# I Have a Dream Speech

## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF MARTIN LUTHER KING

Martin Luther King Jr. was one of the most iconic and influential leaders in the American civil rights movement. Born in Atlanta to a middle-class family and raised near Atlanta's "Black Wall Street," King's father and grandfather before him were Baptist preachers. Even though King was part of a comfortable and tight-knit community, he grew up amid the injustices of segregation. Before entering Morehouse College as an undergraduate, King spent time up North, where he was first exposed to integrated churches and restaurants. Returning home to complete his studies in the South, King graduated from college in 1948 and entered the ministry at his father's suggestion. He attended a seminary in Pennsylvania and completed his doctorate at Boston University. In Boston, King met and married Coretta Scott, and the two of them returned to Scott's native Alabama to begin a family. In 1955, King—a pastor at the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery—was chosen to lead the Montgomery Bus Boycotts. Having studied nonviolent resistance during his time at seminary, King led his fellow Alabamians in acts of civil disobedience that eventually led to the desegregation of the city's bus system. Following the success of the boycotts, King became a renowned and respected civil rights leader. His participation in sit-ins in Atlanta and Birmingham led to his being arrested multiple times—but King always preached nonviolence to those who looked to him as an example of how to fight racism. Following his release from the Birmingham jail and his historic "I Have a Dream" speech at the March on Washington in 1963, King was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his direct influence on the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. King continued to lead nonviolent demonstrations, such as the march from Selma to Montgomery—but as progress stalled, radical factions of the civil rights and Black Power movements began to doubt the uses of nonviolence. King himself admitted to mounting frustrations with going to jail repeatedly and "living every day under the threat of death." In 1968, on a trip to Memphis, Tennessee, King was assassinated on the balcony of his room at the Lorraine Motel.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his "I Have a Dream" speech to an audience of over 250,000 people at the March on Washington in August of 1963. The march was one of the largest civil rights rallies in American history, and it came at a crucial moment in the decades-long struggle for civil rights. The successes of the Montgomery bus boycott of 1955 and 1956 and the lunch counter sit-ins across America of the early 1960s had directly resulted in the passages of the Civil Rights Acts of 1957 and 1960—but segregation still persisted in America, and voting rights for minorities were still under attack, especially in the South. The speech was historically significant because it put political pressure on the administration of then-president John F. Kennedy to continue advancing civil rights legislation. The speech also brought King to greater international attention—he was named Man of the Year by TIME magazine later in 1963, and, in 1964, he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. The speech is widely regarded as a masterpiece of rhetoric and a vital historical document.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

"I Have a Dream" is a sophisticated, hyper-referential speech that makes allusions to patriotic songs, political addresses, the speeches of other civil rights activists, the Bible, and even Shakespeare's *Richard III*. King's speech has also drawn comparisons to speeches delivered by other civil rights activists such as Archibald Carey Jr. and Prathia Hall—the repeated refrains of "let freedom ring" and "I have a dream" weren't necessarily King's own original writing, but rather the repurposing and repatterning of rhetorical devices from other activists' earlier work. King quotes specific passages from the Bible, drawing on the language used in the books of Isaiah, Amos, and Galatians. By mixing the language of Biblical prophets with the lyrics of patriotic songs, the words of other activists, and the sentence structures of Shakespearean drama, King creates a pastiche of multiple rhetorical styles, historical periods, and modes of pathos and persuasion.

### KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** "I Have a Dream"
- **When Written:** Early 1960s
- **When Published:** King delivered versions of "I Have a Dream" in North Carolina in 1962 and in Detroit in June of 1963 before delivering the definitive version of the speech at the March on Washington on August 28th, 1963
- **Literary Period:** civil rights movement
- **Genre:** Speech, religious sermon
- **Climax:** King begins calling for freedom to ring out across America, from the "mighty mountains of New York" to the "molehill[s] of Mississippi"
- **Point of View:** First person

### EXTRA CREDIT

**Ringing Into the Future.** On August 28th, 2013—the 50th

anniversary of the March on Washington—thousands of people gathered on the mall in Washington D.C. where King delivered his iconic speech to celebrate and commemorate the occasion. President Barack Obama spoke at the gathering. Obama paid homage to King while reminding those in attendance that King's dream was still not yet complete, and that the work of justice and anti-racism is complex and ongoing.

## PLOT SUMMARY

In his "I Have a Dream" speech, minister and civil rights activist Martin Luther King Jr. outlines the long history of racial injustice in America and encourages his audience to hold their country accountable to its own founding promises of freedom, justice, and equality.

King begins his speech by reminding his audience—the 250,000+ attendees at the March on Washington in August of 1963—that it has been over a century since the Emancipation Proclamation was signed into law, ending slavery in America. But even though Black Americans are technically free from slavery, they are not free in any larger sense—the "chains of discrimination" and the "manacles of segregation" continue to define the Black experience in America. It is time, King argues, for Black Americans to "cash [the] check" they were promised a century ago and demand "the riches of freedom and the security of justice." There is no more time to waste in pursuit of a gradual solution to racism, King says—it is the "**sweltering** summer of the Negro's legitimate discontent," and the country has reached its boiling point.

Even though King calls for the "whirlwinds of revolt" to spin into action, he urges those on the front lines of the civil rights movement not to let "bitterness and hatred" define their actions. They cannot to let their movement for justice "degenerate into physical violence." King reminds his listeners to remain in the "majestic heights" of nonviolent resistance and also to not see their white allies as enemies. In order to bring true justice about, King says, Americans of all races will need to unite and remain true to the values of nonviolent solidarity.

King acknowledges the long and difficult struggles that many of his listeners have already faced—he knows that those involved in the movement for civil rights have been beaten, insulted, and incarcerated. Still, he urges them to return home from the march to wherever they may live, be it in the sweltering South or in the "ghettos of the northern cities," confident in the value and promise of their fight.

Then King invokes the dream he has for America: a dream that one day the country will "live out the true meaning of its creed" and make it a reality that "all men are created equal." He dreams that his children will one day live in a society where they will be judged not "by the color of their skin but by the content of their character" and that, in the future, Black children and white children will join hands as sisters and brothers.

King urges his listeners to take their faith in meaningful change back to their hometowns—they must continue to struggle together, face incarceration together, and "stand up for freedom together" in order to truly make America a great nation. He calls for freedom to ring out across the country, from the highest **mountains** of Colorado, to Stone Mountain of Georgia, to "every hill and molehill of Mississippi." When America collectively allows freedom to ring across its hills and valleys, he says, only then will "black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Catholics and Protestants" be able to sing truthfully and honestly the words of the old Negro spiritual: "Free at last, free at last; thank God Almighty, we are free at last."

