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# Christian Book Summaries

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## Jesus Wants to Save Christians: A Manifesto for the Church in Exile

**A Quick Focus**

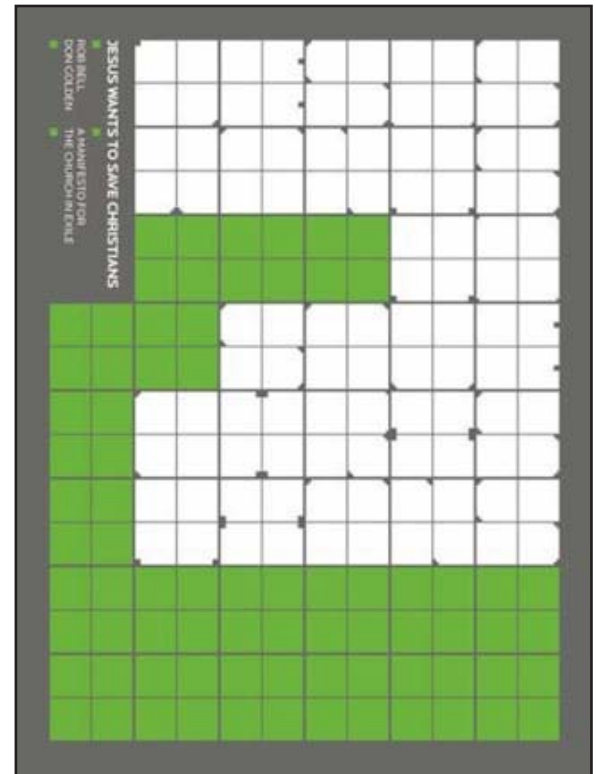
**The Book's Purpose**

- Present a manifesto calling Christians to be the church God designed her to be
- Paint a disturbing picture of what happens when Christians participate and support the very things Jesus came to deliver people from
- Articulate a theology from a New Exodus perspective
- Follow the progression of the biblical narrative in order to teach the things Jesus wants to save Christians from

**The Book's Message**

If one thing stands out about the ministry of Jesus, it is His focus on caring for those on the margins of society. Unfortunately, the American way of life and even the attitudes and practices of Christians promote the very things Jesus came to eliminate.

Throughout the biblical narrative, God hears the cry of the oppressed. Whether in slavery or in exile, His plan has always been to lead His people to the hope of Sinai. Failure to be a light to the world always drives people back to slavery. Jesus died to set people free from oppression; but He also calls them to be a light to the world.



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# East of Eden

## The First Dysfunctional Family

To say that the very first family on earth was dysfunctional is an understatement. Cain, a farmer who worked the soil, became angry with his brother Abel, a shepherd, who tended flocks. Why was Cain upset? Because God accepted Abel's offering but not his.

The story of Cain and Abel is one that suggests the unavoidable forward movement of civilization. It is a story about innovation and progress. It describes the strife that results when society moved to a nomadic orientation and away from an agricultural one. And sometimes the conflict results in murder.

The Genesis text reads, "Cain went out from the Lord's presence and lived in the land of Nod, east of Eden" (Genesis 4:16). In Eden everything is just right, the perfect place, and the place where the favor of God rests. But Cain is east of Eden. And east of Eden he puts his roots.

This east-of-Eden concept appears throughout Genesis. It serves as a metaphor suggesting that something has gone terribly awry with humanity.

## The High Cost of Protection

Keeping Americans safe is a very profitable line of work. For example, one well-known American company that earns hundreds of millions of dollars manufacturing appliances is now making a huge profit on a new airport security device called the air puffer.

Walk through the airport, and you can catch world news on one of the many television monitors located in every waiting area. On this particular day we learn of a new plane for the military that costs fifty billion dollars just to create. It can hover like a helicopter and take off like a jet.

Then we learn that the war "over there" is costing a trillion dollars, and to keep us safe "over here," the Homeland Security needs a staggering amount of money. And then we hear about the declining supply of oil. And then walking through the airport, we see an advertisement for a huge automobile that seats seven and has a television (it gets very few miles to the gallon).

