

The Most Durable Power

This excerpt is from a sermon King preached in Montgomery, Alabama, on 6 November 1956, just seven days before the U.S. Supreme Court ruled against Alabama's bus segregation laws.

Always be sure that you struggle with Christian methods and Christian weapons. Never succumb to the temptation of becoming bitter. As you press on for justice, be sure to move with dignity and discipline, using only the weapon of love. Let no man pull you so low as to hate him. Always avoid violence. If you succumb to the temptation of using violence in your struggle, unborn generations will be the recipients of a long and desolate night of bitterness, and your chief legacy to the future will be an endless reign of meaningless chaos.

In your struggle for justice, let your oppressor know that you are not attempting to defeat or humiliate him, or even to pay him back for injustices that he has heaped upon you. Let him know that you are merely seeking justice for him as well as yourself. Let him know that the festering sore of segregation debilitates the white man as well as the Negro. With this attitude you will be able to keep your struggle on high Christian standards.

Many persons will realize the urgency of seeking to eradicate the evil of segregation. There will be many Negroes who will devote their lives to the cause of freedom. There will be many white persons of good will and strong moral sensitivity who will dare to take a stand for justice. Honesty impels me to admit that such a stand will require willingness to suffer and sacrifice. So don't despair if you are condemned and persecuted for righteousness' sake. Whenever you take a stand for truth and justice, you are liable to scorn. Often you will be called an impractical idealist or a dangerous radical. Sometimes it might mean going to jail. If such is the case you must honorably grace the jail with your presence. It might even mean physical death. But if physical death is the price that some must pay to free their children from a permanent life of psychological death, then nothing could be more Christian.

I still believe that standing up for the truth of God is the greatest thing in the world. This is the end of life. The end of life is not to be happy. The end of life is not to achieve pleasure and avoid pain. The end of life is to do the will of God, come what may.

I still believe that love is the most durable power in the world. Over the centuries men have sought to discover the highest good. This has been the chief quest of ethical philosophy. This was one of the big questions of Greek philosophy. The Epicureans and the Stoics sought to answer it; Plato and Aristotle sought to answer it. What is the *summum bonum* of life? I think I have discovered the highest good. It is love. This principle stands at the center of the cosmos. As John says, "God is love." He who loves is a participant in the being of God. He who hates does not know God.

33 Up to the Mountain



Memphis's black garbage workers formed a picket line and went on strike. They struck because they were only black workers—but no white workers—had been sent home one day when it rained. When the rain stopped, the whites went back to work and were paid a full day's wages; but the blacks, because they had been sent home, were paid for only a few hours.

Martin Luther King, Jr., was preparing for the Poor People's Campaign in Washington when the garbage workers in Memphis, Tennessee, went on strike. They needed help, and King agreed to lead a march on their behalf. That march had hardly begun—King was in the front row—when teenagers at the back of the line began smashing windows and looting stores.

King was furious. "I will never lead a violent march," he said. "Call it off." A staff member urged the marchers to turn around and return to the church where they had begun. Dr. King left. But the police and the rock-throwing youths weren't finished. By the time they were, 155 stores were damaged, 60 people were hurt, and a 16-year-old boy had been killed by police gunfire. It was the first time that anyone had been killed in a march led by Martin Luther King, Jr. He felt sick that a boy had died. He was horrified by the violence. He couldn't sleep. What should he do? He asked a friend. "It may be that those of us who [believe in] nonviolence should just step aside and let the violent forces run their course, which will be...very brief, because you can't conduct a violent campaign in this country."

But King couldn't step aside. He decided that he had to lead a



In a speech after the Selma march, Dr. King said, "I know you are asking, 'How long will it take?' I come to say to you...it will not be long, because truth pressed to earth will rise again."



“Tonight I want to speak to you of peace in Vietnam and southeast Asia,” said LBJ in the speech with which he announced that he would not run for president again. “In the hope that this action will lead to early talks, I am taking the first step to de-escalate the conflict. We are reducing the present level of hostilities. And we are doing so unilaterally, and at once.”

What does de-escalate mean? Hostilities? Unilaterally?

peaceful march in Memphis. “We must come back,” he said, “Nonviolence...is now on trial.” Some of Dr. King’s aides didn’t agree. They thought Memphis was too dangerous. J. Edgar Hoover, the head of the FBI (the country’s federal law-enforcement agency), hated Dr. King. He was using illegal methods to tap King’s phone, and he was starting rumors and planting false articles in newspapers. Later, the truth came out about Hoover, but right now Dr. King was receiving death threats in the mail. That didn’t stop him. He was going to go back to Memphis.

The night before his trip, King turned on the television. President Johnson was making an announcement. First Johnson said that he was cutting back on the bombing of North Vietnam and would try to get a settlement of the war. That was a surprise—and a relief. Then Lyndon Johnson stunned the nation. “I shall not seek and I will not accept the nomination of my party for a second term as your president,” he said. The big man who wanted to be the greatest of all presidents, who wanted to end poverty, who wanted to do his best for America, had failed. The war had claimed another victim.

