

Hello, you beautiful people out there. Good morning. Oh, God, thank you. 3091 Englewood Drive, Stowe, Ohio. That was the address where I spent a good amount of my adolescent years growing up, and it was also very close to a baseball field. It was the field of my dreams. It was an incredible baseball field. It was kind of like a reverse Fenway Park, for those of you that know Boston, with the green wall. Except the green wall wasn't in left field, it was in right field. And it wasn't a wall, it was Dan Martin's garage. And if you could hit a ball over the garage, it was an automatic home run. So that's why I learned to switch hit and bat left-handed, because I could hit more home runs over the green wall. And it was just such a wonderful thing. And watching Major League Baseball opening day this last week, it just made me think of those glorious days, many, many great memories.

And then one not so great memory. It's still a little bit hard to get over, but my brother Steve and Tim, my littler brother, they always wanted to play with us, but they were like five and six and seven years younger than us, and so we didn't really want them to play. But they were my brothers, so I let them play. But they would play and then they would quit. Like something would go wrong, they just quit. Take their bat and go home. So one day we're going to play, and Steve says, hey, I want to play. And I said, Steve, listen, you can play, but you cannot quit. If you quit, there will be consequences. I had no idea what I was talking about at the time, but I just thought that sounded good.

So we played, sure enough, and I don't know, it wasn't very long into the game, and Steve picked up his bat to walk home, and I just wrestled him to the ground. I said there'd be consequences, and here we are. Now what do I do? I'm not going to hit him. So I thought, you know what I'll do? I'll just make him eat grass. Just hearing that come out of my mouth is horrific, but that's what I did. I grabbed a handful of grass, and I started like trying to put it in his mouth. And I'm like, I'm like, there's a mixture of justice with this, and then also utter shame.

And so anyway, just to let you know, I've, I apologize fairly quickly, and I feel like I've done that over the years. I feel like, you know, forgiveness is, you know, you do something, God forgives you, but this one, it's just like, it's taken Steve his whole life to forgive me on this one. And anyway, here's what I didn't know at the time. I didn't know how hard it would be for me to not quit later in my life. I never knew at that point in my life how hard it would be to stay in the game. So that's what I want to talk about today. I want to talk about stay in the game. Don't quit. Don't give up. Persevere. Keep going. Stay in the game. All right?

So what you're going to do is you're going to look at your neighbor now with the most encouraging voice you possibly can muster up. You're going to say, come on now, stay in the game. Come on, stay in the game. Come on. Now, for some of you, that was silly. You're just participating. You're doing what the pastor said you should do. And it's silly. But for some of you who heard that, it wasn't the neighbor that was speaking it to you. It's like the Holy Spirit's

telling you this. Those of you that are in a rough spot, and it's hard, and the enemy wants you to quit, I believe that's what God's telling you today is, no, you're not going to quit. You're going to stay in the game.

And I feel like that brings us to where we are in the season of Lent. We're two weeks from Easter, which means we're one week from Palm Sunday and the beginning of Holy Week. I was thinking about this not that long ago, that for Holy Week, if you read through the Gospels, you can figure out what happened on every day of Holy Week. Palm Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, all the way through. But this week, the week that we're starting today, the scriptures are almost silent. You can't figure out anything that happened on any day that starts this week and goes up until Palm Sunday next week.

What you can figure out is that it was during this week that the opposition to Jesus had come to a brutal and intense level that would lead to a horrific execution. That was beginning to escalate during this week. Why? Well, because we're told that not long before that, Jesus had gone to the grave of a man named Lazarus and raised him from the dead. And that got some attention.

Here's what it says in John chapter 11, and read with me the words in the red. Therefore, many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary and had seen what Jesus did put their faith in him. But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done. Then the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the Sanhedrin. So from that day on, they plotted to kill him. They were serious now. We want him dead.

So here's what I want us to do this morning. I want us to heed the advice of the writer of Hebrews along with you. I want to do this. Consider him, Jesus, who endured such opposition from sinful men so that you will not grow weary and lose heart, so that you will stay in the game.

I want us to learn from Jesus how it is that he was able to not quit, to stay in the game, which of course was no game at all. It was as real as life can get. How did he, when all of hell was coming against him, when he was facing the opposition of sinful men, when even knowing that his father would for a brief time have to turn his face away from him while he was on the cross, how did he stay in the game? How did he not quit? He could have.

And I know this, the evil one, he wants to tell you to get out. He wants to tell you it's easier. Just pick up your bat and get out of the game. Your marriage isn't what it once was, so just walk away. It's just too hard. Be easier on your own. It's really hard to stay sober, so just go ahead. You shouldn't pray anymore. You've prayed so long and it hasn't worked. Just give up. What you've done this time, you've closed the door. You're done. You don't have what it takes anymore. It's over. You're never going to make it back.

