"Snatch them from the fire" Series
Sermon 1: Jude
September 18, 2011

You don't have to stand up or raise your hand or anything, but here's the question: How many of you guys think there is a pretty good chance that you're going to hell? If there is a hell – and some of you hope there's not – but if there is a hell, you figure that's probably where you are going to end up. My suspicion is (this is going to sound really mean), my suspicion is that quite a few of you are in a whole lot more trouble than you think. You see, most of us work hard to convince ourselves that if there is a heaven, we'll sneak in somehow; and if there is a hell, that's got to be for people a whole lot worse than I am.

How about this question: How many of you guys know someone who you think is probably going to hell? I'm not asking if you know of someone who is probably going to hell – you've read about some terribly person in the news or something; how many of you know someone personally, someone close to you, who is probably going to hell? I suspect ... all of us do.

Now we live in a culture that pretty much turns the Bible on its head, and it has infected the church! Not many people out there really believe in a hell. But if there is one, then it is reserved for only the worst of the worst. Hell is for guys like Bin Laden, or the 9-11 terrorists; or genocidal maniacs like Hitler, and Stalin; or mass murderers like Jeffrey Dahmer or Ted Bundy; and maybe a few child molesters and Washington Redskins fans. Hell, if there is one, is for the worst of the worst – we convince ourselves.

And heaven, if there is one, well, we think most decent people will end up there, most people are good enough to make it, we think. Have you ever been to a funeral where the preacher said, "This guy's not going to make it to heaven, he's going to hell." I doubt it. What I hear at funerals is stuff like this: "He didn't go to church much, but he was a pretty good guy." "He worked hard, he loved his family. He had a few vices but he was more good than bad." "I think he was baptized once." You'll see him again, in heaven.
A lot of us pretty much turn the Bible on its head. We don't want to believe what it says, so we twist it around. Barna did a study not too long ago. He wanted to discover how many people who attend church are "born again Christians." If this was a typical church, how many people in this room right now would be born again Christians? Barna found that only 26% of Catholics who attend church are "born again" Christians. About 1 in 4 of those who attend a Catholic church have made a personal commitment to Jesus Christ that is still important in their life today, and believe that they will go to heaven when they die because they have confessed their sins and accepted Jesus Christ as their savior. That's how he defines a "born again Christian." And he found that only 61% of Protestants who attend church are "born again" Christians. That means roughly 40%, about 4 in 10 of us, have not made a personal commitment to Jesus Christ that is still important in our life today, and we do not believe that we will go to heaven when we die because we have confessed our sins and accepted Jesus Christ as our savior. Does that scare you? To think that maybe over 100 people sitting in this room aren't going to make it? It tears me up. Jesus said that to have eternal life a man has to be born again. If Barna's definition of born again is even close, then a couple hundred of the adults who will sit in this room this morning will not go to heaven, they're headed for hell. And I hate that!

We've turned the Bible on its head. The Bible says, Jesus says, "You can enter God's Kingdom only through the narrow gate." He says, "The highway to hell is broad, and its gate is wide for the many who choose that way. But the gateway to life is very narrow and the road is difficult, and only a few ever find it." Guys, if Jesus is not the center of your life, you're on the wrong road. I'm not talking about just believing in Jesus, just believing that God raised him from the dead. To be born again means he's at the center of who you are, he's what makes you tick — he's the Lord of your life.

This next month I'll be preaching about some pretty tough stuff. I hate this stuff. I'll probably be making some of you pretty uncomfortable. It might be a good month to go check out Buck Run, or Forks, or Hope. I'm going to talk about hell quite a bit — especially next week. I hate talking about hell; but I believe it's God's truth. I'm going to talk about how serious it is for us to get off our butts and get out there and bring people face to face with Jesus — we are literally trying to snatch them from the
fire. Do you remember that video we saw about people putting themselves at risk by lifting up that burning car to rescue that motorcycle guy underneath? And amazing picture! That's a picture of the church, guys! That's our mission from God, to rescue people from the fire, even if it means putting ourselves at risk. I'm going to talk about getting out of our comfort zone so we can be effective in bringing people face to face with Jesus. The apostle Paul says, "I'll do whatever it takes to reach them, as long as it doesn't dishonor my God." And we will too, do whatever it takes, to snatch people from the fire and bring them face to face with Jesus.

