasan. Jadi, pembahasan di artikel ini beranjak dari kesia-siaan, yang esensinya adalah ketidakhadiran Allah, menuju keselamatan, yang esensinya ialah kehadiran Allah dengan manusia. Tetapi keselamatan, yang bisa dilukiskan sebagai penawar dari kesia-siaan, justru bekerja lewat kesia-siaan itu sendiri. Dengan kata lain, keselamatan meniadakan kesia-siaan dengan merubah kesia-siaan sebagai kesempatan untuk dipersatukan dengan Allah. Kesia-siaan dapat ditebus, hanya ketika hidup manusia menunjukkan kehadiran Allah didalamnya. Ini sebenarnya adalah hakikat dari kehidupan Kristus di bumi. Di dalam kehidupan Yesus, kejadian-kejadian yang tampaknya sia-sia seharusnya dimengerti sebagai “pencobaan,” karena hal itu bukan konsekuensi dari nasib, tapi merupakan kesempatan yang dapat memimpin kepada kemenangan (lewat ketaatan) atau kekalahan (lewat ketidaktaatan).

Kata-Kata Kunci: ketidakberartian, keganjilan, ditinggalkan oleh Allah, goadaan, lawan dari ketidakberartian, Yesus Kristus, ketaatan

Abstract

This article excavates the soteriological imports of Christlikeness by using the concept of meaninglessness as its starting point. In other words, the article moves from *plight* (the essence of which is meaninglessness, defined as being without god) to *solution*, which can be understood as the very antidote to meaninglessness, namely, living with God. However, the antidote works precisely through the meaninglessness itself, that is, it gets rid of meaninglessness by making apparently meaningless happenings into meaningful occasions of being united with God. Hence, one can defeat meaninglessness, only if one manifests God’s redeeming presence in the midst of one’s seemingly meaningless life. This is in fact the nature of Christ’s life on earth. In Jesus’ life, seemingly meaningless events should be understood as “temptations,” as they are not bad fate but occasions that could lead to either victories (via obedience) or defeat (via disobedience).

Keywords: meaninglessness, absurdity, godforsakenness, temptation, antidote to meaninglessness, Jesus Christ, obedience

The World the Lord Came Into

The Nicene Creed tells us, “We believe in one Lord Jesus Christ . . . who for us humans, and for our salvation, came down from

heaven, and . . . was made man.” These solemn words capture the central faith of Christianity. How can we understand more fully or internalize these majestic statements of the creed, which gives the looked-for weight

for this much-commercialized and hence insubstantial holiday? To grasp the meaning of Christmas, for this reason, is to understand the background or condition that called for the Lord's incarnation, which in turn gives us our salvation. We can know this, only when we are enabled to see this world realistically and biblically. That is, we want to know from the Bible the answer to this question: What sort of world that we live in, that is, the world that greeted the Savior? To know the nature of the world that the Lord entered in two thousand years ago is to know the misery of its every inhabitant, which somehow 'necessitated' God's spectacular way of liberation. "Infinity chose to dwindle to infancy" and embrace suffering and death; this should be more than enough to tell us the sobering truth of the utter brokenness of this world, which calls for incarnation or exacts such a high price of redemption.

The Bible somehow summarizes this world's true condition in this grim verdict: "Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless!" (Eccl. 1:2). The misery of every inhabitant of this world is shown in their subjection to meaninglessness (cf. Rom 8:20), a dreadful force that has infested all things. In this light, when we profess that the Lord came down from heaven for our salvation, we are affirming that the Son of God came down to a meaningless world, to deliver us from meaningless life. The essence of human misery then, lies in the fact that human life is meaningless. But this is not enough. To appreciate the value of our salvation, we need to internalize this truth, namely, it is by personally probing the *depth* of our meaninglessness that we can be flown to the *height* of the Lord's grace. Troubles and sufferings that Christians experience does not repudiate or question salvation, but is a way to probe the value and profundity of Christ's saving work. Christians got the answer to meaninglessness already when they accept Christ as their Savior ("Jesus is the answer"), but it is mainly through personally living out the questions or

problems in life ("but what are the questions?") that they are reminded and strengthened by the answer.¹

But what is the real meaning of meaninglessness (Hebrew: *hebel*, which literally means vapor)? How can one understand one's suffering and sins in terms of it? In the Bible, especially in Ecclesiastes, this word itself is ironically not at all meaningless; it even richly encompasses several dimensions of meaning.² Let us excavate the nuances of this intriguing concept.

Before continuing, I want to explain first about the nature of this article. What I write here is not an exegetical study, but more or less an exercise in theological interpretation, which has been championed by some evangelical theologians recently. They want to make scriptural interpretation more in line with Christian tradition, which includes theological beliefs and spiritual practices of the church. So theological interpretation is not something very new, as it draws big inspiration from the so-called precritical patristic and medieval hermeneutics. It attempts to dig up the richness of the Bible through illuminating and completing exegesis with:³

¹ Thus, one can declare the content of the creed more sincerely, with all the fibers of one's being, only when one can truthfully say, "the Lord came down from heaven to this meaningless world of *mine*, for the sake of redeeming *me* from *my* meaningless life."

² See the brief survey of the meanings of the word in Michael Fox, *A Time to Tear Down and A Time to Build Up: A Rereading of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), ch. 1.

³ Daniel Trier, *Theological Interpretation of Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2008), 42. Some good introductions of theological interpretation can be found in Todd Billings, *The Word of God for the People of God: An Entryway to the Theological Interpretation of Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), and Joel B. Green, *Practicing Theological Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011). See also: Michael Allen and Scott Swain, *Reformed Catholicity: The Promise of Retrieval for Theology and Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2015).

1. Other parts of Scripture, especially in light of the finality of God’s special revelation in Jesus Christ;
2. Doctrines or theology of the church, which serves as the framework and the testing standard of interpretation;
3. The thoughts or insights of the spiritual forebears of the present church; *and*
4. The spiritual awareness and practices of believers, which involve their struggles, needs, and concerns in their pilgrimage on earth.

In other words, in interpreting theological-ly a biblical text, one is reading God’s Word in the interconnected horizons of biblical theology, rules of faith, historical theology, and spirituality. Theological interpretation makes possible a kind of hermeneutical freedom in linking the text with other facets of God’s revelation, as well as the church’s faithful responses to it in her theology and spirituality.⁴ Since God is the primary author of the whole Bible and the source of all truths, exercising this freedom is tantamount to letting God speak more thoroughly to believers. Hopefully, I can illuminate the meaning and the soteriological significance of the biblical notion of meaninglessness and its concomitant concepts in this way.

The Meanings of Meaninglessness

Meaninglessness as Transience

Firstly, *hebel* refers to the transience of things. To say that the world or life is meaningless is to say that it is as transient and insubstantial as *hebel* or mist. According to the Bible, in spite of the impressive conditions and achievements of human beings, they “are like a breath (*hebel*); their days are like a fleeting shadow” (Ps 144:4). Yet why

⁴ Yet this freedom is intellectually accountable, as it still relies on conscientious exegesis, philosophical analysis, theological reflection, and other rigorous methods.

transience is so undesirable? Clearly, not all kinds of transience are unfavorable, for instance, we think that it is good that bad things (pain, failure, sadness, etc.) are transient. But this is precisely the problem: bad things are stubbornly lasting, and it is good things that are frustratingly ephemeral. This is shown most clearly by the destiny that awaits all the living: death, which in essence is the absence of love, happiness, goodness and other things that we hope to be less or not transient at all. If there is no life after death, then it is clearly badness that wins (as death signifies the absence of the good). Thus, ephemerality is bad, since things that we want to stay long stay short and those that we want to vanish or stay briefly stay long. The main writer of Ecclesiastes “from time to time seems to see death and Sheol as casting a shadow of absurdity on all that humans do in this life, making it pointless and profitless.”⁵ Humans, however, tend to take their life for granted and so somewhat believe that they are impervious to death or suffering.⁶ That is why “it is better to go to a house of mourning than to go to a house of feasting, for death is the destiny of everyone; the living should take this to heart” (Eccl 7:2). The Bible clearly discourages naïve religious optimism or dogmatism, which often deludes believers with false hope.⁷ Faith is not the antithesis of being realistic: faith presupposes realism about life but decidedly moves beyond it.

Besides, time is by nature always in flux; it is impossible to capture or isolate time. The present is ‘ghostly’: its reality is undermined by the already and the not-yet: it is both the shadow of the past and the shade of the future. Time always flies, but our love and commitment do not (they are weighty and

⁵ Ben Witherington III, *Jesus the Sage: The Pilgrimage of Wisdom* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 2000), 57.

⁶ See a penetrating analysis of this kind of self-deception in Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York: Simon and Schuster), 1997.

⁷ Graeme Goldsworthy, *The Goldsworthy Trilogy* (London: Paternoster, 2011), 456-57.

substantial). Mortal beings and their well-being are constantly under the threat of annihilation (“no one knows when their hour will come: As fish are caught in a cruel net, or birds are taken in a snare, so people are trapped by evil times that fall unexpectedly upon them” (Eccl 9:12). The fleetingness of time makes our weighty aspirations and devotions weightless, as they are placed on this ephemeral dimension of reality. When we are painfully aware that the most reliable stability in reality is the “stability” of changes (the permanence of impermanence!), we feel frustrated: things that we think and hope to be permanent are destabilized by things that we previously believed—but continually wish—to be insubstantial.⁸ “Meaningless!” is the cry of anguish in such a situation.

