

Name: _____ Class: _____

I Have a Dream

By Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.
1963

Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929-1968) was an American Baptist minister and activist who was a leader in the Civil Rights Movement. He worked to end racial discrimination against African Americans throughout his life. King delivered his iconic "I Have a Dream" speech to over 250,000 people from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C., during the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom on August 28, 1963. In this speech, King discusses racial inequality in America and his hopes for African Americans' civil rights. As you read, take note of how King uses figurative language and how it contributes to the development of the central ideas of his speech.

[1] 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 years ago, a great American, in whose symbolic shadow we stand today,¹ signed the Emancipation Proclamation. 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.



"Martin Luther King Jr. I Have a Dream Speech" by National Archives is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0.

But 100 years later, the Negro still is not free. One hundred years later, the life of the Negro is still sadly crippled² by the manacles³ 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 hundred years later, the Negro is still languished⁴ in the corners of American society and finds himself an exile⁵ in his own land. And 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 of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note⁶ to which every American was to fall heir. This note was a promise that all men, yes, black men as well as white men, would be guaranteed the "unalienable⁷ 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."

1. Referring to the Lincoln Memorial
2. **Crippled (adjective):** severely disabled
3. a metal band, chain, or shackle
4. **Languish (verb):** to suffer from being forced to remain in an unpleasant place or situation
5. **Exile (noun):** a person who is forced to live away from their native country
6. a signed document containing a written promise to pay a stated sum to a specified person
7. unable to be taken away from or given away by the possessor

[5] But we refuse to believe that the 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.

We have also come to this hallowed⁸ 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 tranquilizing⁹ drug of gradualism.¹⁰ Now is the time to make real the promises of democracy. Now is the time to rise from the dark and desolate¹¹ valley of segregation 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 sweltering¹² summer of the Negro's legitimate discontent will not pass until there is an invigorating¹³ autumn of freedom and equality. 1963 is not an end, but a beginning. And those who hope that the Negro needed to blow off steam and will now be content will have a rude awakening if the nation returns to business as usual. And 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 warm 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 plane of dignity and discipline. We must not allow our creative protest to degenerate¹⁴ into physical violence. Again and again, we must rise to the majestic heights of meeting physical force with soul force.

The marvelous new militancy¹⁵ which has engulfed¹⁶ 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.

[10] We cannot walk alone.

And as we walk, we must make the pledge that we shall always march ahead.

We cannot turn back.

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8. **Hallowed** (*adjective*): holy
 9. **Tranquilize** (*verb*): to make calm
 10. **Gradualism** (*noun*): the policy of approaching a desired end by gradual steps
 11. **Desolate** (*adjective*): deserted of people
 12. **Sweltering** (*adjective*): oppressively hot
 13. **Invigorate** (*verb*): to give life and energy to
 14. **Degenerate** (*verb*): to sink into a low intellectual or moral state
 15. the state of being aggressively active in a cause
 16. **Engulf** (*verb*): to sweep over

There are those who are asking the devotees¹⁷ 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 ghetto¹⁸ to a larger one. We can never be satisfied as long as our children are stripped of their self-hood and robbed of their dignity by signs stating: "For Whites Only." We cannot be satisfied as long as a 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."¹⁹

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. And some of you have come from areas where your quest — quest for freedom left you battered by the storms of persecution and staggered by the winds of police brutality. You have been the veterans of creative suffering. Continue to work with the faith that unearned suffering is redemptive.²⁰ 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.

[15] Let us not wallow in the valley of despair, I say to you today, my friends.

And so 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 one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed:²¹ "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal."²²

I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the 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 oasis²³ of freedom and justice.

[20] 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.

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"²⁴ and "nullification"²⁵ — one day right there in Alabama little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers.

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17. **Devotee (noun):** a person who is enthusiastically committed to a cause
 18. a part of a city in which members of a minority group live, especially because of social, legal, or economic pressure
 19. This is a Bible verse from Amos 5:24.
 20. **Redemptive (adjective):** acting to save someone from error or evil
 21. a set of beliefs or aims that guide someone's actions
 22. This quote comes from the Declaration of Independence.
 23. An oasis is a fertile location in a desert with water and plants.
 24. **Interposition (noun):** the act of intervening
 25. **Nullification (non):** the act of making something of no value or consequence

I have a *dream* today!