## CHARACTERS

**Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.** – Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was an American activist and Baptist minister who championed nonviolent resistance during the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. In August of 1963—the 100th anniversary of the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation, which ended slavery in America—King delivered a speech called "I Have a Dream." He gave that speech at the March on Washington, a massive rally for civil rights that took place in the heart of the nation's capital. Throughout "I Have a Dream," King spoke of his belief in the power of nonviolent resistance to transform America into a more just and equal place—a place King and countless other Black Americans had envisioned only in dreams. The speech, delivered in the style of a religious sermon, recounted the unbearable shame and indignity of living under segregation while calling on Americans of all faiths and races to unite and fight nonviolently for an end to injustice. King's dreams for America ranged from the simple and touching (a vision of "little black boys and black girls [joining] hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers"), to the momentous and epic (a dream that "one day every valley shall be exalted" in the name of freedom for all). His wide-ranging visions of an "oasis" of justice in America reveal his unshaken faith in the country's potential to live up to the promise its founding fathers laid out: that America was a place where all men were created equal. Throughout "I Have a Dream," King revealed his deep faith in the fruits of collective struggle more broadly, but he also spoke intimately of his personal investment in the pursuit of justice: he dreamed that one day his children would "not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character." In sharing his most closely held dreams of progress and change to a massive audience gathered at the march, King offered up an intimate part of himself even as he spoke of grand, prophetic visions for a more unified country. Furious but hopeful, the version of himself that King revealed through "I Have a Dream" became a

driving force in the civil rights movement and a reminder of the fact that every participant in the movement had a story and a dream of their own.

## THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

### AMERICA'S PROMISES AND POTENTIAL

In his iconic "I Have a Dream" speech, civil rights activist Martin Luther King Jr. describes the founding promises of America (freedom, equality, and justice for all) and the nation's failure to keep those promises, particularly to Black Americans. Addressing hundreds of thousands of people at the March on Washington in August of 1963, King specifically called attention to the fact that while most white Americans enjoyed freedom and justice, Black Americans did not. Nonetheless, throughout the speech, King maintains hope that America will soon live up to its founding ideals. By highlighting America's failed promises while still maintaining his faith its possibilities, King suggested to those in attendance at the march that it was their right to demand that America fulfill its promises to them—and that it was their duty to fight on until the country reached its potential.

King begins his speech by invoking the Emancipation Proclamation, which, in 1863, promised freedom to all enslaved Americans. The Emancipation Proclamation, King says, "came as a great beacon light of hope to millions of Negro slaves" and he urges his audience to imagine the "joyous daybreak to end the long night of [...] captivity" that the proclamation was supposed to bring. However, despite this sweeping promise of freedom, King says, "one hundred years later, the Negro still is not free." In 1963, when King gave his speech, Black Americans were still abused by police, barred from sharing social spaces with white Americans, and kept in literal (and metaphorical) "ghettos" where social mobility was impossible. This, King implies, is not the freedom that the Emancipation Proclamation promised. While Black Americans were promised equal rights and fair treatment at the end of the Civil War, America has knowingly broken those promises in the years since. America never delivered to Black Americans the social equality, material prosperity, or political representation its white citizens have enjoyed since the country's foundation.

While the United States has not yet lived up to its promises of freedom and equality, King is still hopeful that, in the future, his country will. "We refuse to believe," King states, "that there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity in this nation." This statement makes it clear that King—and countless other Black Americans—have seen firsthand how America provides for its white citizens, and he is certain that the United States is capable of providing such opportunities to all Americans, regardless of race. He frames opportunity as a kind of currency, implying that there's plenty of money to go around. So to him, the United States has not broken its promises of freedom and opportunity because those resources are scarce—actually, he believes that it's completely possible to distribute opportunity equitably without costing white Americans anything. King believes in "the promises of democracy," but he knows that they have not yet been "ma[de] real."

King's faith that America can make good on its unrealized promises depends on one thing: every American embracing their duty to hold their country accountable to its own standards of freedom and justice. King uses the metaphor of money to explain that America has defaulted on its debt to Black Americans, but that his listeners must "cash this check" that they are owed—the check, of course, is the promise of freedom and equality enshrined in the nation's founding documents. "The riches of freedom and the security of justice," King posits, won't be given to America's minorities until they collectively demand the rights they were promised. "This is no time to engage in the luxury of cooling off," King says. Here, he positions "cooling off" (or putting the fight for civil rights on the backburner) as a "luxury" that no American—no matter their race—can afford. King implores his listeners not to assume that America will give them what they're owed without pressure.

Toward the end of his speech, King describes his own vision for America's future as being "deeply rooted in the American dream that 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." Here, King cements his belief that just because America has not yet kept its promises doesn't mean that there's no possibility of growth. He knows that America has the capacity to create a society in which all people are treated equally, as long as Americans take action to ensure that reality.

### THE COLLECTIVE FIGHT AGAINST RACISM

In "I Have a Dream," Martin Luther King Jr. calls out the "shameful condition" of racism in America and demands an end to the indignity of segregation. But he acknowledges that his dream of a free, fair America—a place where Black Americans are judged not "by the color of their skin but by the content of their character"—is one that can't be realized without solidarity from white Americans. The only way to fight against the "vicious" and divisive nature of racism, King argues, is for Americans of all races to stand together and fight

for justice.

King highlights the insidious nature of racism, suggesting that nobody can afford to tolerate it any longer. For instance, King highlights how humiliating segregation is to Black Americans. Black people cannot stay in certain hotels and motels, they are the targets of police brutality, they are confined to "slums" and "ghettos," and some cannot vote (while others feel that have "nothing for which to vote"). To King, segregation isolates Black Americans in a "dark and desolate valley." By using language associated with confinement and isolation, King shows that the effect of segregation is *not* "separate but equal"—it's akin to exile. Furthermore, King uses language associated with **heat** and suffocation to show how oppressive racism is both physically and emotionally, and to suggest that race relations in America have reached a kind of boiling point. "The heat of injustice" is "sweltering" and intolerable, he says, and if things don't change quickly, there will be terrible consequences: America will become trapped in hot "quicksand" from which it might never escape.

King urges Black and white Americans alike to set aside their differences and acknowledge that the fight against racism cannot be won without collaboration. At many points in his speech, King speaks directly to Black Americans, asking them not to let their quest for justice lead to "a distrust of all white people." After all, there are "many [...] white brothers" who have come to the March on Washington after realizing that white Americans' freedom is "inextricably bound" to that of Black Americans. According to King it is not Black Americans who need the help of white Americans to win freedom from racism and injustice, but instead that white Americans need to help free Black Americans from "the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination" in order to be truly free themselves. As long as even one group of people is oppressed, King's words suggest, no one can truly be liberated.

King also uses his speech to speak directly and specifically to white Americans. He urges his white listeners to see that Black Americans "cannot walk alone" in their long struggle against racism. By encouraging a "biracial army" to rise up against "the battlements of injustice," King signals to the white members of his audience that they must stand up for their Black comrades in order to affect any real change. King wants his white listeners to see that they must learn to "work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together" with their Black brethren. There will be no change if white Americans do not themselves on the line in pursuit of Black liberation. Black Americans are punished harder and more unfairly than white Americans—and so it is up to white Americans, who carry social privilege, to stand in solidarity until true freedom is won.

It is only after Americans of different races stand together, King argues, that all Americans will truly be "free at last." King's assertion that white Americans will not be free until all Americans are free from racism and segregation was a radical one for its time because it suggested that racism didn't just humiliate and degrade Black people, but all people. By positioning racism as a stain on America, King suggests that everyone, no matter their race, has a stake in the dismantling of racism and the pursuit of true equality.

