

#206 “Spiritual Lifelines”
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Jude 22-23 says, “And have mercy on some, who are doubting; save others, snatching them out of the fire; and on some have mercy with fear, hating even the garment polluted by the flesh.” Jude is a short but potent epistle that carries a central message of contending for the faith and upholding sound doctrine in a world in which the devil operates, deceiving and leading many astray. As he closes the letter, he gives several admonitions. Two clear-cut principles arise, one for those who are doubting and one for those who are in imminent danger because of their sin.

The first category is made up of those who are doubting. Perhaps they have experienced a traumatic event in their lives, and they are struggling to understand why God would allow such a thing to happen if He is truly loving and all-powerful. Perhaps they have been confused by an argument by someone who opposes the inerrancy of Scripture, and they begin to question what they really can believe. It is a normal part of the Christian experience to seek out answers. This is why Christ tells us to seek so that we can find (Matthew 7:7). He wants to give us answers (Jeremiah 33:3), and He promises wisdom to those who ask in faith without doubting (James 1:5-6). But the “without doubting” part can become the catch. Doubt can be a downward spiral such that a person fails to recover to receive the truth that frees and restores. Doubt, left unresolved, can lead to sin and danger. This is why Christians need to know what they believe and why so that they can resist temptation and refute those who contradict. According to Jude, the antidote for those who are doubting is to mercifully lead them to the truth, with the emphasis on the mercy part. Sometimes it is tempting to get impatient or angry with people when they express doubt about something we thought they believed concerning the Lord. Perhaps we might selfishly worry about how it makes us look, or maybe we might feel like failures in terms of our attempts to teach others the truth. These reactions are not loving and certainly not merciful. Those who doubt need to know that their doubt does not bring judgmentalism, derision, or rejection. They need to know that mercy will override the process of healing and correction. Being unloving and unmerciful increases doubt by undermining our testimony, so, if we hope to free others from their doubts, we had better not forget mercy.

The second category consists of those who are in the fire and who need to be snatched out and saved. There is a sense of imminent and immediate danger and destruction if action is not taken. Certainly, those who do not know Christ need to be spiritually snatched out of the eternal fire by preaching the gospel to them. That is most definitely an urgent need. However, in context, it is more likely that Jude is speaking to believers who are making shipwreck of their faith and who need to get snatched out of harm’s way before they hurt themselves or others further. For example, suppose a teenager who professes to know and love Christ gets caught up in abusing drugs or gets caught up with the wrong friends. There is a time to literally “seize and carry off by force,” as the word “snatching” could also be translated, lest the person make a downward spiral of destructive decisions. In these cases, just approaching with reason and kindness to

answer questions might not be sufficient. If a person is in the fire, they are already being burned. In other words, irreparable damage is being done that will stay with them for the rest of their lives. It is past the time for talking, and it is time to take drastic measures and act. Perhaps a parent might call the police on their drug-abusing child so that he or she is forced into rehab. Perhaps a parent stops paying for college or takes away a car to stop a child from maintaining certain associations and behaviors. Perhaps a Christian brother physically restrains a person from going and doing something he or she will regret. Of course, there will be a time for mercy, forgiveness, and grace, but the person must still be alive and coherent for that to matter. Sin is dangerous and a real death spiral that can make us spin out of control. Even those who seem like they could never fall into such a fire can. We all still have to deal with the devil and our flesh. We should pray that we never make stupid decisions that lead us into sin's destructive grasp, but, if we do, we should hope that we are fortunate enough to have those who will grab a hold of us before it is too late.

A great illustration of this admonition is found in the Old Testament in Genesis 18:15-16 which says, "When morning dawned, the angels urged Lot, saying, 'Up, take your wife and your two daughters who are here, or you will be swept away in the punishment of the city.' But he hesitated. So the men seized his hand and the hand of his wife and the hands of his two daughters, for the compassion of the LORD was upon him; and they brought him out, and put him outside the city." The Lord through the ministering angels literally seized and carried away Lot and his family so that they wouldn't get destroyed. Though 2 Peter 2:7 makes it clear that Lot was a believer, he hesitated and struggled to abandon his home and his lifestyle even despite imminent divine destruction. Sin can get a stranglehold even on Christians, and there is a time to pull a loved one out of the fire before he or she is destroyed by sin. Christians know that they need to be merciful people, and when brothers and sisters struggle with doubt, mercy is indeed the call. However, there is a time for mercy to take a different form of drastic action to pull somebody out of imminent danger. Sometimes tough love is the most merciful thing we can do for a person.

May we be spiritual lifelines for others as we follow Jude's advice for whatever situation in which we may find ourselves. Our intervention could be just enough to be the difference.