Meaninglessness as Uselessness

Next, *hebel* connotes vanity or uselessness. “Surely everyone goes around like a mere phantom (*hebel*),” wrote the psalmist, “in vain they rush about, heaping up wealth without knowing whose it will finally be” (Ps 39:6), and Yahweh’s servant in Isa 49:4 complained: “I have labored in vain; I have spent my strength for nothing (*hebel*) at all.” Once again, there are several kinds of worthlessness. We find that some things that we do or get are worthless but only trivially or even amusingly so, just like when we buy some tools that do not work well or when we discover that we are being slightly overfed. Some other things that we do are worthless but positively so (all sports are about worthless things, e.g., inserting a tiny ball into a hole (golf), but they are healthy and entertaining). On the other hand, some things are forcibly and tragically rendered worthless. “And I saw that all toil and all achievement spring from one person’s envy of another. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind” (Eccl

4:4). We sacrificed the precious hours of our life to pursue things that we thought very worth it, but then we found out that what we had pursued was not at all noble and important; it was for self-aggrandizement or unhealthy competition with others. When we realize that we had forfeited our family and other valuable causes for this selfish goal, the worthlessness of our previous pursuit becomes acutely heartrending.

We always assume that we work for worthy, valuable goals. But in this world, one of the most reliable guides is not the realization of our goals, but the transience of everything, including the attained goals of ours. If there is no eternal life, then the most permanent and final goal (i.e., a goal that does not have any further goals) is nothing but death itself. If this is the case, then in fact, we ultimately work not for our family, prestige, or happiness, but for death. We self-deceivingly work for things that do not last (although we fervently wish that they last) and yet the only thing that lasts nullifies our achievements and renders them worthless (that is why, through medicines, work, and religion, we ardently try and hope to cheat death). “Everyone comes naked from their mother’s womb, and as everyone comes, so they depart. They take nothing from their toil that they can carry in their hands...and what do they gain, since they toil for the wind?” (Eccl 5:15). Hence, “meaningless!” here is furiously uttered when things that are supposedly worthy are rendered worthless, and those that are not worthy or evil become the final destination of all, regardless of their status and achievements (Eccl 9:3). Death is wretchedly egalitarian: it obliterates the contrast between the rich and the poor, the wise and the fool, the good and the bad; it even renders irrelevant the difference between humans and animals (Eccl 3:19-20).

Meaninglessness as Deceitful Idolatry

Thirdly, *hebel* implies deceit. It is not hard to see that we’ll feel very deceived when we

⁸ The Chinese said, in this life, meetings and partings are both transient, and yet, the transience is disturbing because partings are much more than meetings.

find out that in this world, the only permanent thing is impermanence, and we toil assiduously for things that cannot last. Not all deceits, however, are created equal. Some things are deceitful only trivially or even amusingly, as when we found that we were cheated by our friends’ harmless, entertaining jokes or when we discovered that we are slightly duped by our own oversight.⁹ Some other things, on the other hand, are painfully, heartbrokenly deceitful, as when people found out that their spouses have cheated them for a long time, or when parents discovered that they worked self-sacrificially not for mindful children but good-for-nothing prodigals. Religious and morally upright people experience the same thing, when they think that they do not deserve things that befell them. When the righteous get things the wicked deserve and the wicked get things the righteous deserve (Eccl 8:14), people are suddenly stung by dreadful doubts: might it be the case that we are deceived by morality or even God? Is it more possible to say that these things that the righteous uphold wholeheartedly (moral values, God) are in fact fictitious? At any rate, even if we trust in God, we have to prepare ourselves to be deceived by things that give us false hopes, including false pictures of God, so that we can have true hope in things that will not cheat us.

It is important to note that in the Bible, deceit is correlated with idolatry. Prophet Jeremiah confessed: “our ancestors possessed nothing but false gods, worthless (*hebel*) idols that did them no good” (Jer 16:19b). Zechariah warned that “the idols speak deceitfully, diviners see visions that lie” (Zech 10:2). We deceive ourselves tragically when we supplant right devotion to priceless things in life (God, our family, self, others, etc.) with unreasonable dedication to much less valuable or worthless things (money, reputation, sins, etc.). Humans by nature have

desires to go beyond the limitations of their nature, which is essentially a desire to enjoy and be united with God. Since they can’t find the orderly trace of God’s work under the sun, neither can they know God more personally, they do not know how to find an object that can help them surpass their nature. Also, being acutely aware of the passing, imperfect nature of everything under the sun, they feel menaced by the fear of losing the meaning of their life. To avoid the psychological crisis and pain, they self-deceivingly aggrandize the significance of things that are dear to them, i.e., they treat wealth, intelligence, beauty, etc. as things that can help them surpass their nature; but in doing so, they’ll surely make gods of those things. Idolatry is then always two-structured: in trying to make god of ourselves, we inevitably make other things gods.

Not only that, we have here a two-tiered meaninglessness. The first kind of meaninglessness is the transitoriness of everything without God: in the absence of a loving God in Christ, things like wealth, beauty, talents, etc., which by themselves are good, will be swallowed up mercilessly by the passage of time. From the viewpoint of a godless and blind universe, these things, including ourselves, are just “accidental collocations of atoms” (B. Russell). We can call this “external meaninglessness.” Furthermore, our idolatrous penchant for overvaluing the importance of these things, including ourselves, is by itself meaningless, because it is the most insidious form of self-deception. We can call this “internal meaninglessness.” Idolatry, as Jewish religious teachers say, is *avodah zarah* or an abnormal worship that leads to a senseless life.¹⁰ It is a fetishistic or strange preoccupation with (or commitment to) things and attitudes that can harm us and others; we surrender our souls perversely to things that

⁹ “When I was awake, I found that I suddenly became taller, until I realized that the blanket covered me horizontally”—a Chinese joke.

¹⁰ A masterful and insightful analysis of idolatry as an abnormal worship can be found in M. Halbertal and A. Margalit, *Idolatry* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

should instead be controlled by us. We base our eternal security on things that do not last, our great and unfathomable needs on finite things that cannot fulfill them. Tragically, we become like what we worship: “They followed worthless idols and became worthless themselves” (Jer 2:5),¹¹ that is, our life becomes meaningless, since it chases a thing that does not really exist (i.e., permanent security through wealth, reputation, beauty, and other earthly things). If we are aware of the nature of that life, we will surely deem it valueless and do not want our beloved ones live that kind of life. We can provisionally conclude here that external meaninglessness (impermanence, death, etc.) causes internal meaninglessness, which is humans’ false responses (idolatrous self-deception), although it should be noted that while the former seems natural or fixed, the latter is inseparable from human freedom. In any event, both internal and external meaninglessness conspire together to cheat and make human life meaningless.

Meaninglessness as Absurdity

Fourthly, *hebel* can be understood as absurdity. “The absurd,” as an Old Testament scholar insightfully explains, “is a disjunction between two phenomena that are thought to be linked by a bond of harmony or causality, or that *should* be so linked.”¹² The absurd occurs when there is a contradiction or disparity “between reasonable expectations and actual consequences.”¹³ Yet, there are many pairs of phenomena that contradict each other but do not scandalize us greatly (e.g., one’s wish to walk outside is “contradicted” by bad weather, etc.), some pairs of

contradictory phenomena are even positive (one’s craving for sweet food is “contradicted” by the strict diet imposed by one’s spouse, etc.). The contradiction becomes absurd, only when our deep, very personal aspirations and self-worth are thwarted or destroyed by those things that we think should not interfere (or must cooperate) with our life. For instance, we generally think that humans have dignity that cannot be exchanged with or bought by anything in this world, and this implies that humans’ projects or ideals are valuable and must be promoted. Yet nature is deaf to all these talks about dignity and values; from the viewpoint of the natural cycle of life and death, it appears that “humans have no advantage over animals. Everything is meaningless. All go to the same place; all come from dust, and to dust all return” (Eccl 3:19-20). More absurdly, some very passive creatures that resemble machines more than animals (clams and sponges) can live for more than several centuries, while human beings who bear the image of God die early and due to illnesses, disasters, and other misfortunes, their lives sometimes even does not look to be worth living.

That is why, as Michael Fox writes, “the absurd is irrational, an affront to reason—the human faculty that seeks and discovers order in the world about us.”¹⁴ Rational order does not seem to exist in this world, since rational beings, who are the pinnacles of the universe, do not get their deserved fulfillment and destiny. Everything is absurd, because the rational order of causality is destructed: the expected effects do not happen. “The race is not to the swift or the battle to the strong, nor does food come to the wise or wealth to the brilliant or favor to the learned; but time and chance happen to them all” (Eccl 9:11). Ultimately, the rational, humane laws of morality, happiness, and religion are rendered futile by the arbitrary, heartless laws of nature. There is no dependable guide at all, save

¹¹ This idea is presented and explored in Gregory K. Beale, *We Become What We Worship: A Biblical Theology of Idolatry* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008).

¹² Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 31. Fox’s analysis of *hebel* as absurdity is inspired by the work of Albert Camus, a French existentialist writer; see Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, trans. Justin O’Brien (NY: Vintage, 1991).

¹³ Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 49.

¹⁴ Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 31.

death and misfortunes. This depressing nature of *hebel* as absurdity is vividly felt when one remembers the fate of Abel, the namesake of meaninglessness (*hebel*).¹⁵ Adam might name his son this way as a sad reminder of the paradise lost and its tragic consequences (in the futility of labor and the fleetingness of life). This was later confirmed in the unbearable meaninglessness of the righteous Abel’s premature and cruel demise in the hand of his wicked brother. The moral law of cause and effect (the righteous will be rewarded and the wicked punished) appears to be ineffective in this fallen world. The name “Abel” might reverberate in the background when we read some distressing passages about *hebel* in Ecclesiastes. The echo becomes especially clear when we read: “In this meaningless life of mine I have seen both of these: the righteous perishing in their righteousness, and the wicked living long in their wickedness” (Eccl 6:15).

