

SET A PURPOSE FOR READING

Read "I Have a Dream" to find out what kind of future Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. dreams about.

# I Have a Dream

Speech by

DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.



**BACKGROUND** On August 28, 1963, more than 250,000 Americans of all races and from all over the country took part in a march on Washington, D.C. to urge Congress to pass a civil rights bill. Late in the day, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. delivered this speech, encouraging people to use nonviolent protest to bring about social change.

I am happy to join with you today in what will go down in history as the greatest demonstration for freedom in the history of our nation.

Five score<sup>1</sup> years ago, a great American, in whose symbolic shadow we stand today, signed the Emancipation Proclamation.<sup>2</sup> This momentous decree came as a great beacon light of hope to millions of Negro slaves who had been seared in the flames of withering injustice. It came as a joyous daybreak to end the long night of their captivity.

10 But one hundred years later, the Negro still is not free; one hundred years later, the life of the Negro is still sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination; one hundred years later, the Negro lives on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity; one

momentous (mō-mĕn'tēs) *adj.*  
of great importance

Why was the Emancipation Proclamation a momentous event?

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1. **five score:** 100; *score* means "twenty." (This phrasing recalls the beginning of Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address: "Four score and seven years ago...")  
2. **Emancipation Proclamation:** a document signed by President Lincoln in 1863, during the Civil War, declaring that all slaves in states still at war with the Union were free.

hundred years later, the Negro is still languishing in the corners of American society and finds himself in exile in his own land. ❸

So we've come here today to dramatize a shameful condition.

In a sense we've come to our nation's capital to cash a check.

When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words  
20 of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note<sup>3</sup> to which every American was to fall heir. This note was the promise that all men, yes, black men as well as white men, would be guaranteed the unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

It is obvious today that America has defaulted on this promissory note insofar as her citizens of color are concerned. Instead of honoring this sacred obligation, America has given the Negro people a bad check, a check which has come back marked "insufficient funds." But we refuse to believe that the  
30 bank of justice is bankrupt. We refuse to believe that there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity of this nation. And so we've come to cash this check, a check that will give us upon demand the riches of freedom and the security of justice. ❹

We have also come to this hallowed spot to remind America of the fierce urgency of now. This is no time to engage in the luxury of cooling off or to take the tranquilizing drug of gradualism.<sup>4</sup> Now is the time to make real the promises of democracy; now is the time to rise from the dark and desolate valley of segregation  
40 to the sunlit path of racial justice; now is the time to lift our nation from the quicksands of racial injustice to the solid rock of brotherhood; now is the time to make justice a reality for all of God's children. It would be fatal for the nation to overlook the urgency of the moment. This sweltering summer of the Negro's legitimate discontent will not pass until there is an invigorating autumn of freedom and equality.

Nineteen sixty-three is not an end, but a beginning. And those who hope that the Negro needed to blow off steam and will

❸ ARGUMENT

Reread lines 8–16. Underline the evidence King uses to support his claim that "the Negro is still not free." What problems does "the Negro" still face?

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default (dĭ-fôlt') v. to fail to keep a promise, especially a promise to repay a loan

❹ RHETORICAL DEVICE

Circle the **analogy**, or comparison, King uses in lines 25–34. To what situation does King compare the plight of "citizens of color"?

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legitimate (lə-jĭt'ē-mĭt) adj. justifiable; reasonable

3. **promissory** (prŏm'ĭ-sŏr'ē) note: a written promise to repay a loan.

4. **gradualism**: a policy of seeking to reach a goal slowly, in gradual stages.

now be content will have a rude awakening if the nation returns  
50 to business as usual. There will be neither rest nor tranquility  
in America until the Negro is granted his citizenship rights.  
The whirlwinds of revolt will continue to shake the foundations of  
our nation until the bright day of justice emerges.