Could it be that all the harm we're seeking to be protected from is not nearly as destructive as the harm we are bringing upon ourselves? We are living east of Eden. Things are not right.

## Ursprache

The Germans use the word *ursprache* to describe the notion that things are not right in the world. Something is not right with how humans relate to one another. When the Roman Empire put Jesus on the cross, it insisted that it was using crucifixion (military force) to bring peace to the world. The message of Christianity is that God has brought peace to this world through a naked man hanging, bleeding, and dying on a cross and not through weapons of war. More and more it is becoming an accepted belief around the world that Christians are supporting some of the very things Jesus came to deliver people from.

**"A Christian should get very nervous when the flag and the Bible start holding hands. This is not a romance we want to encourage."**

Back to the Genesis story ... God told Cain that He heard his brother's blood crying out from the ground (4:10). God still hears that cry. We need to hear it too.

CBS

# The Biblical Story of Oppression

In Exodus 3:7-9 we read that God saw the misery of His people and that He heard their cry. **"God always hears the cry of the oppressed."** Imagine four quadrants identified by four geographical locations, each representing an important chapter in the redemption story.

## Egypt

We must go back to Eden to get the bigger picture. Eating the forbidden fruit set in motion an ever-increasing deterioration. What started there affected the whole globe. Egypt is the place where God's people suffer the hardships of extreme slavery. Egypt is what results when sin runs rampant. Egypt demonstrates how easy it is for the powerful to manipulate and control the weak.

Exodus is the story about a people God rescues from the throes of oppression. He used a man named Moses to lead the people out of Egypt. When the people crossed the Red Sea miraculously, they celebrated. But that's not the end of the story. We must go to Sinai.

## Sinai

At Sinai, God reminded the whole nation that it was He who

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## THE BIBLICAL STORY OF OPPRESSION

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delivered them from Egypt. At Sinai, He invited the people into a covenant relationship with Him. He informed them that they would be a kingdom of priests who would show the world who God is and what He is like. They had experienced Egypt. Now He was inviting them to be anti-Egypt.

At Sinai He issued the Ten Commandments to teach them how to be human again. The commandments taught them how to experience liberation to the fullest. Because of the grace God had shown them, they were to take them to the world around them.

All these blessings were contingent on their complete obedience to God. Otherwise, the covenant deal was off. How did they respond? To answer, we must now go to Jerusalem.

### Jerusalem

We move forward in time to Jerusalem. The people are living in the Promised Land. The Queen of Sheba pays a visit to King Solomon and she is given the grand tour and experiences firsthand the blessings God has bestowed upon the people. Notice her response: "Because of the Lord's eternal love for Israel, he has made you king to maintain justice and righteousness" (1 Kings 10:9).

Her words suggest that there is one primary reason that God blessed this nation so abundantly—to use the wealth to bless the weak and poor. The Queen of Sheba saw the God of Solomon as the God of the oppressed.

But Solomon turned a deaf ear to the world's injustices. He built the Temple using forced labor. ***"In just a few generations, the oppressed have become the oppressors."*** By his actions the king perpetuated the very thing God delivered his people from in Egypt. He used his massive resources to build military bases and a top-rated homeland security operation. And don't forget all his wives and concubines, who led him further away from God.

Israel had become the new Egypt and Solomon the new Pharaoh. Sinai is long forgotten. What is God supposed to do when the body looks nothing like Him? Let's travel to Babylon.

### Babylon

The Bible teaches very clearly that God hears the cry of the oppressed. It also teaches clearly that He calls out His people and blesses them so that they will be champions for the oppressed. So, what happens when His people don't carry out this mission? Exile.

**"To forget this, to fail to hear the cry, to preserve prosperity at the expense of the powerless, is to miss what God has in mind."**

Exile is just as much a condition of the mind and heart as it is a geographical location. God sent His prophets to warn of judgment if the people did not turn from their evil ways. Amos rebuked the people for stockpiling resources instead of sharing with the poor. Isaiah said God will not hear their prayers because of their heavy emphasis on warfare.

