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# Martin Luther King Jr.:

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## The Man and His God

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**by Jim Meisner Jr.**

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Shortly before 6 p.m. he snuffed out his final cigarette and slipped on his suit coat. He'd spent the day in his hotel room with friends and family and now it was time to go to the home of a local minister for dinner. When the others went to change, Ralph remained in the room, watching him get ready.

It had rained the night before, so he stepped out onto the motel balcony to see if the early evening temperature was cool enough to merit an overcoat.

The rifle's report shattered the quiet Memphis twilight and the Baptist minister lay dying in a pool of blood, shot in the throat.

An hour later, doctors at St. Joseph's Hospital pronounced the 39 year-old Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. dead. The assassin's bullet silenced the civil rights leader and Nobel Peace Prize recipient.

The preacher who so profoundly affected the country's attitudes toward racial prejudice and discrimination and who helped transform the nation's laws and consciousness through nonviolent demonstrations, marches, and sit-ins, was home with his Lord. But the spirit of his message continued to resonate.

In 1977, President Jimmy Carter posthumously awarded King the Presidential Medal of Freedom and on January 13, 1979, the United States Postal Service honored King with a 15-cent stamp. Two days later, on the occasion of King's fiftieth birthday, Carter visited Ebenezer Baptist Church, King's home church in Atlanta, and added his weight to the growing effort to create a national holiday honoring his fellow Baptist and Georgian.

Fittingly, the idea of recognizing King as a national hero was nearly as controversial as the man, but after a series of wide-ranging nation-wide debates, President Ronald Reagan signed the holiday into law on November 2, 1983. The first national celebration of the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. holiday was January 20, 1986.

"This holiday honors the courage of a man who endured harassment, threats and beatings, and even bombings," wrote King's wife, Coretta Scott King. "We commemorate the man who went to jail 29 times to achieve freedom for others, and who knew he would pay the ultimate price for his leadership, but kept on marching and protesting and organizing anyway."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> [www.thekingcenter.org/holiday/index.asp](http://www.thekingcenter.org/holiday/index.asp)

The United States government recognized King again with the 33-cent stamp issued September 17, 1999.

In 2011, the nation's first African American president dedicated a \$100 million memorial commemorating King's life and work. Between the Washington and Jefferson memorials on the National Mall, the project took nearly two decades of planning.

(For video of the King Memorial dedication, visit: <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/event/197892>)

In many ways, building a multi-million dollar memorial to King is easier than effecting the real, profound, cultural change he advocated. It is easier to move earth, carve stone and cast metal than it is to remold the hearts of people.

An iconic leader in his lifetime, the legend of Martin Luther King, Jr. began well before his untimely death on April 4, 1968.

From his early childhood as the son, grandson and great grandson of Baptist preachers, after graduating Crozer Theological Seminary and Boston University with a Ph.D., the young minister's career paralleled the growing civil rights movement. King's growth in his faith, the church, and in leadership in the movement were inexorably linked tighter than the threads of a southern patchwork quilt.

Through activism, protests, marches, speeches and sermons, the message was the man and the man was the message. Despite vocal, often violent, and organized opposition from racists in the streets, politicians in office, and even officials in the FBI, King followed a path that he felt was laid out by God.

He could no more walk away from his crusades for civil rights, justice and equality than he could renounce his calling and ordination and walk away from Christ. In his mind, his actions and activism on behalf of "the least of these" were the best way to be a "Christ-like" follower of Jesus.



# Roots

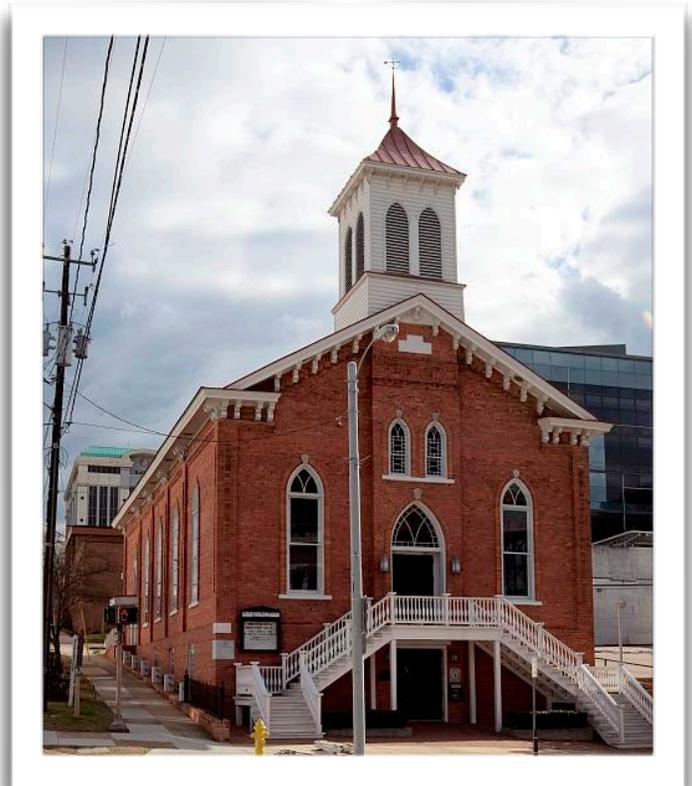
“I grew up in the church,” King wrote about his early life. “My father is a preacher, my grandfather was a preacher, my great-grandfather was a preacher, my only brother is a preacher, my daddy’s brother is a preacher. So I didn’t have much choice.”<sup>2</sup>

Christened Michael King, when King was around five years-old his father returned from a Baptist ministers conference in Berlin so infused with the Spirit that he changed both their names to Martin Luther King.