The devil whispers these insidious temptations for us to just quit and get out of the game. And I can tell you now from a very personal and private place that I heard those despicable taunts from the enemy way more often than I would

ever have let on while I was pastor here at King of Kings.

But there's another voice that speaks. It's the one that speaks from the cross that there is a victory ahead. Yes, there can be a darkness and a heaviness and a burden and an opposition that we can feel on the Fridays of our lives. But as the great preacher said, Sunday's coming.

So today, I want us to hear the Sunday morning voice of Jesus. I want us to hear the Easter resurrection voice of Jesus. But even more than hearing what Jesus has to say to us today, I want us to see him. I want us to observe him and how it was that he stayed in the game, that he kept going.

And I can boil it down to three things and to three words: Truth, trajectory, and target.

Truth: Jesus knew the truth which gave him confidence in God's promises. He understood the trajectory of his life which gave him clarity and God's plan for him. And he had that ultimate target that was out there that he was captivated with, God's prize.

So we're going to look first at the truth that Jesus knew that gave him confidence in the promises of God. So let me just start with the question, what is it that we need in order to trust someone? What is it that makes them trustworthy, worthy of trust? Isn't it this: the truth, that they speak the truth, that they tell the truth, that they don't lie, that they don't deceive you, that they don't make promises that they don't keep? Isn't a trustworthy person a person you can trust because they just tell you the truth and their actions back it up?

And if you flip it on the other side to say, what is it that causes me not to trust someone? Well, it would be the opposite of that. They're not telling you the truth. They're keeping secrets from you. They're lying. They're deceiving you. You can't trust them because they're not speaking the truth.

Jesus now would have to place his trust and faith in his father like nobody's business. Why? Because Jesus had to trust that his father would raise him from the dead. Now, does that require some trust? Yeah, I'm going to die, but God, you're going to raise me back to life.

Here's what it says in Hebrews. During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death. And he was heard because of his reverent submission.

Jesus believed on the basis of his father's perfect record of speaking the truth that he would, in fact, raise him from the dead, that he would not prevent him from dying because that happened. But even more miraculously than that, once he was dead, he would raise him back to life.

It was a few weeks just before that, that Jesus stood at the tomb of Lazarus, who had died, and Jesus called him out with a loud voice, with his own lips, with his own voice. Come out, Lazarus. How's he going to do that now? He has no voice. He's dead.

He had to trust that his father would raise him back to life. And that's the truth that Jesus had confidence in.

So what about you? Is God trustworthy? Does he tell the truth? Does he follow up? Does he keep his promises? Oh, my goodness. Is there ever a time when God's face is not turned toward you? Because here's the thing. Jesus experienced the horrible reality that in order to pay the penalty and price of our sin, he had to take it on himself. And for a time on the cross, the Father turned his face away from him.

Jesus said, My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Jesus died there alone. And he had to trust that the Father would turn his face away from him on the cross, would turn his face back toward him in the empty tomb, which he did. And because of that, Jesus, for a time, did not have the face of his Father shining towards him, which makes this true. There's never been a time when that's not, when that's not been true for you, that his face has always shined on you.

I love that benediction of Aaron in the book of Numbers. The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord what? Make his face shine upon you. It does. Always. He is always turned toward you and you can trust it and you can have confidence in God's promises that he has you now, even though you are in a tough spot, he's got you.

You think about the truth of God and his word, hundreds of predictions, I'm going to call them. It's a more modern term than prophecies. Hundreds of predictions in the Old Testament about the fact that God would send a savior, hundreds, some of them 700 years before Jesus would be here.

Like Isaiah, who said 700 years before the birth of Christ, a virgin will conceive and give birth to a son. Come on, you can say that and do that. You ought to take notice of that. And on top of that, Micah said, and yes, that's going to happen. And it'll happen in this little nobody town of Bethlehem. And that happened.

And then Zachariah said, and after he grows and becomes a man, one day he'll ride into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey. And that happened as have every other one of God's promises in the Old Testament been fulfilled in Jesus.

When you think about the Bible itself, that it was written over a span of 1500 years by over 40 authors on different continents in different languages. And every single one of those authors of those books of the Bible are pointing to one truth, that God so loved the world, come on, that he sent his only begotten son, that whoever believes in him will not perish, but have an everlasting life.

You can trust God's word. It's true. You can put your confidence in God's promises.

And I know that some of you right now are being put to the test. Enemy wants to take you out of the game, wants to tell you you don't have what it takes. But

listen to me, my friend, my brother, my sister, my son, my daughter, God has you, he's got you.

So trust in the truth that his face shines on you and always will, and put your confidence in his promises.

And then secondly, what we can see in Jesus is that he had an understanding of the trajectory of his life, which gave him a clarity about God's plan for him.