Meaninglessness as Cruel Fate

Lastly, and more acutely, meaninglessness implies the presence of a force that is inimical to human well-being (anti-human), beyond human control, and consistently guarantees the futility of human endeavors. If to live meaninglessly is to be despaired by the transience and worthlessness of things, deceived by idolatrous attachments, and to experience absurdity *only*, then we cannot say for sure that it is truly meaningless, since those negative conditions might not last. Who knows that those bad experiences are just incidental or temporary? Who knows that there is life after death? Who knows that we can eventually win over those conditions by our own efforts? But if we add this one condition: there is a superhuman force that makes those facets of meaninglessness befall all humans unavoidably without any way out at all, then everything becomes utterly

meaningless indeed. The world under the sun does not just have the law of gravity, but also the law of meaninglessness. Both laws are simply inescapable on this earth. Meaninglessness has become the “logic of the system of worldly events.”¹⁶ Indeed, the reason why all of the explained nuances of meaninglessness above (transience, worthlessness, deceptiveness, absurdity) are so unbearable is because they are consistently brought forth and sustained by an antihuman force. It feels like that our failures and misfortunes have been predetermined. We are just powerless puppets in the hands of this force. Some call it the law of nature, some others call it fate, while some others call it the devil, sin, or death. Some even identify this power with God himself. But what is it really?

The teacher in Ecclesiastes appears to identify this uncontrollable force with God. He writes, “consider what God has done: who can straighten what he has made crooked? When times are good, be happy; but when times are bad, consider this: God has made the one as well as the other. Therefore, no one can discover anything about their future” (Eccl 7:13-14). God, like the mysterious fate, is threateningly inscrutable: “then I saw all that God has done. No one can comprehend what goes on under the sun. Despite all their efforts to search it out, no one can discover its meaning. Even if the wise claim they know, they cannot really comprehend it” (Eccl 8:17; cf. 3:11). The portrayal here, although not erroneous, is still incomplete, and so it is quite different from the more complete picture of God in the New Testament. It is precisely this partial image of God that, in the minds of sinners who feel threatened by the meaningless world, is almost inevitably skewed or developed into the picture of a cruel and capricious deity. Without the indispensable aid of the special revelation in Christ, people who are oppressed by the absurdity of life would easily identify the incomprehensible God as the arbitrary fate.

¹⁵ William Brown, *Ecclesiastes* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster John Knox, 2000), 21.

¹⁶ Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 48.

Nonetheless, in portraying God as fate (they are often treated as being synonymous or interchangeable), people remove some essential personal qualities (loving, caring, rational, etc.) from God. As a result, eventually, God becomes identical with an impersonal and arbitrary, sovereign but malicious power of fate. More significantly, to depict God in this manner is more or less tantamount to denying the existence of God, who is conceptually defined as the most perfect and benevolent being. If the supreme ruler of everything is the impersonal, arbitrary fate that is hostile to humanity, then there is no eternity, no acceptance, no help, and no meaning for human beings. This is surely a very big “No!” A resounding “No!” to human aspiration and happiness. This is the fearsome nothingness, which, like black hole, absorbs into cold emptiness everything precious in this world. There is no promise, no blessing, nor love from this force of nothingness. The absence of reason, kindness, goodness, and happiness can be aptly expressed as the absence of God. Meaninglessness then more or less signifies godforsakenness.

Conclusion

Now, what do you think if you find that all good things in your life are fleeting, your goal worthless, you are cheated by death and other disappointing turns in the world, and God or fate and all forces of nature seem to conspire against you? Your life is simply meaningless. But somehow more poignantly, we feel that everything is meaningless, when we find that we are alienated from our own life or humanity by a greater and uncontrollable force. This antagonistic force manifests itself through (but is not totally reducible to) the hostility of our environment and, ironically, our own selves. This means that first, to be human means to be enslaved by the law of nature and other external forces (political tyranny, economical conditioning, bad or corrupt society, etc.). But more tragically, it also means that in becoming human beings,

we suffer from the slavery of the powers that perversely work in our hearts (lust, vanity, insecurity, etc.). These negative internal powers reinforce or make possible the injurious intrusion of the aforesaid hostile external forces. All of these oppressive factors, external and internal, conspire to disrupt and eventually wipe out not just our dreams, but also our very humanity. Evil consists of or can be found in our loss in this inevitable struggle with the antagonistic, conspiring forces of fate.

Evil then indicates the absence of God, the source and bearer of all goodness in reality. Evil, in other words, signifies godforsakenness. Thus, meaninglessness, as the teacher wrote, is a “grievous evil” (Eccl 6:2). More specifically, this at least means two things: *first*, one cannot see clear evidences of a perfectly benevolent and omnipotent deity in this world, for, ultimately, any trace of goodness or happiness would be blemished by suffering and then swallowed up by death. Godforsakenness *also* means that in the absence of supernatural intervention or salvation, the antagonistic conspiracy of fate becomes a perverse or aberrant kind of god. God is by definition the most perfect being, but in encountering the power of fate, one feels the overwhelming, quasi-divine power of a cruel being that plays the role of God (the Ruler of everything). This being is both like and unlike God (because it seems to be the highest power in reality, and yet it is not benevolent or loving, and thus not perfect), that is why it is a kind of perverted image of God. Here, godforsakenness does not only show the absence of God, but more correctly, the presence of a perverted substitute for the perfect being. In sum, meaninglessness is evil, since meaninglessness manifests the tyranny of a false, anti-human deity.

The Logic of Redemption

God as the Antidote to Meaninglessness

Therefore, if the creator God exists and He is perfectly benevolent, then the world, including ourselves, does not seem to bear the

stamp of its maker. If the force that ultimately reigns is the force of death or emptiness, then either God does not exist or the so-called God is in fact a cruel, evil tyrant. However, consistent with the teaching of the Bible, instead of disproving the existence of the perfect being, this grim nature of reality reflects consistently the sinfulness of humanity. In chasing after the transient idols of pleasure, wealth, status, etc., human beings show that they want a meaningless, deceptive world and thereby make themselves unworthy of inheriting a world that is full of love and truth. In refusing to look for the eternal, gracious, and loving God, humans in fact choose for a false god, which sooner or later would reveal itself as the cruel tyranny of fate or absurdity. The meaninglessness of everything is captured well by the verdict of Scripture: the wage of sin is death. Hence, the external, godforsaken condition of reality reflects the internal condition of human hearts that forsake God. This also shows to us a rather different facet of meaninglessness: humans and their living environment become like what they worship (false, transient, and meaningless). Instead of bearing the image of true God, human beings and their world display the image of false gods.

Through humanity, however, the meaningless reality cries out for salvation. This in some sense shows the priestly nature of humanity: in this vast universe, only rational beings like humans can, on behalf of other creatures, voice out their frustration and longing for salvation. The despotism of meaninglessness must be stopped. But this is not enough, senseless sufferings have already happened, and they should be righted, i.e., they should be redeemed, transformed or incorporated into something much more meaningful. This is approximately the meaning salvation: the cessation of the evil tyranny and the righting of all wrongs. Christian faith teaches that the only thing that can bring this salvation into effect is the existence or presence of the perfect being, i.e.,

the loving God. So, if meaninglessness signifies godforsakenness or the tyranny of the false, anti-human deity, then meaningfulness must signify the presence of the true, pro-human God (Immanuel). If meaninglessness brings the transience of everything good and beautiful, then meaningfulness must be characterized by the presence of God, who is the eternal goodness and beauty. This is because, as the perfect being, not only is God the source of everything good and beautiful, but he is set apart by his inherent eternity (“everything God does will endure forever” (Eccl 3:14)). In short, *God is the only antidote to meaninglessness*. This implies that to be released from the bondage of meaninglessness, reality needs to be filled with the omnibenevolent God himself. That is why the apostle Paul wrote that in the finality of redemption, God is “all in all” (1 Cor 15:28). To be meaningful, in this sense, is to be filled by God and to become like God.

Starting from Human Being?

Intriguingly though, according to Scripture, God does not manifest his saving presence by totally ending the tyranny of evil or redeeming all senselessness at once. God does not instantly fill everything in the universe. Instead, God wipes off meaninglessness via filling first the life of humans, and thus revealing their Godlikeness (and thus, meaningfulness; by using the term Godlikeness, I do not mean that humans should be divine, but that they are created in God’s image and so in some crucial aspects, they are like God). Scripture testifies that “the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.” (Rom 8:20-21). The perfection of humanity then will bring forth the restoration of all things. But what is God’s logic in choosing

this circuitous route of salvation? Seeing that all corners of the universe are infested with meaninglessness, why must God start from humanity?

First of all, Scripture testifies that since the problem came from humanity, it is reasonable that to fix the whole mess, God needs to start from saving human beings. The problem that plagues humanity is basically twofold:

1. The tragic fact that humans do not feel at home in this world. Human beings are destined to be the heir of the world, which in turn supports and brings forth the flourishing life of its owner. To support or bring forth human flourishing, however, this world needs to be filled by God himself and fully reflect God's glory. That is, to perfect human life, this world must be everlastingly filled by goodness and beauty from God. We can call this kind of world Edenic. But why do people need Eden? Because humans are by nature *both* the bearers of God's image (that is, humans are like God in possessing Godlike attributes like righteousness, love, beauty, knowledge, excellence, etc.) *and* finite creatures who are dependent on external supports. It is this lofty but dependent nature of humanity that requires the support of a living environment that brings out the best (or the godlikeness) in human beings. A decaying and death-infested nature cannot possibly facilitate and reflect human's Godlikeness (humans live flourishingly, only if they lead a godlike life, which is also *the abundant life*). Nonetheless, by 'emancipating' themselves from the very foundation of their existence (that is, God), humans in fact repudiate their Godlikeness and thereby make themselves ineligible to own or inherit a God-filled world. Yet, humans still retain some of their Godlike attributes, albeit in their damaged forms. As a result, they feel alienated from and contradicted by this world, which is no longer Edenic.