During his late teens, King worked two summers in a plant that hired both blacks and whites, an experience that shaped his future dedication to economic fairness. “Here I saw economic injustice firsthand,” he later wrote, “and realized that the poor white was exploited just as much as the Negro. Through these early experiences I grew up deeply conscious of the varieties of injustice in our society.”<sup>3</sup>

The nation had successfully weathered the tumultuous first quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when workers, women and even WW I veterans marched and protested for their rights. As the world’s consciousness changed after WW II, so too did the fabric of the United States. Men who had fought to bring freedom to Europe realized they had less freedom back home in the U.S. because of the color of their skin.

The United States Supreme Court passed the landmark desegregation case of *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954, the same year King was called to be the pastor of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, in Montgomery, Alabama.



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<sup>2</sup> Clayborne Carson, ed. *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Warner Books, 1998) p 1.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. p 10-11.

# Montgomery Bus Boycott

Rosa Parks refused to surrender to a white man her seat on a segregated Montgomery city bus, when, as King said, “the cup of endurance ran over,” on December 1, 1955. Four days later, the 26 year-old King was elected head of the newly formed protest group, the Montgomery Improvement Association, and a city-wide bus boycott began.

“The action had caught me unawares,” he later said of being elected to the new position. “It had happened so quickly, that I did not even have time to think it through. It is probable that if I had, I would have declined the nomination.”

Just three weeks before, King had declined the presidency of the local NAACP chapter, because he had recently completed his thesis, and wanted to give more attention to his church work.<sup>4</sup>

Addressing a standing room only assembly at the beginning of the boycott, without using notes, King struck a balance between motivating the protesters, and encouraging them to maintain their Christian ideals.

“We are not wrong in what we are doing. If we are wrong, the Supreme Court of this nation is wrong. If we are wrong, the Constitution of the United States is wrong. If we are wrong, God Almighty is wrong. If we are wrong, Jesus of Nazareth was merely a utopian dreamer that never came down to earth. And we are determined here in Montgomery to work and fight until justice runs down like water and righteousness like a mighty stream.”<sup>5</sup>

(Hear his speech, here: [http://kingencyclopedia.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/documentsentry/the\\_address\\_to\\_the\\_first\\_montgomery\\_improvement\\_association\\_mia\\_mas\\_s\\_meeting/index.html](http://kingencyclopedia.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/documentsentry/the_address_to_the_first_montgomery_improvement_association_mia_mas_s_meeting/index.html) )

In his first public speech as a movement leader, King established a speaking style he would maintain the rest of his life. He presented his case as a legal issue, appealed to

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<sup>4</sup> Clayborne Carson, ed. *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Warner Books, 1998) p 56.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. p 60.

the listener's morality and sense of justice, but final authority rested with God.

King's roots in protest began in college with multiple readings of Henry David Thoreau's, *Essay on Civil Disobedience*. "I became convinced that noncooperation with evil is as much a moral obligation as is cooperation with good," King wrote.<sup>6</sup>

As the public face of the boycott, King was arrested for the first time on a trumped up traffic charge and faced repeated anonymous threats. King, his fellow leaders in the action, and the black citizens they represented, remained unbowed, dedicated to facing opposition with nonviolent, Christian love.

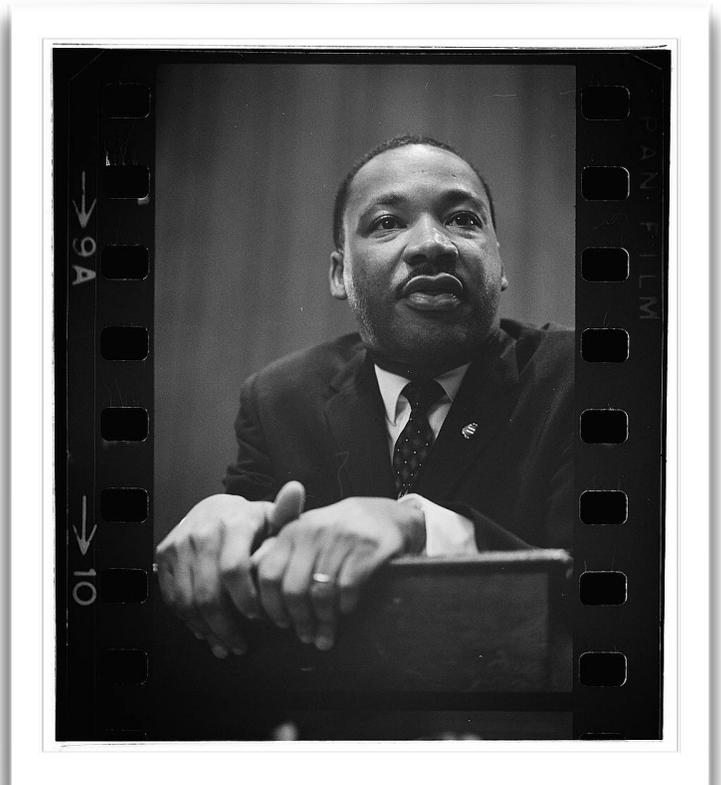
"I came to see that what we were really doing was withdrawing our cooperation from an evil system," King explained, "rather than merely withdrawing our support from the bus company."<sup>7</sup>