## DREAMS, DESPAIR, AND FAITH

Throughout "I Have a Dream"—a rousing civil rights address structured like a sermon—religious faith plays a significant role. After laying bare the brutal facts of racism in America, King offers up a dream of an America in which people of all races and faiths live together in harmony and mutual respect. Even though King has known despair, he's still able to dream of a future where white and Black children hold hands, where the South transforms from a racist inferno into a peaceful oasis, and where his children will be judged by their character instead of their race—and he's able to dream this because of his faith in the equality of "all God's children." In order to create a more just future, King suggests, one must maintain one's faith even in the face of hopelessness.

King shares his own despair with his listeners, acknowledging the hopelessness that many among them may feel. Not only has his audience been living with horrific racism—segregation, police brutality, and widespread disenfranchisement, to name a few examples—but also many activists have faced specific demoralizations while trying to make change. Some members of the audience have been beaten, insulted, or jailed in pursuit of justice, while other activists have been killed. In the face of all this "unearned suffering," it's not surprising that members of the audience might despair—but King urges his listeners to see their unearned suffering as "redemptive." In this way, King compares his audience to Christ; just as Christ suffered on the cross to redeem mankind, civil rights activists suffer through insult and injury to redeem future generations, sparing them the suffering that King's generation has felt. So King is suggesting that suffering shouldn't lead his audience to despair—instead, with a little faith, suffering can be a source of hope.

As another way to combat despair, King shares the dreams that he has for America's future, evoking a nation defined by racial harmony and equal justice. Sharing these dreams not only makes the future towards which the movement is striving seem more concrete, but it also encourages the audience to remember their *own* dreams for themselves and for the nation, helping them to remain focused and motivated. As King spells out his dreams, he associates them with faith, both religious and secular. Among the six dreams that he lays out, the final one is explicitly Biblical, referencing a passage in Isaiah. He says that his dream is for "every valley [to] be exalted" and "every hill and mountain [to] be made low," for "rough places" to be made smooth and "crooked places" made "straight." These are metaphors for equality and justice, showing that all who are

low ("valleys") will be uplifted ("exalted") and everything unjust ("crooked") will be made right. By invoking the goals of the civil rights movement through a passage from Isaiah, King is explicitly grounding his cause in Scripture, just as he has also grounded it in America's founding documents. The message here is that God is on the side of the movement.

But as King winds down his speech, he repeatedly invokes a "faith" that's not explicitly religious. "This is the faith that I go back to the South with," he says, meaning both his Christian faith *and* his faith that his specific dreams of equality and justice will soon come true. In this way, he speaks simultaneously to all members of his audience: those within the Christian activist tradition of which King was a part, and those whose faith is purely secular. Regardless of the audience's specific faith, King insists that it's faith alone—whether that is faith in God or faith in the collective dreams of the movement—that will allow the movement to remain motivated and united. "With this faith," he says, "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."

Despite its religious overtones and undertones, the "I Have a Dream Speech" is something of a secular sermon. It preaches the gospel of freedom, equality, and justice, insists that suffering on behalf of others is powerful and worthwhile, and encourages listeners to keep their faith in the future of their nation no matter what obstacles they might face. With this tireless faith, King promises, the movement will realize their dreams.

## THE USES OF NONVIOLENT RESISTANCE

Martin Luther King Jr. was a civil rights activist noted for his embrace of nonviolent resistance, or the practice of achieving social change through peaceful demonstrations. During the summer of 1963, a "**sweltering**" season simmering with rage and volatility, King's assertion that nonviolent resistance was the surest path to change came at a crucial moment in the long fight for civil rights. In his "I Have a Dream" speech, delivered at the March on Washington (one of the largest human rights rallies in America's history), King extolled the potential of nonviolent action as a path to change, arguing that if the civil rights movement was to be a success, it needed to resist the temptation to meet violence with more violence.

King urged his listeners at the March on Washington to swear off violence and free themselves of violent impulses. "We must not allow our creative protest to degenerate into physical violence," King warned his listeners. "Again and again we must rise to the majestic heights of meeting physical force with soul force." By claiming physical violence was the "degenerate[ed]" form of protest, King underscored the importance of taking the high road and ignoring the impulse to descend into chaos or cruelty. The concept of "creative protest," or new and innovative ways of standing up collectively against injustice, was, according to King, the purest form of resistance because it was connected to the soul and the heart rather than the body. Physical violence, in King's estimation, was common, unimaginative, and lowly. But coming up with other methods to protest—methods that would appeal not to fear or coercion but to growth and openness—would propel their cause. "Unearned suffering is redemptive," King told his listeners at the march. By encouraging listeners to embrace their unearned suffering, King was reframing suffering as a positive experience, rather than one that should provoke a violent response. Many of the "veterans of creative suffering" he spoke to at the march had been faced with violence and survived—and now, King urged them not to emulate the violent tactics of those who hurt them, but rather to model more righteous and just behavior.

Though King denounced violence, he recognized and validated his listeners' rage and encouraged them to channel that rage into meaningful nonviolent action. King urged his listeners to work tirelessly for the rights of Black Americans and to stir up "the whirlwinds of revolt" in order to "shake the foundations of [the] nation." He didn't want his vision of nonviolent resistance to turn the civil rights movement into one of complacency or languor—he wanted to remind his fellow Americans that they could be angry and noncompliant without resorting to "wrongful deeds." Kung acknowledged the "thirst for freedom" among those at the march—but he warned them not to try to satisfy that thirst "by drinking from the cup of bitterness and hatred." He didn't want them to turn to violence or cruelty—he wanted their rage to inspire them rather than keep them bogged down in animosity. Additionally, King praised the "marvelous new militancy" of the Black community and the civil rights movement. But he wasn't approving of "militancy" in the sense of armed violence—instead, he hoped that the civil rights movement would be "militant" by remaining organized and united in the face of oppression. He wanted his listeners to remain thoroughly devoted to change without growing frustrated and resorting to ugly violence when that change didn't come immediately.

Throughout his speech, King implied again and again that it was nonviolent action and the dream of peace—not unchecked militancy or violence—that would allow freedom to ring out at last across America. King wanted to transform "the jangling discords of [his] nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood." He wanted to smooth the "rough places" in America and straighten the "crooked places." He wanted descendants of slaves and descendants of slave-owners to "sit down together at the table of brotherhood." King's vision for a new America was not one that would be won through violence, coercion, or viciousness. True freedom, King asserted, could not be achieved by replicating the violent power structures that kept racism and segregation alive. In order to bring real change to America, King and his supporters would have to find

a new way forward—one that radically rejected violent action as well as violent thoughts.

## SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

### HEAT

Throughout "I Have a Dream," heat symbolizes the stifling and intolerable nature of racism. Martin Luther King Jr. first refers to the "sweltering summer of the Negro's legitimate discontent" early on in his speech. The March on Washington took place in August of 1963, so this is in part a reference to the summer heat that the audience was enduring as they listened to King deliver his speech. But when he describes a "sweltering summer" of justified anger, he's describing how Black Americans have spent centuries suffering through the "heat" of racism. He uses this metaphor in many places in the speech, describing Mississippi, for instance, as "a state sweltering with the heat of injustice [and] oppression."