It was clear, right from the start, never a doubt, right from the beginning, Jesus knew the trajectory of his life from the moment that he would leave the glory of heaven, be born of the Virgin Mary, suffer under Pontius Pilate, be died, crucified, rise again.

Jesus knew all that. And he knew that there was a plan that God had for him, and he was very clear on that, and he was never distracted. He knew he'd come to seek and save the lost. It ordered his steps.

That's why I'm here, to seek and save the lost. It's that plan.

So much so that when word came to Jesus that Lazarus had died, what did he do? Anybody know? Like, if it were me, and I knew that I had the power to help Lazarus, like, and heal him, man, I'd have been, what? Lazarus? I'd have been there. What did Jesus do? Stayed where he was. And he waited. He waited four days.

Was it because he didn't love Lazarus, or Mary, or Martha? Of course not. He loved them dearly. In fact, when he got there, the Bible tells us, and saw their grief and saw Lazarus' grave, he cried. He wept.

But Jesus knew that his purpose was greater than being there before Lazarus died, to be there after he died, so that he could raise him from the dead, so that the glory of God would be seen, and that they would know that he had been sent by the Father.

He always knew that God had a plan for him that didn't always make sense in this world.

You think that's true of you? Man, I feel like my plan's just as, you know, my plan's good. I mean, God, just adopt my plan. Please don't. Please don't.

This all makes me think of my dear friend. Some of you remember him. My dear friend and mentor from Africa. His name was Uma. Uma Ukppe.

And this is what he said a long time ago, and this is how I remember him saying it. Your setback is your setup for your comeback. He didn't really say it like that. That's just in my brain. And it's true.

Let me just say it in this simple tone of voice. Your setback is your setup for your comeback.

Because that's how God works.

Or, if you want to look at it differently, and you want to look at it like I believe how Jesus looked at it, Jesus saw opposition as opportunity, which is why he didn't need to hurry off to get to Lazarus before he died.

He knew that this opposition, this difficult, this grief that was going to come was yet to be followed by an even greater victory.

And I can look back at my life and see this.

There were things that happened in the church that I was at in Tennessee before I came to be pastor in 1993 that were super hard. But we got through it. And God used the pain of what we got through to build me up just a little bit, so that when I arrived here in 1993, and those of you that were here back in those mid and late 90s, you know how hard it was. It was brutal, what God had us walk through together.

But He prepared me, and then that happened, and then that prepared me for what happened, again, personally in 2008 and 2009. Super, super hard time for me personally, pastor at King of Kings, which all helped me for 2016, which was the worst and most difficult year of my life.

I was laying in a hospital bed in February of 2016. My liver was failing, and nobody knew why. I was dying. Thank the Lord I didn't. I'm here. Hey, everybody.

They realized they were giving me an antibiotic to treat something that was, and they doubled down on it, and I was actually allergic to it, and it was just about killing me.

But worse than that was the emotional trauma that I experienced months after that trauma to my body that had me believing I couldn't do this anymore. I was going to have to quit.

But that's where I was in 2016, and now I can look back and say, oh my goodness, God, His plan was amazing.

And when we know the trajectory of our life and our calling by God is for a greater purpose than what we're in, in the middle of what we're in, we can hang on to that and understand that, oh, God's got a bigger purpose for this.

Like Joseph, right? Joseph, who was betrayed horribly by his brothers. I mean, what I did to my brother was bad. I mean, eating grass, that's bad. But his brother sold him into slavery. He might as well be dead.

And look what Joseph says to his brothers. You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good, to accomplish what's now being done, the saving of many lives.

Paul understood this when he was put in prison. He said, now I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that what has happened to me has actually served to advance the gospel.

And as a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and everyone else that I am in chains for Christ.

And because of my chains, most of the brothers and sisters have become confident in the Lord and dare all the more to proclaim the gospel without fear.

Paul understood that the difficulty that he was going through was actually an opportunity to serve a greater purpose.

And so it is with you, and so it is with me.

That's where some of you are today. The enemy just wants to tell you, just quit. It's too hard to stay in the game.

I want to tell you this today, sometimes staying in the game is a minute-by-minute thing. It's an hour-by-hour thing, a day-by-day thing.

But those little wins, they add up to a huge rout of victory in the end.

I had a friend. When she was 16 years old, she was abandoned and deserted by everybody and anybody, including the man that put her in a spot of having an unwanted pregnancy.

She was 16. She didn't know what else to do.

And she had an abortion, and it just about killed her.

But she made it through, and then God said, you know what we're going to do? We're going to turn that back around against the enemy. You're forgiven. I love you. We're good. But now you're going to help some other ladies.

And I don't know how many ladies she helped during her lifetime, and I don't know how many babies were saved.

That opposition became an opportunity for a greater good.

Anybody hearing me right now? Whatever it is that you're going through right now, that's opposition. That's tough. That's an obstacle where the enemy is saying, just quit. Just give it up. Just hang it up. Just take your bag and go home.