2. The tragic fact that humans are enslaved by things, many of which should be ruled by human beings instead. God appointed humans to be his vice-regent or co-ruler in this world, to rule and manage the world (Gen 1:28, Ps 8:6) not only for humans' benefit, but also for the benefit of the whole creation. But now, humans are absurdly under the mercy of the forces or elements of this world. Natural events, wild beasts, bacteria, virus, one's rebellious or cancerous cells, etc. mercilessly tyrannize and ravage human life. The earth was created for humanity's sake, but now, ironically, "generations come and generations go, but the earth remains forever" (Eccl 1:4).¹⁷ This absurdity is the result of human beings' idolatrous desire to be their own masters. In realizing their weakness or limitations and yet refusing to seek the true God, they have to depend on external things to prop their self-love. But realizing that all things in this world are transient, they self-deceivingly aggrandize the importance of those things, so much so that they worship them. Consequently, desires to make a god of oneself would invariably end in the tragic subjugation to external gods. Instead of ruling those things and being ruled by the true and benevolent God, humans show that what they want and deserve is to be subjugated to those forces or things that should serve them.

The aforesaid twofold tragic reversal of human destiny essentially explains the meaning of the absurdity or meaninglessness of reality. In his project to overturn this condition, God restores human beings first, since, as the heir and the co-ruler of this world, humans have to prove themselves worthy in inheriting, enjoying, and managing a God-filled, meaningful world.

¹⁷ See the commentary of this passage in Tremper Longman III, *Ecclesiastes*, NICOT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997).

Second, God restores humanity first, because God wants to cooperate with human beings in actualizing his redemptive project. In his wisdom, God wants this redemption project to occur through love, and working or serving together is a powerful sign of loving relationship between God and human beings. In fact, humans are more like God when they work together with God. This is because, being God’s coworkers, they are filled with God’s own loving presence and power.

Therefore, if God is the antidote to meaninglessness, then human beings are delivered from meaninglessness, only when they attain Godlikeness through being filled by God and thus becoming God’s coworkers. Be that as it may, the problem now is: in the midst of the absurdities, complexities, and pressures of life, we humans do not know how to be concretely filled with God and thus recognize and defeat meaningless deceptions and fate. More crucially, we humans are so infested by and so entrenched in this web of meaninglessness, that we do not have the power to approach God and participate in God’s redemptive works. We cannot even seek and ask God to fill and save ourselves. For these reasons, it is not only the case that God decides to save and fill humanity first before restoring all things, God also decides to fill one human being first before saving and filling all human beings. Here, the presence of the true God was most clearly proved and shown through God’s becoming a human being, and the saving love of God was enacted through the life of this particular man. In the process of making humanity Godlike and human life meaningful, God makes the life of a human being Godlike and his life meaningful.

The Incarnation

Why? Because only this human being has the required capacity and power to be filled by God, and know the way to defeat meaninglessness, and this is caused by the fact that this human being is God himself. The Bible witnesses to us that Jesus is “the image of the

invisible God” (Col 1:15), and in him, “all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form” (Col 2:9-10). Thus, in becoming a human being: (1) God reveals his loving nature, which is much more certain, greater, and stronger than the power of fate; (2) God reveals about how to be true human beings and in that way defeat the forces of fate and death; and (3) the triumphant life of this God-man will be given to human beings through faith, so that when by faith they are united with the Spirit of this God-man, humans are at the same time being filled by God himself and redeemed from meaninglessness. It is only Jesus who can realize God’s plan for humanity perfectly; he is the most Godlike of all and therefore can be called the Son of God *par excellence*, and it is only in Jesus that human beings regain their co-regency status. So strictly speaking, Christ is the only “heir of all things” (Heb 1:2).

The apostle Paul wrote that Jesus, “being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!” (Phil 2:6-8). This wonderful passage does not mean that Jesus exchanged his divinity with the nature of a slave, but it is precisely through servanthood or taking the form of a slave that he reveals the image of God himself.¹⁸ But what is the meaning of “taking the very nature of a servant (that is, slave)” here? Grammatically speaking, “taking the very nature of a slave” is not different from “being made in human likeness”¹⁹ or both expressions are mutually explanatory.²⁰

¹⁸ F. F. Bruce’s words, quoted in Peter O’Brien, *Philippians*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 206.

¹⁹ Peter-Ben Smit, *Paradigms of Being in Christ: A Study of the Epistle to the Philippians*, Library of NT Studies 467 (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 91.

²⁰ Ralph Martin, *A Hymn of Christ: Philippians 2:5-11 in Recent Interpretation and in the Setting of Early Christian Worship* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1997), 177.

The correlation tells us also that to be a human after the Fall is to be enslaved to the elements in this universe, especially the laws of nature or the tyranny of evil that inescapably lead to sufferings and death.²¹ Therein lays the subversiveness of Gospel message: it is precisely through willingly being subjected to the power of fate that Christ overpowers fate.²² Thus, incarnation does not just display the Lord's glory, but more accurately, it is about the Creator's unique way of winning the battle for humanity, which was paradoxically hidden in the apparent meaninglessness of life in the flesh.²³

So when the creed calls us to trust in Lord Jesus "who for us humans, and for our salvation, came down from heaven, and . . . was made man," it tells us that not only did this Lord Jesus enter a meaningless or absurd world, he also voluntarily subjected himself in some sense to the power of meaninglessness or fate. We see here the contrast between divinity and humanity: while humans are subjected to the power of absurdity unwillingly or necessarily, God in Christ freely chose suffering and death to express his immense love; only Jesus is able to gladly choose a "meaningless life" and made it an opportunity to be obedient.²⁴ In "coming down from heaven and was made man," the Second Person of the Trinity was situated in "the likeness of sinful flesh" (Rom 8:3), i.e., God himself was "contextualized" in an absurd human environment and life. There is nothing more absurd or meaningless than these: a

supremely holy, innocent young person, in the height of his career, was unjustly subjected to cruel tortures and death; a liberator of his own people, a savior of the world, was abandoned by his closest friends and sold to his enemy for just 30 silver coins; a boundlessly great mercy or love was rewarded with stubborn, merciless hatred. If there was no resurrection, and if the teacher in Ecclesiastes knew Jesus, he might well use Jesus' life as the prime example of an utterly meaningless life.

Yet, Jesus' story is not a tragedy, but consummated in the happiest possible ending: he was resurrected and thus defeated the power of meaninglessness. Due to his willingness to empty himself by living as a servant and embracing death, "God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of the Father" (Phil 2:9-11). Surprisingly to his enemies: more than Abel, Christ's seemingly vain or death-inducing righteous life ("do not be overrighteous, neither be overwise—why destroy yourself?" (Eccl 6:15-16) is in essence the only life that defeats meaninglessness and death. Christ shows that righteous sufferers like Abel have future! Just as God mysteriously and ironically used unimaginable weapons (slingshot, etc.) to defeat Israel's more powerful and advanced (in weaponry) enemies, God in Jesus amazingly used the seemingly meaningless condition to defeat meaninglessness. Due to his divine obedience and radical love, Jesus' life is a life that cannot be subdued by decay and absurdity. Through Jesus, God is contextualized in the midst of meaninglessness. God in the Second Person of the Trinity even added to himself a humanity that is "infested" by weaknesses, though sinless. It is obvious that even in this sort of circumstance, God's power, which is expressed through a Godlike human life, is unconquerable. Jesus proves to us that God's presence is truly the antidote to

²¹ This is the thought of Ernst Käsemann, explicated briefly in Martin, *A Hymn of Christ*, 179.

²² Martin, *A Hymn of Christ*, 180.

²³ "What is surprising is the form our champion took and the means of our liberation . . . Since we could not save ourselves, he did not save himself from the worst of human experiences. The limitless Lord of the universe took on limitations in order to free us from ours, and nowhere are our limitations more clearly recognized than in face of death" G. Guthrie, *Hebrews*, NIVAC (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998), 120.

²⁴ Martin, *A Hymn of Christ*, 217.

meaninglessness: a life that is filled to the full by God’s spirit can overcome all kinds of absurdity and fate. In Jesus, therefore, lies the future and hope of humanity.

Redeeming Meaninglessness through Overcoming Temptations

The Concept of Temptation

From the viewpoint of Jesus’ ultimate victory over fate, sufferings that befell on Jesus in his life were in reality not aimless or absurd. If God exists *and* God, who is love, wants us to become like him, *then*, the apparently absurd fate or suffering *is in essence* the opportunity to defeat meaninglessness *through* imitating God. This implies that the defeat of the outwardly meaningless fate also depends on our reactions, i.e., whether we want to win by being filled by God, the antidote to meaninglessness. This is consistent with God’s plan to make the restoration of all things dependent upon the salvation of humanity. Portrayed this way then, outwardly absurd sufferings are basically temptations, since the opportunity offered by suffering can lead to either victory or defeat. As Christians, our view of reality is like this: if there is God above the sun, then love, not evil, is the ultimate reality, which is also the final goal of all things. But if evil is not the ultimate reality or if it is not the final goal of everything, then sufferings or absurdities that are accepted by faith are essentially temptations that can bring utmost benefits and victory. The concept ‘temptation’ by itself connotes that reality under the sun is not meaningless, since there is a potential victory or meaning behind every kind of absurdity. But this is not only true for sufferings, even apparently neutral or positive events are temptations! They can make us reliant on transitory things and not on God. Ecclesiastes seems to tell us that meaninglessness infests everything, and so without God, positive things like wisdom, pleasure, wealth, etc. are only seemingly meaningful but essentially deceiving, for by the end, they are

futile and cannot withstand death and decay. Through living like Jesus, which is living like God himself, we are called to react to those apparently positive things correctly and in this way liberate them from meaninglessness (and preserve their positive values eternally).

