

## REFORMED CHURCH BELLVILLE : SUNDAY 25 NOVEMBER 2011 EVENING SERVICE

**Sing before:** Psalm 139:1,6,6

*Let us commence this meeting with God by declaring openly to one another and to God:*

Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth. Beloved grace and peace be to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, through the mighty working of God the Holy Spirit.

**Amen**

Psalm of praise: Psalm 91:1-3,7

**Prayer:**

- **Doxology**
- **Worship**
- **Confession of sins**
- **Forgiveness**
- **Gratitude**
- **Prayer for the need of the congregation of the church, the authorities and the sinful world and appeal to God's promises**
- **General prayer**
- **Enlightenment from the Holy Spirit for the sake of the ministry of the Word.**

**Amen**

Psalm 71:1,11,14

**Scripture reading:** Isaiah 1: 1 – 18 and Belgic Confession Article 13

**Article 13:** The Doctrine of God's Providence

We believe that this good God, after he created all things, did not abandon them to chance or fortune but leads and governs them according to his holy will, in such a way that nothing happens in this world without his orderly arrangement.

Yet God is not the author of, nor can he be charged with, the sin that occurs. For his power and goodness are so great and incomprehensible that he arranges and does his work very well and justly even when the devils and wicked men act unjustly.

We do not wish to inquire with undue curiosity into what he does that surpasses human understanding and is beyond our ability to comprehend. But in all humility and reverence we adore the just judgments of God, which are hidden from us, being content to be Christ's disciples, so as to learn only what he shows us in his Word, without going beyond those limits.

This doctrine gives us unspeakable comfort since it teaches us that nothing can happen to us by chance but only by the arrangement of our gracious heavenly Father. He watches over us with fatherly care, keeping all creatures under his control, so that not one of the hairs on our heads (for they are all numbered) nor even a little bird can fall to the ground without the will of our Father.

In this thought we rest, knowing that he holds in check the devils and all our enemies, who cannot hurt us without his permission and will.

For that reason we reject the damnable error of the Epicureans, who say that God involves himself in nothing and leaves everything to chance.

**Scripture text:** Isaiah 1:18

**"Come now, and let us reason together," Says the Lord, "Though your sins are like scarlet, They shall be as white as snow; Though they are red like crimson, They shall be as wool.**  
(Isaiah 1:18)

## **ACCOUNTING FOR THE OLD YEAR**

Beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ,

Saturday will again be Old Year's Day.

In the papers, over the radio and TV lengthy accounts are given about the high and low points of the past year. All sorts of matters known to us when we read or hear about it. But most of it would have been forgotten should we not have been reminded about it.

The year was filled to the brim with news flashes about violence in Iraq, Afganhistan and the Arabian area, although in our own continent there were possibly many more victims in Sudan, Dafour, the Ivory Coast, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, which is only in name democratic like the comrades in the ANC and in our so-called independent neighboring country Zimbabwe. All this dark-africa-misery is slowly becoming quite boring, it becomes monotonous picking up corpses and seeing fly covered children with dirty big eyes and bloated stomachs, all those cried-out refugees who have never heard about the Africa-renaissance. During the six decades following World War II there were 313+ international and internal conflicts with 101 million deaths. I wonder whether anybody knows the number of wars and civil wars and rebels – or freedom fighter groups in our part of the world – it feels so never-ending that nobody would ever take the trouble to stay abreast. We hear about diplomacy and peace negotiations but results are as quiet as a sort of diplomacy understood by little of us. But today even our internal problems remain more relevant to us than what is happening to the north of us. And then unrest, violence, moral decay and the joyous toi-toi about it is the news of the day. Behind all this lies the abandonment of the Word of God and the norms and measures we find therein. Is South Africa turning into a non-Christian and even an anti-Christian country?

On Saturday we can reflect upon all this and, because it will be too hot for coffee, have another drink. Well, it is Old Year's eve...? Is it different to us as believers? Of course we know that our personal lives are also worth some reflection because God also guided that life through His Hand. We talk about the Hand of God and also about that what we possibly have lost, a loss hurting particularly

more on Old Year's eve, it at least is the evening when old wounds really do hurt. But possibly and hopefully in your life there was only joy and all your loved ones were spared. Then a wave of thankfulness comes over you and you wish each other the same for the New Year. Old Year's Eve, a synopsis about the good and bad events that filled the days of 2011.

Now such an overview can be done in two ways. Like the newspapers or TV by emphasizing what went well and what was rather a disaster, a summary or chronicle of the year 2011.

Similar summaries are also found in the Old Testament. In the book of Kings we time and time again read that "the other stories about this and that king are recorded in the book of chronicles (annals) of the kings of Judah or Israel". We also read this about the four kings in whose times Isaiah was a prophet. Those kings also had the annals of their times kept up to date. During their times and in their own ways they did as we do on Old Year's Eve. The ; "and the further history of 2011 and everything that was done and took place, is that not described in the Old Year's Eve conversations?"