As King continues to envision his dream for social and racial justice in America, he describes an "oasis of freedom and justice"—an oasis being a cool place where one might find respite from a hot desert. Comparing freedom and justice to an oasis suggests that fighting to make freedom and justice a reality for Black Americans will help break the "heat" from which the country currently suffers. The imagery of heat breaking due to the successes of the civil rights movement is also apparent in King's description of an "invigorating autumn of freedom and equality" ending the horrific summer heat. The contrasting imagery of heat and cool throughout the speech helps the audience understand that they can only be comfortable in America once the fight for civil rights has been won. If anyone wants a break from racism—or, metaphorically, from the oppressive August heat—they need to help make the "invigorating autumn of freedom and equality" a reality.

### HILLS AND MOUNTAINS

Throughout "I Have a Dream," King uses imagery of hills and mountains to invoke the future of the civil rights movement. Just as climbing a mountain requires enduring pain and difficulty in order to reach a glorious summit, King knows that civil rights activists will face tremendous obstacles (physical beatings, demoralizing insults, and even incarceration or death) on their way to achieving their goal of freedom, justice, and equality for all. But King's imagery of mountains both acknowledges this difficulty and emphasizes that the end result will be worthwhile—after all, his language surrounding mountains is overwhelmingly positive, calling them "mighty" and "prodigious" and referring, in another context, to "majestic heights."

King uses most of his mountain imagery towards the end of the speech while invoking the patriotic hymn "America (My Country, 'Tis of Thee)." That song includes the line "From every mountainside, let freedom ring," and King calls for Americans to be able to sing those words wholeheartedly, knowing that freedom really is a reality for everyone. In driving home this message, he specifically invokes different American terrains, saying to "let freedom ring from the prodigious hilltops of New Hampshire" to the "heightening Alleghenies of Pennsylvania" to the "snow-capped Rockies" and even to "every hill and molehill of Mississippi." By invoking the gorgeous terrain of America (just as the song does), King aligns his movement with patriotism, suggesting that the full beauty of America will be realized only once the movement's goals are met. And finally, the notion that freedom will ring from the tops of mountains across America emphasizes that once the movement has struggled and reached the summit, they will have the power to make their ideas a reality.

## QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the HarperCollins edition of *I Have a Dream: Writings and Speeches That Changed the World* published in 1992.

### I Have a Dream Quotes

❝ Fivescore years ago, a great American, in whose symbolic shadow we stand today, 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.

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…

**Related Characters:** Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 102

**Explanation and Analysis**

In the opening lines of his "I Have a Dream" speech, Martin Luther King describes how, in spite of being freed from slavery by the Emancipation Proclamation 100 years

before, Black Americans are still not truly free citizens in their own country.

Throughout this passage, King contrasts America's promises to its Black citizens (including equality, justice, and freedom) with the country's failure to live up to those promises. As the passage begins, King uses language that parallels the opening of Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address. That speech began "Four score and seven years ago…" and it went on to address the potential of a country founded on the principle that "all men are created equal." So by beginning his speech with the phrase "fivescore years ago" and by acknowledging Lincoln's "symbolic shadow" over the March on Washington (the rally was physically beside the Lincoln Memorial on the mall), King is reminding his listeners that, just as Lincoln reckoned with unfulfilled promises, he made unfulfilled promises of his own.

Abraham Lincoln's legislation to end slavery promised a "great beacon light of hope" for millions of enslaved people, but that daybreak, according to King, still hasn't come. America is still languishing, having failed to meet its potential as a truly great nation. In reality, though Black Americans are no longer enslaved, they are still in metaphorical "chains" and "manacles." Discrimination, racism, and segregation keep Black Americans bound in other ways. The beginning of his speech acknowledges his disappointment in how Black Americans have been and are still being treated, while reminding the Black listeners in his audience that their country made a promise to them—a promise that they must pressure the country to fulfill if they are ever going to enjoy the "joyous daybreak" of equality.

❝ When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir. […] Instead of honoring this sacred obligation, America has given the Negro people a bad check; a check which has come back marked "insufficient funds." 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.

**Related Characters:** Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 102

**Explanation and Analysis**

As King describes America's unmet promises, he uses an extended metaphor of America having written a bad check. Just as someone writing a bad check promises money that they don't have, King suggests that America promised freedom and opportunity in its founding documents but only provided them to white Americans. Here, King suggests that Black Americans are still entitled to cash their check for freedom and equality, and that the civil rights movement's goal is to make sure that America meets its obligations.

The language of checks, funds, vaults, and riches underscores just how prosperous America became in the century before the March on Washington. Though Black Americans had been free for a hundred years at the time of this speech, they hadn't seen much social progress—and they certainly hadn't equally benefited from the postwar economic prosperity that many white Americans enjoyed. America's foundational documents asserted that "every American"—regardless of race—was the rightful "heir" to American prosperity. But while the rest of America was able to cash in on the promises their country made to them, the checks that America wrote to Black Americans bounced. In other words, America has withheld the "funds" of prosperity, equality, and justice from them.

King came to the March on Washington to say that enough is enough—it was ridiculous to believe there were "insufficient funds" in America's "great vaults." By 1963, America was a bona fide superpower and one of the most prosperous countries in the world. There was more than enough wealth and opportunity to go around—but systemic racism barred Black Americans from benefiting. By demanding America cash the "check" it wrote to Black Americans one hundred years ago, King was demanding that America stop pretending that there was not enough to share. King was declaring that it was time for equal rights, no holds barred—it was time for Black Americans to enjoy the riches of freedom and justice.

❝ This sweltering summer of the Negro's legitimate discontent will not pass until there is an invigorating autumn of freedom and equality.

**Related Characters:** Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Related Symbols:**

**Page Number:** 103

**Explanation and Analysis**

In this passage, King is encouraging his listeners to understand the importance of demanding full civil rights immediately.

To bring his point home, King introduces language associated with heat to make his listeners feel the confining, scorching pressure of the moment. King describes the current moment for Black Americans as a "sweltering summer." They are exhausted and at their limits; their experience in America has wrung them out, worn them down, and nearly suffocated them. By underscoring how intolerable the heat of injustice has become, King is both acknowledging his Black listeners' "legitimate discontent" and letting his white listeners know that things have come to a boiling point.

What's perhaps most significant about this passage, though, is the fact that the structure of this sentence isn't King's own: he's alluding to the opening lines of William Shakespeare's history play *Richard III*, which read "Now is the winter of our discontent made glorious summer…" King uses the scaffolding of Shakespeare's words much in the same way he used Abraham Lincoln's words earlier in his speech—but he inverts the seasons, presumably because he gave the speech in August of 1963, so the audience would have been literally feeling the "sweltering summer," heightening the power of his metaphor.