The Bible is clear that God does allow temptation but intends it to be the opportunity to grow and win, while Satan tempts in order to stumble and destroy. Being seen from this perspective, we can imagine the teacher in Ecclesiastes runs back and yelled to those who either do not believe in God *or* haven’t encountered God’s grace: “do not go there (i.e., do not pursue the final happiness by your own ways)! It is worthless, meaningless! It is all absurd!,” while Christ looks back at us and calls: “Go there with me on my way, and trust in God! It is not meaningless or worthless at all!” So, if meaningless phenomena are not themselves aimless, but are by nature opportunities or temptations, then meaningless happenings are tamed and lose its ultimate meaning. Everything becomes meaningful, since by definition, meaninglessness or absurdity connotes also aimlessness.²⁵ Without getting the answer of the “whys” of sufferings, life becomes unbearable to us. In knowing that the benevolent God is on our side and so everything has a final purpose that benefits us, sufferings should not be understood as absurdities. Moreover, God cooperates with us in bringing forth the meaning of our sufferings, i.e., God fills and empowers us to respond to our sufferings correctly, in *the way* that redeem or eliminate the *potential* absurdities of those sufferings (or any kind of happening in life, including the positive ones). We respond to sufferings or temptations redemptively, only if we respond to them in a Christlike manner, which is via trustful obedience. To recap, the combination of God’s benevolence and our response

²⁵ In absurd or meaningless happenings, humans cannot fulfill the goals that make them truly flourish.

transform sufferings into temptations (as opportunities to trust God and redeem meaninglessness). More precisely, a happening (suffering or not) x in this world is a temptation (and so x is not meaningless or absurd), only when: (1) the benevolent God exists; (2) God will redeem and transform x meaningfully; (3) God will redeem and transform x through our Godlike response to x (being trustfully obedient in the midst of x).

Jesus' Temptation

In this sense, Jesus' seemingly absurd life is not meaningless, because it is in fact a life that is full of temptations, which are essentially opportunities to be trustfully obedient to the Father. As a matter of fact, we can even summarize Jesus' earthly life in this one word: "temptation" (Luk 22:28; cf. Luk 4:13). Like Jesus, we must fight and overcome temptation in the Lord via recognizing things that by themselves (without God) are meaningless (fame, wealth, success, etc.) and resisting *meaninglessness-inducing* attitudes (idolatry, lack of trust, despair, self-deception, etc.). But this is by no means easy. Jesus' life and his subversive message show that the way and the success of defeating meaninglessness are often hidden and subtle. So God became a man in Jesus, because humans need a clear and powerful guidance of how to recognize and defeat meaninglessness in their life. More crucially, humans need urgently the power that Jesus had and exercised in defeating meaninglessness (which is the power of the Holy Spirit), but Jesus could only exercise that power and become more perfect (as a human being, Jesus grew also in perfection, although he did it sinlessly) if he lived in human situation with all of its sufferings and apparent senselessness. Scripture testifies that "in bringing many sons and daughters to glory, it was fitting that God . . . should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through what he suffered. Both the one who makes people holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to

call them brothers and sisters" (Heb 2:10-11). Now, if the whole human life of Jesus can be understood as a series of temptations, then we can learn it well through one of its most representative episodes, which is Jesus' temptations in the desert (Matt 4, Luk 4).²⁶

After his baptism, Jesus was led by the Holy Spirit to be tempted. It is interesting to note that Adam and his progeny, Jesus, were tempted in similar ways (e.g., through food, to snatch the lordship of everything illegally, etc.). Here Jesus reenacted the Genesis temptation, redeemed Adam's failure by defeating Satan, and thereby starting afresh the history of humanity. Hilary of Poitiers wrote, "[Satan] had enticed Adam and by deceiving him led him to death. But it was fitting, because of his wickedness and evil deed, that he be defeated by that same humanity in whose death and misfortunes he gloried."²⁷ This story also signifies two things. *First*, Jesus also reenacted the temptation of the Israelites in the desert (for forty years, note the similarity with Jesus' forty days period of fasting). God chose the Israelites to start the new humanity, and yet they failed too. Now it is the task of Jesus, an Israelite, to succeed where his nation failed. *Second*, Jesus' temptation was harder than that of Adam. While Adam was tempted in the garden, Jesus the Second Adam was tempted in the desert. Adam was tempted in a blissful, pre-fall context, but Jesus was tempted in the post-fall world, a world that has been quite thoroughly infested with meaninglessness. In this way, Jesus identified himself more with our situation, as we experience the meaningless toil and hardship under the sun. For that

²⁶ For more detailed exegeses, including the background information or theology, of this story, please consult R. T. France, *Matthew*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), G. Osborne, *Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the NT: Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), among other commentaries.

²⁷ Quoted in Manlio Simonetti, ed., *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: NT 1a: Matthew* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001), 57.

reason, we can put our trust in him who loves us so greatly: “because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted” (Heb 2:18).

In contrast to the prosperous and peaceful bliss of Eden, Jesus was led to the most barren, wretched topographical patches of the planet, i.e., the desert. The desert is often associated with death and hopelessness, so it can symbolize godforsakenness. The situation itself bespeaks meaninglessness or absurdity: humans were created to be the master of inanimate things, including the land; but now the latter jeopardizes the survival of the first. It is an affront to reason, disturbingly absurd to witness a starving human being, as humans are the most dignified being in the world. What’s more, this hungry man was not an ordinary folk; he was just declared as the beloved Son of God! So it is more than absurd if the Holy One of Israel had to die agonizingly in hunger. Surely, to die of starvation looks to contradict those claims about humanity and Jesus, and it might be the case that they are deceived. This absurdity seems to manifest the absence of benevolence and providence. In Jesus, the Logos now personally tasted the physical and spiritual suffering of human being: “for we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin” (Heb 4:15).

We Christians are often placed in the “desert” of life. We consider ourselves to be the children of the Almighty, but our needs for health, happiness, and love are relentlessly undermined by all sorts of weaknesses, physical and psychological. We believe that we are God’s beloved, even the pupil of God’s eyes, and yet what we continually experience is the cruel hatred of fate that is blind to our righteousness and faith, and sabotages our attempts to fulfill our own—and our beloved’s—needs. In short, our legitimate human needs are consistently frustrated by external and natural forces that we cannot

control (illness, death, crime, misfortune, slander, etc.). We are sons and daughters of God, and yet we live in a desolated world, “we are pronounced just, as yet sin dwells in us; we hear that we are happy, but we are as yet in the midst of many miseries; an abundance of all good things is promised to us, but still we often hunger and thirst; God proclaims that he will come quickly, but he seems deaf when we cry to him.”²⁸ This sounds absurd. It seems that our piety or ministry is merely “chasing after the wind.” What we need is meaningful life, but life in all of its fullness seems to be denied to us.

Jesus’ First Temptation

It is at this juncture that Satan tempted Jesus to change stones into bread. Satan here personifies the cruel lord that oppresses humanity and tempts them to meaninglessness. Satan then represents the force of meaninglessness itself, and it is for this reason that Satan’s temptation is to be recognized and resisted as such. God reveals through Satan’s temptations the real face of meaninglessness, which was previously hidden to us. Satan’s temptations tell us that meaninglessness not only enters as tragic or absurd happenings, but also as tantalizing things that are outwardly very good but would sink us deeper in absurdity. In starting his temptation by saying, “If you are the Son of God . . .” (“if” here should be understood as “since”), Satan expressed his logic: Since being the Son of God was Jesus’ prerogative, he was fully entitled to rely on the divine power to serve his own ends. Many Christians might well adopt this kind of logic: We cannot accept our sufferings, for we think that this is not the way it is supposed to be. We are the children of the Master of the universe, and this solid backing should give us an unhindered access to smooth, happy life. But even if many of us do not think that

²⁸ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews*, trans. John Owen (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2007), 261.

happiness or prosperity is everything, we still expect that God, as our Father in heaven, will fulfill our needs. But this can degenerate into a self-deceiving manipulation or a meaningless attitude, when we use it to put the fulfillment of our needs above everything else. Although in appearance Jesus was asked to do a spiritual or meaningful thing, which is relying on his Father for life sustenance, he was actually asked to manipulate God to affirm a self-centered attitude, which is actually a carnal and senseless thing.²⁹ This is absurd: because Jesus was essentially asked here to use the antidote to meaninglessness (God) to realize a desire that brings forth meaninglessness.³⁰ This is not to say that bread is in itself useless or harmful, but it is the attitude of using God as a tool for submitting oneself to transitory things that is deleterious and meaningless. It is not just idolatrous but also illogical to worship both God and Mammon, since God as the source of meaning (or the antidote to meaninglessness) cannot be used to render inherently meaningless things meaningful. If God restores everything to meaningfulness, then he logically has to get rid of meaningless entities.