These prophets came to call people back to their Sinai experience. The results? Amos was removed from the palace. Jeremiah got beaten up and thrown into a pit. The people didn't change. They enjoyed their comfortable living and turned a deaf ear to the cry of the oppressed. So God brought judgment and sent many Israelites into exile in Babylon, where they ended up serving the king against their will. The word for this? Slavery. They're back in "Egypt."

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# The Second Exodus

The glory days of Solomon are no longer. The people of God find themselves in a foreign land.

### The Value of Tears

The Hebrews had been on top of everything; they were admired by the world. They had great power. But they lost it all because they forgot God, and they forgot to care for the orphans and widows.

However, they turned their exile into poetry. They sang about their harps no longer playing. They longed for the days of celebration and the good life that the harp represented (Psalm 137). They cried out to God. And, remember, God always hears the cry of the oppressed. Crying reminds us that we are dependent and that we need to reconnect with God.

**"Our tears are sacred. They water the ground around our feet so that new things can grow."**

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## Hope in Exile

It didn't take them long to connect their experience with their ancestors' bondage in Egypt. And they began to dream of a better future. They needed a second exodus. And that's what they longed for and prayed for.

Out of the exile, there arose prophets who helped them rebirth imagination of a new day filled with joy and peace. However, their messages pictured an exodus that would draw people from all corners of the earth and include all of humanity.

## The Real Problem

Egypt is more than a location. It represents the real problem in each of our hearts, the problem of sin. We all are born in Egypt; and we all need an exodus from Egypt. The prophets helped the Israelites to see that salvation involved more than just their particular race. God's plan included every race. But to experience this second exodus, they would have to go by way of Sinai again and deal with the big "if" issue. "If" they obeyed, God would deliver and bless.

## A New Marriage

The Sinai covenant was like a marriage between God and His people. Since the first marriage didn't work out, they would need a new marriage with God if they were to be delivered from the rivers of Babylon. Hosea spoke vividly of God wooing His bride back. Jeremiah preached that the covenant would be different than the first. It would be a covenant written not on tablets of stone but on human hearts.

## A New Leader

The future hope described by the prophets centered on a new leader. Solomon, the son of David, did not work out. So, there would have to be a different son of David. Isaiah referred to this new leader as a servant. He would use power properly and purely. He would be a champion of the poor. He would rule forever.

This concept really wasn't anything new for the people. They remembered from Genesis that God would send someone who would crush the serpent, thereby liberating all of humanity (Genesis 3:15). He would be a prophet like Moses and a prince of peace. These promises generated new hope for the people of Israel. And that is how the Old Testament ends~unfulfilled, hanging, waiting~with the people longing for this new son of David.



# The New Son of David

The Israelites returned home from exile and rebuilt the Temple. But it was much smaller, and things just weren't what they used to be.

## In Exile at Home

Imagine growing up in a Jewish family. Your parents teach you regularly that Israel is the chosen people of God ... chosen to be a light to the entire world. You go to the festivals where songs of celebration are sung about the days of David and the great power of God.

But there is an obvious disconnect. Why is the Roman military center built right next to the Temple? You wonder why your people are so oppressed and why Roman soldiers control your streets.

Such was first-century life in Israel. At home, yet still living in exile. Still hanging on to the promises of the prophets that a new son of David would emerge and lead a new exodus.

## The New Exodus

Four hundred thirty years after Nehemiah's return to Jerusalem, Jesus was born, marking the end of bondage and a new exodus. All four Gospels quote Isaiah 40:3 to announce its beginning: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight paths for Him."

The mother of a dying daughter, a blind man, and a beggar get Jesus' attention by calling Him "Son of David." It was as much a question as a statement. Would He be like Solomon, the other son of David? Would He promote justice and righteousness, or would He build military bases?

Jesus performed His first miracle at a wedding feast as a symbol signifying that He was leading the people into a remarriage with God. They could reach for their harps once again.

The new son of David who inaugurates a new marriage covenant and who leads a new exodus represents the way for people to return from exile.