It's also significant when analyzing the language in this passage to note that King doesn't want things to cool down slowly, simmering down from a boil to a placid stillness. He wants for there to be an "invigorating autumn"—a swift and total change. King and his fellow comrades in the civil rights movement don't have time for gradual change, nor do they want things to boil over and become blistering for everyone. Instead, they want a fast and revitalizing solution to their restlessness: the time for full freedom and equality is now.

> 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 degenerate into physical violence. Again and again we must rise to the majestic heights of meeting physical force with soul force.

**Related Characters:** Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 103

**Explanation and Analysis**

After using rousing, invigorating language to fire his listeners up about the urgency of the moment, King uses this passage to remind them to channel their rage not into violent action, but into nonviolent resistance.

Throughout this passage, King's abiding faith in nonviolent resistance is clear. While there is a lot to be angry about and it might feel satisfying to confront racism with hatred and violence, King insists the civil rights movement cannot succeed unless its followers commit to nonviolence. "Drinking from the cup of bitterness and hatred," he believed, would poison the movement by embodying the very traits that they fought against. But by remaining "on the high plane" and staying "discipline[d]," the movement could combat racism while also modeling a new way of relating to one another, one founded in love, respect, and the persistent faith that America can do better. Without modeling this kind of behavior, the movement would be less capable of creating the society they imagined.

King's faith in the uses of nonviolence is reflected in the language he uses in this passage. He describes the "high plane" of the fight for civil rights and the "majestic heights" of "soul force," for instance. All of King's language here is lofty and reverent. He believes that the movement for civil rights must reflect the pure, aspirational nature of the movement's central ethics. The fight for an end to segregation and equal rights for Black Americans is a righteous one—and King doesn't want the movement to descend or "degenerate." The use of physical force, to King, is debased and counterproductive. But "soul force" is generative and full of potential: by harnessing positive energy, those involved in the civil rights movement could use nonviolent protest to spread their ideals.

> 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.

**Related Characters:** Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 103

**Explanation and Analysis**

In this passage, King continues to urge his supporters to work together and trust in one another, regardless of race—even as he acknowledges the anger and distrust that exists between white and Black Americans.

Though King recognizes the painful divisions in America, he uses this passage to urge unity of purpose. King is speaking to both white and Black Americans here at alternating moments. When he acknowledges the "marvelous new militancy" in the Black community, he's speaking directly to the Black members of his audience. He's praising the ways in which Black Americans have come together, organized, and demanded their due from their country. But King doesn't want the "militancy" of the Black community to turn into violence, distrust, or animosity toward white Americans. Many factions of the movement scoffed at nonviolence and encouraged Black Americans, as Malcolm X (quoting Frantz Fanon) said, to pursue justice by "any means necessary." King wanted to acknowledge the righteousness of this fury while still encouraging them to envision "militancy" as unity of purpose rather than violence.

When King says that white people have realized that their own destinies are tied up with the destiny of Black Americans, he's speaking more directly to the white Americans in attendance at the march. By saying that many white Americans have already realized the importance of the civil rights movement, King is subtly pressuring those on the fence to join the growing tide of whites fighting for freedom. And by framing the civil rights movement as important not just to *Black* freedom, but to *white* freedom as well, he's making clear that white people have a personal stake—by fighting for civil rights, they're fighting to create a country that's not simply better for Black people, but for *all* people.

When King says that the destinies of white and Black Americans are "inextricably bound," he's speaking to both white and Black members of his audience, cautioning both races to recognize that no one can truly be free in America until everyone is. The fight for civil rights, King knew, couldn't be won by Black Americans alone, oppressed as they were in 1963—they needed white allies to put their bodies on the line for them and to use their social influence to help the movement thrive. Throughout this passage, King urges true unity and mutual trust—otherwise, he implicitly warns, the entwined destinies of all Americans will fail to meet America's promise.

> You have been the veterans of creative suffering. Continue to work with the faith that unearned suffering is redemptive.

**Related Characters:** Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 104

**Explanation and Analysis**

In this passage, King acknowledges the suffering and persecution that Black Americans have endured, particularly in the pursuit of civil rights. But rather than framing suffering as a wholly bad thing, he suggests that suffering can be "redemptive." King knows the weight of suffering, and he knows how exhausting and demoralizing racism is. But by reframing suffering as a productive and redemptive experience, King seeks to instill in his listeners a renewed sense of hope and endurance.

By calling suffering "redemptive," King—a Baptist preacher—is drawing clear parallels between the plight of Black Americans and the suffering of Jesus Christ. Christ's suffering was "unearned" (he was unjustly persecuted, just as Black Americans are)—but because he suffered on the cross, he was able to redeem mankind. In drawing a parallel between the Biblical suffering of Christ and the everyday suffering of Black Americans, King is seeking to remind his followers of the gravity of their purpose. By 1963, the civil rights movement had made some major strides, but there was still much work to do—and much violence and persecution left to face. King knew he had to inspire the movement to find the strength to carry on and "continue to work." Here, he suggests that by continuing to suffer, the movement will be able to redeem generations to come, sparing them the pain that King's generation faced.

Finally, when King uses the phrase "creative suffering," he's invoking a speech that he gave in 1960 celebrating the Black students who led sit-ins to protest segregated lunch counters. King referred to this action as "creative protest," since the students had invented a striking and nonviolent way to draw attention to the issue of segregation. He hoped that the movement would invent more "creative protests" to fight racism. The notion of "creative suffering" goes hand-in-hand with creative protest. Rather than simply enduring suffering for its own sake, the phrase "creative suffering" suggests that suffering can serve a purpose. "Creative suffering"—or suffering the repercussions of creative protest—can help create a new world.

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 the northern cities, knowing that somehow this situation can, and will be changed. Let us not wallow in the valley of despair.

**Related Characters:** Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 104

**Explanation and Analysis**

In this passage, King instructs those in attendance at the March on Washington to spread the messages they've heard at the March to places across the country in a show of radical faith in America's potential.

King is telling his audience that "this situation"—meaning racism and segregation—will come to an end. But he's also saying that for things to really change in America, there needs to be action, and that for action, there needs to be faith. He doesn't want his listeners to "despair" or to give up hope. Instead, they need to take their faith in the possibility of change and spread it to even the most neglected corners of America, including "slums and ghettos" and obscure pockets of the South, where anti-Black violence is most pernicious and pervasive. It is only through faith that dreams can become reality, because the actions people take in pursuit of their dreams is what creates change.

King's language in this passage is also significant. As he's trying to rouse faith in his audience, he's alluding to the thing that gives him his own faith: the Bible. King's line about "wallowing in the valley of despair" is a riff on a Bible verse from Psalms that speaks of "walk[ing] through the valley of the shadow of death." Here, King is equating despair with death, as he suggests that if his listeners were to despair, it would kill the movement for civil rights. King isn't specifically telling his followers to take their faith from the Bible, but he's telling them that they'll need faith to the do the work that must be done across the country.

So I say to you, my friends, that even though we must face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream that 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.

**Related Characters:** Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 104

**Explanation and Analysis**

In this passage, King introduces the most iconic part of his speech: the dream he has for America. King begins his explanation of his dream for America by stating that his personal vision is "deeply rooted" in America's own claims about itself. America's central "creed" has, since its inception, been the "self-evident" (or obvious, non-negotiable) truth that "all men are created equal." If America holds this truth about itself as a given, it should apply to *all* Americans—not just white Americans. So King's dream for America—a dream of true equality and brotherhood—shouldn't be so radical or unimaginable. After all, the country has laid out this dream for itself since its founding.