Within days of the protest's beginning, King began to receive threatening calls and letters. The pressure eventually got so great that King felt like quitting, unable to go on. At his weakest point, the preacher gave his problems to God.

"Lord, I'm down here trying to do what's right," he prayed, head in hands. "I think I'm right. I am here taking a stand for what I believe is right. But Lord, I must confess that I'm weak now, I'm faltering. I'm losing my courage. Now, I am afraid. . . . I've come to the point where I can't face it alone."

King later wrote that he heard a voice telling him:

"'Stand up for justice. Stand up for truth. And lo, I will be with you. Even until the end of the world.' I tell you I've seen the lighting flash. I've heard



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<sup>6</sup> Clayborne Carson, ed. *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Warner Books, 1998) p 14.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. p 53-54.

the thunder roar. I've felt sin breakers dashing trying to conquer my soul. But I heard the voice of Jesus saying still to fight on. He promised never to leave me alone. At that moment I experienced the presence of the Divine as I had never experienced Him before. Almost at once my fears began to go. My uncertainty disappeared. I was ready to face anything.”<sup>8</sup>

King's conversation with God in the early days of the civil rights struggle remained with him for the rest of his life. For the next decade King faced violence, death threats, and danger. But he faced them with the love of Christ in his heart and the comfort of the Lord.

On January 30, 1956, while he attended a Monday evening mass meeting at a local church, a bomb exploded on King's front porch. He returned home to find his wife and daughter unharmed, the city's mayor and police commissioner in his dining room and a growing and increasingly angry crowd on his front lawn. King walked back outside and addressed the crowd, telling them that he and his family were unhurt.

“We believe in law and order,” King continued. “Don't get panicky. Don't do anything panicky at all. Don't get your weapons. He who lives by the sword will perish by the sword. Remember that is what God said. We are not advocating violence. We want to love our enemies. I want you to love our enemies. Be good to them. Love them and let them know you love them. . . . If I am stopped our work will not stop. For what we are doing is right. What we are doing is just. And God is with us.”<sup>9</sup>

The bus boycott dragged on for more than a year, until the United States Supreme Court declared Alabama's segregation laws unconstitutional. With television cameras capturing the moment, King rode the first integrated bus in Montgomery, with a white, Southern minister beside him.

“Montgomery marked the first flash of organized, sustained, mass action and nonviolent revolt against the Southern way of life,” King wrote.<sup>10</sup>

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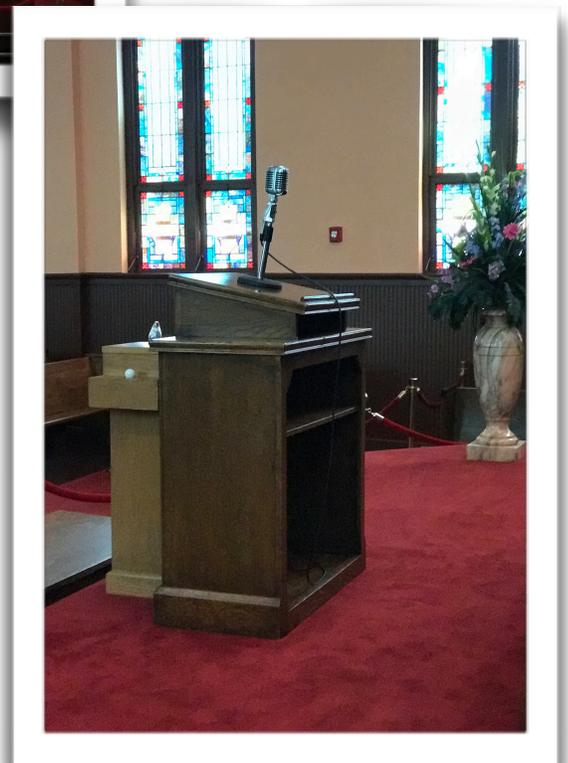
<sup>8</sup> Clayborne Carson, ed. *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Warner Books, 1998) p 77-78.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. p 80.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. p 98.

Building on his success and the national prominence he gained during the campaign, King joined with other southern black ministers to found the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in 1957.

Two years later, King resigned from Dexter Avenue Baptist Church and returned to Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta to be the co-pastor with his father. Relieved of the day-to-day responsibility of the pastorate, King had a base from which to fight racism and serve as an integrationist missionary in his own country.