## A New Kingdom and a New Humanity

In this new kingdom, Jesus teaches what new humanity looks like. His power flows to the lame, the blind, and the broken. He uses His power as a servant who administers love and compassion.

The first Creation, according to Genesis, happened out of chaos. In the same way Jesus enters a world of chaos to bring new creation. He promises that when He is lifted up, He will draw all people to Himself and bring renewal to all things.

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**“This new son of David isn’t just leading a new exodus for a specific group of people; he’s bringing liberation for everybody everywhere and ultimately for everything everywhere for all time.”**

### The Road to Emmaus

After the Crucifixion, two Christ-followers are returning from Jerusalem to their home in Emmaus. They are dejected and embarrassed that the one they gave their lives to follow is now dead and gone. They are joined by another traveler who probes what they’re discussing.

After hearing the story, the traveler calls them foolish for not understanding the big picture. He reminds them that the prophets predicted this new son of David would have to suffer and die. And then He explains why Jesus had to suffer.

Did the traveler teach them about the history of violence? Did He teach them about exile? Did He teach them about Adam? Did He teach them about the prophets predicting that someone would come and be willing to pay the price?

Whatever approach this stranger used, it worked. Their eyes were opened. Everything began to make sense. Using the Scriptures, this traveler turned their deep despair into a fresh hope and a clear vision of the future. The stranger, of course, is Jesus Himself.



# Away from Jerusalem

In the previous chapter, we talked about two men traveling home from Jerusalem. Let’s look at another man who is leaving Jerusalem. His name is Philip.

### To the Ends of the Earth

Philip was one of the early followers of Jesus. He was from the small village of Bethsaida, known for its strict religious rules. But when he met Jesus, everything changed. In Acts 8, we find him on a road leaving Jerusalem, where he meets an Ethiopian eunuch.

This movement away from Jerusalem is symbolic of the entire story of the early Church. The story begins on the Mount of Olives (remember Mount Sinai?) where the resurrected Christ over a period of 40 days (remember 40 years in the wilderness?) talked to the disciples about Moses and the exodus. Luke wants us to see that Jesus is the new Moses and that He is leading a new exodus.

In Acts 1:8, Jesus told the disciples that they would be witnesses “in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” Basically, He was saying that whatever happens in Jerusalem will have such a powerful effect, the whole earth will be influenced, just as the prophets had predicted.

**“If it’s liberation for all of humanity, for all of creation, how could something that massive, that true, that good, that compelling stay in Jerusalem?”**

The Ethiopian eunuch is heading home to Africa. Someone from the “ends of the earth” is asking about this new exodus. And certainly for a small-town Jewish man like Philip, Ethiopia is located at the ends of the earth.

### Sinai Not Forgotten

Let’s go back a little and look at a previous story. Acts 2:1 informs us that on the day of Pentecost all the believers were gathered in one place. Sinai taught us about covenant, a group of people gathering at the foot of a mountain agreeing to be God’s representation to the world. Sinai was about all people to the ends of the earth regaining their edenic relationship with God.

On the day of Pentecost, the believers had gathered to read about Sinai from the book of Exodus when a supernatural power overwhelmed them. It was reminiscent of Sinai, except on this occasion God chose to reside in their lives and not just on a mountain or in a tabernacle. Included in this group were people from all over the world. God and man are coming together once again. We call this gathered people the church.

### Breaking the Rules

The Ethiopian eunuch requests baptism from Philip. To oblige, Philip would be violating the Jewish rulebook. But what do you do when your religious system is falling apart and being replaced by something far superior? This tension is a common theme throughout the book of Acts.

## AWAY FROM JERUSALEM

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We find it in Paul. He is on his way to Damascus to bring back Christians as prisoners to Jerusalem. Damascus is in Syria, away from Jerusalem. Paul is trying to counteract the ends-of-the-earth commission by bringing these people back to the Holy City. But on the way, he meets Jesus.

We also find the tension in the dispute in Acts 15 where the religious leaders are stuck in the old rituals. Not only are they stuck there; they are trying to bring others back there.

