Community of God pt11 – Faithful to the End

1. As we close this series on the Community of God, let's remember the entire premise: we are to be light and salt in a broken, divided world. We are among a people who are not prepared for Jesus. They are not looking for him. They do not sing our songs or tell our stories. When we refer to scripture, they do not get the reference. And this was very much the situation for the early church and since their time to ours.

2. God IS doing something new with OSHC and other works…but THIS, our situation, is not new. To prove it, let's talk about Paul.

3. When we think of apostles who left a great and lasting legacy, we think first of Paul. Once a persecutor of Christians, he encountered Jesus on the road to Damascus and became the greatest of the apostles when it came to writing and codifying the faith (though we need to be careful that we do not assume that he was making rules for every person in every age).

4. We've stayed in Acts for the last several weeks and we will be there again today, but we are skipping forward all the way to chapters 21-28 for this story. We find Paul leaving Ephesus and heading toward Jerusalem. This was an emotional parting for Paul and for the Christians at Ephesus. They loved each other dearly and everyone knew that Paul was heading into danger.

5. When we talk about Jews in the lesson today, we need to keep in mind that we are talking about the portion of the Jews that did not accept Jesus as the Messiah and who honestly and fervently believed that Paul and the Christians were aberrant in their theology and dangerous to their community.

6. Many Jews were convinced that Paul would destroy them from within and without. He must be stopped. About a week after Paul arrived back in Jerusalem, some of these Jews started a riot when Paul started speaking at the temple (just as Jesus did his last week on earth before the crucifixion).

7. When the Roman soldiers arrived to enforce the peace, Paul surprised them by asking if he could address the crowd, the very people who had been trying to kill him.

8. He told the assembly his story, as he'd told it before. He had been a Pharisee who spent his life persecuting Christians. He told them how and why he had changed so dramatically and now accepted Jesus as the Promised One, the Messiah. The crowd did not react well to his testimony as we see in Acts 22:22. The Roman officer in charge gave orders that Paul was to be taken away and beaten so that the Jews would be satisfied.

9. Paul tells the officer that he, Paul, is a citizen of Rome, born a citizen. In fact, his citizenship outranked that of the arresting officer. Had Paul pushed the point, this officer would have been in serious trouble, perhaps facing loss in rank and a beating, but Paul didn't do that. (Just because you have the right to say or do something doesn't mean you should. What would best advance the cause of Jesus?)

10. The officer went back to the leaders of the mob and got them together with Paul to settle this matter but the mob erupted almost immediately and, once again, the Romans had to pull Paul out of there and then separate the factions among the Jews who were all claiming harm and calling for Paul's punishment.

11. A group of 40 of them bound themselves by an oath that they would fast until they killed Paul. They planned to ambush Paul as he made his way to a sham peace meeting with the Sanhedrin. Paul got word of the plot through his nephew and he, in turn, alerted the commander of the Roman regiment. He was given a guard – 470 horsemen, spearmen, and infantry.

12. Paul was sent to Felix, a Roman ruler, for examination. Paul made a defense of himself and his conduct in chapter 24. Felix couldn't find anything wrong with him, but left him in prison to keep peace with the Jews. Paul stayed there…two years. Felix was succeeded by another Roman Ruler, this one named Festus. Festus wanted to send Paul back to the Jews and let them sort this all out but Paul played his trump card as a born citizen of Rome: he appealed to Caesar.

13. Paul was sent to Agrippa and that trial is described in Acts 25 and 26. Agrippa was pretty sure Paul was deluded – maybe mentally ill – but he hadn't broken any law. He could have freed him but Paul had appealed to Caesar and that appeal could not be taken back (as a precaution against torturing someone to make them drop the appeal) so it was off to Rome.

14. Paul's trip to Rome was full of trials and adventures. He was shipwrecked, did miracles, and had such an influence on his captors and fellow prisoners that it made a real impression on those around them (once again – he was salt and light in a place not prepared for it).

15. Three months later, Paul arrives near Rome. The Christians in the area came out and walked with him all the way into the city. What bravery on their part! Paul was held in a house for two years while he waited for his appeal to be heard. During that time. He spoke to any and all who would come, telling them about Jesus. (Acts 28:17-31)

16. From a worldly standpoint, things went very wrong for Paul and for Rome itself. Rulers came and went until finally Nero was made Caesar. Evil, insane, and murderous, Nero had no interest in hearing Paul's story. He wanted him killed for the crime of being an inconvenient Jew.

17. Paul was isolated now. He wasn't a family man. He had no wife or children to care for him. He was cold. He didn't have his clothes or books. He was rejected by the very churches he had planted and/or nourished over the years. 2nd Timothy 1:15 and then 2:8-10.

18. Paul did not believe that he would be spared the ax, the gibbet, or the garotte. He knew he was going to die. He didn't despair for his life for he believed that the story of Jesus would continue to spread and that was all that mattered.

19. Paul had some who loved him still. Foremost among those was Timothy, whom he called his son in the faith. If you were in Paul's position, after all he had suffered, would you ask your son to do the same, to follow in your footsteps? Would you encourage him to hide,

or to be more crafty in spreading the story of Christ? Would you drop the gospel as a lost cause, a bad idea, a failed attempt? Paul did none of those things; he charged Timothy to do the same work because the story of Jesus was, is, and always will be greater than anything else. 2 Tim. 4:1-8.

20. As we learn in Revelation 21:1-7, the end of the story is what matters.

21. I remember one time speaking at a big event. I knew the worship team because I'd worked with them in various forms over the years. During the singing, I couldn't sing. I kept looking at them and thinking of their stories. One had lost a son mere months before. Another's husband had left her with three children within the last year. A third had come home from university to find his parents divorcing.

22. And, yet, they sang songs of hope, love, faith, and grace. Their faith rocked me. How can they sing at a time like this? Because the Spirit of God in them was greater than anything in the world. They were overcoming, right before our eyes.

23. Some of you may have been blessed by a relatively easy journey so far and I hope that continues the rest of your life. I'm not jealous about it; I am happy for you. Others, like me and quite a large portion of OSHC members, have had a hard time.

24. My childhood friend and I were excited about going to kindergarten together. The day came and he wasn't there. He had died in an accident while working on a tractor with his father. I went to funerals of other friends and family so often that when two schoolmates died in my senior year of high school, I didn't bat an eye.

25. My childhood was rough. I won't go into details except to say that the scars remain. And yet…I have not suffered like Paul or most of you, I'm sure. And I have not performed as well as I would have liked, but I kept asking, seeking and knocking and Jesus has honored that in me as he honors it in you.

26. What do we scarred, broken people do in an unprepared world? What Paul did. What he charged Timothy to do, Connect, grow,

serve. And trust the Lord of the Harvest to do what He promised to do.