

# Sermon on Joshua 1:8

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**Title:** Prepare for prayer by meditating on Christ

- the need
- the way
- in order to pray

**Series:** Practice Prayer #2

**Goal:** Help believers to discover how they can prepare for prayer by meditating on Jesus. Invite them to pray lively.

**Prayer suggestions:**

- thank God that we have so much to meditate on
- praise Jesus for his life on earth and everything he has done for us
- ask the Holy Spirit to teach you to pray by responding to his words
- ask God to help the congregation pray together
- ask the Holy Spirit to give you a burning zeal for God's glory and a passion for the lost
- ask his help to flee the distractions of the world and to concentrate on meditation and prayer.

**Liturgy** (from the 'Book of Praise' of the Canadian and American Reformed Churches)

**call to worship:** Ps 19.1.14

**opening:** Ps 1

**declaration of mercy:** Lamentations 3:19-24

**response to law & grace:** Ps 143,5-7

**Scripture reading:** Joshua 1,1-11

**before sermon:** Ps 119, 5.6.44

**after sermon:** Ps 105,1-3

**thanksgiving:** Hymn32, 1.2

*I hope this sermon will serve to increase your love for God and lead you to a deeper dedication to our Lord Jesus Christ.*

*Praise him for his grace!*



*(before the sermon)*

In preparation for the preaching of God's word I request that everyone takes their bulletin and read the first question:

- how much time do you spend on prayer every day, every week? Do you prepare for it (and how)?

Then, think about this question before God for a minute.

(silence)

## *Sermon*

Worshippers of the true God, belonging to Jesus Christ,

### (1. The need for meditation: focus on Jesus)

#### *our busy lives in a crazy world*

So how much time DO you spend on prayer?

This question is not meant to send you on a guilt trip.

It's the same type of question married couples should ask themselves: how much time are we spending together? Do we talk enough? Do we work out the rough edges of our relationship or are we just dragging on as if everything is ok?

When your marriage is happy and satisfying you should still ask these questions.

Likewise, for a Christian it is a good habit to be aware of how we relate to our Lord. Do I allow the many things in my daily life to take over?

How much time do I spend on prayer? This is an indication of how important the Lord is to me.

If you love sports you spend a lot of time on sports.

If you watch many movies you probably love movies.

If you can often be found hiking in the mountains chances are that you are an outdoor person.

So are you a Christ-like person? This will be visible in your habits.

This question helps every one of us to notice when things come in the way. We need to realize that our relation to the Lord is under fire.

In today's society it is in a time crunch.

#### *Huge distractions*

Let me give you an example of what I read in the newspaper this past week.

Parents go camping with their children on or before the 4th of July and they sigh and say: 'Finally we have some time together without cell phones, internet, play stations, and TV.'

(Just a first thought: don't these things have an Off switch? Just because you have these electronics doesn't mean you have to leave them on all the time! And don't responsible parents give their children a maximum amount of computer and TV time every week?)

This remark indicates a deeper problem: we have these things that seem to make our lives better. But they send us new impulses every minute; there are so many things we should see and experience – news, entertainment, information, emails to respond to - and the message is: don't miss it! This is a huge distraction.

Our minds have to deal with this overload. There is too little time to do and experience everything.

Since God is not banging on the door in the same way, drawing our attention on our TVs, sending us emails, we spend less time in prayer and more on all those other things.

Children at school experience the effects. They can't concentrate for a long time as they are so used to getting new impulses every minute.

What effect does it have on you, especially on your prayer life?

Do you feel like this person who says: ‘My mind wanders when I pray. I cannot concentrate on what I’m saying. I just make a few requests, pray for the people and things that come to mind right there and then and that’s it.’

It’s easy to become a victim of our overload of impulses and info.

If you recognize this and find that you spend less than half an hour in prayer and Bible reading every day, I’d like to help you in this sermon and give you an alternative.

### *Prayer is an expression of fellowship with God*

Let’s realize again what prayer is.

Prayer is not about formulas or a few quick requests. You can do so on occasion, but this is not what your prayer life should look like during the next 1-10 years.

If we are to pray in the right way, we need to realize what prayer is:

prayer is fellowship, seeking God’s presence, bowing down before him and talk to him your heavenly Father and talk to Jesus your friend.

This fellowship with God is so important that you can compare it to breathing – it is essential to our life. Only, we discover that, unlike breathing, it takes a conscious effort and a huge effort. It is a spiritual discipline that takes time to master.

