

Our Single Greatest Need as a Church

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Are We There Yet?

Exodus 33

A few weeks ago, Julia began our summer series from the book of Exodus titled “Are We There Yet?” She made the point that when the Children of Israel were led out from Egyptian slavery, they were taken on a long, roundabout journey before they reached the Promised Land. Israel’s journey through the wilderness is really a picture of our own lives in this world. We often feel like we’re on a long, roundabout journey to get to where God wants us to be. Like kids in a car on a summer road trip, we constantly ask “Are we there yet?” When are we going to arrive?

Life as a journey is a constant theme in the world’s great literature. Some of you may have read *The Odyssey* when you were in high school. Or *Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain. Or seen *The Lord of the Rings*

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Movie poster

Or *Homeward Bound*

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Or *College Road Trip*

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Movie poster

Vineyard Columbus is on a journey as a church. As I publicly announced 18 months ago, at the end of 2020 I’ll be transitioning out of my role as Senior Pastor and I’ll hand the reins over to Julia and Eric Pickerill. I’m going to remain on staff as our Founding Pastor, but in a very different role. I’ll continue to be on the preaching team. I’ll be leading our Pastors Residency Program that we’re starting this September. And I’ll be doing some other things for the church. But I’ll no longer be the senior leader of this church!

This is new for us here at Vineyard Columbus because I’ve been the only Senior Pastor this church has ever known. We’re on a journey. But like the children of Israel, we’re not doing this journey alone. The children of Israel weren’t simply led by Moses through their wilderness wanderings. Instead, they were led by God! It was Moses’ job as the

leader to make sure that the people kept following the cloud during the day and the fire at night which represented the leadership and the presence of the Holy Spirit.

And that's always been my heart, brothers and sisters! Regarding the big decisions we have made as a church, I can stand here today and say that I've always viewed my job as trying to shepherd a church that followed the leadership of the Holy Spirit. Not my leadership, but the leadership of the Holy Spirit. Our big decisions were in response to the Holy Spirit's initiative.

For example, we started a leadership training school years ago called VLI in response to the Lord speaking to me in a time of prayer. We were growing rapidly and we didn't have enough qualified leaders. I prayed to the Lord and said, "Lord, you said the harvest is white but the laborers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into the harvest. So I'm asking you, God, give us more workers. Give us more leaders!" And the Lord responded so plainly to me and said, "Rich, you won't be able to reap where you haven't sown!" As I sat there in prayer, meditating on that word, I felt like the Lord was leading us to begin a training program to raise up leaders in our church.

Our Community Center was in direct response to a vision the Lord had given me about connecting a church with a place that would be actively engaged day after day in activities of justice and mercy. I could point out many, many big decisions we made as a church that were in direct response to the supernatural initiative of God's Spirit.

In the passage we're going to look at today, we're going to find that Moses as a leader was never satisfied with his past experience of God's presence and God's leadership. Moses was a man who always wanted more. In this journey into our future, I believe we need to be grateful for past blessings from God. But we must never be a church that is nostalgic for the good old days. Instead, we need Eric and Julia, along with our leadership team and the entire church to constantly be seeking more of God. More of God's presence, more of God's leadership in the future, more than we ever had in the past.

I've called today's talk "Our Single Greatest Need as a Church". Let's pray.

You know, a desire for more is a sign of health.

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The desire for more is a sign of health

A desire for more – to have more of God's Spirit at work in your life, more of God's leadership at work in your family, and to have more of God's presence and leadership in our church – is a sign of health. We know that a baby is sick when it stops wanting to eat. A hungry baby is generally a healthy baby! When a married couple stops wanting

more for their marriage, when a couple throws up their hands and says “I give up, our marriage will never improve. We will never solve the arguments that we always have about this or that.” When a couple says “I guess I have to just settle for a business partnership, not an intimate, mutually satisfying marriage” most of us would say that’s the sign of a really unhealthy marriage.

