

**THE MERCY OF
HELL, AND OTHER
SERMONS**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649744930

The Mercy of Hell, and Other Sermons by Joseph Fort Newton

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Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.
Cover @ 2017

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JOSEPH FORT NEWTON

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BY

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**THE MURRAY PRESS
BOSTON AND CHICAGO
1917**

PUBLISHERS' FOREWORD

This volume owes its existence to the belief that Joseph Fort Newton is one of the few living preachers who have a universal message. He lives beyond dogma and above controversy, accompanied by Him, "whose we are, in whom we live, and in the service of whose will there is peace."

Because this book is a witness of The Unseen, its message is to all who seek where they do not yet see.

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I

THE MERCY OF HELL

"And in hell he lifted up his eyes."—*Luke 16: 23.*

SO terrible a theme casts over one the hush of a great awe. Too often those who discuss it do so as advocates of this side or that, keen to make out their case. Whereas it is too solemn and fearful to be used for dogma, much less as a ready expedient to terrify, and still less to drive away those whom the preacher has not the skill, the patience, the sympathy to win. Let all such thoughts be far from us to-day, as we seek to inquire into the issues of the moral life.

Strangely enough this theme, once so popular, has almost vanished from the pulpit. So much so that it is seldom named. The place where the reality of hell is preached most vividly to-day is in the hall of science, with its vision of inexorable law. Outside that temple, the man in our day who has taught it with most terrible intensity of insight, making men view with uncovered eyes the uncovered horror, is Henrik Ibsen. It is startling to pass from the theology of our day, often only a confection of rose-water sentiment — not to

name the current denial of the reality of sin— into the air of the Ibsen stage. There we are made to behold the facts of the moral life in the light of a profound and authentic insight, and without disguise.

Such teaching seems unduly severe to our easy-going and indulgent age, not a little given to flip-pant talk about the most serious things. Many think that with the passing of the crude idea of literal fire burning unburnable spirits, hell has been done away with. Not so. As a fact, hell, in the sense of inevitable and unmistakable punishment for sin, or rather by sin, is to-day more a reality than ever before. Whatever may be the sufferings through which men must go in the future, there is no question about the sufferings we undergo in this present life. That man was right who, when asked if he believed in hell, replied: "No, I do not believe in it, I know it, because I am in it." This awful reality has been put off into the dim future, whereas, like heaven, it begins on earth and goes with us into the beyond.

To-day the fact of hell gets its most tragic aspect from the truth that men who are in it are often unconscious that they are in a place of torment. Sad beyond tears is the sight of moral decay, the deadening of moral sensibilities, and blinding of moral vision, and the slow degradation of soul into which, imperceptibly, men sink. It is this inward hell which each man makes for him-

self that is so terrible. Men go to hell, not because they are sent there by divine fiat, but because they choose to go. They go by a law of their own natures, as surely as harvest follows sowing, as certainly as night follows day. It does not lie beyond the open doors of death; it is here. It begins the moment a man sins and continues as long as he is in sin, here or elsewhere. To be in hell and not know it, happy and contented there — that is the ultimate moral tragedy.

Fear of hell is one of the great influences under which man has been educated, and it is rooted in his primary moral instincts. Consider the facts. We have, as psychology discloses, an infallible memory below the surface of the mind, keeping record of all that we have thought, dreamed, said, and done. We have also a moral judgment relentless in its accuracy and insight. We have, besides, a developing nature. Given these three things, and nothing else is needed to make a hell more terrible than Dante dreamed in his darkest mood. Once there is an awakening, and the thoughts and acts of days ago rise up like the citizens of a sleeping city. Then a man sees his brutality set in the light, remembers every look of pain, every tear he has caused, all the tragedy and sorrow which he failed to notice before. As in a drama, which he must sit and see out, he beholds the shame of his life in the light of what he might have been! What cycle of the Inferno could be more terrify-

ing than to witness that tragedy pass and repass!

Such an awakening is sure to come at last, if not here, then beyond. Some pass through this life like the rich man in the parable, thoughtless and indifferent, carelessly taking toll of unresisting love, inflicting suffering, perpetuating injustice; but those things all come back to them in the end. During his lifetime the rich man did not see the beggar at his gate, covered with sores and attended by dogs; but in hell he lifted up his eyes, and then he could see Lazarus afar off. His eyes were opened at last. Too late he saw how brutal, selfish, and unfeeling he had been to a fellow man in dire plight. No wonder he was in torment, and in his misery he became a beggar, asking mercy of one for whom he had no mercy in life. This is hell — not the painted flame that flickers in the evasive talk of our time, but the very thing itself.

Unhappily, this awful hell, real and terrible beyond all words, has too often been made, not simply salutary in its warning and effects, but almost savage, by three frightful errors. First, it has been portrayed in lurid rhetoric as a punishment inflicted by God in anger, and sometimes almost in a glee of vengeance. So blasphemous an idea of God, instead of serving the purpose intended, often made Him whom men should love and serve a Being whom it were an act of worship to despise. Volumes could not tell the injury done to religion