

Martin Luther King, Jr.



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“I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.” - Martin Luther King, Jr. (1963)

In 1934, Pastor Michael King traveled to Berlin, Germany for a meeting of the Baptist World Alliance. King arrived in Berlin in time to witness the rise of the Nazi regime. In response, the Baptist Alliance passed a resolution declaring “This Congress deplores and condemns as a violation of the law of God the Heavenly Father, all racial animosity, and every form of oppression or unfair discrimination toward the Jews, toward coloured people, or toward subject races in any part of the world.”¹ Inspired by this act of resistance, King returned home and promptly changed his name and the name of his five-year-old son to honor a 16th century German monk who had offered a similar act of resistance to the perceived injustice he saw around him. Little could the elder King have anticipated that one day his young son, now known as Martin Luther King, Jr., would become a global leader in resisting oppression and injustice.

Born in 1929, the younger King was only 15 years old when he enrolled at Morehouse College. It was here that he met Dr. Benjamin Mays, the institution’s president and outspoken advocate for racial equality. Influenced by Mays, King decided to pursue a career in theology. He attended Crozer Theological Seminary in Pennsylvania and continued at Boston University where he earned a doctorate in systematic theology. King and his new wife, the former Coretta Scott, then moved to Montgomery, Alabama to preach at the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church.

On December 1, 1955, a short time after his arrival in Montgomery, a woman named Rosa Parks refused to vacate her seat for a white passenger on a local bus and was promptly arrested. In protest, residents organized a Bus Boycott and chose King as their spokesman. Martin Luther King, Jr. now found himself in the center of the emerging civil rights struggle. This required King to consider the main ideas on which the movement would be based. He became convinced that the principle of non-violence was a key to ultimate victory. In 1957, he preached a sermon titled “The Birth of a New Nation” where he described the aftermath of non-violence as redemption, reconciliation, and community. By contrast, the aftermath of violence was emptiness and bitterness.²



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That same year, King and fellow ministers founded the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). The main principle of the SCLC was nonviolent activism as evidenced by the organization's motto "Not one hair of one head of one person should be harmed." King's commitment to the principles of non-violence and forgiveness would be tested the next year when a woman in a Harlem bookstore, convinced that King was a secret communist, thrust a seven-inch letter opener into his chest. Despite almost dying that day, King was resolute in his commitment to the principles of non-violence and reconciliation and publicly proclaimed that he held no ill feelings for the attacker.

In 1960, King and his family moved to Atlanta, Georgia to join his father as co-pastor of the Ebenezer Baptist Church and his influence continued to grow. He traveled to Birmingham, AL in 1963 to participate in peaceful protests and was promptly arrested. Over the course of his life, King was arrested 29 times on charges ranging from loitering to traffic violations. These attempts to intimidate and silence King had the opposite effect. He used this occasion to issue his influential "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" which is saturated with references to the Christian faith. In that letter, King wrote "I am in Birmingham because injustice is here. Just as the prophets of the eighth century B.C. left their villages and carried their 'thus saith the Lord' far beyond the boundaries of their home towns, and just as the Apostle Paul left his village of Tarsus and carried the gospel of Jesus Christ to the far corners of the Greco Roman world, so am I compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond my own home town."



Just a few months later, this gospel of freedom would take him to the nation's capital for the March on Washington. On August 28, 1963 King delivered his "I Have a Dream" speech from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial to a crowd of 250,000 people. King's dream that "this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal'" was tragically cut short just a few years later. Increasingly under attack from radical activists who resented his nonviolent methods, entrenched racists who resented his message, and public officials who questioned his connections, Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated while standing on a motel balcony in Memphis, Tennessee. He was 39 years old.

In 1983, President Ronald Reagan signed a bill making Martin Luther King, Jr. Day a federal holiday. At the signing, the President noted that "Dr. King had awakened something strong and true, a sense that true justice must be colorblind."³ By anchoring his calls for social justice to his Christian ideals, Martin Luther King, Jr. provided Americans with a vision to "transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood."⁴

Key Questions

1. Imagine you are asked to give a speech that will unite all Americans against injustice. What would be your main points? Would they be similar to those made by MLK in his speeches?
2. MLK forgave the person who attacked him in Harlem. Can you think of someone else who heroically forgave a person who had harmed him or her? What do you think motivated these acts of forgiveness?

Sources

- 1 Resolution of the Fifth Baptist World Congress found at J.H. Rushbrooke, ed. *Fifth Baptist World Congress: Berlin, August 4-10, 1934* (London: Baptist World Alliance, 1934).
- 2 Martin Luther King, Jr., "'The Birth of a New Nation,' Sermon Delivered at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church," April 7, 1957, (accessed Dec. 1, 2023), [web](#).
- 3 Ronald Reagan, "Remarks on Signing the Bill Making the Birthday of Martin Luther King, Jr. a National Holiday," November 2, 1983 (accessed Dec. 3, 2023), [web](#).
- 4 Martin Luther King, Jr., "I Have a Dream" transcript, *National Archives and Records Administration* (accessed Dec. 3, 2023), [web](#).