So how do I wrestle myself free so that I can pray, spend enough time on it, and give it the attention it needs?

The answer is found in what God commands Joshua.

Even though prayer is not mentioned there directly, I hope you will discover that the habit and skill God teaches Joshua and us is the one we need if we are to pray intimately, intelligently, and continuously.

*(vs. 6-9:) “Be strong and courageous, because you will lead these people to inherit the land I swore to their forefathers to give them. 7 Be strong and very courageous. Be careful to obey all the law my servant Moses gave you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, that you may be successful wherever you go. 8 Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful. 9 Have I not commanded you? (in Hebrew: I have commanded you!)*

*Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go.”*

### *Daunting task*

Joshua was the next leader of Israel at a key moment in their history. They were entering the Promised Land. To lead them there had been a daunting task for Moses. He could not prevent the Israelites from being stubborn. They did not believe and therefore they were punished with 40 years of wandering through the desert. Even Moses had not made it: he could not enter the Promised Land himself because he took matters into his own hands.

To fill the shoes of Moses with an unwilling nation like that – imagine that! This is why God encourages Joshua with these repeated promises:

‘Be strong. Don’t be afraid!’ – well, he could have been, considering what happened in the previous 40 years...

‘Do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go.’ – that’s quite a promise! If God is with us, we can do anything!

In what way is God going to do this?

He is not backing down from his demand for faith and obedience. He does not lower his standards. The covenant with God requires that his people listen and obey.

He tells Joshua to ‘be careful to obey all the law my servant Moses gave you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, that you may be successful wherever you go.’

And God tells Joshua how he is going to do this:

*‘Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful.’*

*The way it works: meditate!*

God was obviously not going to tell Joshua all the details directly by revelation. Instead, Joshua had to learn how to lead the nation by studying his will and his promises in the books of the law. God was going to guide Joshua by his meditation on what God had told his people. And I am sure this went hand in hand with prayer every day.

In this sense we are more like Joshua than Moses: we are to find what God’s will is by careful studying of the Bible, bathed in prayer. There are no direct voices. God wants us to fill our minds with what he has told us already. The usual way is that matters become clear after meditation of, informed by praying over what we read in Scripture.

Joshua was not the only leader who had to meditate on God’s laws. Deut 17 tells us that God had put meditating on his law on the daily schedule of every king of Israel:

*When he takes the throne of his kingdom, he is to write for himself on a scroll a copy of this law, taken from that of the priests, who are Levites. 19 It is to be with him, and he is to read it all the days of his life so that he may learn to revere the LORD his God and follow carefully all the words of this law and these decrees 20 and not consider himself better than his brothers and turn from the law to the right or to the left. Then he and his descendants will reign a long time over his kingdom in Israel (Deut 17,18-20)*

The kings could inquire with God on special occasions and then ask his prophet. But he could not rely on prophets to tell him how to handle the daily affairs of being in charge of God’s nation.

Clearly, the task of a king was that important that he had to study God’s will themselves! God had appointed him to lead his people not just in state affairs but in giving spiritual direction in how to serve God.

*(It is clear that in later times the book of the law had disappeared and clearly wasn't present in the king's palace any more (the book of the law was rediscovered in Josiah's time).*

### *Leadership and meditation*

We can draw a conclusion about leadership and meditation: those who lead (and we all lead others, one way or another) must be led by the Word of God, which we must absorb into head and heart as a lifetime project.

(as J.I. Packer summarizes in his book *Praying. Finding our way through duty to delight*, p. 77).

Every Christian with responsibilities, then, should follow God's instruction: meditate on the Scriptures and study God's will for your personal life, the church, your family, the government, and your business.

If you have a responsibility or you desire to serve God in any area of life, you need to immerse yourself in God's truth and draw from his wisdom.

If you are a husband who wants to lead his family in God's way, then first you need to be immersed in God's Word. You can't lead if you are not studying God's Word yourself.

## 2. Meditate on ...

### *Meditation: how do you do that?*

Meditation – if this word had not been in the text you would probably wonder whether I had been reading too many Buddhist books this week. It brings images to mind of monks endlessly reciting mantras, trying to get into a trance. They try to escape from the real world and become one with the divine. That's not for rational Christians like us...