By rooting his dream in "the American dream," King is preparing the audience to accept that what he's about to tell him is not simply possible, but also the only way to make America the country it claims to be. His dream, then, is not a fanciful notion of giving Black people more rights—it's a patriotic impulse to help America live up to its promises for the sake of all Americans. It shouldn't be a "dream" to imagine that America will be accountable to its promises, and his audience is the group of people who will make those sacred promises a reality.

I have a dream 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!

**Related Characters:** Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 104

**Explanation and Analysis**

In this passage, King makes his dream for America personal. Throughout the speech, he has spoken somewhat abstractly about racism, freedom, equality, and justice, but here he speaks in personal terms about what this means for his own family. Racism means that his children are treated badly simply because of what they look like, without considering who they are as people. But with King's dream of justice and equality—which is also, he has demonstrated, America's

own dream for itself—his children will be treated as human beings.

King's "I Have a Dream" speech is structured like a sermon—and, like all good sermons, it's designed to rouse the audience's emotions as it progresses, with the goal of leaving them feeling inspired and invigorated. This passage does a lot to make listeners connect emotionally with the speech, first because it's so personal, but also because it's invoking the toll of racism on innocent children and then laying out a concrete vision of a better future. As King invokes the image of his "four little children," he also reveals his personal investment in what he's saying to his audience. King isn't just a preacher or an activist: he's a father, and he wants a better future for his sons and daughters.

By repeating the phrase "I have a dream" at the beginning and end of this short passage, King is underscoring, as he does in many places throughout his speech, the profound sadness of living in a country where simple equality and freedom are nothing but unrealized dreams.

> 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.

**Related Characters:** Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 105

**Explanation and Analysis**

In this passage, King reminds his audience that the hard work that must be done to secure equal rights for Black Americans can only be accomplished if they have faith in their mission.

The collective fight against racism won't be easy—King knows that, and he wants his listeners to keep that fact in mind, too. But alongside the hard work and "struggle[s]" ahead—struggles that include tirelessly protesting and repeatedly "go[ing] to jail"—there will be prayer, hope, and solidarity. King believes that there can be no meaningful action without deep faith in the possibility of change. Here, he's urging his listeners to accept that they have a hard road ahead—and to commit to undertaking the work that must be done anyway.

This passage is significant because it illustrates King's abiding faith in the power of nonviolent resistance. King doesn't want his listeners to descend into violence or cruelty—he wants them to know the suffering that's ahead of them so that they can better devote themselves to nonviolence even in the face of violent injustice. Nonviolent resistance can wear a person down—but with prayer, solidarity, and faith in the power of hard work, King believes that nonviolence can transform America. Turning the other cheek and accepting that police brutality and other violent threats will define much of the work ahead isn't an easy request to make of his followers and listeners. But King knows that if his listeners "stand up for freedom together" and endure the fight ahead with solid faith in each other, the movement for civil rights will triumph. His goal with this speech is to renew the faith of all who have gathered to listen to him.

> 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"—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 every hill and molehill of Mississippi, from every mountainside, let freedom ring.

**Related Characters:** Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Related Symbols:**

**Page Number:** 105

**Explanation and Analysis**

In this passage, King invokes the lyrics to the patriotic hymn "America (My Country, 'Tis of Thee)" in order to point out the gulf between America's promises and its reality. King, a Baptist preacher, believed that every living soul was a child of God. Just as all people were created equal in the eyes of the Lord, King suggested, all men were equal under America's constitution. But the odes to America's greatness that have emerged since its foundation—this patriotic hymn among them—overlook America's failures to live up to the promises the country has made to its citizens. King wants to be able to sing the words of this hymn with pride and conviction—but until the words of the song reflect the

reality of living in America, he cannot.

By invoking the lyrics of the hymn, King relays his yearning to believe that America truly is a "sweet land of liberty," a land where "freedom ring[s]" out from each mountainside. But in reality, America is a place where not everyone is free to enjoy the liberties laid out in the constitution. It is a place that covers up a shameful legacy of slavery and oppression and continues to oppress Black Americans. So King is calling for his listeners to gather together to fight for those words to "become true." In order for this to happen, America will need to right its wrongs—starting with guaranteeing the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness to Black Americans as well as white Americans. Only then will freedom ring out from the mountainsides of the nation.

When King mentions "every mountainside" in the context of the hymn, he's not just speaking metaphorically. As his speech progresses, he calls for freedom to ring out from every major mountain range in America—and even from the "hills and molehills" of the flattened South. King is literalizing the words of the hymn, suggesting that America's grand mythology about itself *can* be true, even though it isn't true right now. Throughout the speech, mountains and hills symbolically represent how the civil rights movement can overcome obstacles to become powerful, just as one endures the difficulty of climbing a mountain. So when King begins his rousing call for freedom to ring out across the mountains of the nation, he's suggesting that if the civil rights movements keeps climbing the mountain (or, metaphorically, fighting for freedom), they will reach the summit and create a world where freedom is the reality for all.

## SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

### I HAVE A DREAM

Martin Luther King Jr. announces how proud he is to be at the March on Washington—a rally that he believes will be remembered forever as "the greatest demonstration for freedom in the history of [the United States]."

*Martin Luther King is addressing an audience of 250,000 at the 1963 March on Washington. Though King had delivered versions of this speech to smaller gatherings over the last year or so, the March on Washington was unprecedented in scope. It turned out to be one of the largest and most iconic protests in American history, a show of strength in the fight against racism and an inspiration to many Americans to fight to live up to their country's potential.*

"Five score" (or one hundred) years ago, Abraham Lincoln—a great American whose "symbolic shadow" looms over the rally in the form of the Lincoln Memorial—signed the Emancipation Proclamation. This was a historic order that offered hope to millions of enslaved Black Americans. The Proclamation was seen as a "joyous daybreak" at the end of a "long night of [...] captivity."

*King delivered his address from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, which looks out on the National Mall and the Washington Monument. So not only were he and the protestors at the March on Washington standing literally in Lincoln's shadow—they were also standing metaphorically in the shadow of the actions he took to end slavery. King telegraphs this to his audience by essentially quoting the opening lines of Lincoln's famous Gettysburg Address, which began: "Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth, upon this continent, a new nation, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal." Looking at King's speech through the lens of sermon structure (he was a preacher, after all), Lincoln's words could be viewed as the sermon's epigraph (typically a Bible verse that the sermon goes on to analyze). Here, the epigraph is the words of Lincoln, who is renowned and praised for his role in ending slavery, although the speech will go on to examine all the work left to be done to create true equality.*

Though the Emancipation Proclamation ended the institution of slavery, Black Americans still aren't truly free. Over a century later, the "manacles of segregation" and the "chains of discrimination" still keep Black people in America yoked to the burdens of racism and injustice.