But there is something that I must say to my people, who  
stand on the worn threshold which leads into the palace of  
justice. In the process of gaining our rightful place we must not  
be guilty of wrongful deeds. Let us not seek to satisfy our thirst  
for freedom by drinking from the cup of bitterness and hatred.  
We must forever conduct our struggle on the high plain of  
60 dignity and discipline. We must not allow our creative protests to  
degenerate into physical violence. Again and again we must rise  
to the majestic heights of meeting physical force with soul force.  
The marvelous new militancy, which has engulfed the Negro  
community, must not lead us to a distrust of all white people.  
For many of our white brothers, as evidenced by their presence  
here today, have come to realize that their destiny is tied up with  
our destiny. And they have come to realize that their freedom is  
inextricably bound to our freedom. We cannot walk alone. And  
as we walk, we must make the pledge that we shall always march  
70 ahead. We cannot turn back. **PAUSE & REFLECT**

**militancy** (mĭl'ĭ-tənt-sē) *n.* the  
act of aggressively supporting a  
political or social cause

**inextricably** (ĭn-ək'strĭ-kə-blē)  
*adv.* in a way impossible to  
untangle

**PAUSE & REFLECT**

Reread lines 54–70. How does  
King's message address his  
followers and also encourage  
support from a wider audience?

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There are those who are asking the devotees of civil rights,  
“When will you be satisfied?” We can never be satisfied as long  
as the Negro is the victim of the unspeakable horrors of police  
brutality; we can never be satisfied as long as our bodies, heavy  
with the fatigue of travel, cannot gain lodging in the motels of  
the highways and the hotels of the cities; we cannot be satisfied  
as long as the Negro's basic mobility is from a smaller ghetto to  
a larger one; we can never be satisfied as long as our children  
are stripped of their selfhood and robbed of their dignity by  
80 signs stating For Whites Only; we cannot be satisfied as long as  
the Negro in Mississippi cannot vote and a Negro in New York  
believes he has nothing for which to vote. No! No, we are not



satisfied, and we will not be satisfied until “justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.” ③

I am not unmindful that some of you have come here out of great trials and tribulations. Some of you have come fresh from narrow jail cells. Some of you have come from areas where your quest for freedom left you battered by the storms of persecution and staggered by the winds of police brutality. 90 You have been the veterans of creative suffering. Continue to work with the faith that unearned suffering is redemptive.<sup>5</sup> Go back to Mississippi. Go back to Alabama. Go back to South Carolina. Go back to Georgia. Go back to Louisiana. Go back to the slums and ghettos of our Northern cities, knowing that somehow this situation can and will be changed. Let us not wallow in the valley of despair.

I say to you today, my friends, even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream. I have a dream that 100 one day 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.” I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood. I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice. 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 110 skin, but by the content of their character. ④

I have a dream today!

I have a dream that one day down in Alabama—with its vicious racists, with its Governor having his lips dripping with the words of interposition and nullification<sup>6</sup>—one day right there in Alabama, little black boys and black girls will be able

③ ARGUMENT

Underline examples of racial injustice that King provides in lines 71–84. How does King suggest his supporters should respond to this injustice?

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④ RHETORICAL DEVICES

What rhetorical device does King use in lines 97–110? Fill out your answers in the chart below.

Word, Phrase, or Sentence
↓
Type of Device
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Effect

5. **unearned suffering is redemptive:** undeserved suffering is a way of earning freedom or salvation.  
 6. **Governor . . . nullification:** Rejecting a federal order to desegregate the University of Alabama, Governor George Wallace claimed that the principle of nullification (a state’s alleged right to refuse a federal law) allowed him to resist federal “interposition,” or interference, in state affairs.

**RHETORICAL DEVICES**

Reread lines 124–136. Underline the words that King repeats. What effect does this have?

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**PAUSE & REFLECT**

How does King appeal to a wide audience in this last portion of his speech?

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to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers.

I have a dream today!

I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, and every hill and mountain shall be made low. The rough places will be 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.”

This is our hope. This is the faith that I go back to the South with. With this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. With this faith we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day. And this will be the day. This will be the day when all of God’s children will be able to sing with new meaning, “My country ’tis of thee, sweet land of liberty, of thee I sing. Land where my fathers died, land of the pilgrims’ pride, from every mountainside, let freedom ring.” And if America is to be a great nation, this must become true.

So let freedom ring from the prodigious hilltops of New Hampshire; let freedom ring from the mighty mountains of New York; let freedom ring from the heightening Alleghenies of Pennsylvania; let freedom ring from the snowcapped Rockies of Colorado; let freedom ring from the curvaceous slopes of California. But not only that. Let freedom ring from Stone Mountain of Georgia; let freedom ring from Lookout Mountain of Tennessee; let freedom ring from every hill and molehill of Mississippi. “From every mountainside, let freedom ring.”

And when this happens, and when we allow freedom to ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God’s children—black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics—will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual, “Free at last. Free at last. Thank God Almighty, we are free at last.”

**PAUSE & REFLECT**