But at the same time the prophets and especially Isaiah will teach the people that you can compile an overview of what happened in the country and in the church and your life, in a completely different way.

In Isaiah 1 we read an overview of various things that took place in Judah. Abundant offers were brought, many people came to the temple. They celebrated the Sabbath and New Moon. Beautiful and solemn prayers were said. The prophet Isaiah will now judge everything in the light of the Word of the holy God and His Law. His judgement will not be externally but internally. He would be weighing it, but not counting it off on his fingers. The crux of the matter is not WHAT happens but HOW it happens. Isaiah places the whole life on the scale of God's Law. But then the overview really darkens. The conclusion the prophet comes to is that the land and its people are sick, terminally sick. The Lord is no longer known, religiousness is plentiful but nothing about a just life is to be found. Oppression and injustices are flowering. Judah no longer knows the Lord: **"The ox knows its owner and the donkey its master's crib; But Israel does not know, My people do not consider."** An overview of church-facts becomes an overview of church-sins.

In the same way we would be able to compile an overview of 2011. Of course we do not read this in the paper and even less would we spoil the spirit of Old Year's eve with it. But that does not nullify the fact that sometimes it is needed. Should the LORD today take His pen and describe your and my life, then we all would, red with shame, rush out of church. To the people our lives might be like an open book, but the Lord reads what is written at the rear of every page of life.

Should the Lord then also write the yearly overview of the Reformed Churches, it would sound a lot more serious than it would be should we write it. In the last years we are prone to writing those yearly overviews somberly but not nearly as seriously as the Lord would do it. The more I read about our predecessors, whom we, under the command of God, must honour and whose faith we must follow, the more I am dumbfounded by our lack of perspective. Through the ages warnings against false prophets, in conjunction with the warnings by Christ Himself and His apostles, sounded. Through the ages a call to, like a child, obey and persevere in trust to the sole sanctifying faith sounded, even although it seemed that the Church of Christ cannot possibly survive in and through a bloodthirsty hostile world. The continual wailing that "the church will go under should there not be made drastic

adaptations” is sinful lack of faith and blindness to the work of the King of the Church, through the ages, by His Holy Spirit.

Yes, should the Lord compile His overview about country and people, nations and so-called churches and the Church He put you and me into as well as His overview about us as children of the church, and about you and me personally... well, yes than the sound about our guilt of sin would completely drown out all the noise made on Saturday evening at midnight.

Of course you and me would not like hearing this today. Who wants to leave the Old Year on such a dark depressive note? Fine, as people of the church we are aware that we must listen when the Lord addresses us about our lack of love, patience, faith and works of faith during the past 365 days or so. But deep in our hearts we feel that because this is such a serious subject, it does not fit into these festive days. I am of the opinion that the listeners to Isaiah also did not find it very befitting, At the end of the day it never is the proper time to hear something like this from God.

But in verse 18 we unexpectedly hear something else. The Lord really does not want the people to only hear what their sins are, but they must take it into their overview themselves and weigh it up. They must not let the Lord talk alone. To put it into style of this Old Years sermon: we must not just hear how our 2011 guilt heaped up, only to then go over to the order of the day. As the children of God we must ourselves weigh our own lives on the scale of God’s Law. We must actively deepen ourselves into the question of how our lives were facing God in 2011. We could and should at least talk about it, think about it and pray about it. Tonight we must not only give thanks and complain in our evening prayer but also consider the invitation: **"Come now, and let us reason together,"** .. Then you and I must lay our lives to the Holy, weigh our lives and SELF, as guilty sinner, lay it open to Him.

In fact, the Lord wants us to confess everything openly that shame us about 2011: **"Come now, and let us reason together,"** O, no the Lord does not tell that to you only, He tells it to every one in our large country and in the whole wide world. South Africa is more and more abandoning the Lord but He calls to every person from a renegade nation “COME”. It is like with the prodigal son who rather not spoke about the God-given years he squandered, but at the end said to himself: **'I will arise and go to my father, and will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you, and I am no longer worthy to be called your son.** (Luke 15:18) He came to himself, no longer practiced ostrich-politics or shunned his responsibilities.