The very next evening, in Memphis, Dr. King spoke before a huge crowd at a church rally. He didn’t have a written speech; he just spoke from his heart. He pretended that he was at the beginning of time and God was asking him, “Martin Luther King, which age would you like to live in?” He thought about being there when Moses led the children of Israel out of slavery in Egypt. Then he wondered about the time when the gods of the ancient Greeks were believed to live on Mount Olympus. He imagined what it would be like to see Martin Luther nail his 95 arguments to the church door in 16th-century Germany. He thought about being with Lincoln in 1863, when the president signed the Emancipation Proclamation. He even considered the time of Franklin Roosevelt and the problems of worldwide war. But King decided that none of those was the time he would choose. “Strangely enough,” he said, “I would turn to the Almighty and say if you allow me to live just a few years in the second half of the 20th century, I will be happy.”

Now that did seem a strange choice, but King said, “Only when it is dark enough can you see the stars.” He understood that he and others in the 20th century had been given a great opportunity. They were grappling with problems of the first order: war and peace and human rights. Everywhere, people were rising up, saying, “We want to be free.” But Dr. King knew that some people and nations thought freedom gave them the right to do anything they wanted—even to act violently.

Throughout all of history, violence had marred human life. No one is really free in a violent society. Martin Luther King, Jr., had dedicated his life to a protest against violence and hatred and unfairness. He understood that freedom brings responsibility. That understanding had helped enlarge the quest for life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. King had shown the power of a decent individual. Was he right to be happy to have lived in the tumultuous 20th century?

Those who heard him that day would always remember his next words:

I would like to live a long life. 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. And 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... I have a dream this afternoon that the brotherhood of man will become a reality.

The next evening, after making plans for the Memphis march, Martin Luther King, Jr., went out onto the balcony off his room at the Lorraine Motel to breathe some fresh air before dinner. His friend Ralph Abernathy heard something that sounded like a firecracker. But it was no firecracker. Martin Luther King, Jr., had been shot dead.

Robert Kennedy heard the news in Indianapolis, just before he was to speak to a black crowd in a troubled section of the city. The people on the street had not heard the awful news. "Cancel the talk," the mayor of Indianapolis urged. The police refused to protect the senator. But Kennedy would not leave. He climbed onto the flat back of a truck under some oak trees and told the crowd of the

Someone in the Hebrew Bible (the Old Testament) led his people to the mountaintop and looked over into the Promised Land. Who was it?

Senator Robert

Kennedy said he supported a "massive effort to create new jobs—an effort that we know is the only real solution." A friend said that he "would have torn the country apart to provide jobs for everybody."

It is April 4, 1968, and on the balcony at Memphis's Lorraine Motel, Martin Luther King's companions point to the source of the shots from the high-powered rifle that killed the civil rights leader. King was 39 years old. The assassin, James Earl Ray, a white escaped convict, was captured two months later at London Airport, in England.

The night Martin Luther King, Jr., died Robert Kennedy spoke these lines from the ancient Greek drama *Agamemnon*. The play was written by Aeschylus (who is known as the father of tragedy) about 2,500 years earlier. *In our sleep, pain which cannot forget falls drop by drop upon the heart until, in our own despair, against our will, comes wisdom through the awful grace of God.* Kennedy didn't have the quote quite right. Aeschylus said "despite," not "despair." But Kennedy's misquote seems more appropriate than the original. Did he do it on purpose? Scholars still wonder about that.



Some think that Martin Luther King, Jr.'s last speech, the night before he was killed, showed that he had a premonition that he would die. "So I'm happy tonight," he said. "I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. 'Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.'" *Left:* Coretta Scott King and her children view their father as he lies in state at Ebenezer Baptist Church.

tragedy in Memphis. Then he said:

Martin Luther King dedicated his life to love and to justice for his fellow human beings, and he died because of that effort. In this difficult day, in this difficult time for the United States, it is perhaps well to ask what kind of a nation we are and what direction we want to move in. For those of you who are black—considering the evidence there evidently is that there were white people who were responsible—you can be filled with bitterness, with hatred, and a desire for revenge. We can move in that direction as a country...black people amongst black, white people amongst white, filled with hatred toward one another.

Or we can make an effort, as Martin Luther King did, to understand and to comprehend, and to replace that violence, that stain of bloodshed that has spread across our land, with an effort to understand with compassion and love.

He told his listeners that he understood their anguish because he had lost a brother to an assassin's bullet.

What we need in the United States is not division; what we need in the United States is not hatred; what we need in the United States is not violence or lawlessness, but love and wisdom, and compassion toward one another, and a feeling of justice towards those who still suffer within our country, whether they be white or they be black... The vast majority of white people and the vast majority of black people in this country want to live together, want to improve the quality of our life, and want justice for all human beings who abide in our land.

Let us dedicate ourselves to what the Greeks wrote so many years ago: to tame the savagery of man and to make gentle the life of this world.

Let us dedicate ourselves to that, and say a prayer for our country and for our people.

The crowd was hushed: people wept: and there was no violence.

U2 "Pride: In the Name of Love"

One man come in the name of love
One man come and go
One come he to justify
One man to overthrow

In the name of love What more in the name of love
In the name of love What more in the name of love

One man caught on a barbed wire fence
One man he resist
One man washed on an empty beach.
One man betrayed with a kiss

In the name of love What more in the name of love
In the name of love What more in the name of love

(nobody like you...)

Early morning, April 4
Shot rings out in the Memphis sky
Free at last, they took your life
They could not take your pride

In the name of love What more in the name of love
In the name of love What more in the name of love
In the name of love What more in the name of love.

