

# Excerpts from MLK Jr.'s Final Public Address: "I've Been to the Mountaintop"

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## **Scripture:**

Deuteronomy 34

Then Moses went up from the plains of Moab to Mount Nebo, to the top of Pisgah, which is opposite Jericho, and the Lord showed him the whole land... The Lord said to him, "This is the land of which I swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, saying, 'I will give it to your descendants'; I have let you see it with your eyes, but you shall not cross over there." Then Moses, the servant of the Lord, died there in the land of Moab, at the Lord's command. He was buried in a valley in the land of Moab... but no one knows his burial place to this day. Moses was one hundred twenty years old when he died; his sight was unimpaired and his vigor had not abated. The Israelites wept for Moses in the plains of Moab thirty days... Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face. He was unequalled for all the signs and wonders that the Lord sent him to perform in the land of Egypt... and for all the mighty deeds and all the terrifying displays of power that Moses performed in the sight of all Israel.

Amos 5 I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

## **Sermon:**

These are excerpts from Martin Luther King, Jr.'s final public address which was given in Memphis TN on April 3, 1968. He was murdered the following day. This is, in my estimation, his best speech given to encourage striking garbage workers to keep marching.

## **The full text can be found at:**

[http://kingencyclopedia.stanford.edu/kingweb/publications/speeches/I%27ve\\_been\\_to\\_the\\_mountaintop.pdf](http://kingencyclopedia.stanford.edu/kingweb/publications/speeches/I%27ve_been_to_the_mountaintop.pdf)

Thank you very kindly, my friends. As I listened to Ralph Abernathy and his eloquent and generous introduction and then thought about myself, I wondered who he was talking about. [Laughter]

I'm delighted to see each of you here tonight in spite of a storm warning. You reveal that you are determined (Right) to go on anyhow. (Yeah, All right) Something is happening in Memphis, something is happening in our world. And you know, if I were standing at the beginning of time with the possibility of taking a kind of general and panoramic view of the whole of human history up to now, and the Almighty said to me, "Martin Luther King, which age would you like to live in?" I would take my mental flight by Egypt (Yeah), and I would watch God's children in their magnificent trek from the dark dungeons of Egypt through, or rather, across the Red Sea, through the wilderness, on toward the Promised Land. And in spite of its magnificence, I wouldn't stop there.

I would move on by Greece, and take my mind to Mount Olympus. And I would see Plato, Aristotle, Socrates, Euripides, and Aristophanes assembled around the Parthenon... as they discussed the great and eternal issues of reality. But I wouldn't stop there.

I would go on even to the great heyday of the Roman Empire, and I would see developments around there, through various emperors and leaders. But I wouldn't stop there.

I would even come up to the day of the Renaissance and get a quick picture of all that the Renaissance did for the cultural and aesthetic life of man. But I wouldn't stop there...

I would come on up even to 1863 and watch a vacillating president by the name of Abraham Lincoln finally come to the conclusion that he had to sign the Emancipation Proclamation. But I wouldn't stop there.

Strangely enough, I would turn to the Almighty and say, "If you allow me to live just a few years in the second half of the twentieth century, I will be happy." [Applause]

Now that's a strange statement to make because the world is all messed up. The nation is sick, trouble is in the land, confusion all around... But I know, somehow, that only when it is dark enough can you see the stars. (All right, Yes) And I see God working in this period of the twentieth century in a way that men in some strange way are responding. Something is happening in our world. (Yeah) The masses of people are rising up. And wherever they are assembled today... the cry is always the same: "We want to be free." [Applause]...

And also, in the human rights revolution, if something isn't done and done in a hurry to bring the colored peoples of the world out of their long years of poverty; their long years of hurt and neglect, the whole world is doomed. (All right) [Applause] Now I'm just happy that God has allowed me to live in this period, to see what is unfolding. And I'm happy that he's allowed me to be in Memphis. (Oh yeah)

I can remember [Applause], I can remember when Negroes were just going around, as Ralph has said so often, scratching where they didn't itch and laughing when they were not tickled. [Laughter, applause] But that day is all over. (Yeah) [Applause] We mean business now and we are determined to gain our rightful place in God's world. (Yeah) [Applause]

And that's all this whole thing is about... We are saying that we are determined to be men. We are determined to be people. (Yeah) We are saying [Applause], we are saying that we are God's children. (Yeah) [Applause] And if we are God's children, we don't have to live like we are forced to live.

Now what does all this mean in this great period of history? It means that we've got to stay together. (Yeah) We've got to stay together and maintain unity. You know, whenever Pharaoh wanted to prolong the period of slavery in Egypt, he had a favorite formula of doing it. What was that? He kept the slaves fighting among themselves. [Applause]

But whenever the slaves get together, something happens in Pharaoh's court, and he cannot hold the slaves in slavery. When the slaves get together, that's the beginning of getting out of slavery. [Applause] Now let us maintain unity.

Secondly, let us keep the issues where they are. (Right) The issue is injustice. The issue is the refusal of Memphis to be fair and honest in its dealings with its public servants, who happen to be sanitation workers. [Applause] Now we've got to keep attention on that. (That's right) Now we're going to march again, and we've got to march again (Yeah), in order to put the issue where it is supposed to be (Yeah)...

We aren't going to let any mace stop us. We are masters in our nonviolent movement in disarming police forces. They don't know what to do. I've seen them so often. I remember in Birmingham, Alabama, when we were in that majestic struggle there...

By the hundreds we would move out, and Bull Connor would tell them to send the dogs forth, and they did come. But we just went before the dogs singing, "Ain't gonna let nobody turn me around." [Applause]

Bull Connor next would say, "Turn the fire hoses on." (Yeah)... And we went before the fire hoses. (Yeah) We had known water. (All right)... we were Baptist... we had been immersed. If we were Methodist... we had been sprinkled... we knew water. That couldn't stop us.