Whatever that is, God's saying to you today, uh-uh, no, you stay in the game.

This is an opportunity that I'm going to use to grow you, to mature you, and to use this for a greater purpose for my kingdom.

I was talking about this last week with our teaching team.

One of the people said, Mark, that's like plants. I don't know anything about plants, so it was good for me to learn this.

I mean, if a plant is in a greenhouse, she said, you just don't take it out of the greenhouse and put it out in the sun and leave it there.

You got to take it out there for a little while, let it get a little exposure to the sun, maybe clouds, maybe rain, take it back in the greenhouse.

You kind of do that back and forth a little bit until finally you know the plant's ready to survive out there in the world.

Isn't that the way it is with us? We're kind of in the greenhouse where it's safe, and we go out in the world where it's hard, and until finally God, through all those things that go on in our lives, sets us up to thrive and to live in this world.

Come on. Thank you, Lord.

So we base our faith on the truth that God's promises are sure.

We understand that God has us on a trajectory in our lives where we gain clarity in his plan for us.

And this last one, I really love this one.

Jesus had a target that he was captivated with.

It was a prize that he was captivated with.

And I can net it out in two verses in Hebrews.

The author here says, Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who, for the joy set before him, endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of God.

Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

Look at Jesus. See how he did it, and stay in the game.

And how did he do it? How did he endure such opposition and the cross and its shame?

He had his eyes on the prize, the joy that was set before him.

And are you ready for this?

That prize, that thing that brings him the greatest amount of joy, is you.

Are you kidding me? Me? What? Yeah.

And he was captivated by you.

So, nine o'clock, Sharon was here, my wife.

She's not here now, so I'm still going to tell the same story.

And I don't know if she gets embarrassed when I do this, but when I first saw her in 1974 on the tennis courts of Concordia, Ann Arbor, I was captivated.

I was captivated.



And I decided I was going to do whatever I needed to do to let her know that, so I could win her over.

I'm not going to go into the details of what I did, because that would not only embarrass her but me.

But suffice it to say, I set out to prove to her that I wanted her to be with me for the rest of my earthly life.

Wow.

What did Jesus do to prove that to you?

That he wanted you to be with him for the rest of eternity?

He died for you.

He bled and died for you on that cross.

He endured the cross and all of its shame, the opposition of sinful men.

He was hanging on a cross that he didn't deserve.

But he was there because he was captivated by the joy and the prize that was set out ahead for him, which is you and me.

If that's not a reason all by itself enough for me to stay in the game, that's enough.

Just to know that.

He was, he is, he ever will be captivated by you.

That word captivated is such a cool word.

It means enthralled.

It means delighted.

It means dazzled by you.

Honestly, is that true?

Are any of you going like, no, come on.

Pastor Mark, come on.

You don't know me.

Trust me, God isn't captivated with me.

Oh yeah, he is.

Oh yeah, he is.

And he proved it.

He died for you because he wanted you to be with him forever.

When he prayed to his Father on those closing days before his crucifixion, he said, Father, these that are with me, I want them to be with me where I am going.

And then he said, and I pray this not only for those who are with me but for those who would believe.

Guess who that is? Come on.

I'm looking at it.

I'm looking at you.

For you.

So I'm happy to close this message by telling you that my brother Steve, like, we're more than brothers.

We're like the best of friends.

And I'm very proud of him.

And I'm saying that not only because I am, but because he might be listening to this message afterwards.

But I really am proud of him.

He's an example of someone that has just persevered, stayed with it, stayed in the game.

I'm super proud of him.

I'm also super proud of you.

Really am.

You've weathered some storms.

You've faced some opposition.

You're sitting in this room right now today.

That says something.

We don't do it by ourselves.

We do it with the help of God's Holy Spirit himself working in us.

So may I pray that for you today as we close?

Father, thank you for your spirit that you send to us that just blesses us to be able to stay in the game.

And there are people I know, Lord, that are here this morning, perhaps that what they need more than anything else is the reminder that when you speak, you don't lie.

You speak the truth and you back that truth up with your actions.

And I pray that they would know that that keeps them in the game.

And there are others that need to be reminded that the trajectory of their life is not just for their own well-being, but for the well-being of a greater good.

That you have a plan for them and your plan for them is better than the one they have for themselves.

Give them clarity about that.

And so doing, keep them in the game.

And then lastly, Lord, oh, that we might know that you're captivated by us and that you proved it by dying.

And there is going to be a day, Lord, when we get to see you face to face.

I want to be captivated by your beauty.

I am.

Increase, Lord, my faith and the faith of my brothers and sisters here today.

That we could be captivated with you and for that day, that day when you're coming back and you're going to restore all things and make all things new.

Lord, we bless you and we thank you and we receive that today to keep us in the game.

And we agree in all God's people said.

Amen.