### A Story of Movement

The early church is a story of movement from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth. The church by its very nature must expand. In Acts 13, we read where the Spirit prompted the believers to “set aside” Paul and Barnabas to take the mission to other parts of the world. Once again we are reminded of Sinai where the mountain, Aaron and his sons, and the objects of the Temple were “set apart.” *“This passage in Acts 13 is the first time in human history when ... the gathered people of God join together as willing priestly agents to the world.”*

At the end of Acts, we find Paul in Rome (to the ends of the earth) where he *witnessed* all day long to the Jewish leaders (28:23). The word *witness* takes us back to Acts 1:8 where Jesus commissioned the believers to be His witnesses to the ends of the earth. The book of Acts ends in Rome with Paul sharing the message of Jesus with anyone who would listen.



# The American Empire

The road to Emmaus reminds us that it's entirely possible for someone to be with Jesus every day and yet still miss who He actually is. Jesus had a completely different view of what happened back in Jerusalem.

### From Accumulation to Preservation

America is an empire; and the Bible talks a lot about empires. Most of the Bible was written about a people who lived under the world superpowers (Egyptian, Babylonian, Assyrian, Persian, Roman). It is difficult to read it from the perspective of the oppressed when you see things from the paradigm of the superpower.

Every empire accumulates wealth and resources. Remember Solomon? America represents only 5 percent of the world's population; yet it owns 20 percent of the world's wealth. Almost one billion people survive on less than the equivalent of 1 American dollar a day. The average American teenager spends about 150 dollars a week.

Another problem is that people develop a sense of entitlement. They think they have a right to have all these things. The biggest temptation, however, is to forget the God who provided all the blessings. People forget God when they forget the people God cares for.

Once entitlement settles in, it becomes imperative for the empire to preserve what it has accumulated. Why do you think America has such an interest in the Middle East? Because two-thirds of the world's oil is located there. Consequently, we build massive defense systems and do all we can to protect our dear friends in Saudi Arabia. So preservation of the entitled lives we enjoy becomes priority number one.

**“In empire, you believe in that which you preserve, you preserve that which you are entitled to, and you are entitled to that which you have accumulated. This is the religion, the animating spirit of empire.”**

### Missing the Biblical Message

This vicious cycle makes it very difficult to empathize with the stories of those who don't share our faith. In empire, for example, it is difficult to hear stories from the perspective of Native Americans whose land we raided. When you have the power and when you have enough food, it is hard to understand the voice of those who have no power and who have no food. Just like the men going to Emmaus missed the Bible's central message, the same happens today because of empire.


Take the book of Revelation, for another example. Most Christians today see the book only in light of future events instead of understanding it from the paradigm of its initial recipients.

John was a pastor who wrote this book in a subversive form of language called apocalyptic. The believers would have understood perfectly that he was addressing the evils of the Roman Empire. He exhorted them not to take the mark of the beast. He let them know that Jesus is Lord, not Caesar. Peace and compassion are the right way, not violence and domination. The recipients of this book were not thinking about how it would be helpful to believers two thousand years later.

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## THE AMERICAN EMPIRE continued from page 6

How is it possible to translate these messages in today's culture? We have multi-million-dollar church campuses and expensive technology that allows us to worship in state of the art facilities. We have youth pastors, a luxury that until recent generations was never heard of. We have accumulated the financial resources to afford all of these things.

How can our people today ever relate to the oppression and hunger in our world? How can they truly understand what Jesus meant when He said He came to preach the good news to the poor? They hear the Sunday message, go home in their nice cars, and close the garage door behind them. The only hope possible in communicating with impact is to remind them of the blood on the door posts. 

# The Eucharist and New Humanity

In Egypt, life was nothing but despair as the Israelites daily tried to satisfy the Pharaoh's increasing quota of bricks. God was seemingly absent. But that was about to change.

## Symbol of the Lamb

God heard the cry of His oppressed people. Moses finally convinced Pharaoh to let the people leave. Before they left, they ate the Lord's Passover.

The symbol of the revolution was a lamb—an innocent, slain lamb, sacrificed for each family. Its blood was sprinkled on the door posts to protect the firstborn from the angel of death. But before the journey could begin, God told them to eat the roasted lamb. They were to remember this date because their history would be marked by this significant event.