We ought to be grateful for past experiences of God! But let’s never be nostalgic about the good old days. Instead, constantly reaching for more is a characteristic of every great Christian who has ever lived. I see this passion for more of God’s presence in the life of the Apostle Paul. Listen to Paul as he writes this:

Slide Philippians 3:10–14

¹⁰ I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, ¹¹ and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.

¹² Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. ¹³ Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, ¹⁴ I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.

Paul knew Jesus Christ. If anyone ever knew Christ, it was Paul. But Paul says, “I want more. I’m not satisfied with what I had in the past. I want more of God’s presence in my experience. I don’t think I’ve attained everything yet.” As Paul presses forward, he’s straining to attain the high call of God. After 25 years as an apostle, he says, I’m not finished yet. There’s so much more of Jesus Christ that I haven’t explored. I want more!

Brothers and sisters, as a church we want to be like the Apostle Paul. As individuals we want to be like Paul. Thank God for what you’ve given me up until now. But, I want more. Now,

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We can have many blessings and yet not have God’s presence

Look with me at this text in Exodus.

Slide Exodus 33:1-3

Then the LORD said to Moses, “Leave this place, you and the people you brought up out of Egypt, and go up to the land I promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, saying, ‘I will give it to your descendants.’ ² I will send an angel before you and drive out the Canaanites, Amorites, Hittites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites. ³ Go up to the land flowing with milk and honey. But I will not go with you, because you are a stiff-necked people and I might destroy you on the way.”

Let me give you the setting of Exodus 33. The nation of Israel who are God's people in the Old Testament, sinned against the Lord by their worship of the golden calf. We read that story in Exodus 32.

In verses 1-3 of Exodus 33, God says to Moses: I've seen my people's worship of the golden calf. And what the people are saying to me is that they don't really want a relationship with me. You don't really care about my presence in your life. You don't really want my leadership anymore. If that's your desire, that you not have intimate present-tense relationship with me, ok!

Listen, I made you a promise to give you the land of Canaan. I'm a God who keeps his promises. I will give you the Promised Land. I will protect you from your enemies, because I promised to do that. I'm going to give you lots of blessings in your life. The one thing that you won't have is me! You're not going to experience my presence anymore. You're not going to have my leadership of you anymore. You'll have blessing, but those blessings won't include my presence.

Sadly, I suspect that many of us who have the name "Christian" would take that deal. I think many folks in the church who have the name "Christian" would say, "God, if you gave me a great job and a lot of money and a nice house and a good family, yes, I would take that deal without you."

For true Christians, we would say what Moses said, "You cannot buy me off that cheaply, Lord. I don't want all the goodies and miss the **ultimate good**. It's not enough for me to have the gift unless I also have **the giver.**"

Brothers and sisters, as we continue on our journey into our future let's never be satisfied with God's blessing, unless with it, we also experience the presence of God. We can experience tremendous blessing – bigger buildings, better financing, more people, great popularity, wonderful men's fellowship breakfasts and women's groups and Bible studies – but have nothing of the reality of God's presence or leading by God's Holy Spirit. We can have many blessings and yet not have the blessed one with us.

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We can't have more of God's presence without radical surgery

Let's read verses 4-6:

Slide Exodus 33:4-6

⁴ When the people heard these distressing words, they began to mourn and no one put on any ornaments. ⁵ For the LORD had said to Moses, "Tell the Israelites, 'You are a stiff-necked people. If I were to go with you even for a moment, I might destroy you.

Now take off your ornaments and I will decide what to do with you.' " ⁶ So the Israelites stripped off their ornaments at Mount Horeb.

Here's what's going on. When the people heard that God wasn't going to go with them anymore, that God wasn't going to lead them, God wasn't going to speak to them anymore, God wasn't going to give them his presence any longer, they grieved, they mourned and they stripped off their jewelry!

