

REFORMED CHURCH BELLVILLE: SUNDAY 20 NOVEMBER 2011: EVENING SERVICE

Sing before: Hymn 18-3:6+7.

I lift up my eyes to the hills – where does my help come from? My help comes from the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth.

Grace and peace to you from Him who is and who was and who shall come, and from the seven Spirits before His throne, and from Jesus Christ, the reliable Witness, the first to have arisen from the dead, the ruler over the kings of the earth.

Amen

Song of praise: Psalm 95:1+4.

Prayer:

- **Doxology**
- **Worship**
- **Confession of sins**
- **Forgiveness**
- **Gratitude**
- **Prayer for the need of the congregation for 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

Hymn: 18-1:4+5.

Scripture reading: Leviticus 16:1-2; Luke 23:44-49.

Scripture text: Luke 23:45.

“And the curtain of the temple was torn in two.”

Theme: He, who has Christ as his saviour, always has access to God.

Beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, the LORD laid down clear guidelines for the believers of the time of the Old Testament as to how they could remain alive in an intimate and personal relationship with Him. Apart from the Law the LORD also gave them the sacrifices. And there was the Day of Atonement once a year when all the sins of the people were washed away and carried off. But, with all these privileges and mercy that the LORD bestowed on His people, it was still not permitted for anyone just to come into the presence of the Lord God.

At the Tent of Meeting and subsequently at the temple, particular boundaries were set for particular people. The farthest outside courtyard around the temple was the courtyard of the gentiles. Then came the courtyard of the women and nearest was the courtyard of the Jewish men. In this courtyard the altar for the burnt-offerings stood. The priests were allowed to enter the holy part of

the temple where they brought the incense-offering and prayed daily for the people. And then there was the Most Holy Place ...

When the LORD instructed Moses to build the Tent of Meeting, He said the following about the curtain:

“Make a curtain of blue, purple and scarlet yarn and finely twisted linen, with cherubim worked into it by a skilled craftsman. Hang it with gold hooks on four posts of acacia wood overlaid with gold and standing on four silver bases. Hang the curtain from the clasps and place the ark of the Testimony behind the curtain. The curtain will separate the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place.” (Exodus 26:31-33)

Inside the Most Holy Place of the Tent of Meeting, and subsequently the temple, the ark of the Testimony was placed. This part of the temple was separated from the Holy Place by a dense, dark and heavy curtain of 18 metres high. The curtain proclaimed that here one must take care. The holiness and presence of God is veiled from the eyes of men. Sinners cannot with the naked eye see the holy glory of God and remain alive. The holiness of God is a blinding light – an unapproachable light. The person who sees this will immediately be blinded and die. Therefore these dense and dark colours speak of danger – danger to the person who would dare to enter behind the curtain. Only the High Priest was permitted to enter the Most Holy Place and that only once a year – on the Day of Atonement. Then he enters it to make atonement with the blood of a bull and a goat in the holy presence of the LORD for the sins committed by himself and the people. If anybody else would dare to enter the Most Holy Place in the temple he would die immediately because his sin renders him unworthy of being in the presence of God.

And the cherubim embroidered on the curtain speak of the same. Nobody has access to the place behind the curtain. These cherubim refer back to the cherubim of whom we read in Genesis 3. After the Lord God drove man out from the Garden of Eden, He placed cherubim on the east side of the garden to guard the way to the tree of life. The curtain therefore was a continual reminder to the faithful of their sinfulness and, consequently, their unworthiness of appearing in the presence of the LORD.

The curtain was therefore an eloquent symbol, brothers, sisters and children. This heavy curtain said to each believer: “NO ENTRY”. Only after having complied with all the requirements set by the LORD, was the High Priest permitted to go behind the curtain to appear there on behalf of the people before the LORD. Ordinary believers therefore needed an intermediary in the person of the High Priest to represent them before the LORD. The curtain thus permitted only a limited access to God.

In Hebrews 9:7-9 the Holy Spirit explains the meaning of the curtain to us:

“But only the high priest entered the inner room, and that only once a year, and never without blood, which he offered for himself and for the sins the people had committed in ignorance. The Holy Spirit was showing by this that the way into the Most Holy Place had not yet been disclosed as long as the first tabernacle was still standing. This is an illustration for the present time, indicating that the gifts and sacrifices being offered were not able to clear the conscience of the worshipper.”