This example also enlightens the question why the Lord wants us to, in the light of His Law, accept responsibility for our lives in 2011. Thereby He wants us to admit that He has right over you and me, covenant-right, Ownership. You cannot just call any person to responsibility. Should a stranger approach you or me and out of the blue request that we balance the books of our lives during 2011 and honestly find what I have achieved then I would most certainly tell him to keep his crooked nose out of my affairs. Who does he think he is at any rate? But when I let myself be invited by somebody to give account, then thereby I admit that that person has the right to request it. What a worrying feeling it is to a child when a father tells him that he wants to have a talk with him or her. Then the feeling of guilt stirs deep inside the child because the father was disappointed of his trust was broken. Woe to that child who then would say “no I have nothing to discuss” and thereby breaking the relationship between father and child. The child who reluctantly complies and fears accepting

responsibility has possibly sinned greatly but at least still acknowledges the father as father. The father has the right to ask for and expect admission of responsibility. It is about that admission that the Lord is dealing with His children. Continually the children of the Lord pretended as if the Lord had no say in their matters. In the read scripture the Lord is complaining about it. But in verse 18 we find that the Lord does not chase away or reject His children but calls: **"Come now, and let us reason together!"** This is an urgent appeal to the people. Do they still want to acknowledge the Lord as their Lord of the Covenant? The God who granted salvation, who as loving Father has the right to full obedience? Does the prodigal son still want to return and accept responsibility by reasoning together, or would he rather spend time with his friends to, at a later stage, find himself at home amongst the pigs? There are countless people in our vicinity that refuse to be called to account facing God. People, who as Christians in name only, refuse to be obedient to God's revealed will. They do not want to be bothered by God's admonishments and censure but want to be their own boss and serve God according to their own liking and recipe. They refuse weighing their lives on the scale of God's Word.

And us?? Do we today and tomorrow approach the Lord because, in his invitation, we taste the Fatherly love? Do we admit that He had the right over us every day of the past year? Do we acknowledge Him as the Shepherd having right over us? He who so expensively bought His sheep and we therefore could measure the life of every day against His Love? We must not be upset should it be determined that we, on this last Sunday of 2011, have mountains of guilt. Let us rather be thankfully surprised. Should the Lord have told us: "Children of the church, it has now become late enough, half of your few prayers are empty lip-language and insincerity is what rang the church-bell, now it is finished, I do not want to experience another year filled with guilt of sin. Therefore, be gone, go, follow your own heads and directions.... Should the Lord today have said this to us He would have had the fullest right and greatest reason to do so. But now we gather in church and by the grace of God hear something totally different. He calls on us to reason together, confess our guilt – not by whispering a few muffled words – but to give account. : **"Come now, and let us reason together! ..."** Should you risk it about the year 2011?? With people we would never risk it. I would not want even the most loving person judging my life of the past year!!

But what about God? He who knows everything, He the perfect Holy. In His eyes our sins become absolutely blood-red and pitch-black. If our sins become monstrously large, then it is in the eyes of God, exactly there where His Fatherly love touches us.

Should a son steal something from his family home, he knows that it is wrong. Should the so disappointed eyes of the father rest on him he and the sin would become blood-red, fire-red.

We know that during 2011 much was lacking in our lives. But when God looks at us and we see in our mind's eye the Lamb in front of His throne, slaughtered for all my sins, then we realise something about the terribleness of our so-called small sins.

**Come now, and let us reason together** says God the father. And .. and... we know how large our mountain of sin is, dare we do so? Should it have been a human who invited us we would never have dared doing it. But it is God who is speaking, God, merciful, compassionate and large in benevolence. Nowhere our sins become blacker and fiercer than facing Him, but also nowhere does it become less dangerous.

What are the dangerous sins in our lives?? They are not the large sins, but the sins we never confess. The lethal dangers are non-confessed and therefore non-forgiven sins. Forgiveness is only with God. Just listen: **"Though your sins are like scarlet, They shall be as white as snow; Though they are red like crimson, They shall be as wool."**

There where our sins become the largest, they also become the least dangerous. Should we truthfully approach the Father with our myriad of sins our lives are justified, becoming pure and snow white.

Is this possible? Can we leave 2011 behind as a clean year, a year during which we have done nothing wrong, a year from which we do not carry guilt over to the New Year, as a year in which we were perfect?

Should I regard myself then I stutter that it would not be possible in all eternity.

Should I look at the promises of God in the text of scripture from His unshakable Word then it can already happen now.

Because when God forgives many greater wonders happen than what science and technology can ever give us, then a sinner enters the future as a holy loved one of God, the God of all forgiveness.

Therefore He says: bare all your sins and come now, and let us reason together. God does not want to upset us on this old year's day when He speaks about the guilt of sin, but in fact wants to eradicate the guilt.

What you are taking along as baggage from the old year I do not know... heartache, longing for a beloved, challenges, prosperity and joy?? But I do know that all of you would be the happiest people in South Africa should you be able to exit the Old Year and enter the New Year devoid of any guilt of sin. That is also the only way to start right and properly. The Lord entices us towards Him to want to live from His forgiveness so that we may live a life of thankfulness. God pulls us towards Him as His children, He wants to reason about the matter of 2011, He wants to teach you and me how to ask for His forgiveness. He wants to continue with us into the future.

**Amen.**

Closing prayer.

Closing Psalm: Scripture Versification 11-1: 6-9, 11 [Isaiah 40:1-11]

The Lord bless and keep you, the Lord make his face shine on you, the Lord turn His countenance to you and give peace.

**Amen**

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Scripture Modern King James Version