When we are tempted, we often become anxious and tend to release ourselves from this mental burden by being excessively focused on those means that can help us remove our worry, and this in the end can generate our worship of those means.³¹ In other words, the apparent absurdity of life tempts us to act more absurdly by placing our trust in passing things, and this will in turn generate more absurdities. This psychological (or 'spiritual') mechanism is so natural, but in reality, it is one main way through which

meaninglessness freely creeps in. Seeing that our desires or wish is contradicted by harsh reality, we feel cornered and attempt to protect ourselves by asserting our self-control (which, without obedience, is rooted in self-worship) and directing all our energies and efforts to things that are able to fulfill our needs. This twofold attitude constitute the very elements of idolatry, which, as our discussion about Ecclesiastes above has shown, is the very meaning of being trapped in the conspiracy of meaninglessness. The subtlety and unavoidable of this attitude gives a forceful reason for us to "keep our eyes always on the Lord" (Ps 16:8), to remind ourselves through faith about God's continual presence with us.

Hence, in tempting Jesus to make breads out of stones, Satan in reality tried to deceive Jesus in two interconnected respects: to focus on the bread only (but left to its own, bread or anything in this world that can be used to satisfy our need, is transitory) and to live on his own terms (without paying attention to God's will, which by itself has everlasting value). For this reason, in asking God to satisfy our needs, we are not necessarily drawing near to God, for it might be the case that here we only treat God as the means (to support our focus on earthly things and desire to live on our own terms). In regarding God's being our Father as an advantage to be personally exploited, we in effect show our enslavement by both transient things and our self-centeredness (which is in itself meaningless, as our self, being left to its own, is also transient). It is clear then, that making the divine sonship an exploitable capital, which is Satan and human's logic, is the very logic of meaninglessness. But, in God's logic, this attitude is the very antithesis of being God's beloved Son, which is, in one of its most primitive definition, being someone who is most like God.

John Chrysostom, the Greek Church Father, pointed out that just as Adam and Eve were tempted to become gods through

²⁹ We can see then how religious attitudes can become a part of the network of conspiracy that makes human life meaningless.

³⁰ More precisely, to self-deceivingly and impossibly make meaningful that very thing which is helplessly meaningless is in itself a meaningless desire.

³¹ Helmut Thielicke, *Between God and Satan*, trans. C. C. Barber (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1963), 40.

forbidden food, Jesus as the second Adam was tempted through food too.³² Adam, our flesh ancestor, transgressed his limit, entered into the forbidden territory and consequently became less like God, while Jesus, our spiritual forbear, stayed obediently within his limit and as a result became more perfectly like God (the very thing that Adam wanted to gain through eating the fruit; Gen 3:5). Adam and his fallen offspring think that “the forbidden” indicates good and lasting things that God selfishly or suspiciously guard from his creatures, while in reality, “the forbidden” refers to the area of meaninglessness that God in his love, demarcate through his precepts, so that his creatures will not enter it. God forbids us to do or desire for certain things, not because God does not want us to be happy, but because those very things lead to meaninglessness and make us miserable. What’s more, the sense of forbidden here also covers meaningless attitudes, which in essence are using God as a launching pad to make god of oneself.³³ In light of this, obedience is in essence also the antidote to meaninglessness, since it prevents us to transgress the limit of meaningful life. But now there seems to be two antidotes to meaninglessness: God, and our obedience. How can we explain this?

Jesus overcame the first temptation by telling the devil, “Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God” (Matt 4:4). What does it mean? Does it mean that although food is indispensable, the word of God is necessary too? Or does it mean that food is undeniably essential for living, but God’s Word is much more? It might be, but a more correct understanding may be like this: even our bread comes from God’s Word, and without God’s creative word, not only that bread cannot come into being, bread itself will not

be able to sustain our life and it certainly cannot give us a more genuine, eternal life. In other words, even in the absence of bread, the presence of God’s Word is able to give us everlasting life. Even if hunger leads to death, as long as hunger is the means to be united with God the antidote to meaninglessness (however absurd it sounds), then death is not final and will be totally overcome. This is the paradox of living with God, the utmost manifestation of which is love: love needs to be spent, and yet it will not be exhausted but will ever increase precisely through being given away; love naturally leads to sacrifice or even death, but it will conquer death. So Jesus here basically tells us that we should not rely on those earthly things that sustain our life, but on God, the true source of life. What’s more, God’s Word or promise is the way God is present with us moment by moment.³⁴

As we are going to see, to rely on God is to obey God’s Word, which also presupposes, for us Christians, to be united with God. God’s Word is the source of everlasting life and thus can defeat meaninglessness and imperfections: “All people are like grass, and all their faithfulness is like the flowers of the field . . . The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God endures forever” (Isa 40:6, 8); “to all perfection I see a limit, but your commands are boundless” (Ps 119:96). Here we learn that to become like God or “to make God present” in the world can only be done via establishing relationship with God’s Word.

But what kind of relationship that we must cultivate with His word? The answer is:

1. Obeying God’s Word. Obedience here, as being shown in Jesus’ life, is putting our agenda or personal plan under the sovereignty and guidance of God’s will. In turning bread into stones, not only did Jesus would fulfill his personal needs disobediently, but he was also tempted to realize success much easily. Many were

³² Simonetti, ed., *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: NT 1a: Matthew*, 56.

³³ This, in turn, is what we have seen above: the irrational attitude of using God, who is the antidote to meaninglessness, to pursue meaninglessness.

³⁴ Thielicke, *Between God and Satan*, 41.

hungry at that time, and turning countless stones into breads would undoubtedly accomplish several great things in one swoop: assuring people's acceptance of Jesus' messiahship, silencing the opponents, and toppling the Roman Empire.³⁵ Nonetheless, this alluring short-cut is not in accord with God's will and therefore is by nature meaningless and would definitely lead to greater meaninglessness. But we know God's will mainly not mystically (through extraordinary phenomena) but via close study of God's Word. More exactly, we immerse in the study of the Scripture in such a way, so that we can find God's own way of thinking or value system (e.g., giving is more blessed than receiving, inner heart is more important than appearance, love is sacrificial, etc.), and adopt it as our way of living.

2. In line with the Christian faith, a necessary condition for true and lasting obedience is the believers' union with God. This entails that: *first*, in making our personal desires and plans in line with God's will, what we are doing is more about loving God with all of our hearts than about legalistically complying with God's commands; it is a precious wish of love that the beloved wants to feel and desire what the lover feels and desires. *Second*, according to the New Testament, to be united with God is to be united with Jesus as the Word of God in person (Jn 15). Hence, to obey God entails living as Jesus himself has lived, desiring what Jesus desires, and being empowered by Jesus' own Spirit (Rom 8:9-13). To overcome temptation, we should ask for insights from God's Word, but to get those insights and do them in daily life, what we must ask for is Christ's own Holy Spirit.

Through doing the aforesaid ways, the objective Word of God becomes subjectively efficacious and springing forth eternal life. To be exact, in obeying God's Word, the power of the Word works in our heart and redeeming our life from decay and meaninglessness, as Paul said, "Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day" (2 Cor 4:16).

Jesus' Second Temptation

There are several dimensions of meaning that we can dig out of the next temptation of Jesus. But to shorten my exposition, I will just focus on one nuance only, which is the temptation to get more tangible achievements. The tangibility here chiefly refers to those desirable qualities that we normally pursue when we want to achieve something, such as: popularity, ease, self-confidence, pleasure, and authority or influence. In asking Jesus to throw himself down from the highest point of the temple, Satan also asked Jesus to perform a spectacular show of success, as the spectacle would be witnessed by many who thronged the temple. Jesus flatly refused to do this, since it is not in accord with the will of God, who defines victory through suffering, self-denial, and obedience.

As mortal sinners, Christians and God's servants in the church find this temptation very hard to resist. Being infested with meaningless way of life or mindset, we often forget God, who is the true source of everlasting happiness and meaning, and try to make ourselves divine. Being able to attract and influence many people (fans?), as well as making difference in their lives, will somehow divinize ourselves. How? We feel very powerful or find ourselves become the center of attention or even semi-worship attitude of our audience, and we try to convince ourselves (and make every effort to guarantee that) this extremely good feeling will last. This self-worship, as we have seen above, requires another kind of idolatry: we become the slave

³⁵ See also the insightful explanation of the socio-political nuances of Jesus' temptations in Donald Kraybill, *The Upside-Down Kingdom* (Harrisonburg: Herald, 2011).

of others' acceptance. But people's attitudes, as well as our talents and achievements, are in essence temporary, always in change, and unreliable. Basing our happiness on them is self-deceiving and meaningless. On the other hand, our thirst for tangible success and acceptance will balloon and be easily destroyed by harsh reality of life. "All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field" (1 Pet 1:24). "Mortals . . . spring up like flowers and wither away; like fleeting shadows, they do not endure" (Job 14:1-2). Without God, "man in his pomp will not remain; he is like the beasts that perish" (Ps 49:12). From the viewpoints of death, a plethora of sufferings in this life, and the absence of God's blessings, our labors under the sun are unprofitable, worthless (Eccl 1:3). This, as we have seen, is the meaning of absurdity.

This temptation was also aimed at making Jesus choose a shortcut for success. Instead of accomplishing his mission through rejection, suffering, and even agonizing death, Jesus now could win over people's acceptance in an instant. The miraculous spectacle would certainly affirm his status as the messiah from God. Satan's tempting words ("if you are the Son of God, throw yourselves down") was voiced again through the mouths of the mockers during Jesus' crucifixion ("if you are the Son of God, come down from the cross!" (Matt 27:40). In the midst of his terrible agony on the cross, Jesus was tempted to abandon God's will (something that he could easily do, considering his power, cf. Matt 26:53). Similar with the previous one, the logic of this temptation is that being the Son of God is an exploitable privilege to bring out an easily won success. This is the logic of selfishness and meaninglessness (since being left to its own, human self cannot attain eternity). God's logic, however, is different. Before he was led by the Spirit to be tempted in the desert, God the Father testified about Jesus: "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased" (Matt 3:17). This statement

is made from two different sources: the coronation psalm (Ps 2) and the passage about God's servant in Isa 42:1. The meaning is clear enough: to be God's son (which implies to be God's co-ruler in this world) is to be God's servant. In other words, being the image of God or to be like God for human beings, which is to attain the true and genuine authority (1 Cor 6:2-3), is to be obedient to God's will.