Obviously this is not what God wanted Joshua to do. Biblical meditation does not place the focus on yourself and your thoughts. And it does not take you away from this world.

No, God wants you to meditate on what he has told you because he wants you to serve him in this world. This is the way how you can remain concentrated on him and discover how to behave in today's world.

### *Meditate on the law?!*

God made it clear what the believer should meditate on: the law.

I say 'the believer' on purpose (and not just Joshua) because the Psalms tell us that this is what believers did.

- Psalm 1: the man who is blessed and fruitful is the believer whose 'delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night.'
- Psalm 119 speaks about this meditation many times:
- Psa. 119:27 Let me understand the teaching of your precepts; then I will meditate on your wonders.
- Psa. 119:48 I lift up my hands to your commands, which I love, and I meditate on your decrees.
- Psa. 119:97 Oh, how I love your law! I meditate on it all day long.

How could a believer spend so much time on God's law and meditate on it every day? Isn't that boring: all those rules?

Since you live in the United States, would you review the traffic rules and the federal laws every day because you live here?

Isn't this strange?

In Ps119 the believer is excited about the law because it was the path of God's covenant: when they followed God's law they were keeping the covenant: obeying God meant living in his presence and assured them of his blessing.

*"If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened." (Ps 66)*

Keeping the law meant that you were near God and would receive his blessing. So the law was a safe path; it was God's wisdom for a good life full of blessing.

In Deut 28 Moses had told them that obedience would bring them God's blessing in a visible way. Disobedience, however, led to their downfall, visible in the desert and at later times, when the exile came.

### *'The law': not only laws*

But there is more.

The law is not only the rules and precepts Ps 119 so often mentions. The books of the law, the 5 books of Moses, also contained many promises.

*My eyes stay open through the watches of the night, that I may meditate on your promises. (Ps 119:148)*

Sinners as they were, believers needed to learn both God's will and his promises. The promises gave them hope: God assured them that he would be gracious and save them.

The books of the law contained precious words of grace and forgiveness. That was worth meditating on:

'How can God be merciful to us?

How beautiful is his grace for us!

I owe him my life!

### *This leads to prayer*

Now don't you think that meditating on God's will and his promises would urge believers to pray?

When you discover God's will you need to ask for his strength to obey his will.

When you discover his promises and marvel at them you are going to pray that they will come true. You plead with God because he has made promises.

When you do this, your prayers will reflect what you meditated on:

'Lord, I've just seen that you promised this... Now I pray that you will do this.'

**The more you meditate on these things the more your prayers will be filled with them and the more they will be focused on God and his will.**

So you can turn it around, too: how can you pray with any conviction and passion if you don't know God's promises? Where is your passion if you are ignorant about God's mercy for you? If you don't meditate you can't really pray, can you? Your prayers will be short and shallow and will probably be filled with the things that just come to mind at the moment.

If we don't study God's will and discover our need for redemption and change in our hearts, how could you and I ever pray for forgiveness and change of our lives? We would be stuck in generalities.

### *The law was only first stage. How much more...*

We must take this a step further.

God continued making himself known. No longer do we only have the books of the law.

Jesus has come. He has brought the full reality of those promises. The gospel, the good news of Jesus, has been revealed.

If OT believers had to meditate on God's law and were ravished by it, if they regarded it as their daily food and their daily joy to marvel at God's will and promises every day (see the Psalms), how much more should we meditate on God's wonders after Jesus has come?

If Joshua would meet us today, he would consider us much, much more blessed than him!

He only heard about the Jesus from a distance, he received just a ray of light. He had the law which revealed the contours of Jesus, the sketchy outline, but not the floodlight of the gospel in the New Testament.

**How much more should we meditate on Jesus and all his goodness, truth, grace, life-changing power.**

### *Meditate on Christ*

From now on the focus of meditation for every Christian must be on Christ. He is the center of the Bible.

We must meditate on what God has accomplished through him: his cross and resurrection; his glory and power in heaven; his return; his gathering of the church. His qualities: goodness, mercy, holiness, humility, power, and much, much more.

The light that was so dim in the law of the Old Testament has turned bright and makes our lives beautiful and radiant. Jesus is present in our lives. Should we not meditate on who he is and what he has done?

And God wants us to become like Christ. How is that going to happen?

By filling your mind with everything that's going on in the world?

By the latest news on movie stars, sports, science, or politics?

I don't think so.