# Birmingham Jail

In the spring of 1963, King and the SCLC led demonstrations and economic boycotts in Birmingham, Alabama, where the local law enforcement was notoriously anti-integration and the state's governor declared in his inaugural address, "segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever!"

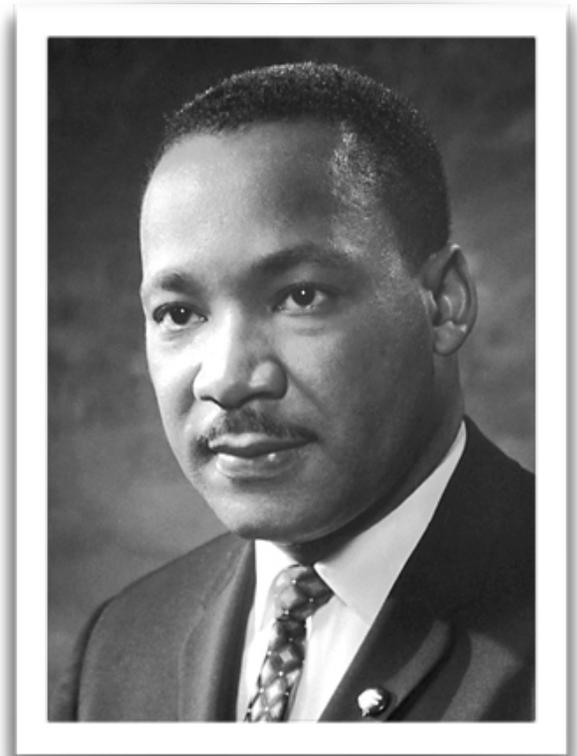
Throughout the first few weeks of April, night after night, in church after church, King preached nonviolence to a growing following of volunteers. Peaceful protesters were arrested daily, with more added each day. In violating a court order, King offered himself up for arrest on April 12, Good Friday.

Held incommunicado for more than 24 hours, King was permitted no visitors. It was only after the personal intervention of President John Kennedy and Attorney General Robert Kennedy, was King allowed to speak to his wife by telephone Sunday afternoon.

On the day of his arrest, eight white Alabama clergymen published a letter in a Birmingham newspaper calling for the boycott and protests to cease, for the Negroes to be more patient, and praising the police for their calm during the demonstrations.

Alone in a filthy jail cell, King read the letter in the paper, and immediately began drafting a response on the newspaper itself. He eventually composed a landmark epistle that addressed their concerns, clearly defined the civil rights movement, touched on far-reaching philosophical questions, and served as an inspiration for generations of the oppressed around the world.

"How does one determine whether a law is just or unjust? A just law is a man-made code that squares with the moral law or the law of God. An unjust law is a code that is out of harmony with the moral law. . . . So the question is not whether we will be extremists, but what kind of extremists



will we be. Will we be extremists for hate or for love? Will we be extremists for the preservation of injustice or for the extension of justice? In that dramatic scene on Calvary's hill three men were crucified. We must never forget that all three were crucified for the same crime – the crime of extremism. Two were extremists for immorality, and thus fell below their environment. The other, Jesus Christ, was an extremist for love, truth, and goodness, and thereby rose above his environment.”<sup>11</sup>

While King's letter seemed to be heard by deaf ears at the time, one modern historian described it as “the most splendid and elucidating prose that King ever wrote. Decades later, it is studied all over the world by those interested in nonviolent struggle.”<sup>12</sup>

As the effort in Birmingham increased in more non-violent numbers, the police responded with increased violence. Images of unarmed, peaceful demonstrators, many of them school children, attacked by police dogs and fire hoses, were broadcast around the world, and helped sway a public previously blind to the violent effects of segregation.

Watching in Washington D.C., President Kennedy decided the time had come for him to add his voice to the civil rights struggle. On June 11, using a King-like justification of law and God, Kennedy told a national television audience that “we are confronted primarily with a moral issue. It is as old as the scriptures and is as clear as the American Constitution. The heart of the question is whether all Americans are to be afforded equal rights and equal opportunities. . . . Next week I shall ask the Congress of



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<sup>11</sup> Clayborne Carson, ed. *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Warner Books, 1998) p 193 and 198.