But I'm going to start this little series in a hard place. You see, it's not just about rescuing them from the fire, people outside these walls. It's about rescuing some of you, inside these walls. Some of us don't even realize that we need rescuing, we won't admit that our walk with God just won't cut it. You see, one of the reasons God created the church was so that we could snatch each other from the fire and drag each other to heaven. And we want to do that here, this month.

I'm going to kick this little series off by preaching from a book we don't read much. It's the tiniest letter in the New Testament: Jude, just one chapter, 25 verses. It's not hard to find: the last book in your Bible is Revelation. If you'll turn to the first page of Revelation, Jude is on the page just to the left. Jude was one of Jesus' human brothers. He didn't believe in Jesus until after the resurrection. But after the resurrection he was a fierce believer, and he became one of the leaders in the early church. I'm going to kind of race through this little letter really fast until I get to the end; that's where I want to slow down and listen really carefully.

Jude starts out (3) saying that he wanted to write a letter of praise and gratitude. He wanted his letter to be positive and upbeat. That's the kind of stuff I like to preach — praise, gratitude, positive, upbeat. But he says he can't write that kind of letter, because the church is under attack. He has to challenge the church to take a stand, to roll up our sleeves and get after it, because if we don't some of the people sitting next to you in this room this morning are going to fall away, some of your brothers and sisters here are drifting towards hell.
Here's why. Jude says, "What has happened is that some people have infiltrated our ranks (our Scriptures warned us this would happen), who beneath, their pious skin are shameless scoundrels. Their design is to replace the sheer grace of our God with sheer license—which means doing away with Jesus Christ, our one and only Master." (4) There were people in the church saying two things that were damnable. People in the church today still believe these same two damnable things.

- 1: They were saying that you could believe in Jesus and still live anyway you please. They thought they could come to church on Sunday and praise Jesus, and then go home on Monday and dishonor him. People still live that way. Some of us live that way. We act all pious in here; and dishonor God out there.

- 2: They were calling Jesus "Lord," and then treating his words as suggestions. Guys, if you call Jesus Lord, it means he's the Master, he's your boss. I don't care whether you disagree with him; I don't care whether you don't understand him; his words aren't recommendations, they are mandates.

And the church today, even Capital City Christian Church, is still full of people who are okay with praising Jesus on Sunday, and living a life that marginalizes him or dishonors him the rest of the week. And the church is still full of people who call Jesus "Lord" and yet treat his will as a suggestion. We'll do life his way if it is convenient, if it is agreeable to us, if it doesn't make us too uncomfortable. Well, those lies are killing Christians, they are leading some Christians to hell. And Jude says, "We've got a war to fight; we have some brothers and sisters, some Christians, to snatch from the fire," if we can.

In the middle verses of this little letter Jude gives some examples of what happens to people who fall away from God. It's pretty hard stuff.

- Jude reminds them (5) that God rescued the Israelites from Egypt—remember the Exodus. And yet when the children of Israel got into the wilderness he had to destroy some of them when they fell away. You see, just because you're hanging around with God's people doesn't mean you're going to make it.

- And then Jude talks about angels (6). When some of the angels fell away, when some of the angels began treating God's words as suggestions, God put them in prison, where they are waiting for judgment. That's a warning for us, too. We have a gracious God, but he expects us to take him seriously!
And then Jude talks about the people of Sodom and Gomorrah (7). Some of them believed in God, but their lifestyle didn't back it up. So God hammered them. I don't care what you say you believe if it doesn't change the way you live.