We might not be ambitious or have big aspirations, but the temptation remains: we cannot help but identifying ourselves with (that is, basing our well-being on) our works, personal projects, or life plans. How should we resist this temptation? Not only should we keep healthy emotional distance from our works or projects, we must also discipline ourselves to perceive the intangible. We restrain ourselves from being too receptive to the dictates of our feelings or other tangible things, so that we can be more sensitive to God's will and work in our hearts.

Perceiving the intangible means that we control the use of our senses and feelings, so that we attain *both* a degree of detachment from them *and* more nearness to God. The key is to make the perceivable less determining and the unperceivable more determining to our feelings and senses and by this means to let it transform the perceivable. In this fallen and absurd world, some things seem meaningless but not, while some others appear meaningful but not. But the problem is that, as we have seen, there is an internal force of meaninglessness that works in us, and as a result, we are much more easily controlled by perceivable but meaningless things. We are naturally attracted to those things, as they give us false security and quick gratification. To be precise, our meaningless tendency to idolatry impairs our discernment and makes us easily deceived by things that look meaningful but not. "Though we are convinced, that all our support, and aid, and comfort, depend on the blessing of God, yet our senses allure and draw us away, to seek

assistance from Satan, as if God alone were not enough.”³⁶ To regain our discernment, we have to practice the presence of God, i.e., to cling to God’s loving presence with us through faith and then see God’s light in all things. “So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal” (2 Cor 4:18). Moses was “not being afraid of the anger of the king, for he endured as seeing him who is invisible” (Heb 11:27). Why must we do this? Since God, who is the only antidote to meaninglessness, is “eternal, immortal, invisible” (1 Tim 1:17) and all good things come from Him. In this stage of our existence, God’s invisibility protects our faith, as invisibility is invulnerable to change and decay that characterize meaninglessness. According to Guy Lafon, Jesus renounces all possessions in each of the three temptations, “because being human is only guaranteed in us through the presence of what is absent.”³⁷ Our worth and search for meaning is affirmed, and our meaninglessness redeemed, only if we attach ourselves to the invisible God, who is present beyond the perceived godforsakenness.

We detach ourselves from the perceivable (including our senses and feelings), so that we can come back to it with new senses and feelings, sanctified by God’s presence. “For we live by faith not by sight” (2 Cor 5:7); faith trains our eyes by inspiring them to penetrate things and see their real natures. “Our love enables us to find, in God Himself, the goodness and the reality of all the things we have renounced for His sake. We then see Him Whom we love in the very things we have renounced, and find them again in

Him.”³⁸ What is more, going after the Holy Spirit is personal guidance through faith, we can discern: which things or events are in fact meaningless, which are not. Intriguingly, regardless of our beliefs, we will in the end find out that in many areas of life, what we see is not what we want or will get. If we trust in God, the apparent sufferings or absurdities are essentially temptations that can bring forth victory; if we do not, happy things are in essence meaningless, and the apparent victories will lead to defeat. So being guided through faith helps us avoid being deceived by appearances. Jesus’ trust in God empowered him to see that the spectacular, easy achievement offered by the devil is meaningless and deceitful, while the hard-won victory through the cross’ humiliation is meaningful and genuine.

We must always remind ourselves then that all tangible things in this world, including our achievements, cannot give us the most genuine, final victory, if they are not united first with the cross of Christ, which is the only way to success. That is to say, we have to: (1) realize that our achievements are still marred by transience and other kinds of imperfection, so that we can healthily detach ourselves from them and submit them in hope to God; and (2) use our success as an opportunity to deny ourselves, to refuse being intoxicated and controlled by achievements and focus our affections on the Lord instead. To surrender our achievements to God is a way to make them more lasting, and not to make them the devil’s bait to plunge us into the abyss of meaninglessness. This implies that in making efforts to achieve something, we must be faithful: instead of preoccupying ourselves with it, we need to let God control and work through us, so that when we succeed or fail, we know that the result comes out of God’s will.

Jesus replied to the devil, “You shall not put the Lord your God to the test” (Matt 4:7).

³⁶ John Calvin, *Harmony of the Evangelists: Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, trans. William Pringle (Edinburgh: The Calvin Translation Society, 1845), 220.

³⁷ Quoted in Francois Bovon, *Luke 1: A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke 1:1-9:50*, trans. Christine Thomas (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002), 147.

³⁸ Thomas Merton, *No Man is An Island* (New York: Fall River, 2003), 103

Testing God is a passive-aggressive attitude toward God: through venting our complaints, suspicions, and anger, we try to force or threaten God to follow our will. Basically, testing God is caused by a lack of trust in God, which leads to bitterness or resentment to God. In resentfully asking God to fulfill our wish, we listen to and make the taunts of God’s enemies our own (e.g., “God does not want me to be happy,” “God is not willing to help me,” etc.; cf. Gen 4:5, Ps 3:2). Hence, testing God entails entertaining negative thoughts about God, but different from doubts, in testing God, one is *suspicious* about God’s kindness. While doubt is quite rational in character, suspicion in this context is more about relationship. It is important to note that the first sin happened when our first parents question God’s goodness (Gen 3:5-6). We are in the process of leaving God and yet we still “give a chance” for God to show his good will. We are tempted to test God, when we are on the brink of despair, as we experience painfully that our aspiration is contradicted by reality. It is when we start to be engulfed by the sense of meaninglessness that we mistrust God; we entertain seriously the possibility that God is the cruel, capricious power of fate. In this regard, testing God is an attempt to postpone despair by intimidating God with our frustration and dissatisfaction. Tempting God is sinful, not only because we are disrespectful and disobedient, we also do not trust him and try to manipulate him to achieve an essentially meaningless thing (the fulfillment of our desires without obedience to or union with God, the antidote to meaninglessness).³⁹

We can overcome this temptation, only when we resist deceit and despair. We do not want to be deceived by the despairing verdicts of our sights. Resisting despair is itself a proof that we are not under the threat of meaning-

lessness. In the midst of the oppressing power of meaninglessness, we see through faith the Heavenly Father’s existence and providence behind every event. We commit ourselves to “the buoyancy of the good.”⁴⁰ We believe that goodness is undefeatable, because the good God is working in everything to bring the final triumph of goodness (Rom 8:28). For Christians, difficulties are

only miracles that have not yet happened. Faith cannot tell time very well. To say we should praise only after the miracle has occurred makes no sense to faith. Faith means God *will* just as much as God *has*.⁴¹

We should then have a positive mindset, especially a positive thought about God’s loving intention. This positive attitude is different from ordinary optimism and the so-called positive thinking (the core teaching of the “prosperity gospel”). We do not think that events in this fallen world will satisfy all of our expectations, but we do think that God will ensure that eventually, everything will be exceedingly all right, after we fully become like God in Christ.

To resist despair and self-deception, we rest on God’s promise and we do not try to hasten its fulfillment in our way. Obedience here is not about relinquishing everything for nothing, but about letting God transform us to be like Christ through trustful patience: we trustfully and patiently wait for the final fulfillment of God’s redemption. Yet, amazingly, the Christlike trustful patience in us is a sure sign that our redemption from meaninglessness has happened, as the patience itself is a fruit of the eternal life within us. We are not only content in God’s providence, we also actively obey God’s will, although it involves sufferings, since we know that (1) God’s seemingly absurd way of doing things will eventually wipe out meaninglessness, and (2)

³⁹ “But if we love God for something less than Himself, we cherish a desire that can fail us. We run the risk of hating Him if we do not get what we hope for” (Merton, *No Man Is An Island*, 18).

⁴⁰ John Cottingham, *On the Meaning of Life* (London: Routledge, 2002), 73.

⁴¹ Glynn Evans, *Daily with the King* (Chicago, IL: Moody, 1979), 34.

obedience, which signifies our union with God, is itself an antidote to meaninglessness.

Jesus' Third Temptation

Thirdly, the devil offered Jesus all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. This temptation shows the meaninglessness of power, which is not only about political power, but basically about humans' desire to have more control of their lives and thereby assert their worth. The concept of human glory is also associated closely with the concept of power: in satisfying our hunger for self-control, we in reality want to fill our empty and insecure hearts with earthly achievements, and whenever possible, boasting about and revealing them to others. This is the meaning of self-glorification. The enemy cunningly controls us precisely through our desire (and action) to take a full control our own lives. The more we want to be emancipated from God's will, the greater is the degree of our enslavement by the force of meaninglessness. God asks us to relinquish everything, so that we can obtain everything; Satan asks us to snatch all things, so that we will lose all. To control our own lives is to let ourselves be flatly deceived by two kinds of false gods: idols and fate. In looking for self-glory, we make idols of ourselves and achievements or other valuable things, and this kind of false god is actually the disguise of the second sort of false god, which is what we perceive as fate. We are allured to catch the first kind of false god, only to be led to the disclosure of the second, and it is Satan who works behind all of these.