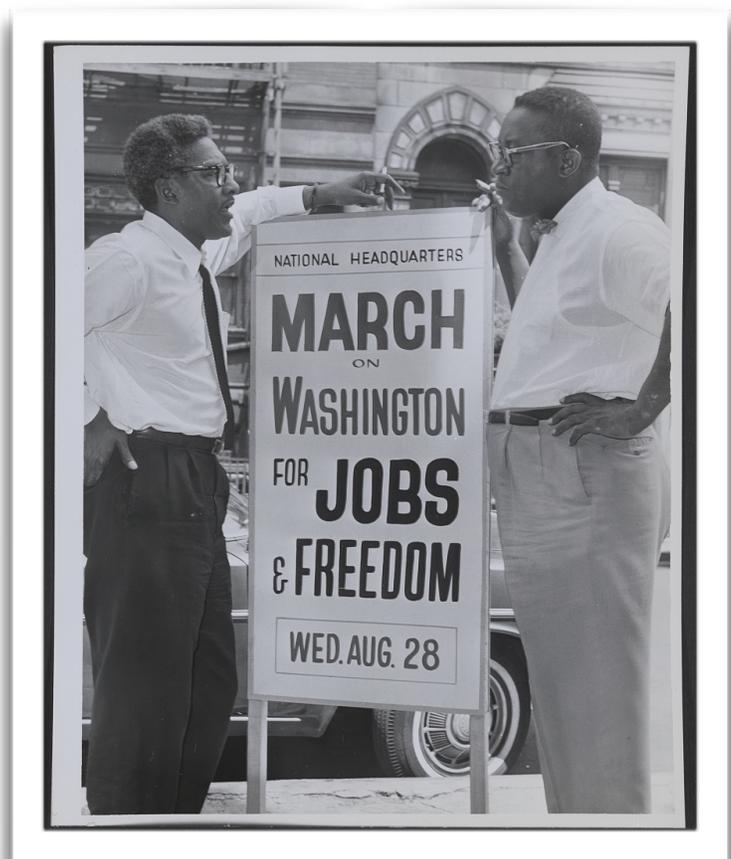
<sup>12</sup> King, Mary, *Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Paris, France: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 1999) p 152.

the United States to act, to make a commitment it has not fully made in this century to the proposition that race has no place in American life or law.”

King’s non-violent attack on racism and segregation in Alabama led a presidential assault on racism across the country. Kennedy’s civil rights legislation ensured the right to vote, and eliminated discrimination in all public places, including hotels, restaurants, and retail establishments. He also proposed expanding the attorney general’s power to enforce court-ordered school desegregation.<sup>13</sup>

By the summer, the proposed legislation stalled in Congress, with Southern segregationists blocking key aspects of the legislation.

Black leaders proposed a march on Washington to unite the civil rights movement, and to demonstrate to Congress their dedication. While initially opposing the march, sensing the inevitability of the rally, the Kennedys worked to ensure its success. They helped arrange participation of white churches and labor unions and assisted with a myriad of logistical and law enforcement issues. More than 250,000 people assembled on August 28, 1963.



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<sup>13</sup> [www.historynet.com/ah/bljfkcivilrights/](http://www.historynet.com/ah/bljfkcivilrights/)

# “I Have a Dream.”

King stayed up most of the night before working on his speech, but he hadn't planned to use the iconic phrase in his prepared remarks. Drawing on previous writings and speeches, King laid out the justification for the struggle and why the time was right for change. But when he came to the famous section about his dream that “one day, this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed,” he moved off of his prepared speech, and fell into the roll of preacher.

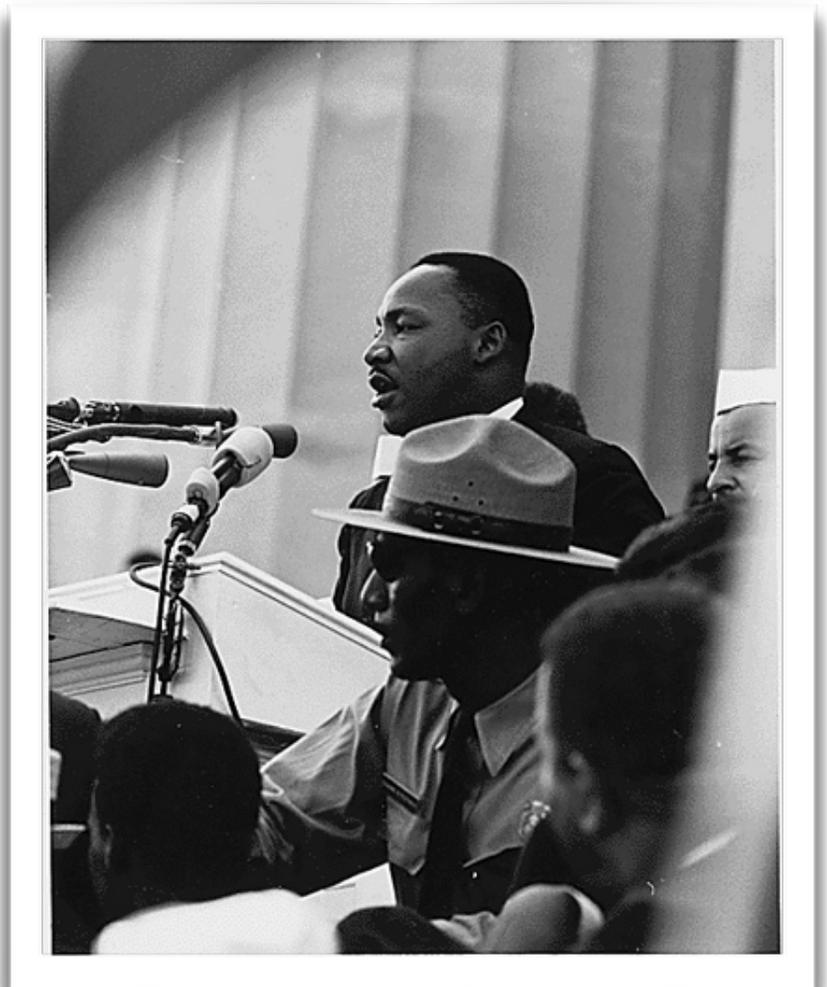
Repeating the familiar refrain, “I have a dream today,” King effortlessly shifted from describing Southern racists, to quoting Isaiah 40:3-5, and the voice of one crying in the wilderness:

“I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain and the crooked places will be made straight and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together.”