*Even though the Emancipation Proclamation legally abolished slavery, King asserts that Black Americans are still not free. The imagery of chains and manacles (which are associated with slavery) positions racist Jim Crow laws (which mandated segregation and discrimination) as just another form of enslavement. In other words, while slavery was officially over in 1963, King is suggesting that America has simply come up with new methods of oppressing Black Americans, finding unjust loopholes in the promises of the Emancipation Proclamation.*

Black Americans live on a "lonely island of poverty" in the middle of a vast ocean of prosperity. They are ostracized even in their own country.

*In King's metaphor, America has placed its Black population on an island of poverty and social degradation. This happened by confining Black Americans to ghettos and by instituting discriminatory policies that prevented social and economic mobility. Under Jim Crow laws, Black Americans weren't allowed in white spaces, exiling them from the rest of society. Even though Black Americans were surrounded on all sides by opportunities for prosperity and justice, American politics and social norms prevented them from even dipping a toe into the wealth and opportunity that white Americans enjoyed all around them.*

The attendees at the March on Washington have come to the capital "to cash a check." The Constitution and the Declaration of Independence were "promissory note[s]" to every American—Black and white—entitling them to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. But America has "defaulted" on this note and given Black Americans a bad check—a check that has come back marked "insufficient funds." King refuses to believe that, in the "great vaults" of American opportunity, there are not sufficient funds to bestow "the riches of freedom" unto all Americans.

*In this passage, King introduces an extended metaphor in which America's founding documents are compared to a bad check. Just as the writer of a bad check promises funds that aren't available, the founders promised a freedom that would not be a reality for centuries to come. While white Americans were able to immediately cash this check and enjoy their freedom, whenever Black Americans try to fight for freedom—or, metaphorically, to cash their checks—they're turned down. However, King doesn't believe that "insufficient funds" is a plausible excuse—unlike money, freedom is not a finite quantity. He believes that there is endless freedom and opportunity in America, and that Black Americans should not give up on cashing their checks, because freedom is something they are owed.*

King wants to remind the whole of America of the "urgency" of the moment. There is no time left for taking things slowly; the promises of American democracy—including justice—must be a reality "for all God's children" right away.

*At the time of this speech, Black Americans had been exiled socially and politically for almost two centuries while white Americans enjoyed ever-increasing prosperity and opportunity. After 200 years, expecting things to gradually get better just wasn't good enough for King. To underscore his demand for urgency, King uses the rhetorical device of* pathos *to appeal to his listeners' emotions. By invoking the idea that white and Black Americans are all children of God, King—a Baptist preacher—takes his speech into the realm of a sermon, helping his audience to feel justified in their demands not just on an intellectual level, but also on a spiritual one.*


The "**sweltering** summer of the Negro's legitimate discontent" must come to an end, ushering in an "invigorating autumn" of justice and equity. Until Black Americans receive equal rights, there will be no peace in America. It is time for a revolt to "shake the foundation" of the country.

*In this passage, King's language mirrors the opening lines of William Shakespeare's play Richard III: "Now is the winter of our discontent made glorious summer…" But King reverses the seasons, suggesting that the period of discontentment in America isn't a chilly winter but an unbearably scorching summer. (The speech was delivered in August, so this rhetorical rearrangement makes sense.) When King suggests that there won't be peace in America until there is sweeping change, it could be viewed as a threat (perhaps a threat that Black activists won't rest until they get justice), but it can also be seen as a call to action. If the audience wants there to be peace and calm, then they have to fight for the change that will allow peace to reign—ceasing to fight would only surrender to the miserable "sweltering summer."*

But to everyone fighting for justice, King warns, there can be no violence or hatred in the civil rights movement—dignity and discipline must prevail in "creative protests," and demonstrations must never descend into physical violence. King urges his listeners to meet "physical force with soul force" and remain in the "majestic heights" of righteous nonviolent resistance no matter the provocation.

*King knows that by invoking the language of scorching heat and urging a foundation-shifting revolution, he's firing people up. But he doesn't want that fiery energy to translate into violence or chaos. Instead, King wants his listeners to feel validated in their belief that the time for radical change is now, and he wants them to channel that belief into "creative protest." In a 1960 speech, King dubbed the tactic of staging sit-ins at segregated lunch counters "creative protest." He was impressed that the young people leading the sit-ins came up with a protest idea that was peaceful, symbolically powerful, and clear in its message: that Black Americans would not tolerate segregation. By subtly invoking that speech with the term "creative protest," King reinforces a throughline of his thought: that the movement will succeed only as long as activists meet violence with creativity and love. Rather than giving into bitterness and violence, King suggests that his listeners transform their rage into nonviolent action.*

King applauds "the marvelous new militancy" among Black Americans—but at the same time, he urges his audience not to begin harboring a distrust of all white people. Many white Americans have realized that their fates are tied to the fates of Black Americans—the freedoms of both groups are "inextricably bound," and neither race can "walk alone."

*When King uses the word "militancy" in this passage, he's not talking about violence or force: he's talking about organization and solidarity. He is moved by how Black Americans have united in their refusal to tolerate injustice any longer—and he wants white Americans to join them, especially since many whites are also ready for an end to racial injustice, having realized that no one can truly be free until everyone is. For this reason, King wants Black Americans to reject violence and use rhetoric and protest tactics that bring others into the movement, rather than scaring them off. Though King's views would change later in life, at this moment, he was committed entirely to an interracial, nonviolent movement for civil rights.*

As these groups walk together, they must vow to march ahead and never look back. There can be no satisfaction in any part of America until Black Americans are no longer victimized by police, until they are allowed to enjoy the same accommodations as white Americans, and until they have full social mobility. Until "justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream," the movement for equality must not stop.

*In the previous passage, King was speaking to his Black listeners as he urged them to accept the help of white allies in the struggle for civil rights. In this passage, however, he implicitly addresses his white listeners and urges them to remain committed to the fight for equal rights. He believes that without the help of white allies, whose social position protects them from police brutality, the civil rights movement cannot succeed. He therefore asks white Americans to put their bodies on the line for their Black brethren and to stay in the fight until the cooling waters of justice have washed away the intolerable heat of injustice.*

King says that he knows how much attendees at the march have suffered—many have been incarcerated, persecuted, and victimized by police brutality. But King urges these individuals to keep their heads held high. "Unearned suffering," King says, "is redemptive."

*In this passage, King acknowledges the despair his listeners are facing, but he uses this moment to reframe the "unearned suffering" Black Americans have endured for centuries. By saying that this sort of suffering is "redemptive," King implicitly invokes the suffering that Jesus endured on the cross, which resulted in the redemption of mankind. In a 1960 essay on suffering, King suggested that while suffering can lead to bitterness, a person can also use the experience of suffering to transform themselves into a more dedicated crusader for justice and a more loving and empathetic person. To endure suffering for the cause of civil rights is Christlike, in that those who embrace suffering to fight for change will spare future generations the same suffering.*

King urges his listeners to return to their home states across the nation, from Alabama to the "ghettos of the northern cities," knowing that America can and will be changed. There is no time to despair—it is time to face the challenges of the moment head on.