Jude goes on for the next ten verses talking about how dangerous these people can be in a church.

- **Verse 10:** Jude says, "These people scoff at things they do not understand. Like unthinking animals, they do whatever their instincts tell them, and so they bring about their own destruction." People in church still scoff at God. People in church still act like God is stupid. "God wants me to forgive her? No way." "God wants me to wait till marriage? That's silly." "God wants me to give even when times are hard? That makes no sense." We scoff at God whenever we know what he wants us to do, and we think our way is better. And guys, doing life your way instead of God's way will put yourselves at risk ... of hell.

- **Verse 12:** Jude says, "When these people eat with you in your fellowship meals commemorating the Lord's love, they are like dangerous reefs that can shipwreck you. They are like shameless shepherds who care only for themselves." They are walking down to the Lord's Table with you; they are singing songs to God with you; when we pray – their heads are bowed and their eyes are closed. They look pious, and they sound pious ... but it's all about them. "Shameless shepherds who care only for themselves."

- **Verse 16:** Jude says, "These people are grumblers and complainers, living only to satisfy their desires. They brag loudly about themselves, and they flatter others to get what they want." They are grumblers and complainers, because they think church is about what I want, what I need, rather than what God wants, what God needs. You can't really call Jesus "Lord" and be self-centered, can you?

- **Verse 19:** "These people are the ones who are creating divisions amount you. They follow their natural instincts because they do not have God's Spirit in them." And so they put themselves at risk of hell, they drag others to hell with them, and they tear up churches. These verses aren't about people outside these walls; they are not about atheists, or agnostics, or Muslims, or
Buddhists. They are about people who claim to be Christian, people inside these walls.

Jude's church had a problem, the same problem a lot of our churches struggle with today. So his advice to them will probably work for us too. Here's what he tells them to do; let's see if it will work for us too. Verses 16 20-21: he says, "But you, dear friends, must build each other up in your most holy faith, pray in the Holy Spirit, and await the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ, who will bring you eternal life. In this way, you will keep yourselves safe in God's love." Build each other up, pray godly prayers, and be patiently faithful – and you will keep yourselves safe in God's love.

Before we try to snatch our brothers and sisters from the fire we need to be sure we're not standing in it too. Before you look around and start pointing some fingers at people you think are drifting away, look inside. How are you doing with God? You call Jesus Lord – are you living that way? Are you treating his will as a suggestion, or as a mandate from your God? Even when you don't understand him, even when you don't agree with him, are you sold out to him?

If you have flown on an airplane you have listened to the stewardess give you instructions on what to do if the cabin loses air-pressure. The oxygen masks will drop down. Now let's say your kid is sitting next to you. A mask drops down in front of both you and your kid. Whose mask are you supposed to put on first? They tell you to put on yours first, because if you lose consciousness, you can't help your kid. That sounds self-centered, to put your mask on first, until you realize that if you don't take care of yourself first, you won't be able to help the people around you.

That's kind of like what Jude is telling us. Before you start looking around to see who else needs help, make sure your faith is strong. "But you, dear friends, start out by building each other up in your most holy faith, and praying in the Holy Spirit, and faithfully awaiting the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ, who will bring you eternal life. In this way, you will keep yourselves safe in God's love." And then when you are safe in God's love, Jude says, go look for those Christians who are trapped under a burning car and lift up that car and drag them out to safety.
Listen to what Jude says. He identifies three groups of Christians who are in trouble.

- **Group 1:** He says, "You must show mercy to those whose faith is wavering."
- **Group 2:** He says, "Rescue others by snatching them from the flames of judgment."
- **Group 3:** Show mercy to still others, but do so with great fear, hating the very garments their deeds have fouled.

Some of you guys have a faith that is wavering.

- Maybe you are going through a tough time in your marriage, and you've been praying hard, but God isn't fixing it.
- Maybe you are going through a rough patch financially, and you've been trying to trust God, but it's hard.
- Maybe there's a sin you've been battling. And the truth is, it's growing stronger in you and you're getting weaker fighting it.
- Or maybe there are some things about God that are just hard to understand, some of God's ways that just don't seem to make sense.