(For excellent audio of his speech, click here: <https://youtu.be/ARvrvJV4th4> )

The year of civil rights was punctuated the next month with the death of four young black girls, killed in a Birmingham church bombing, and again two months later with three shots in Dallas that helped cauterize Kennedy's legacy with the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

Later that year, King became the first African American honored as TIME magazine's Man of the Year.



# Nobel Peace Prize

In December, 1964, King was in Oslo, Norway, accepting the Nobel Prize for Peace. He recognized that while the prize was in his name, he received it on behalf of the millions of black people who struggled for the cause of equality. While his remarks kept to the message of the movement, the Baptist preacher also invoked God and quoted Isaiah.

“I still believe that one day mankind will bow before the altars of God and be crowned triumphant over war and bloodshed, and nonviolent redemptive goodwill will proclaim the rule of the land. ‘And the lion and the lamb shall lie down together and every man shall sit under his own vine and fig tree and none shall be afraid.’”<sup>14</sup>

As Civil Rights legislation passed Congress and the courts increasingly ruled in favor of desegregation, King’s attention turned to opposing the war raging in North Vietnam. And again, his call to social change was as deep as his call from God.



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<sup>14</sup> [www.mlkonline.net/acceptance.html](http://www.mlkonline.net/acceptance.html)

# Vietnam

Speaking in April, 1967, at the Riverside Church, in New York City, King elevated his message of Christian love and nonviolence to a new, international level. But his intention was not freedom for his fellow Americans, it was to stop the war. In his first speech in opposition to the war, King tried to explain the depth of his commitment to Christ.

“This is a calling that takes me beyond national allegiances. But even if it were not present, I would yet have to live with the meaning of my commitment to the ministry of Jesus Christ. To me, the relationship of this ministry to the making of peace is so obvious that I sometimes marvel at those who ask me why I am speaking against the war. Could it be that they do not know that the Good News was meant for all men—for communist and capitalist, for their children and ours, for black and for white, for revolutionary and conservative? Have they forgotten that my ministry is in obedience to the one who loved His enemies so fully that He died for them? What then can I say to the Vietcong or to Castro or to Mao as a faithful minister of this one? Can I threaten them with death or must I not share with them my life?”<sup>15</sup>

Even his fellow Christians had difficulty understanding a Christian love so deep, that he was willing to die for the nation’s “enemies.” If Christians couldn’t comprehend it, non-Christians had no hope of understanding. In their ignorance they perceived King as a threat politically, economically, and any other ways they chose to project their feelings onto him.



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<sup>15</sup> [www.mlkonline.net/vietnam.html](http://www.mlkonline.net/vietnam.html)

# FBI Wiretaps, Surveillance and Accusations

While people who hate think they have reasons for their feelings, what they have is justifications. The FBI bugged King's rooms and phones. Informants infiltrated his meetings. In claiming King was a Communist, FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover's bugs provided the justification for hostility that probably already existed in King's detractors. The simple fact is, people who hate, can't understand people who love.

Through the government surveillance, King's adulteries and infidelities became known. Although he never spoke of the infidelities publicly, this darker side can be glimpsed in sermons when King spoke of the "two sides" of people, and when he quoted the Apostle Paul, "the good that I would I do not: And the evil that I would not, that I do."

Because King was so closely tied to the message of racial and economic justice, detractors leveled accusations of being a Communist sympathizer in an effort to discredit him and the issues he supported. But again, when faced with opposition, King returned to God.

"Communism is based on an ethical relativism and a metaphysical materialism that no Christian can accept," King wrote.<sup>16</sup>

But the Baptist preacher was far from a Communist. Godless men and men whose type of faith allowed them to defend oppression and injustice couldn't understand a man whose faith forced him to stand up to oppression.

"I didn't get my inspiration from Karl Marx," King said, "I got it from a man named Jesus, a Galilean saint who said he was anointed to heal the broken-hearted. He was anointed to deal with the problems of the poor. And that is where we get our inspiration."<sup>17</sup>

First, last, and always a man of God – King felt called from a higher power to a higher purpose. King's deepest driving force was Christian love. All other causes grew

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<sup>16</sup> [www.mlkonline.net/christians.html](http://www.mlkonline.net/christians.html)

<sup>17</sup> Clayborne Carson, ed. *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Warner Books, 1998) p 351.

from his sense of love. “This principle stands at the center of the cosmos,” King wrote. “As John says, ‘God is love.’ He who loves is a participant in the being of God. He who hates does not know God.”<sup>18</sup>

When King moved from racial issues to more volatile, deeper and more threatening questions of economic equality and the war in Vietnam, he grew more dangerous to the status quo. In many ways, the question of racial equality was easier for the nation to address than issues of economics. Race issues could be ignored, but by 1968 King was threatening people in the pocketbook.

