

Biography of Martin Luther King Jr.

Part One: Childhood and Youth

Martin Luther King Jr. was born on January 15, 1929, in Atlanta, Georgia. He was the second of three children in his family.

Martin's family was very religious. His father, Martin Luther King Sr., was a Baptist minister. So was his grandfather on his mother's side, Reverend Williams. Martin's grandfather served as the pastor of Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta.

As you might imagine, religion was a big part of Martin's life. As a young boy, he read aloud from the Bible every day. Grandmother Williams often entertained him with Bible stories. Each day began and ended with family prayers.

Racial prejudice was another thing that Martin learned about early in life. He grew up at a time when segregation still ruled the American South. Segregation means keeping people of different races apart. In the South, it was a way of keeping white people in a superior position to blacks. Blacks and whites lived in separate neighborhoods. Blacks could not go to the same schools as whites. They couldn't sit in the same sections of theaters or buses. There were "Whites only" signs at public swimming pools, on bathrooms, and even on drinking fountains.

Martin's father and grandfather were both active in the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People). This organization tried to improve conditions for African Americans. Most whites in the South viewed it with suspicion and hostility.

Martin's father tried to set an example for his son. Once he took Martin to buy a pair of shoes at a downtown store. Martin Sr. was a well-respected member of the community. He had taken over as pastor of the Ebenezer Baptist Church after Martin's grandfather died. But that didn't matter to the white clerk. When Martin and his father took seats in the front of the store, the clerk asked them to move to the rear for service.

Instead of obeying, Martin's father took his son and walked out of the store.

Martin grew up wanting to change the way America treated its black citizens. When he was 14, he entered a speech contest on the theme, "The Negro and the Constitution." He spoke about the wrongs of a segregated system. A democracy, he said, should give fair play and free opportunity for all. Martin won the contest. On the way home, a white bus driver harassed Martin and his teacher for not giving up their bus seats to white passengers quickly enough.

At the age of 15, Martin entered Morehouse College, an all-male, all-black school in Atlanta. He thought about becoming a doctor or a lawyer. Eventually he turned to the family tradition of the ministry. When he told his father what he wanted to do, Martin Sr. told him to prove it by giving a sermon at the Ebenezer Baptist Church. Martin, a young man of 18, amazed the crowd with his maturity and power.

On February 24, 1948, at the age of 19, he became a minister. He continued his studies at a seminary (a school for ministers) in Pennsylvania. Even among older classmates, he stood out. As a senior, he was elected president of his mostly white class.

Martin was given a scholarship for further study at a graduate school. He chose to pursue a Ph.D. (the highest academic degree) at a school of theology in Boston, Massachusetts. There he met Coretta Scott, a young woman who was studying voice at a school of music.

On June 18, 1953, Martin and Coretta were married on the front lawn of her parents' home in Alabama. Martin's father conducted the marriage ceremony. The newlyweds returned to Boston, where they finished their studies. As a Ph.D., Martin earned the title "Doctor" to go along with "Reverend."

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Part Two: Major Contributions

In 1954, Martin Luther King Jr. was named pastor of a Baptist church in Montgomery, Alabama. Of Montgomery's 120,000 citizens, 48,000 were black. Like Atlanta, the city was segregated. It was even a crime for whites and blacks to play cards or checkers together. Most blacks lived in terrible housing on unpaved streets. Some of the houses lacked electricity and running water.

King wanted to do more to protest segregation. A brave woman named Rosa Parks gave him the chance. On December 1, 1955, Parks refused to give up her seat on a city bus for a white passenger, as the law required. She was arrested and charged with breaking the law.

King and other black leaders decided to protest the unjust law by organizing a boycott of the city buses. Asking blacks to stay off the buses was a huge request. Most blacks did not own cars, and they depended on the bus system. King thought the boycott would be a success if 60 percent of black riders took part.

On the first day of the boycott, King was amazed to see bus after bus passing by his front window completely empty. Ninety percent of black riders had stayed off the buses. College students hitchhiked to school. Old men and women walked miles to get to their jobs. One man rode a mule. Another traveled in a horse-drawn buggy.