In Jerome's view, the Lord in his temptation was determined to subdue the devil not by power, but by humility.⁴² This means that Christ prioritized his obedience to God's will over human impulse to assert and display one's own worth. Humility and obedience are interconnected⁴³: one can be

obedient, only if one does not assert one's will to be in control or look impressive on one's terms. The sobering truth is that humility is often occasioned by suffering or by the contradiction between our aspirations or desires and harsh reality. During his earthly life, Jesus, "Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him" (Heb. 5:7-9). Now, if we see suffering as an opportunity to be humbly obedient, then suffering will lead to meaningful life and final victory in God, but if we fall into despair or react sinfully, then we make suffering another instance of meaninglessness. Hence, as we have seen, suffering is a temptation that can lead to either absurdity or humility (as a way to redeem meaninglessness). Yet, as Christ shows to us through his life (Phil 2:6-11), it is only through humbly emptying ourselves (from false security or idols, pride, sins, etc.) that we can attain the only true glory, which is likeness to God in Christ (Rom 8:29; 2 Cor 3:17-18).

For this reason, we must be more courageous and creative in dealing with our weaknesses and sufferings. We should view them as occasions to be more like God in Christ. We dare to enter into contradictions in life and use them as means of obedience. In allowing us to experience sufferings, God dust off dirt from our soul, making us like a prism that shines forth God's glory more perspicuously and transparently. Humble obedience (in fact, humility is a necessary condition for obedience) is the consequence of expensive grace, while self-centered nominal Christianity is the result of rendering grace cheap.⁴⁴ Expensive grace is not oxymoronic: the grace that is bestowed to us is God himself, and due to its pricelessness, it can only be given freely, but this greatest gift of all can only be contained in a largely emptied heart.

⁴² Simonetti, ed., *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: NT 1a: Matthew*, 60.

⁴³ Martin, *A Hymn of Christ*, 223.

⁴⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, trans. R. H. Fuller (New York, NY: Macmillan, 1963).

Obedient humility then is an *expensive but free* way to *simultaneously* empty our heart and receive the great God himself. So, it is not the price to get God, but a container to receive God, whose presence will wipe away every tear and make all things new (Rev 21:4-5).

Be that as it may, trying to be humble without loving God more is grossly inadequate and ineffective, as we can neither deny nor repress the human need for being accepted by something greater. Humility involves a degree of detachment from the self, but when we do that, due to our sinfulness, we can gradually either lose a healthy dose of self-love or (more often) subtly manipulate other things to affirm our idolatrous self-love. Thus it is necessary that in being humble, we “compensate” by letting the Lord himself fill our emptied, humbled hearts. In fact, true humility has as its necessary condition a heart-felt love of God. “For glory befits God because of His majesty, while lowliness befits man because it unites us to God” (*Diadochos*).⁴⁵ Worshipping God cannot be separated from obedient love to God. Moreover, sufferings, including the awareness of our weaknesses and the imperfection of things in life, are *both* the calls and apt occasions to love God even more. Our godly love empowers us to bear this world’s injustice and meaninglessness, and hope for God’s final redemption. “By your hand save me . . . LORD, from those of this world whose reward is in this life. May what you have stored up for the wicked fill their bellies . . . As for me, I will be vindicated and will see your face; when I awake, I will be satisfied with seeing your likeness” (Ps 17:14-15; also Rom 8:28-29).

To love God in the midst of temptation (human life in this world is actually a series of temptations) is to enjoy God’s glory in things. Things in this world are imperfect and insufficient, so “we must go beyond them to

Him in Whom they have their true being.”⁴⁶ Our authentic love to all good and beautiful things can only come out of and lead back to our profound love of God, because God is both the source and the goal of all things. Good things in this world are a kind of sacraments; they are windows that lead us to see the reality beyond themselves. The nature of things is only perfected and completed in God; they have their ultimate destiny in love (*both* God’s love of them and our love of God *through* them, which entails our love *for* them). If we love things more than we love God, then we haven’t known the essence of things in this world, and we also haven’t enjoyed them truly and properly. Enjoying everything in the Lord entails recognizing the ploy of the devil, because the main way the power of meaninglessness deceives us is through presenting things in this world as idols, as final and pointing to nothing beyond themselves. But without God’s presence, things are eternally subjected under decay and emptiness. Last but not least, we can practice this humbling discipline of loving God by seeing: (1) good things or events as occasions to love and enjoy God more; (2) imperfectly good and bad things or events as occasions to hope for their redemption by God; and (3) the absence of good things in life as opportunities to make God our portion.

Conclusion: Union with Christ

The story of Jesus’ temptation tells us that meaninglessness rears up its head and tries to deceive us through needs, craving for achievements, and desires for control. These are things that commonly drag us away from God, who is the only source of meaning and life. At the same time, these three are also the very contexts or opportunities to unite ourselves to God through obedience. Meaninglessness strangely but miraculously becomes a way to gain meaningfulness. Human needs and desires, therefore, constitute the battlefield of

⁴⁵ Quoted in G. Palmer, P. Sherrard, and K. Ware, eds., *The Philokalia: The Complete Text*, Vol. 1 (London: Faber and Faber, 1983), 256.

⁴⁶ Merton, *No Man is an Island*, 19.

two opposing forces: the cruel power of meaninglessness or fate, and the loving power of God. Being seen in this manner, temptation captures the essence of spiritual warfare. For this reason, we have to make “the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil” (Eph 5:16). Every event can lead to either meaninglessness or meaningfulness. Each moment in life can be either lost in absurdity or redeemed in God. The evil power is ready, through manipulating us, to infest every inch of our life with meaninglessness. But God is more than ready, by uniting Himself with us in Christ, to redeem every inch of our fallen life or imbue it with everlasting meaning. The victory depends also on whether we want to let God work in our life or not.

We are saved every day. We are saved from our self-righteousness, our narrow minds, our own wills, our obstinate clinging . . . Salvation stands before us at every moment. It meets us face to face. It asks us to make a choice. Do we have the courage to accept it? It is costly, yet it brings life.⁴⁷

We can name those meaningless things that challenge us personally: anxiety, anger, despair, etc., and those meaningful things that we can gain personally through defeating meaningless things: peace, patience, hope, etc. We can see here that each moment, including the negative one, is brim with redemptive meanings. Thus, living with God is not a meaningless life at all.

Through Jesus we understand that sufferings or apparent absurdities in this world do not have the final say, they are essentially God’s means to realize his redeeming plans, which is inseparable from human’s faithful response in it. But it is only the life of one single human being, Jesus, which can defeat emptiness, for Jesus has the right life goal, cannot be deceived by the power of meaninglessness, and so, it is only Jesus who can attain the perfect fulfillment of

human nature. Consequently, it is only through living like Jesus that we⁴⁸ can finally put an end to meaninglessness. In overcoming temptations, Jesus shows to us that the only antidote to meaninglessness is our union with God, which is expressed in three Christlike attitudes (we can call them “sub-antidotes”): uniting oneself to God through obeying God’s Word (against the devil’s lure in the first temptation), trustfully attuning oneself more to the invisible reality of God (the sub-antidote to the meaninglessness that could be brought by the second test), and relinquishing the power of self-control through worshipping God more in love (the sub-antidote to the deceptiveness in the third temptation). These attitudes are like Midas touch: they can turn meaningless things or events into the everlastingly meaningful ones, as they can only be produced by a heart that is filled with God himself. In imitating Jesus’ attitudes, we are participating in God’s project to eliminate meaninglessness, to bring back Eden on earth (more precisely, to realize the New Heaven and New Earth).

Imitating Christ is identical to living in Christ.⁴⁹ We cannot live like Jesus without being united with—and empowered by—Jesus’ own Spirit. “The first man was of the dust of the earth; the second man is of heaven . . . And just as we have borne the image of the earthly man, so shall we bear the image of the heavenly man” (1 Cor 15:47, 49). We are not just united with Adam through flesh, we are also united with and thereby recreated in the image of the heavenly Adam (Christ) through His Spirit; it is the latter union that is more important and able to redeem us from our meaninglessness. In putting on Christ as our new identity in the midst of temptations, we are rendered eligible by God to be the inheritors of His glorious New Jerusalem. “Now if we are children, then we are heirs— heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if

⁴⁷ M. Wiederkehr, *A Tree Full of Angels* (New York, NY: HarperOne, 1992), 18.

⁴⁸ More accurately, God through us.

⁴⁹ This is Collange’s idea, quoted in Smit, *Paradigms of Being in Christ*, 94

indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory” (Rom 8:17). Hence, not only are we empowered by Jesus’ Spirit in overcoming temptations, but the temptations that we experience are also Jesus’ own temptations in our bodies, that is why we can be assured of getting help and win (Col 1:24).⁵⁰

Not only that God in Jesus was contextualized in our predicaments, but we in the Spirit are also contextualized in Jesus’ dying and rising. The temptations that we undergo are the signs that we have been united with Christ, and the live that we are living out now is Christ’s own life (Gal 2:20). Hence we must ask God to strengthen our being in His Spirit, so that we can feel more concretely and powerfully Christ’s presence in our heart (Eph 3:14-19). This is the very locus of meaningfulness: that the life that we live in our body is the eternal life of Christ himself, which, in presently in this world, mysteriously unfolds itself through the continual suffering and transformation (dying and rising). The church fathers emphasized that to know God is to be united with God, which is to become like God, but knowing God is not just an intellectual exercise, but a union with Christ in His death and resurrection (Phil 3:10-11). Being united with Christ himself is not just to be like God, but also to be filled with God. Through being filled with God in the midst of temptations, together with Christ, we start the process of God’s fulfilling all things (1 Cor 15:28) or letting God, the source of meaning, invade and permeate the realm of meaninglessness. Therefore, we in Christ are the living proofs that the world has destiny.

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⁵⁰ Dietrich Bonhoeffer. *Creation and Fall: Temptation*, trans. John Fletcher (NY: Collier Books, 1959), 108.

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