Let us fill our minds with Jesus.

Then you will become more and more like him.

When you grow in knowing him better and in holiness you will be equipped for a life of worshipping and serving God in today's world.

## 3. Meditate in order to pray

### *Compared to OT believers*

I hope that you can see the connection between meditation and prayer by now.

Leaders in the Old Testament could not function unless they meditated on God's law.

Believers were thrilled with God's words. Every bit they learned from and about him was precious to them.

And as a response, they sang the Psalms,

- praising God;
- calling for help when they did not receive his blessing;
- asking for forgiveness;

- pleading with him for his promises to come true;
- expressing their sadness and joy.

**Their prayers were a response to what they learned about God by meditating on his words.**

### *Our prayers*

How about your prayers and mine?

Are they a response to what we learn about God?

Are we satisfied with some general knowledge, or do we meditate on the beauties of God and his Word every day and then respond in prayer?

Our prayers become dry and meaningless if we don't meditate on Jesus. They become repetitive if we always mention the daily needs that are on our minds and do not respond to what we had just learned from the Bible when we read it that day and meditated on it.

Do you see how meditation is **necessary** in order to pray?

### *Be specific*

Let me give a few examples.

You want to thank God and praise him in your prayer.

What for? Of course you can always say the same thing: 'thank you that you forgive our sins; thank you for your grace; for meeting our daily needs.'

Sure, that's good enough for basics. This is what you learn as a child and you could pray this the rest of your life.

But don't you think you can make it more specific and praise God more?

Why would God reveal for example in the book of Romans how he saves us from our sins?

The goal is that we glory in Christ, our savior, and praise him for all the things we learn about the depth of our sin and his grace. So let's thank him for that.

Let our prayers reflect our growing knowledge as we read the Bible and think it over in our minds, which is meditation. Let's spend time with God by listening to his Word and letting it shape our thinking.

Thinking of an illustration to remember this by, I would put it like this:

your Bible reading should not be like an espresso machine but like a pot of tea.

You know how they work, right?

An espresso machine pushes steaming hot water through the coffee grind under high pressure. It's done in a few seconds.

Tea, however, needs time to brew. It takes a couple of minutes and the British would tell you that you should not hasten the process.

That's meditation.

Another example:

if you ask God to act in this world you need to meditate on his Word first. Otherwise we would be stuck in praying for a peaceful solution for Iraq, for his solving the problems at the office, and so on. We would think short term and man-centered.

We are to seek God's kingdom, however. We need to pray for it. Well, how, when, and where is it coming? What difference does it make? How do we pray for God's kingdom instead of the well-meant but limited solutions we would like to see?

We need to grow in insight what God's kingdom is. We need to meditate on the way God makes it come and how it is different from the desires and felt needs of this world. With that insight, gained through meditation, we will be able to pray differently. The more we pray according to God's intentions the more we will see that God answers our prayers. And the more our prayers will serve God's goal.

### *More than Bible Study*

As a Reformed church we place a high value on knowledge of the Bible. With the same zeal we should translate what we know about God into prayer.

Prayer should be as important to us as Bible study.

In the past year the attendance at prayer meetings has dwindled. Why is this? Is it because we are too busy with other things?

Is it because we don't see a need for prayer?

Or because we don't know what to pray for after we have prayed a few times for the same needs of that ourselves and other church members?

The consistory doesn't want you to come to prayer meetings because it is on the program and you feel obliged.

We want to see you have a burning desire to pray:

- To praise God for all the great things he has done.
- To plead with God for his promises - promises that you have discovered and meditated on yourself so that you desire to see them come true.
- To pray for the conversion of unbelievers. To pray that your own heart may be delivered from the apathy of thinking 'they are not interested'. You need a burning desire, a passion for the lost, which you can only get from meditating on God's grace and your own sinfulness.
- To learn God's plan for the church and your role in it. The more you meditate on what God wants to do with this church, the more you will see a need to pray for his power to work in you and to do powerful things in our midst. We don't receive because we don't ask. We don't ask because we expect too little. That can only be cured by knowing God's power and goodness.

Prayer requires preparation: meditate on God's word. Spend time with Jesus and admire his mercy, his power, all his qualities.

Remove the distractions from your life and focus on the things that really matter: God and his kingdom. His grace. His glory. His name. His will.

Let's practice this today during our sermon discussion and pray for the things God has taught us today.

Amen