

Rosa Parks



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“I felt the Lord would give me the strength to endure whatever I had to face. God did away with all my fear. It was time for someone to stand up—or in my case, sit down. – Rosa Parks

The Henry Ford Museum in Dearborn, Michigan houses thousands of artifacts from American history. Surrounded by national treasures such as presidential limousines, Lincoln's rocking chair from Ford's Theater, and artifacts used by George Washington in his revolutionary campaigns, is an ordinary 1948 GM bus, number 2857. This bus routinely transported passengers for years on Cleveland Avenue in Montgomery, Alabama. Today, Cleveland Avenue is named Rosa Parks Avenue.

On February 4, 1913, Rosa Louise McCauley was born somewhere in Tuskegee, Alabama—nobody knows exactly where. As a young child, she moved to Pine Level, Alabama, where she was raised by her mother and grandparents. Two fixtures in the McCauley house were Booker T. Washington's

autobiography, *Up From Slavery*, and the Bible. According to Rosa, she learned the power of hard work and perseverance from the biography,¹ and she learned to trust in God and not be afraid from the Bible.² These were important lessons, as those were challenging days with much to fear. Rosa's grandfather slept with a loaded, double-barreled shotgun in response to the continual threats to the black community. For her part, Rosa recalled sleeping in her clothes to be ready to run in the middle of the night if danger came calling. One of Rosa's earliest childhood memories was hearing her family talk about the time a white man treated her like a regular little girl without distinction for her race—as if that was some remarkable feat. Unfortunately, in that day it might have been, because while it may not have been against the law to treat black and white girls alike, it certainly defied social customs. Under this cloud of fear and prejudice, Rosa somehow managed to live a rather ordinary life. By her own admission, there was little in her early years that suggested she would one day become one of the most famous women in America.

In 1932, at the age of 19, she married Raymond Parks and settled in Montgomery, Alabama. Raymond worked as a barber and Rosa was a seamstress. Both were soon active in the Montgomery chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), an organization that actively worked to secure voting rights of Black Americans and eliminate the “Jim Crow” laws that made life both dangerous and insulting for black Americans. In those days, black Americans were required to attend separate schools, drink from designated water fountains, and borrow books from the black library. Even taking public transportation was a daily reminder of the injustice all around them. Rosa had never known anything other than a system that required black people to pay the fare at the front, exit the bus, and re-enter at the

back. They were forced to stand in the overcrowded section at the back even when there were empty seats in the front, and they were made to vacate a seat in that same section when a white passenger demanded a place to sit. One day in 1955, Rosa Parks was returning from her work at the Montgomery Fair department store, and she had had enough.

At some point on the trip home, a white man had no seat because the designated “white” section was full. The driver demanded that the riders in the front row of the “colored” section stand and surrender their seats. Everyone but the 42-year-old seamstress complied. After initial threats from the driver, Rosa remained steadfast, was promptly arrested, and spent the night in the local jail. Throughout the ordeal, it would have been natural for Rosa to be consumed with fear, but she would later write, “I felt the Lord would give me the strength to endure whatever I had to face. God did away with all my fear. It was time for someone to stand up—or in my case, sit down. I refused to move.”³

By morning, this single act of courage had launched the civil rights movement in the United States. In later years, Rosa reflected that “people always say that I didn’t give up my seat because I was tired, but that isn’t true. I was not tired physically. . . . The only tired I was, was tired of giving in.”⁴ Rosa’s act of defiance happened to coincide with the recent arrival of a 26-year-old pastor at Montgomery’s Dexter Avenue Baptist Church by the name of Martin Luther King, Jr. With other local leaders such as the Baptist minister Ralph Abernathy, Rosa and Pastor King organized a boycott of the Montgomery bus system that lasted 381 days and became a turning point in the civil rights movement in America. In the process, many of the leaders of the boycott lost their jobs, their homes, and their sense of security. Believing that, as a matter of principle, she would be within her rights to retaliate against death threats and acts of violence, Rosa instead rejected the idea that the injustice around her was cause to live in a constant stage of rage. In her words, the teachings of Jesus had



convinced her, as they had Martin Luther King, Jr., that “a heart filled with love could conquer anything, even bigotry.”⁵ “I’ll always remember the way Dr. King would respond to violence,” she said. “He would use the same words that Jesus said on the cross, ‘Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.’”⁶ For the courage she demonstrated and the quiet grace with which she pursued her righteous cause, Rosa Parks became known as the “mother of the civil rights movement.”

Rosa spent the rest of her life seeking to improve the lives of those around her. In 1996, she was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom, and three years later the Congressional Gold Medal, the highest honor given to a United States civilian. When she died in 2005 at age 92, just a few weeks shy of the half-century anniversary of that fateful bus ride, she became the first woman in history to lie in honor at the U.S. Capitol. For a half-century, Rosa Parks was a symbol of the American civil rights movement and an icon for the nation’s quest to live out its commitment to equality for all. Her later years were spent in the city of Detroit, Michigan, just a few miles from where Montgomery public bus 2857 is now displayed. To the end, Rosa was active in her community, busy serving the underprivileged members of her community. Over the years, she was often asked to articulate her motivation for what she did: “everyone living together in peace and harmony and love—that’s the goal that we seek.”⁷

Key Question

1. Rosa Parks responded to injustice with peaceful civil disobedience. Identify another historical figure who responded similarly to injustice.

Sources

- 1 Douglas Brinkley, *Rosa Parks: A Life* (New York: Penguin Books, 2000), 11.
- 2 Rosa Parks and Gregory J. Reed, *Reflections by Rosa Parks* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 16.
- 3 Parks and Reed, *Reflections by Rosa Parks*, 17.
- 4 Rosa Parks and Jim Haskins, *Rosa Parks: My Story* (New York: Puffin Books, 1999), 116.
- 5 Brinkley, *Rosa Parks: A Life*, 69.
- 6 Parks and Reed, *Reflections by Rosa Parks*, 47.
- 7 Parks and Haskins, *Rosa Parks: My Story*, 188.