"Check the Real Scoreboard"

Most High School students have very keen powers of observation. I've come to this conclusion having attended numerous high school football and basketball games. It starts this way: the scoreboard shows that one team has 42 points… the other has 0 points. The scoreboard also tells us that it's the fourth quarter. With about 1 minute left, and here's where their keen powers of observation really begin to shine, the student body, as in 1 voice, begins to let everyone know there is a winning team and a losing team. One version goes something like this, "I believe that we will win!" repeated over and over again. Another version, one that shows a much lesser degree of sportsmanship, asks this, "Do you see the Winning Team? Do you see the Losing Team?" Sometimes the chant will simply be, "Scoreboard! Scoreboard!" No matter which chant is used, they display a very high degree of confidence that they have predicted the winner, even before the clock strikes 0.

The truth is that high school students are not the only ones who have very keen powers of observation, especially when it comes to identifying who are the winners and who are the losers. In fact, life itself has many scoreboards – most of which don't hang in on gymnasium walls or on steel endzone posts.

With your powers of observation, you may, from time to time, gaze upon those scoreboards and draw conclusions about who is on the "winning" team: that neighbor, who gets a new car every 2 years… that person who looks all super healthy, dressed so neatly, perfect hair… your "friend's" social media posts that are always so are perfectly edited… they must be on the winning team. Conversely, (and of course you keep it to yourself) you may also draw other conclusions… as that old rust-bucket jalopy, with a cloud of smoke, sputters into the parking lot, out steps that co-worker who really isn't the picture of health… whose dog just died… You feel bad for them as the challenges and struggles just keep piling up. Life is tough, when you're losing battle after battle.

Right or wrong, people view these kinds of scoreboards in life, and they draw conclusions about who is part of the winning team and who is part of the losing team.

In our Scripture reading from Hebrews, we're given a few "scoreboards" to consider. One army has just 300 rookies while the other has 135,000 battle hardened soldiers. By the time the clock hits 0, the team of 300 has completely routed and destroyed the other. Do you see the winning team? Yes! Gideon defeated the Midianites with a mere 300 men, though clearly the battle was the Lord's. Or this scoreboard: with a young teenage boy, equivalent to an 8th grader… going up against a giant who is over 9 ½ feet tall. You know the players, David and Goliath. That scoreboard didn't lie; there was a clear winner and a clear loser.

In fact, the first half of our Second Lesson is full of clear winners who did amazing things in God's kingdom. They scored tremendous victories as God shut the mouths of the lions for Daniel in that den; as God spared the 3 men in the fiery furnace. God gave Samson the strength to defeat the Philistine army time and again. God gave great victories to his people who were hopelessly outnumbered. Yeah, winning team!

But then in the middle of verse 35, things take a sharp turn, a turn for the worse? ***35 … There were others who were tortured, refusing to be released so that they might gain an even better resurrection. 36 Some faced jeers and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. 37 They were put to death by stoning; they were sawed in two; they were killed by the sword.*** Quite a different scoreboard.

That word "tortured" is literally being tied up, stretched out, beaten repeatedly until they renounce the Lord God, but they didn't. Jeering, mocking, beatings and floggings… all because they held to the word of God. Chains and imprisonment… ask Joseph, who refused the advances of Mrs. Potiphar. Being stoned to death… the Prophet Zechariah and Stephen were not on the winning end of those stones; they lost their lives. Church tradition claims that Isaiah was sawed in two… while so many other prophets were killed by the sword. By the powers of plain observation, anyone in the bleachers surrounding these events would have seen the scoreboard and drawn the obvious conclusion about those who were the winners - and who were the losers.

When you look at the scoreboard of your life, how are things going? Do you see yourself on the winning team? Are things going great? Good grades at school? Victories at work? Clean bill of health from the doctor? Third Quarter Investment reports come back in your portfolio's favor? Maybe? Perhaps things are quite rosy…

but beware of the challenge… the temptation to think that these blessings, these victories must be proof and validation that I'm on the winning team! I'm doing the right things! God is really blessings me because I've been working really hard. Look at the results, look at my scoreboard. How easily the sinful human heart can turn God's good gifts into a self-centered curse!... that we should think we are the cause of God's gifts and blessings. What a deadly deception and conclusion.

Or, perhaps you're saying, "NO, that doesn't describe my life at all." Each day is one struggle after another, and now the doctor diagnoses ____, and what investments???, and the job cuts are looming. But beware, there's a temptation here too, to think that because of these things, I'm doing something wrong, and God is upset and angry with me. I guess I'm not on the winning team, and time is running out fast. This depressing deception and conclusion is just as deadly as the other. What are we to do? The scoreboard is the scoreboard.

Allow me to make this suggestion – it's time to look at a different scoreboard – a scoreboard that will always tell you the REAL story, that shows you how things REALLY are. This scoreboard is found in our text, and it's one those believers kept their eyes on. Check out this scoreboard - as I reread verse 35 from our text. ***There were others who were tortured, refusing to be released <u>so that they might gain an even better resurrection.</u>*** This, my friends, is the REAL scoreboard – the only one that truly matters.

When you look at the picture of Christ Jesus on the Cross – do you see the winning team? Do you see the losing team? It's so very obvious, isn't it? In one picture, your given the entire story. You know what happened on that cross. It looked like defeat; a bruised, bloodied body hangs lifelessly until it was laid in a tomb. To all who were there it looked like defeat and loss, but you know the full story. We know that Jesus, the spotless, sinless Lamb of God, came down to this earth from heaven above to live sinlessly in our place, and then he laid down his life to die innocently in my place… so that he might deliver that final crushing defeat to the head of Satan who brought sin, sorrow and death into this world. And, that last enemy to be destroyed… death. Look at that empty tomb – with the linens neatly folded as if to say, "Nice try, losing team!"

This is the scoreboard that was before the eyes of those who suffered for their faith. They had in mind the better resurrection that was already theirs through faith in Christ Jesus. They knew that in Christ, they were the victors. What could this world offer that compares to eternal life with Jesus? Our text continues, ***[37] They were put to death by stoning; they were sawed in two; they were killed by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated— [38] <u>the world was not worthy of them.</u>***

The world was not worthy of them. It's like shouting, "Scoreboard! Scoreboard!" to anything that tries to lead you to think you've lost, or are on the losing team. So what if life is challenging, hard, difficult, full of sorrow… full of cancer… heartaches and pains… those things cannot rob you of what Jesus has already won for you. A better resurrection awaits you. ***They wandered in deserts and mountains, living in caves and in holes in the ground. [39] These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised, [40] since <u>God had planned something better for us</u> so that only together with us would they be made perfect.*** Scoreboard!

That, my friends, is the reason it is such a blessing for us to have a Sunday such as this, All Saints Sunday. By the Scriptures definition a saint is one who has been redeemed by the blood of Christ… that includes you and me, just as it includes all the believers who have gone before us. And as we look back, not just over the pages of Scripture, but in your own history, you see time and again how God preserved his people through so many hardships and challenges. Truly you see Afflicted Saints – but they drew near to and clung to Christ; and now he has bestowed upon them the crown of life. Taking this time to remember this, grounds us, reaffirms our faith, reassures us that nothing can separate us from his love. It builds in us that same resolve and stamina to keep our eyes on thee Scoreboard. Through Jesus we have that absolute assurance of victory, and together with all believers of all time, we will be made perfect forever as we dwell in the eternal glories of heaven.

In the meantime, until that, may God continue to sharpen our powers of observation. May he focus and direct them properly, not on the ups and downs of this life, but on the Scoreboard of Christ Jesus.