In an Orthodox Jewish family, when a loved one dies, you take off your jewelry and tear your clothes as a sign of grief. The interesting thing in this story is that people not only tear their clothes, they remove all of their jewelry. Why? Well, it was their jewelry that was used to make the golden calf in Exodus 32. Here's what we read:

Slide Exodus 32:2-4

² Aaron answered them, "Take off the gold earrings that your wives, your sons and your daughters are wearing, and bring them to me." ³ So all the people took off their earrings and brought them to Aaron. ⁴ He took what they handed him and made it into an idol cast in the shape of a calf, fashioning it with a tool. Then they said, "These are your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt."

So, when the children of Israel stripped themselves of their jewelry what they're doing is they're getting rid of everything that was associated with their past sins. There's radical surgery going on here. They are cutting deeply and saying, "We want to get rid of everything in our lives that is associated with our past idolatry."

Let me update this a little bit. For those of us who are married, imagine if you or your spouse entered some kind of illicit relationship. Maybe there was an emotional or physical affair. This illicit relationship caused a breach between you and your spouse and also caused a breach in your relationship with God. You no longer experienced the presence of God. You lost intimacy and connection with your spouse. What must you do to heal this breach? You need radical surgery, of course!

Like the children of Israel, you have to cut deep. You've got to cut that other relationship off completely. You've got to say, "I cannot see this person anymore. I can't text that person anymore. We can't talk anymore. We can't talk on Messenger anymore." The children of Israel went further. They had to say, "I'm going to get rid of everything associated with that relationship. All the ornaments. All the gifts that were ever given. You must delete all the texts from your phone. You must get rid of all the emails, all the mementos of that relationship."

Marlene and I were shocked to discover years ago that some married friends of ours kept letters and gifts from old boyfriends and girlfriends. When we got married, no one had to tell us to get rid of old letters and photos and gifts. We understood that our

relationship was to be one of radical exclusivity. We didn't want any of the old stuff around! We got rid of all of it. Radical surgery may include you changing your phone number, blocking someone's number, getting rid of all the alcohol in the house, entering recovery, cutting the cable on your TV, putting some kind of parental control on your computer! We do whatever we need to do to cut deep. Repentance often involves radical surgery!

Jesus talks about the importance of radical surgery in

Slide Matthew 5:27-30

²⁷ "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' ²⁸ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. ²⁹ If your right eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. ³⁰ And if your right hand causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell.

Brothers and sisters, if you've lost God's presence in your life one of the questions you need to ask yourself is, "Is there any area of my life that requires deep repentance?" Is there any place where I have yet to cut deeply? Superficial healing is not enough. I need radical surgery!"

There's a big difference between asking God's forgiveness, getting a little temporary balm for our consciences and stripping off the ornaments. We're at such a moment regarding racial injustice as a country and as God's people, the church. There are lots of folks after four weeks who are saying, "Can't we just move on already? My goodness, this has been talked about for four weeks. These protests just continue! Let's go back to normal. Can't we all just get along? Let's talk about peace. Let's talk about unity. Let's not just talk about racial injustice."

Those who say that churches should only focus on peace and unity and never on racial injustice are like abusive husbands who tell their wives, "Why can't you just forgive and move on? Why do you have to keep bringing up my abuse? You know, your complaints are damaging to our marriage. You're affecting our unity by complaining about my abuse."

I think the question for us is: how committed are we in achieving true justice, which is the foundation for true peace and unity? If true justice is what we desire, the surgery of repentance has to cut deep in our own hearts and in our church and community.

- We can have many blessings and yet not have God's presence
- We can't have more of God's presence without radical surgery

Now, here's the encouragement:

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We can have more of God's presence by starting with just a few people

Just a few people – Moses and Joshua – decided they wanted more of the presence of God in their lives. They pulled away, outside the camp, outside all the institutional structure, and they went after God on their own. I love this text because it tells me that discovering a deeper relationship with God, experiencing more of God's presence and really having God lead us in the future doesn't require some gigantic organization or a big church-wide campaign. Having more of God doesn't have to wait for big meetings, flashy advertising and massive budgets. I'm not saying you can't have the presence of God in those things. I've experienced God's presence in large conferences. But the most meaningful time of God leading me personally was when I was alone with the Lord.