...And we'd just go on singing, "Over my head, I see freedom in the air." (Yeah) [Applause] And then we would be thrown into paddy wagons... and we would just go on in the paddy wagon singing, "We Shall Overcome." (Yeah) And every now and then we'd get in jail, and we'd see the jailers looking through the windows being moved by our prayers (Yes) and being moved by our words and our songs...

Now we've got to go on in Memphis just like that... And so just as I say we aren't going to let any dogs or water hoses turn us around, we aren't going to let any injunction turn us around. [Applause] We are going on...

...And I'm always happy to see a relevant ministry. It's all right to talk about long white robes over yonder, in all of its symbolism, but ultimately people want some suits and dresses and shoes to wear down here. [Applause] It's all right to talk about streets flowing with milk and honey, but God has commanded us to be concerned about the slums down here and His children who can't eat three square meals a day...

Now the other thing we'll have to do is this: always anchor our external direct action with the power of economic withdrawal...

We don't have to argue with anybody. We don't have to curse and go around acting bad with our words... We just need to go around to these stores (Yes sir), and to these massive industries in our country (Amen), and say, "God sent us by here (All right) to say to you that you're not treating His children right. (That's right) And we've come by here to ask you to make the first item on your agenda fair treatment where God's children are concerned. Now if you are not prepared to do that, we do have an agenda that we must follow. And our agenda calls for withdrawing economic support from you." [Applause]

And so, as a result of this, we are asking you tonight (Amen) to go out and tell your neighbors not to buy Coca-Cola in Memphis. [Applause] Go by and tell them not to buy Sealtest milk. (Yeah)[Applause] Tell them not to buy... Wonder Bread... Tell them not to buy Hart's bread... up to now only the garbage men have been feeling pain. Now we must kind of redistribute that pain. [Applause] We are choosing these companies because they haven't been fair in their hiring policies, and we are choosing them because they can begin the process of saying they are going to support the needs and the rights of these men who are on strike. And then they can move on downtown and tell Mayor Loeb to do what is right...

Now let me say as I move to my conclusion that we've got to give ourselves to this struggle until the end. (Amen) Nothing would be more tragic than to stop at this point in Memphis. We've got to see it through. [Applause]

And when we have our march, you need to be there... Be concerned about your brother. You may not be on strike (Yeah), but either we go up together or we go down together. [Applause] Let us develop a kind of dangerous unselfishness...

Let us rise up tonight with a greater readiness. Let us stand with a greater determination. And let us move on in these powerful days, these days of challenge, to make America what it ought to be. We have an opportunity to make America a better nation. (Amen)

And I want to thank God, once more, for allowing me to be here with you. (Yes sir) You know, several years ago I was in New York City autographing the first book that I had written. And

while sitting there autographing books, a demented black woman came up. The only question I heard from her was, "Are you Martin Luther King?" And I was looking down writing and I said, "Yes."

The next minute I felt something beating on my chest. Before I knew it I had been stabbed by this demented woman... And that blade had gone through, and the X rays revealed that the tip of the blade was on the edge of my aorta, the main artery. And once that's punctured you're drowned in your own blood, that's the end of you. (Yes sir) It came out in the New York Times the next morning that if I had merely sneezed, I would have died.

Well, about four days later, they allowed me... to move around in the wheelchair of the hospital. They allowed me to read some of the mail that came in, and from all over the states and the world kind letters came in. I read a few, but one of them I will never forget... that came from a little girl, a young girl... It said simply, "Dear Dr. King: I am a ninth-grade student at the White Plains High School." She said, "While it should not matter, I would like to mention that I'm a white girl. I read in the paper of your misfortune and of your suffering. And I read that if you had sneezed, you would have died. And I'm simply writing you to say that I'm so happy that you didn't sneeze." (Yes) [Applause]

And I want to say tonight [Applause], I want to say tonight that I, too, am happy that I didn't sneeze. Because if I had sneezed (All right), I wouldn't have been around here in 1960 (Well), when students all over the South started sitting-in at lunch counters. And I knew that as they were sitting in, they were really standing up (Yes sir) for the best in the American dream and taking the whole nation back to those great wells of democracy...

If I had sneezed (Yes), I wouldn't have been around here in 1962, when Negroes in Albany, Georgia, decided to straighten their backs up. And whenever men and women straighten their backs up, they are going somewhere, because a man can't ride your back unless it is bent. If I had sneezed [Applause], if I had sneezed, I wouldn't have been here in 1963 (All right), when the black people of Birmingham, Alabama, aroused the conscience of this nation and brought into being the Civil Rights Bill.

If I had sneezed [Applause], I wouldn't have been down in Selma, Alabama, to see the great movement there.

If I had sneezed, I wouldn't have been in Memphis to see a community rally around those brothers and sisters who are suffering. (Yes) I'm so happy that I didn't sneeze...

And then I got into Memphis. And some began to say the threats, or talk about the threats that were out (Yeah), or what would happen to me from some of our sick white brothers.

Well, I don't know what will happen now; we've got some difficult days ahead. (Amen) But it really doesn't matter to with me now, because I've been to the mountaintop. (Yeah) [Applause]

And I don't mind. [Applause continues] Like anybody, I would like to live a long life—longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. (Yeah)

And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. (Go ahead) And I've looked over (Yes sir), and I've seen the Promised Land. (Go ahead) I may not get there with you. (Go ahead) But I want you to know tonight (Yes), that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land. [Applause] (Go ahead, Go ahead)

And so I'm happy tonight; I'm not worried about anything; I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord. [Applause]

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