King became the public leader of the boycott. Soon he was receiving hate mail and vicious phone calls. Some of the writers and callers threatened to kill him. Once his house was bombed. King was afraid, but determined. He told a mass meeting, "If one day you find me sprawled out dead, I do not want you to retaliate with a single act of violence. I urge you to continue protesting with the same dignity and discipline you have shown so far."

The boycott lasted for more than a year. It made King a national figure. Many whites were

won over by his pleas for fairness and Christian brotherhood.

In 1956, the Rosa Parks case went before the U.S. Supreme Court. The Court ruled that Montgomery's bus law was unconstitutional. Parks, King, and their supporters had won a great victory. But many segregation laws and practices remained in force.

King continued organizing protests in the South. Even though he shared the anger many felt about injustice, he constantly preached nonviolence. As a seminary student, he had studied the life and teachings of Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhi had organized boycotts, strikes, and marches to protest the rule of the British in India. His nonviolent tactics helped win independence for his homeland in 1947. King believed that a similar approach could work in the United States. Nonviolence also fit with his belief in Christian love.

In 1963, King joined a protest against segregation in Birmingham, Alabama. He encouraged children and teenagers to take part in peaceful marches. As the children marched and sang, police turned powerful fire hoses on them and let police dogs attack them. The brutal treatment of children shocked people across the nation.

During the demonstrations, King was arrested and taken to the Birmingham jail. There he wrote a letter to some local clergy who had criticized him for creating disorder in the city. King's letter became a famous statement of the right and duty to stand up against injustice.

On May 12, 1963, President John F. Kennedy ordered army troops to Birmingham to restore order and enforce new desegregation laws. But King felt that the federal government was still not doing enough. To gain even more attention for civil rights, he called for a peaceful "march for freedom" in Washington, D.C.

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On August 28, 1963, more than 250,000 people marched in the nation's capital. They demanded a new civil rights law, the integration of schools, an end to job discrimination, and a program of job training.

Standing on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, King gave the most memorable speech of his life. "I have a dream today," he told the marchers. His dream was that blacks and whites could live together in peace and justice.

King's speech helped create support for new action. The next year, Congress passed the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The law outlawed segregation in most public accommodations, such as

hotels, theaters, and restaurants. It forbade discrimination on the job and in schools. It was the most far-reaching civil rights law in almost 100 years.

The Civil Rights Act was a major step toward ending discrimination and segregation. But huge problems of inequality remained. King began to shift his focus to issues of economic justice, especially poverty. In 1967 he started planning a Poor People's Campaign. The goal of the new movement was to guarantee all Americans decent housing, a good education, and a job.

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Part Three: Death and Legacy

By 1968, Martin Luther King Jr. was campaigning actively for economic justice. As part of his new focus, he went to Memphis, Tennessee, to support a strike by sanitation workers. The strikers wanted fair wages and decent working conditions.

In Memphis, King gave his last speech. He told his listeners that he might not live to see the day when justice was truly achieved. "But I want you to know tonight," he said, "that we, as a people, will get to the promised land."

The next night, April 4, King was shot as he stood on his hotel balcony. He died a short time later. He was just 39 years old. His accused killer was a white man named James Earl Ray.

Millions of people around the world mourned King's death. His funeral was held at the Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta. More than 100,000 people lined the streets to watch the funeral procession bring his body to the cemetery. President Lyndon Johnson declared a national day of mourning.

Between 1957 and 1968, King had traveled over six million miles. He had given more than

2500 speeches. He had written six books and numerous articles. He had been threatened and attacked, but he had also been given many honors. In 1964, he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. At 35, he was the youngest person ever to receive this honor.

In his lifetime, King saw his activities bring about major changes in federal law. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 was followed by the Voting Rights Act the next year. The new law outlawed a number of practices that had been used to keep blacks from voting. It had a dramatic impact. For example, in 1966 the number of blacks registered to vote in Alabama, Mississippi, and South Carolina was more than four times greater than in 1960.

In 1986, Congress established a national holiday in honor of King's birthday. It is celebrated on the third Monday in January. Today, his example continues to inspire people around the world to work for peace and justice.