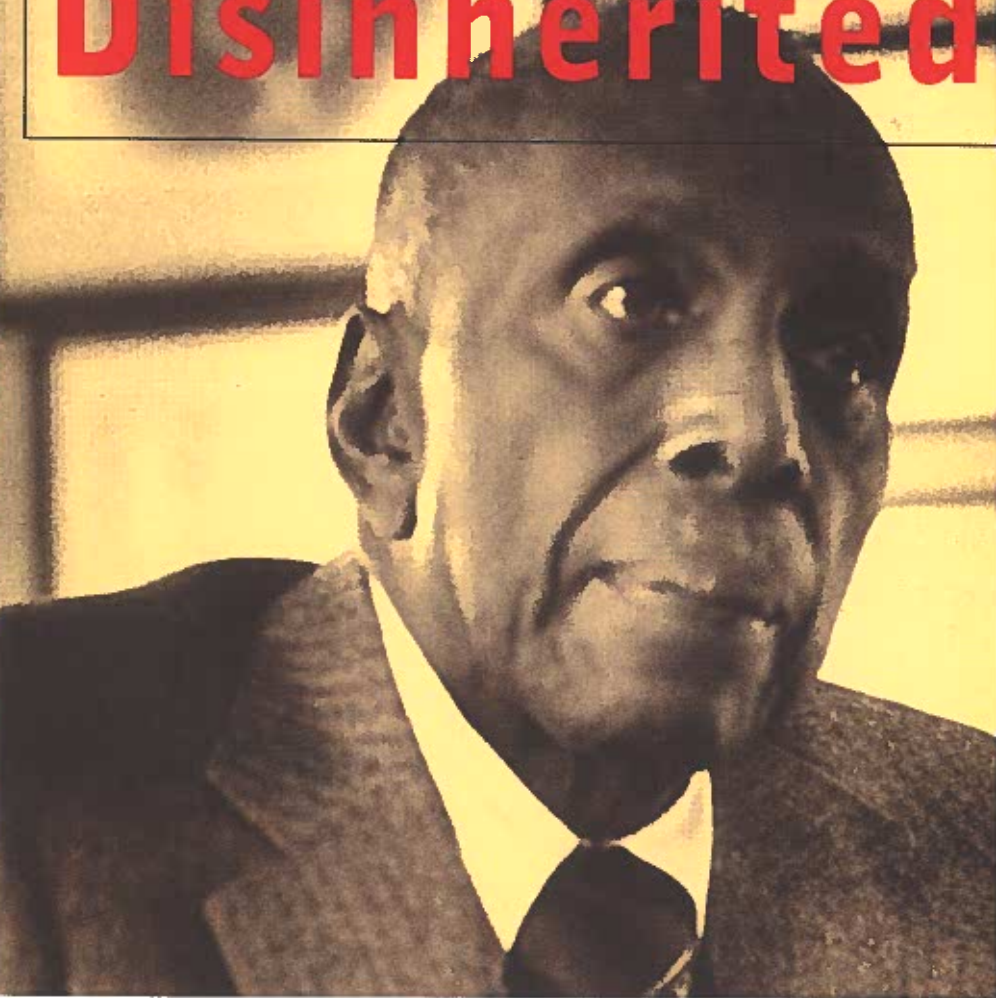


**Jesus**

and the

**Disinherited**



**HOWARD THURMAN**

Foreword by Vincent Harding

JESUS  
*and the Disinherited*

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To  
My Beloved Daughters  
OLIVE and ANNE

and to the future of their generation  
in whom the struggles of the  
past will find fulfillment

# Fear

**F**EAR is one of the persistent hounds of hell that dog the footsteps of the poor, the dispossessed, the disinherited. There is nothing new or recent about fear—it is doubtless as old as the life of man on the planet. Fears are of many kinds—fear of objects, fear of people, fear of the future, fear of nature, fear of the unknown, fear of old age, fear of disease, and fear of life itself. Then there is fear which has to do with aspects of experience and detailed states of mind. Our homes, institutions, prisons, churches, are crowded with people who are hounded by day and harrowed by night because of some fear that lurks ready to spring into action as soon as one is alone, or as soon as the lights go out, or as soon as one's social defenses are temporarily removed.