“In the last 12 months of his life,” wrote one scholar, “King represented a far greater political threat to the reigning American government than he ever had before.”<sup>19</sup>

The reason behind King’s prominence and effectiveness in the movement he led and the causes he supported, may not simply be a case of the right man in the right place, at the right time. King believed, with every cell in his body, what he said, because he believed he was doing the work of God, in the name of God.

“We have the power to change America and give a kind of new vitality to the religion of Jesus Christ,” King said. “And we can get those young men and women who’ve lost faith in the church to see that Jesus was a serious man precisely because he dealt with the tang of the human amid the glow of the Divine and that he was concerned about their problems. He was concerned about bread; he opened and started Operation Breadbasket a long time ago. He initiated the first sit-in movement. The greatest revolutionary that history has ever known. And when people tell us when we stand up that we got our inspiration for this or that, go back and let them know where we got our inspiration.”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> [www.mlkonline.net/christians.html](http://www.mlkonline.net/christians.html)

<sup>19</sup> Harding, Vincent, *Martine Luther King: The Inconvenient Hero* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1996) p 49.

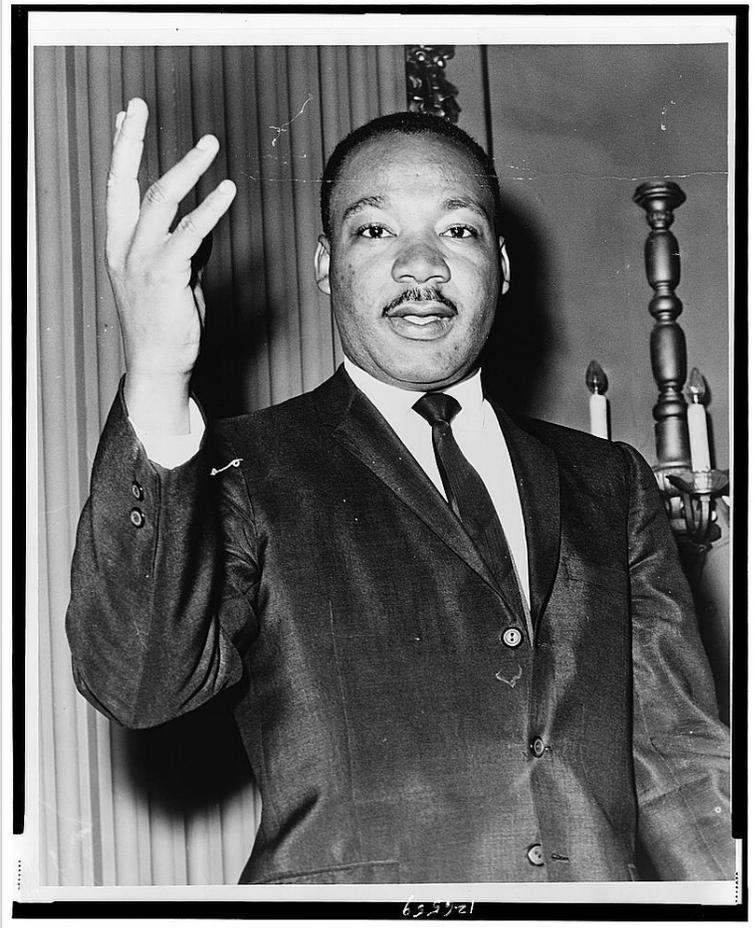
<sup>20</sup> Clayborne Carson, ed. *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Warner Books, 1998) p 351.

# From Memphis to the Mountaintop

Economic justice brought King to Memphis. Freedom and racial equality was hollow for workers who didn't earn an equal or even livable wage. King lent his considerable reputation to the city's 1,300 striking sanitation workers when he traveled there several times in March, 1968.

King hadn't planned to speak at the April 3 rally, so he sent Rev. Ralph Abernathy in his stead. King wanted to relax, and with a storm brewing that night, didn't expect a large turnout. When Abernathy arrived at the Bishop Charles J. Mason Temple, he found more than 300 people waiting to hear from King, so he called his friend at the motel and told him to come to the meeting.

During one week the previous month, King gave about thirty-five speeches, so he had no need for notes that night. He began somewhat nostalgically, reflecting on times in history, and on his era, the second half of the twentieth century. He recollected back to his early days in the movement, and their success in Birmingham. He talked about being attacked and knifed by a demented woman during a book signing, and shared the parable of Jesus and the good Samaritan as he encouraged his listeners to support each other. He recalled the successes the movement had across the years and brought his audience to his arrival in the city that day, and rumors of threats.