Brothers and sisters, you don't have to wait for the church hierarchy or somebody to give you permission to seek the presence of God with a few friends. Just two or three men or two or three women say let's draw aside for a little while and pray. Let's really go after God. It's amazing, in the history of Christianity how often a few people – sometimes one obscure person – decide they are going to go after the Lord and they do so not because they are judging the rest of the church. "I'm way more spiritual than everyone else." They are doing so for their own souls. A thirst for God is not satisfied by waiting for the church or its leadership to hold a meeting.

This, by the way, is how the Vineyard movement started. A few people in southern California, including a woman by the name of Carol Wimber the wife of the late John Wimber, a couple of relatives and a few friends felt completely dried out. They were Christians living moral lives. They knew all the rules. But they said, "We don't have any of God's presence in our lives. We haven't heard God's voice for such a long time. We want more of God."

So, they began to meet together to worship God and to pray. They didn't have this holier than thou attitude that often characterizes prayer groups that are supposedly seeking after God, but whose subtext is "Let's judge the church together." A few more people joined them and then a few more. Pretty soon, they had 120 folks gathering together week after week simply to worship and wait on God. God started to visit them. Then John Wimber, Carol's husband, began visiting the group. He experienced more of the presence of God. The little group turned into several thousand churches around the world.

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We can have more of God's presence which is the distinguishing mark of the church

Slide Exodus 33:14–17

¹⁴ The LORD replied, “My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.”

¹⁵ Then Moses said to him, “If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here. ¹⁶ How will anyone know that you are pleased with me and with your people unless you go with us? What else will distinguish me and your people from all the other people on the face of the earth?”

¹⁷ And the LORD said to Moses, “I will do the very thing you have asked, because I am pleased with you and I know you by name.”

Of all the things that mark out Vineyard Columbus in the future, our distinguishing mark needs to be the presence of God! The distinctive mark of God’s people is that we are people of the presence. The greatest disaster in Old Testament history was when God departed from the temple in Jerusalem because of Israel’s sin. You can read about that in Ezekiel 10. The people of Israel still had the Temple standing. They still made sacrifices. They still had all the rituals. They still had the Promised Land. They still had their religion. They still engaged in all the prayers. But they didn’t have the presence of God. The Holy of Holies where God dwelt was empty.

Let me ask you a question: What will make Vineyard Columbus unique among all the other social groups and clubs and gatherings? What will make the church distinct from every other charitable organization or religious institution on earth as we move into the future? The church is not unique because we’re better organized. We’re not special because we’re better financed. I think that Amazon, Google and Apple are a little better financed than we are at Vineyard Columbus. We’re not even unique in our ability to teach. There are lots of colleges and TED Talks that educate people better than the church does. What makes the church unique, what makes the church worth doing, is the presence of God.

Let me close by asking you a few questions, brothers and sisters. Do you value having God’s presence and God’s leading in your life more than you value anything else? Is the most precious thing to you that you have God? Do you pray for more of God’s presence and more of God’s leading? Not only for yourself, but for your family, if you have children for your children, for your spouse? Do you pray for God’s presence and leading for this church and its leaders?

Say to God: Don’t buy us off cheaply in the future. It’s not enough to have bigger meetings, bigger buildings and more money if we don’t have you! Will you join me, brothers and sisters, in praying for our leaders? Eric and Julia certainly. Campus pastors – Charles, Irene, Scott and other pastors and leaders of our church. Pray for more of God’s presence in our lives, in pastors and church leaders and in our family’s lives. Let’s pray.

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Exodus 33

1. The desire for more is a sign of health
2. We can have many blessings and yet not have God's presence
3. We can't have more of God's presence without radical surgery
4. We can have more of God's presence by starting with just a few people
5. We can have more of God's presence which is the distinguishing mark of the church