The ever-present fear that besets the vast poor, the economically and socially insecure, is a fear of still a different breed. It is a climate closing in; it is like the fog in San Francisco or in London. It is nowhere in particular yet everywhere. It is a mood which one carries around with himself,

distilled from the acrid conflict with which his days are surrounded. It has its roots deep in the heart of the relations between the weak and the strong, between the controllers of environment and those who are controlled by it.

When the basis of such fear is analyzed, it is clear that it arises out of the sense of isolation and helplessness in the face of the varied dimensions of violence to which the underprivileged are exposed. Violence, precipitate and stark, is the sire of the fear of such people. It is spawned by the perpetual threat of violence everywhere. Of course, physical violence is the most obvious cause. But here, it is important to point out, a particular kind of physical violence or its counterpart is evidenced; it is violence that is devoid of the element of contest. It is what is feared by the rabbit that cannot ultimately escape the hounds. One can almost see the desperation creep into the quivering, pulsing body of the frightened animal. It is one-sided violence. If two men equally matched, or even relatively matched, are in deadly combat, the violence is clear-cut though terrible; there is gross equality of advantage. But when the power and the tools of violence are on one side, the fact that there is no available and recognized protection from violence makes the resulting fear deeply terrifying.

In a society in which certain people or groups—by virtue of economic, social, or political power—have dead-weight advantages over others who are essentially without that kind of power, those who are thus disadvantaged know that they cannot fight back effectively, that they cannot protect themselves, and that they cannot demand protection from their persecutors. Any slight conflict, any alleged insult, any vague

whim, any unrelated frustration, may bring down upon the head of the defenseless the full weight of naked physical violence. Even in such a circumstance it is not the fear of death that is most often at work; it is the deep humiliation arising from dying without benefit of cause or purpose. No high end is served. There is no trumpet blast to stir the blood and to anesthetize the agony. Here there is no going down to the grave with a shout; it is merely being killed or being beaten in utter wrath or indifferent sadism, without the dignity of being on the receiving end of a premeditated act hammered out in the white heat of a transcendent moral passion. The whole experience attacks the fundamental sense of self-respect and personal dignity, without which a man is no man.

In such physical violence the contemptuous disregard for personhood is the fact that is degrading. If a man knows that he is the object of deliberately organized violence, in which care has been exercised to secure the most powerful and deadly weapon in order to destroy him, there may be something great and stimulating about his end. Conceivably this is a lesson that may be learned from one interpretation of the slaying of the giant Goliath. The great Goliath, the symbol of the might and prowess of the Philistines, is equipped for battle, armor replete, sword and protectors in order. Then there is David, just a lad—perhaps in short shirt, possibly without even sandals. For him no armor, no sword, no helmet—just a boy with a slingshot in his hand. David's preparation for battle may be thought to reflect David's estimate of the might and prowess of the Philistines. When the great Goliath beheld David, and the full weight of the drama broke upon

him with force, it well might be literally true that under the tension growing out of a sense of outraged dignity he burst a blood vessel, resulting in apoplexy.

Always back of the threat is the rumor or the fact that somewhere, under some similar circumstances violence was used. That is all that is necessary. The threat becomes the effective instrument. There was a dog that lived at the end of my street in my home town. Every afternoon he came down the street by the house. I could always hear him coming, giving a quick, sharp yelp in front of certain yards along the way. He was not hit by flying stones; each boy would catch the dog's eye and draw his arm back—the yelp followed immediately. The threat was sufficient to secure the reaction because, somewhere in the past, that particular motion had been identified with pain and injury. Such is the role of the threat of violence. It is rooted in a past experience, actual or reported, which tends to guarantee the present reaction of fear.

The disinherited experience the disintegrating effect of contempt in some such fashion as did Goliath. There are few things more devastating than to have it burned into you that you do not count and that no provisions are made for the literal protection of your person. The threat of violence is ever present, and there is no way to determine precisely when it may come crushing down upon you. In modern power politics this is called a war of nerves. The underprivileged in any society are the victims of a perpetual war of nerves. The logic of the state of affairs is physical violence, but it need not fulfill itself in order to work its perfect havoc in the souls of the poor.