As the prophets connected the exile with their ancestors' slavery in Egypt, they recognized that the whole world was in a type of exile, one which would take more than an innocent lamb's blood to resolve. They foretold the birth of God's own firstborn who would take upon Himself the burden of the whole world. Jesus is the lamb

## Jesus and the Passover

On the night Jesus was arrested, He and the disciples ate the Passover meal. At this meal, He took the bread and the cup and said, "This is My body; this is My blood." He took the annual Passover event and made it about Himself. He knew that He would not be spared a cruel death. His blood was shed for all of creation.

What should our response be? We are to remember, and we are to be thankful. The word for thankful is *eucharizomai*, based on two Greek words meaning "good" and "to give." Out of these roots comes our English word *Eucharist*, literally meaning "good gift." "***Jesus is God's good gift to the world.***"

Today, believers take part in a ritual called the Eucharist (Communion) to remember and to be grateful for God's good gift of Jesus, His Son. But we must realize that the significance of the Eucharist extends far beyond the ritual itself.

## Living Eucharist

We are talking about a whole new way of life. Paul captured this significance when he talked about Jesus being revealed through our bodies (2 Corinthians 4:10). He's living a life that goes beyond himself. This life is difficult and costly.

Identifying with our hurting neighbor always costs something. And that is how the Eucharist is supposed to work. The church is the body of Christ, a living Eucharist. The most powerful sermon preached is when someone is struggling hurting, doubting, and barely hanging on, and a believer with heartfelt compassion says, "Me too."

Through the death of Jesus all creation has been reconciled to God. Peace has been made, and the wall has come down. There is a new humanity. And the church embodies this new humanity where labels are insufficient, rigid stances are no longer possible, and perspectives are no longer black and white.

## The Eucharist Is the Answer

If the goal of a church is to get people to come and get those who come to invite others to come, then something critical is missing. Church is not about attendance. Church is people living out the Christian life and becoming champions of the suffering, the poor, and the oppressed. When there is a disconnect from those on the margins of society, the result will always be despair because God created us for so much more.

Cain asked, "Am I my brother's keeper?" The answer to that question is yes. The Eucharist says yes to the community with all of its suffering. Where is God when one loses his job, another tests positive, and another is alone? The answer? The Eucharist. The church is God's good gift for the world because Jesus' blood has been shed on the door posts of the world.

**"The church is the living, breathing, life-giving, system-confronting, empire-subverting picture of the new humanity."**

# Conclusion:

## Jesus Wants to Save Us

We have looked at life from the perspectives of Egypt, Sinai, Jerusalem, and Babylon. In Egypt we cry out to God and find rescue and redemption. From Egypt we travel to Sinai where we discover identity and purpose. It is here that God invites us to join Him in doing something about all the brokenness in the world.

**“God doesn’t just want to save us; God is looking for a body, a people to incarnate the divine.”**

In Jerusalem, we face the ongoing question: How will we manage our blessing? Will we use it to benefit the oppressed? Or will we develop a sense of entitlement and end up in exile in Babylon where we live in despair? In exile, if we confess and repent, we can have a fresh start and begin re-imagining.

In our fresh start we must understand the stark reality of slavery, hunger, suicide, and AIDS that enmesh our world. In our reimagining we realize that Jesus wants to save us from irrelevancy and use us to make a difference. We must seize any voice, power, or energy we have and turn them into blessings for those who don’t enjoy these privileges.

Jesus wants to save the world; but He also wants to save us. He wants to save us from the kingdom of comfort, from the empire of indifference, and from the priority of preservation. He wants us to understand that the priests are not someone else. Every believer is a priest.

Jesus wants to save us from the misconception that salvation is about individuals and not about the systems that enslave people. He wants to save us from watering down the gospel to the removal of sin while neglecting God’s desire to redeem all of creation.

The Bible begins with Cain’s cry emerging from the ground. It ends with God wiping away every tear in a world where there is no mourning or crying or pain. And that, my friends, is hope.



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