*King suggests that there's no room for hopelessness in the movement for civil rights. Even though things seem bleak, he has faith in what he and his comrades are doing, and he hopes that this speech—given to hundreds of thousands of listeners from all over the country—can bring hope to all the different places that need it. It's up to the audience to spread the faith that King is trying to inspire across the nation. He can't make change alone—no individual can. But with collective faith (and the action that faith inspires), America can transform.*

Even though the fight will be hard, King has a dream: a dream rooted in the American dream. He dreams that one day, America will "live out the true meaning of its creed"—it will at last embody the foundational truth of its creation, the idea that all men are created equal.

*In this passage, King begins laying out the dream that gives this speech its name. He starts modestly, stating that the foundation of his dream for America is actually based on America's own founding dream for itself: to become a place where all people are treated equally. Implicitly, this calls attention to the fact that, nearly two centuries after the country's inception, this ideal is still nothing but a "dream." Something written into the country's constitution shouldn't be a fanciful wish—it should be a concrete fact of daily life for every American citizen.*

King dreams that some day, the sons of former slaves and former slave-owners will be able to join together as brothers. He dreams that places like Mississippi, though currently "**sweltering** with the heat of injustice," will soon become cool oases of freedom.

*In this passage, King expands the bounds of his dream for America. Now, his dream isn't just rooted in the promises America has already laid out itself: it's rooted in all Americans coming together in brotherhood and freedom. In other words, he doesn't stop at a baseline of begrudging equality—he wants people to genuinely love and respect one another and overcome their differences. When King uses emotional language in this passage, he's leaning on the rhetorical device of* pathos*—an appeal to the audience's feelings. He's trying to inspire the audience to dream along with him by arousing sentimental images of brotherhood and forgiveness. When he pivots back to the contrasting language of sweltering heat and redemptive coolness at the end of this passage, he's engaging the audience's senses as well as their feelings. King's speech, especially in passages like this one, strikes a careful balance between a rousing call to action and an intimate portrait of what America can look like if people all across the country commit themselves to justice.*

King also dreams that, one day, his four children will live in a nation that does not judge them by the color of their skin, but "by the content of the character."

*In what is perhaps the most famous passage of this speech, King makes his dream more personal, moving from general brotherhood to the specific reality that he wants for his children. By bringing up his dreams for his own children, King is reminding the audience that he's not just a figurehead for the movement: he's one of them, and like them, he's fighting for goals that mean something to him personally. His dream isn't lofty or figurative: it involves his own family. King is also appealing to the audience's emotions by invoking the effects of racism on innocent children.*

King dreams that in his home state of Alabama, where he lives with his family, the "vicious racists" there will lose political and social power. He dreams that one day, even in a place as racist as Alabama, "little black boys and little black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers."

*As King continues to expand his dream both inward (toward the personal) and outward (toward the political), his language remains calculated to appeal to the audience's emotions. In urging his listeners to visualize the goals of the civil rights movement, King is suggesting that the personal* is *political. The dream of harmony King envisions here when he talks about white and Black children holding hands in sisterhood and brotherhood is a personal one—but it isn't possible if a dream of a more inclusive American society isn't realized first. The vicious racists who hold political power stand in the way of the idyllic future King is urging his listeners to imagine. He wants them to see this clearly, and to dedicate themselves to eradicating racism.*

King dreams that valleys will be "exalted" and mountains brought low, that what's rough will be smoothed and what's crooked will be made straight. He dreams that all of humanity will see the "glory of the Lord."

*In this passage, King's speech becomes much more explicitly religious. While the entire speech has had a sermon-like quality and has subtly invoked religion throughout, it has mostly focused on social and political issues. But this passage makes clear the religious ideas that underlie all of King's dreaming: his dream is that God's love will redeem humankind. When he talks about valleys being "exalted" (made higher) and mountains lowered, he's using Biblical language to convey a vision of equality—terrain that was once uneven will all be brought to the same level. This imagery of equality is also apparent in King's invocation of smoothing rough places or making crookedness straight. This brings his specific dream of equality (racial equality) into a more universal realm, one grounded in Christian theology.*

King's dream gives him the faith to return to the South and continue fighting to craft "a stone of hope" out of a **mountain** of despair. It is his faith in a dream of a better America that he hopes will inspire everyone in attendance to work together and fight together until all of them are free.

*King now shifts his audience's focus from dreaming to action. Here, he asks his listeners to imagine whatever it is that they have faith in and to use that faith to do the hard work of fighting for freedom. In a striking image, he asks the audience to use faith to help make something useful out of their despair—if their despair is a mountain (enormous and unwieldy), they can craft a "stone of hope" from it, a stone of hope being a smaller, more manageable, and actively inspiring thing. In this way, he shows how faith can help people manage overwhelming despair and channel their emotions into making change.*

King hopes that soon, "all of God's children" will be able to sing Samuel Francis Smith's patriotic hymn "America (My Country, 'Tis of Thee)" with new meaning. America cannot truly be "great" until every American can wholeheartedly sing the most iconic words of that song: "let freedom ring."

*By invoking the patriotic hymn "America (My Country, 'Tis of Thee)," King is again showing how America has never lived up to its founding principles, especially freedom and justice. While Americans have sung this song for generations, King suggests that, on some level, Americans who sing it are either ignorant or disingenuous—they can't truly proclaim that freedom is ringing throughout the country while Black people remain oppressed. But here, King isn't criticizing the song—he's exalting it. He loves the promise of the song and instead of discarding it because its words aren't true, he wants to encourage all Americans to take its words seriously and fight to make them true so that everyone can earnestly sing this patriotic song together.*

King calls out for America to "let freedom ring" all across the nation—from the hilltops and "mighty **mountains**" of the Northeast, to the snowy, curvaceous slopes of the West. He also calls for freedom to ring out from "every hill and molehill" of the South.

*Here, King invokes the imagery of terrain once again. This imagery—like the Biblical imagery he used before—is using contrasting landscapes to communicate a vision of equality. King wants* all *landscapes in America to hear the ringing of freedom (and, by extension, he wants all the people inhabiting those landscapes to be free). Just as before he invoked the exalting of valleys and lowering of mountains, here he specifies that both mountains (high places) and molehills (low places) will hear the ringing of freedom, showing that freedom and equality will benefit* all *Americans, no matter where they are.*

Once these calls for freedom ring out across the nation, the country will be one step closer to the day when "all of God's children," regardless of their race or religion, will be able to join hands and sing the words of an "old Negro spiritual": "Free at last, free at last; thank God Almighty, we are free at last."

*A few moments before this, King expressed his hope that all Americans could come together to sing "My Country 'Tis of Thee"—a song written by a white person to celebrate the freedom that mostly white people experienced in America. Here, King expresses another hope: that all Americans will also join hands to sing a spiritual, a song likely written by an enslaved or recently freed Black American, celebrating the feeling of having freedom after a long period of bondage. This demonstrates an important part of King's vision. It's not just that, once racism is defeated, Black people will be able to sing patriotic songs that white people wrote about freedom—but also that white people will be able to sing songs written by Black people about finally becoming free. This shows, implicitly, that the project of defeating racism belongs to all races, and that once Black people are truly free, white people will be, too.*

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