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Fear, then, becomes the safety device with which the oppressed surround themselves in order to give some measure of protection from complete nervous collapse. How do they achieve this? In the first place, they make their bodies commit to memory ways of behaving that will tend to reduce their exposure to violence. Several years ago, when I was in India, I experienced precisely what is meant here. It was on our first evening in the country that a friend came to visit and to give advice about certain precautions to be observed. Just before he left, a final caution was given about snakes. He advised that we should not walk around at night without a light, not go into an unlighted room at night. We should sleep with a flashlight under the pillow, so that if it were necessary to get up during the night, a circle of light could be thrown on the floor before stepping out of bed, lest we disturb the nocturnal rambling of some unsuspecting cobra. I sat alone for some time after he left. During that period of concentration I was literally teaching my body how to behave, so that after that particular evening it would be extremely difficult for me to violate his expressed advice. My conditioning was so complete that, subsequently, my behavior was automatic.

This is precisely what the weak do everywhere. Through bitter experience they have learned how to exercise extreme care, how to behave so as to reduce the threat of immediate danger from their environment. Fear thus becomes a form of life assurance, making possible the continuation of physical existence with a minimum of active violence.

Children are taught how to behave in this same way. The children of the disinherited live a restricted childhood. From

their earliest moments they are conditioned so as to reduce their exposure to violence. In Felix Salten's *Bambi*, the old stag counsels Bambi, giving to him in great detail a pattern of behavior that will reduce his chance of being shot without an opportunity for escape. He teaches him to distinguish human scent, the kinds of exposure that may be deadly, what precise kind of behavior is relatively safe. The stag is unwilling to leave Bambi until he is sure that the young deer has made his body commit to memory ways of behaving that will protect and safeguard his life.

The threat of violence within a framework of well-nigh limitless power is a weapon by which the weak are held in check. Artificial limitations are placed upon them, restricting freedom of movement, of employment, and of participation in the common life. These limitations are given formal or informal expression in general or specific policies of separateness or segregation. These policies tend to freeze the social status of the insecure. The threat of violence may be implemented not only by constituted authority but also by anyone acting in behalf of the established order. Every member of the controllers' group is in a sense a special deputy, authorized by the mores to enforce the pattern. This fact tends to create fear, which works on behalf of the proscriptions and guarantees them. The anticipation of possible violence makes it very difficult for any escape from the pattern to be effective.

It is important to analyze the functioning of segregation that we may better understand the nature of the fear it engenders. It is obvious that segregation can be established only between two groups that are unequal in power and control.

Two groups that are relatively equal in power in a society may enter into a voluntary arrangement of separateness. Segregation can apply only to a relationship involving the weak and the strong. For it means that limitations are arbitrarily set up, which, in the course of time, tend to become fixed and to seem normal in governing the etiquette between the two groups. A peculiar characteristic of segregation is the ability of the stronger to shuttle back and forth between the prescribed areas with complete immunity and a kind of mutually tacit sanction; while the position of the weaker, on the other hand, is quite definitely fixed and frozen.

A very simple illustration is the operation of Jim Crow travel in trains in the southern part of the United States. On such a train the porter, when he is not in line of duty, may ride only in the Jim Crow coach—for the train porter is a Negro. But the members of the train crew who are not Negroes—the conductor, brakeman, baggageman—when they are not working, may ride either in the Jim Crow section or in any other section of the train. In the town in Florida in which I grew up as a boy it was a common occurrence for white persons to attend our church services and share in the worship. But it was quite impossible for any of us to do the same in the white churches of the community. All over the world, wherever ghettos are found, the same basic elements appear—a fact which dramatizes the position of weakness and gives the widest possible range to the policing effect of fear generated by the threat of violence.

Given segregation as a factor determining relations, the

resources of the environment are made into instruments to enforce the artificial position. Most of the accepted social behavior-patterns assume segregation to be normal—if normal, then correct; if correct, then moral; if moral, then religious. Religion is thus made a defender and guarantor of the presumptions. God, for all practical purposes, is imaged as an elderly, benign white man, seated on a white throne, with bright, white light emanating from his countenance. Angels are blonds and brunets suspended in the air around his throne to be his messengers and execute his purposes. Satan is viewed as being red with the glow of fire. But the imps, the messengers of the devil, are black. The phrase “black as an imp” is a stereotype.