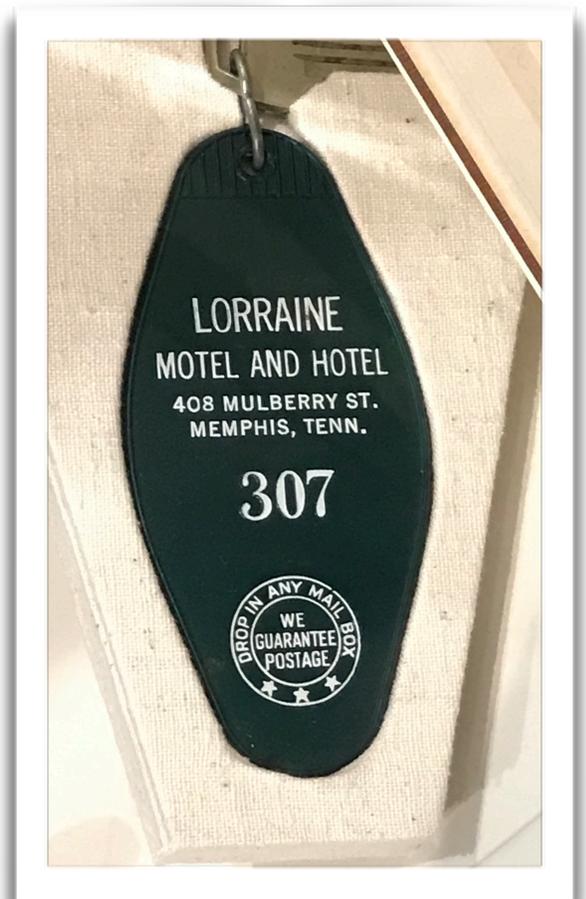


While he frequently talked about the possibility of his own death in speeches, those remarks were often couched in the context of his place in the movement. Speaking in Memphis that stormy, spring night, King's remarks took a decidedly personal tone.

Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people will get to the promised land. And I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord."

The next day, King spent April 4 strategizing, relaxing and laughing with his brother, friends, and staff in his second floor room at the Lorraine Motel.

In the early evening, as the talk turned to making their way to Rev. Samuel Kyles' home for dinner, someone told young Jessie Jackson to get the car. Because he very seldom smoked in public, King lit a final cigarette after the other men in the room left to change for dinner. His close friend, confidant, and fellow leader in the movement, Rev. Ralph Abernathy watched King extinguish the cigarette, put his jacket on, adjust his tie, and walk out the door.



# Suggested Reading List

*The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.* Clayborne Carson, ed.

*Martin Luther King Jr.* by Adam Fairclough

*Strength to Love*, by Martin Luther King Jr.

*A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, by Martin Luther King Jr.

*Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr.*, by Mary King

*Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?* by Martin Luther King Jr.

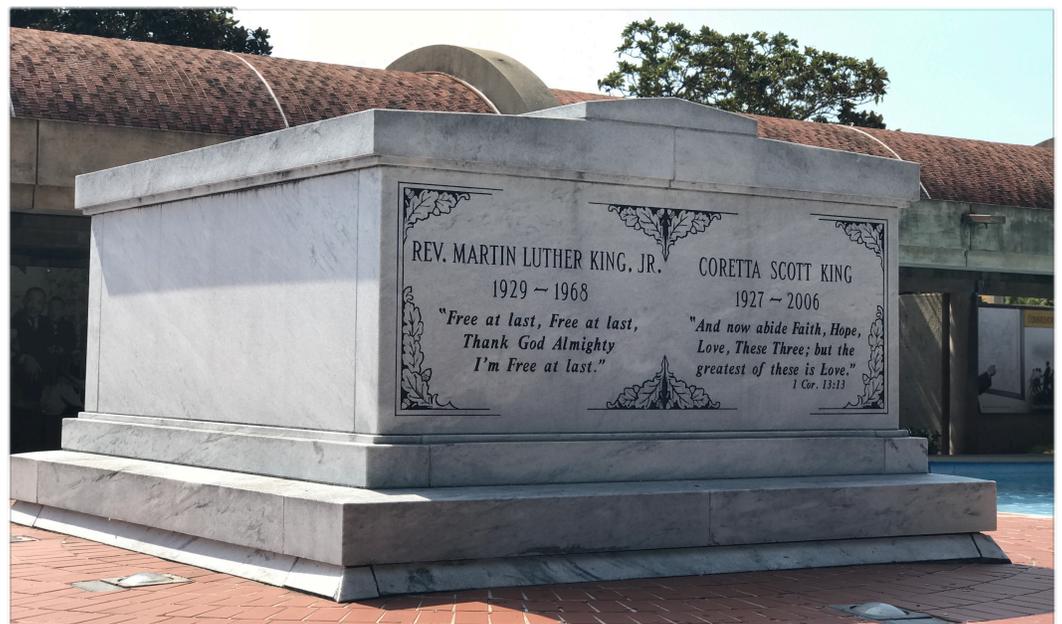
**King was influenced by the writings of**

Mahatma Gandhi

Reinhold Niebuhr

Paul Tillich

Walter Rauschenbusch



# About the Author

Jim Meisner Jr. writes about faith and culture on the website [www.faithonthefringe.com](http://www.faithonthefringe.com) and the corresponding [Facebook page](#).

He's the author of a motivational history book about the Wright Brothers, *Soar to Success the Wright Way* and the co-author of *American Revolutionaries and Founders of the Nation*, a children's history collective biography published in 1999 by Enslow Publishers.

A former pastor, Jim holds a Master of Divinity.