I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted,²⁶ and every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made 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."²⁷

[25] This is our hope, and this is the faith that I go back to the South with.

With this faith, we will be able to hew²⁸ 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 Pilgrim's pride,

*From every mountainside, let freedom ring!*²⁹

And if America is to be a great nation, this must become true.

[30] And so let freedom ring from the prodigious³⁰ 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 snow-capped Rockies of Colorado.

Let freedom ring from the curvaceous slopes of California.

[35]

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.

26. **Exalted (adjective):** placed at a high or powerful level

27. This paragraph contains language and quotes from Bible verses Isaiah 40:4-5.

28. to chop or cut something

29. These lines are verses from "My Country, 'Tis of Thee," a patriotic song written in 1831 by Samuel Francis Smith.

30. **Prodigious (adjective):** remarkably or impressively great

[40] From every mountainside, let freedom ring.

And when this happens, and when we allow freedom ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet,³¹ 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!

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31. a small settlement, generally one smaller than a village

Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which of the following identifies the central idea of the text? [RI.2]
 - A. King believes that African Americans should not be denied their civil rights, and encourages others to be relentless in their non-violent fight for freedom.
 - B. King's dream is for African Americans to be free, and makes it clear he will do anything to achieve this, no matter the consequences.
 - C. King does not believe that America is ready to grant African Americans their freedom, but is hopeful for a future in which this is possible.
 - D. King knows that equality is not something he will see during his lifetime, but is confident that his children will eventually live in a world of equality.

2. PART B: Which detail from the text best supports the answer to Part A? [RI.1]
 - A. "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." (Paragraph 3)
 - B. "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." (Paragraph 8)
 - C. "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." (Paragraph 14)
 - D. "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." (Paragraph 20)

3. PART A: What is the meaning of "tribulation" in paragraph 14? [RI.4]
 - A. adventure
 - B. uncertainty
 - C. difficulty
 - D. desperation

4. PART B: Which clue from the text best supports the answer to Part A? [RI.1]
 - A. "we will not be satisfied until 'justice rolls down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream.'" (Paragraph 13)
 - B. "And some of you have come from areas where your quest -- quest for freedom left you battered by the storms of persecution" (Paragraph 14)
 - C. "go back to the slums and ghettos of our northern cities, knowing that somehow this situation can and will be changed." (Paragraph 14)
 - D. "Let us not wallow in the valley of despair, I say to you today, my friends." (Paragraph 15)

5. PART A: How does paragraph 4 contribute to the development of ideas in the text? [RI.5]
- A. It emphasizes that African Americans have been cheated the civil rights that the nation owes them.
 - B. It demands that African American receive financial compensation for the injustices they have suffered.
 - C. It proves that African Americans are never going to stop fighting for their civil rights and freedom.
 - D. It shows how essential African Americans' civil rights are to them by comparing rights to money.
6. PART B: Which quote from paragraph 4 best supports the answer to Part A? [RI.1]
- A. "In a sense we've come to our nation's capital to cash a check."
 - B. "When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note"
 - C. "This note was a 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.'"
 - D. "Instead of honoring this sacred obligation, America has given the Negro people a bad check"
7. What kinds of figurative language does King use in his speech to describe inequality and the work of the Civil Rights Movement? What is the impact of this language? Explain examples from at least two different paragraphs of the speech. [RI.4]

8. King makes allusions to multiple other texts in the course of his "I Have a Dream" speech. Analyze the impact of his use of at least two other texts. What does he accomplish by including references to these other texts? [RI.4]

Discussion Questions

Directions: *Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.*

1. In your opinion, why did Martin Luther King, Jr. discourage people from fighting discrimination with violence? Is violence an effective means to create change? Why or why not? Use evidence from the speech and other examples from history in your answer.

2. In the context of the text, how has America changed over time? How did America's treatment of African Americans change through history, and how has it changed since this speech was delivered in 1963? What additional change is Martin Luther King, Jr. demanding in his speech? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.

3. In the context of the text, how do people create change? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.

4. In the context of the text, what are the effects of prejudice? How does Martin Luther King, Jr. describe the prejudice that African Americans face? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.