And your faith is wavering. And the Bible says, when a brother or sister is wavering, don't shun them, don't hammer them; love on them; love them back.

Others, others need to be rescued, others need to be snatched from the flames of judgment. There are Christians here who are more than wavering, they are flat out on the wrong path.

- There are people here who praise God every Sunday, and then walk out these doors and immerse themselves in a relationship they know is not God honoring. Maybe you're shacking up; maybe you're cheating on your spouse; maybe you are abusing your wife, or your kids.
- There are people here who praise God every Sunday, and then walk out these doors and immerse yourselves in some other habitual sin. Some of you are addicted to drugs, or to alcohol, or to porn. And your addiction is pulling you away from God and God's people.
Guys, they are in danger of judgment; and God tells us to snatch them from the fire, if we can.

There's a third group. I suspect most of them aren't in church any more. They used to call Jesus "Lord," but they really don't any more. The Bible says, "Show them mercy" – never give up on them. Never assume that someone is too far gone to be transformed by God. "But with great fear, hating the very garments their deeds have fouled." The imagery here is powerful, even crude. The word for garments here for their inner garments, like their underwear. The word for fouled here carries the idea of excrement, feces. They are so deep in sin it's like there are sitting in their own excrement. Pray for them, reach out to them, love them, but don't get pulled in to their crap.

So what should we do? This is serious stuff. If we don't do anything, people we know and care about will go to Hell. If we try to go to them, they might blow us off, or even pull us into their mess. But we can't do nothing. We can't just sit back and do nothing. not if you care about someone, not if you love them, not if God loves them.

I can tell you this, we have to do it together... as a team. We can't rescue people alone. 17 people put their shoulders to that burning car and pulled that guy out from underneath. That's a picture of the church. It's imperative that when you reach out to someone, your other hand is firmly gripped by others who can pull you from harm's way. There has to be a human chain that links you to safety. Some of you can't help ... yet. Because you're not safe in Christ yourself, and you're not connected to others who can support you. But guys, we have a job to do. The church has a job to do. And it is infinitely more important than rescuing a motorcyclist from underneath a burning car. We're trying to snatch them from the fire of hell.

Let me go back to where I started. Is there anyone in this room going to Hell? Is there anyone here who believes that, if there is a hell, that may be where I'm going. Especially if it's all about this "born again" stuff. Or how about this question. "Do you know anyone you fear is going to hell?" The question is not, "Do you know of anyone who may be going to hell," it's "Do you know anyone, anyone close to you, that you fear is on a path to hell?" Don't play that "It's not mine to judge" garbage. That's just a cop-out. Are you going to tell that to God some day? "It wasn't
mine to judge and so I let my friend go to Hell." Who is here that needs a wakeup call. The truth is, either you don't care enough to confront; or you are afraid you might get rejected—you are afraid to put yourself in harm's way; or you really don't believe there is anything to worry about? Which is it?

In just a moment we will invite each of you to go to an appropriate place in this room. Some are you are believers, secure in your faith. We invite you to make your way to a communion station where you can thank God for saving you. You can remember the price Jesus paid for your sins. But after you've been to the communion table, slip over to one of the tables near it where you will find a smoke-filled patch of cloth for you. Take that cloth and write on it the name of a person who needs to be snatched from the flames; someone you need to pray for, you need to talk to about important, eternal things. Keep that smoky patch with you for the next month. To remind you of your obligation to that person.

Come on guys, if you're heart isn't breaking for someone in your life, you don't get it yet. Let's get it done, this month.

But maybe a few of you don't need to go to the Lord's Table, you need to come here. Maybe you have never made Jesus the Lord of your life. And it's time step off that wide road that leads to destruction, onto that narrow road that leads to life. If you need to turn your life around, please, come on down here and let's get it done.