The way into the Most Holy presence of God was not yet open to everyone. The curtain kept even the ordinary priests out of the Most Holy Place of the temple. The existence of and the layout of the temple symbolised the limited access and the limited working of the old covenant. For everybody to have access to the Lord, this entire structure would need to change into something better.

The curtain furthermore bears witness that, as is written in the epistle to the Hebrews, that the offerings and the gifts did not clear the conscience of the worshipper. After the atonement was made on the Day of Atonement, the curtain closed again and the high priest may, and must, enter again the next year. The blood of the offerings could not remove the curtain. The offerings could not obtain unrestricted access to God for everyone.

Brothers, sisters and children, we thank and praise the Lord our God. Jesus Christ came and fulfilled all the offerings, also the offerings of the Day of Atonement, completely. With His precious blood the Holy Spirit washes people perfectly clean of all their sins. And with His voluntary surrender to the terrible death on the cross He also carried away the sins of people who belong to the Lord. On that Friday when Christ died on the cross, no other than God Himself showed that He was satisfied with this perfect offering of His Son. In the original language it is written that **the curtain in the temple was torn in two**. Matthew and Mark write that **the curtain in the temple was torn in two from top to bottom**. Our heavenly Father Himself tore the curtain in two from top to bottom.

With this God Himself made it plain that henceforth He is accessible to all men. Jesus paid the price in full, therefore the faithful and all who place their trust in Christ alone, may frankly approach God. The requirements set by God for Aaron and the priests were complied with perfectly by Christ, therefore the manner of approaching God according to the old covenant is past. Each one of us, man, woman, adult or child, may freely approach God because we have a perfect High Priest who opened the way for us with His body and blood. Our perfect Redeemer and Intermediary now is with His Father and because of His redemptive ministry all of us may personally speak to the Lord. What a great privilege the Lord has given us! Which of us would not want to go along this newly-made road to appear personally before the Lord? All of us would want to, and may, the Lord Himself says so, that is why He tore the curtain in two from top to bottom. Our heavenly Father says: **“Look, I have opened the way for you, come to Me.”**

Of course, we still are sinners, and therefore unworthy of coming into the presence of the Lord. But through faith the Holy Spirit clothes us with the perfect ministry of Christ so that we can answer this call from God. We can go to God on the road that Christ made. There no longer is a high and heavy curtain hanging between us and God which says: “NO ENTRY”. That curtain was torn asunder by God.

Brothers, sisters and children, I imagine that there was great consternation at the temple when the priests saw that the curtain was torn in two from top to bottom. In stead of their eyes being opened to see that God Himself had accepted Christ’s payment and had opened the way to Him, they were overcome with fear. Without delay they would have had the curtain repaired. To them Jesus was only a troublemaker who wanted to destroy their manner of worship. But, happily, so they thought, they were now rid of Jesus. The scribes and the Pharisees and the chief priests were blind to the grace that our heavenly Father brought to all through Jesus.

Beloved, it is a terrible thing to cheapen God’s grace to us. One cheapens God’s grace by accepting the forgiveness that the Lord grants us because of Jesus’ offering and then to go on living as before. Or one cheapens the Lord’s grace by accepting it as self-evident that the Lord forgives us when we pray for it, hence we can live as we choose. But, we must remember that, when we cheapen the Lord’s grace, we tread underfoot with our dirty feet the blood of Christ. Last Sunday the Lord warned us not to cheapen His grace.

On the other hand, to act as if God never tore the curtain in two, or to pull the curtain closed again, is to ignore, or even to reject, the grace that the Lord bestows on us in and through Christ. It would be throwing back into His face the gift, that we in any event never deserved, and saying thereby that we do not want it. The Jews did not want this gift of grace - that is why many of them remained blind to God's love. We cannot, we may not again, allow our sins to hang between us and God like a curtain. We may not allow us to again become unworthy or to remain unworthy of coming into God's glorious presence.

Let us subject ourselves to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Let Him guide us in the tracks of the Word of the Lord so that we may more and more be clothed with Christ's perfect ministry by ridding us of our sins. Let us as true children of God run to our Father because He calls us and through Christ has removed all obstacles. May the aftertaste of this morning's communion remain in our mouths not only until this evening but, let this aftertaste rather become the foretaste of the Wedding of the Lamb, to which we all longingly look forward.

Amen!

Closing prayer.

Closing song: Hymn 18-3:8+9.

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all.

Amen

Rev CCA Vrey
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Scripture: New International Version