The implications of such a view are simply fantastic in the intensity of their tragedy. Doomed on earth to a fixed and unremitting status of inferiority, of which segregation is symbolic, and at the same time cut off from the hope that the Creator intended it otherwise, those who are thus victimized are stripped of all social protection. It is vicious and thoroughly despicable to rationalize this position, the product of a fear that is as sordid as it is unscrupulous, into acceptance. Under such circumstances there is but a step from being despised to despising oneself.

The fear that segregation inspires among the weak in turn breeds fear among the strong and the dominant. This fear insulates the conscience against a sense of wrongdoing in carrying out a policy of segregation. For it counsels that if there were no segregation, there would be no protection

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against invasion of the home, the church, the school. This fear perpetuates the Jewish ghettos in Western civilization, the restrictive covenants in California and other states, the Chinatowns, the Little Tokyos, and the Street of the Untouchables in Hindu lands.<sup>1</sup>

The Jewish community has long been acquainted with segregation and the persecution growing out of it. Jews have been all the more easily trapped by it because of the deep historical conviction that they are a chosen people. This conviction and its underscoring in the unique ethical insights of the prophets have tended to make all those who were not a part of Israel feel in some sense as if they were spiritual outcasts. The conscious and unconscious reaction inspired by this sense of being on the outside is a fertile seedbed for anti-Semitism. Anti-Semitism is a confession of a deep sense of inferiority and moral insecurity. It is the fear of the socially or politically strong in the presence of the threat of moral judgment implicit in the role of the Jewish community throughout human history. Jesus was intimately acquainted with this problem from the inside. Jesus knew all of this.

His days were nurtured in great hostilities  
Focused upon his kind, the sons of Israel.  
There was no moment in all his years  
When he was free.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Recently untouchability was outlawed by the Indian state. A Hindu government did what years of British rule failed to do. Perhaps this is as it should be.

<sup>2</sup> From my privately published volume of poems, *The Greatest of These*, p. 3.

## FEAR

It is instructive to inquire into the effects of fear on the disadvantaged. Fear becomes acute, in the form of panic or rage, only at the moment when what has been threat becomes actual violence; but the mere anticipation of such an encounter is overwhelming simply because the odds are basically uneven. This fact is important to hold in mind. The disadvantaged man knows that in any conflict he must deal not only with the particular individual involved but also with the entire group, then or later. Even recourse to the arbitration of law tends to be avoided because of the fear that the interpretations of law will be biased on the side of the dominant group. The result is the dodging of all encounters. The effect is nothing short of disaster in the organism; for, studies show, fear actually causes chemical changes in the body, affecting the blood stream and the muscular reactions, preparing the body either for fight or for flight. If flight is resorted to, it merely serves as an incentive to one's opponent to track down and overpower. Furthermore, not to fight back at the moment of descending violence is to be a coward, and to be deeply and profoundly humiliated in one's own estimation and in that of one's friends and family. If he is a man, he stands in the presence of his woman as not a man. While it may be true that many have not had such experiences, yet each stands in candidacy for such an experience.

It is clear, then, that this fear, which served originally as a safety device, a kind of protective mechanism for the weak, finally becomes death for the self. The power that saves turns executioner. Within the walls of separateness death keeps

watch. There are some who defer this death by yielding all claim to personal significance beyond the little world in which they live. In the absence of all hope ambition dies, and the very self is weakened, corroded. There remains only the elemental will to live and to accept life on the terms that are available. There is a profound measure of resourcefulness in all life, a resourcefulness that is guaranteed by the underlying aliveness of life itself.

The crucial question, then, is this: Is there any help to be found in the religion of Jesus that can be of value here? It is utterly beside the point to examine here what the religion of Jesus suggests to those who would be helpful to the disinherited. That is ever in the nature of special pleading. No man wants to be the object of his fellow's pity. Obviously, if the strong put forth a great redemptive effort to change the social, political, and economic arrangements in which they seem to find their basic security, the whole picture would be altered. But this is apart from my thesis. Again the crucial question: Is there any help to be found for the disinherited in the religion of Jesus?

Did Jesus deal with this kind of fear? If so, how did he do it? It is not merely, What did he say? even though his words are the important clues available to us.

An analysis of the teaching of Jesus reveals that there is much that deals with the problems created by fear. After his temptation in the wilderness Jesus appeared in the synagogue and was asked to read the lesson. He chose to read from the prophet Isaiah the words which he declared as his fulfillment: