



# THE RADICAL KING

Edited and introduced by **CORNEL WEST**  
**MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.**

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“As I have moved to break the betrayal of my own silences and to speak from the burnings of my own heart . . . many persons have questioned me about the wisdom of my path. At the heart of their concerns this query has often loomed large and loud: Why are *you* speaking about the war, Dr. King? Why are *you* joining the voices of dissent? Peace and civil rights don’t mix, they say. Aren’t you hurting the cause of your people, they ask? And when I hear them, though I often understand the sources of their concern, I am nevertheless greatly saddened, for such questions mean that the inquirers have not really known me, my commitment or my calling.”

— Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., remarks delivered at  
Riverside Church, New York, April 4, 1967

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# THE RADICAL KING WE DON'T KNOW

The FBI transcript of a June 27, 1964, phone conversation reveals Malcolm X receiving a message from Martin Luther King, Jr. This message supported the idea of getting the human rights declaration of the United Nations to expose the unfair, vicious treatment of black people in America. Malcolm X replied that he was eager to meet Martin Luther King, Jr.—as soon as the next afternoon. If they had met that day and worked together, the radical King would be well known.

In a speech to staff in 1966, King explained: “There must be a better distribution of wealth and maybe America must move toward a democratic socialism.”<sup>1</sup> If he had lived and pursued this project, the radical King would be well known.

On April 4, 1968, in Memphis—the last day of his life—Martin Luther King, Jr., phoned Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta with the title of his Sunday sermon: “Why America May Go to Hell.” If he had preached this sermon, the radical King would be well known.

Yet in Dr. King’s own time, he would say repeatedly, “I am nevertheless greatly saddened . . . that the inquirers have not really known me, my commitment, or my calling.”<sup>2</sup> It is no accident that just prior to King’s death, 72 percent of whites and 55 percent of blacks disapproved of his opposition to the Vietnam War and his efforts to eradicate poverty in America.<sup>3</sup> When much of the black leadership attacked or shunned him, King replied, “What you’re saying may get you a foundation grant but it won’t get you into the kingdom of truth.”<sup>4</sup>

In short, Martin Luther King, Jr., refused to sell his soul for a mess of pottage. He refused to silence his voice in his quest for unarmed truth and unconditional love. For King, the condition for truth was to allow suffering to speak; for him, justice was what love looks like in public. In King’s eyes, too many black leaders sacrificed the truth for access to power or reduced sacrificial love to service to selfish expediency and personal gain. This spiritual blackout among black leaders resulted in their use and abuse by the white political and economic establishment that constituted a kind of “conspiracy against the poor.” This spiritual blackout—this lack of integrity and courage—primarily revealed a deep fear, failure of nerve, and spinelessness on behalf of black leaders. They too often were sycophants, cheerleaders, or bootlickers for big monied interests, even as the boots were crushing poor and working people. In stark contrast to this cowardice, King stated to his staff, “I’d rather be dead than afraid.”<sup>5</sup>

Although much of America did not know the radical King—and too few know today—the FBI and the US government did. They called him “the most dangerous man in America.” They knew Reverend King was a revolutionary Christian, sincere in his commitment and serious in his calling. They knew he was a product of a black prophetic tradition, full of fire in his bones, love in his heart, light in his mind, and courage in his soul. Martin Luther King, Jr., was the major threat to the US government and the American establishment because he dared to organize and mobilize black rage over past and present crimes against humanity targeting black folk and other oppressed people.

Any such black awakening can either yield hatred and revenge or love and justice. This is why the prophetic words of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel still haunt us: “The whole future of America will



depend upon the impact and influence of Dr. King.”<sup>6</sup> The fundamental question is: Does America have the capacity to hear and heed the radical King or must America sanitize King in order to evade and avoid his challenge?

King indeed had a dream. But it was not the American dream. King’s dream was rooted in the American Dream—it was what the quest for life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness looked like for people enslaved and Jim Crowed, terrorized, traumatized, and stigmatized by American laws and American citizens. The litmus test for realizing King’s dream was neither a black face in the White House nor a black presence on Wall Street. Rather, the fulfillment of his dream was for all poor and working people to live lives of decency and dignity.

King’s dream of a more free and democratic America and world had morphed into, in his words, “a nightmare,” owing to the persistence of “racism, poverty, militarism, and materialism.” He called America a “sick society.” At one point, King cried out in despair, “I have found out that all that I have been doing in trying to correct this system in America has been in vain. I am trying to get at the root of it to see just what ought to be done. The whole thing will have to be done away with.”<sup>7</sup> He said to his dear brother Harry Belafonte days before his, King’s, death, “Are we integrating into a burning house?”<sup>8</sup> He was weary of pervasive economic injustice, cultural decay, and political paralysis. He was not an American Gibbon chronicling the decline and fall of the American empire but a courageous and visionary Christian blues man, fighting with style and love in the face of the four catastrophes he identified, which are still with us today.

Militarism is an imperial catastrophe that has produced a military-industrial complex and national security state and warped the country’s priorities and stature (as with the immoral drones dropping bombs on innocent civilians). Materialism is a spiritual catastrophe, promoted by a corporate-media multiplex and a culture industry that has hardened the hearts of hard-core consumers and coarsened the consciences of would-be citizens. Clever gimmicks of mass distraction yield a cheap soulcraft addicted and self-medicated narcissists.

Racism is a moral catastrophe, most graphically seen in the prison-industrial complex and targeted police surveillance in black and brown ghettos rendered invisible in public discourse. Arbitrary use of the law in the name of the “war” on drugs have produced, in legal scholar Michelle Alexander’s well-known phrase, a new Jim Crow of mass incarceration. And poverty is an economic catastrophe inseparable from the power of greedy oligarchs and avaricious plutocrats indifferent to the misery of poor children, elderly and disabled citizens, and working people.

The radical King was a warrior for peace on the domestic and global battlefields. He was a staunch anti-colonial and anti-imperial thinker and fighter. His revolutionary commitment to nonviolent resistance in America and abroad tried to put a brake on the escalating militarism running amok across the globe. As a decade-long victim of the vicious and vindictive FBI, King was a radical libertarian as well as having closeted democratic socialist leanings. His commitment to the precious rights and liberties for all was profound.

For King, dissent did not mean disloyalty—in fact, dissent was a high form of patriotism. When he said that the US government was “the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today,”<sup>9</sup> he was not trashing America. He was telling the painful truth about a country he loved. King was never anti-American; he was always anti-injustice in America and anywhere else. Love of truth and love of country could go hand-in-hand. Needless to say, under the policies of the National Security Agency and Obama administration, King could have been subject to detention without trial and assassination by executive decree (owing to his links to “terrorists” of his day, such as Nelson Mandela).

The radical King was a spiritual giant who tried to shatter the callousness and indifference of his fellow citizens. Following his dear friend and comrade Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, King believed that indifference to evil is more evil than evil itself. And materialism, with its attendants hedonism and egotism, produces sleepwalkers bereft of compassion and zombies deficient in love. This spiritual crisis is not reducible to politics or economics. It is rooted in the relative decline of integrity, honesty, decency, and virtue, due in large part to the role of big money in American life. This coldhearted obsession with manipulation and domination drives our ecological catastrophe-in-the-making and our possible military Armageddon.

The radical King was a moral titan with profound allegiance to his roots—the black prophetic tradition and black freedom struggle. His genuine commitment to the dignity of whites, as well as peoples of all hues, never overshadowed or downplayed his deep commitment to black people. For King, the struggle against the legacy of white supremacy was never a strategic move or tactical afterthought; rather, it was a profound existential and moral matter of great urgency. King knew that white supremacy, in various forms, was a global phenomenon. It remains shot through our hearts and minds, institutions and structures, smart phones and unwise politicians. The modes of racial domination—from barbaric slavery to bestial Jim Crow, Sr., to cruel Jim Crow, Jr.—are never reducible to individual prejudice or personal bias. Empire, white supremacy, capitalism, patriarchy, and homophobia are linked in complex ways, and our struggles against them require more consistency and systemic analyses.

The radical King was a democratic socialist who sided with poor and working people in the class struggle taking place in capitalist societies. This class struggle may be visible or invisible, manifest or latent. But it rages on in a fight over resources, power, and space. In the past thirty years we have witnessed a top-down, one-sided class war against poor and working people in the name of a morally bankrupt policy of deregulating markets, lowering taxes, and cutting spending for those who are already socially neglected and economically abandoned. America's two main political parties, each beholden to big money, offer merely alternative versions of oligarchic rule. The radical King was neither Marxist nor communist, but he did understand the role of class analysis in his focus on poor and working people. He always had a healthy suspicion of all politicians—of any color—owing to his critique of legalized bribery and normalized corruption in money-saturated American politics. He noted, “I have come to think of my role as one which operates outside the realm of partisan politics. . . I feel I should serve as a conscience of all the parties and all of the people.”<sup>10</sup> This critical attitude toward politicians was deepened when he worked to register thousands of people to elect the first black mayor in modern times, Carl Stokes, in Cleveland in 1967, yet was uninvited to join the staff for the victory celebration.

Needless to say, the rich legacy of the radical King in the age of Obama celebrates the symbolic breakthrough of a black president and keeps track of the right-wing backlash against him. Yet the bailout for banks, record profits for Wall Street, and giant budget cuts on the backs of the vulnerable—rather than mortgage relief for homeowners, jobs with a living wage, and investment in education, infrastructure, and housing reveal the plutocratic domination of the Obama administration. The dream of the radical King for the first black president surely was not a Wall Street presidency, drone presidency, and surveillance presidency with a vanishing black middle class, devastated black working class, and desperate black poor people clinging to fleeting symbols and empty rhetoric.

I shall never forget the first question I asked Barack Obama when he called to solicit my support: “What is the relation of your presidential policies to the legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr.?” He replied—in hours of dialogue—that the relation was strong. And I agreed to lend critical support.



After sixty-five events, from Iowa to Ohio, in 2008, I knew that most of his advisers were not part of the King legacy. And Obama's betrayal of what the radical King stands for became undeniable.

Sadly, the damage done by Obama apologists—often for money, access, and status—is immeasurable and nearly unforgivable. For the first time in American history, black citizens are the most prowar in American society. Black churches are among the weakest in prison ministry—even given the disproportionately high percentage of black prisoners. Black schools are under attack from profiteering enterprises. Forty percent of black children live in poverty.<sup>11</sup> Aside from a few exceptions, black musicians are more and more marginal in popular culture. Black deaths, especially among young people, are out of control. In other words, the Obama apologists who hide and conceal Wall Street crimes, imperial crimes, new Jim Crow crimes, and surveillance lies in order to protect the first black president have much to account for. And a health-care bill—a bonanza for big insurance and drug companies alongside access to new consumers—falls far short of the mark.

The response of the radical King to our catastrophic moment can be put in one word: revolution—a revolution in our priorities, a re-evaluation of our values, a reinvigoration of our public life, and a fundamental transformation of our way of thinking and living that promotes a transfer of power from oligarchs and plutocrats to everyday people and ordinary citizens.

The radical King was first and foremost a revolutionary Christian—a black Baptist minister and pastor whose intellectual genius and rhetorical power was deployed in the name of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. King understood this good news to be primarily radical love in freedom and radical freedom in love, a fallible enactment of the Beloved Community or finite embodiment of the Kingdom of God.

King's radical love can be heard in John Coltrane's "A Love Supreme" or the Isley Brothers' "Caravan of Love." This radical love of an intensely hated people is both liberating and contagious, just as this radical freedom of a thoroughly unfree people is both emancipating and infectious.

The radical King was the most significant and effective organic intellectual in the latter half of the twentieth century whose fundamental motif was radical love. King's radical love was Christocentric in content and black in character. Like the Christocentric language of the Black Church that produced the radical King—Jesus as the Bright and Morning Star against the backdrop of the pitch darkness of the night, as water in dry places, a companion in loneliness, a doctor to the sick, a rock in a wearied land—his Christocentrism exemplifies the intimate and dependent relationship between God and person and between God and a world-forsaken people. The black character of King's radical love was its root in the indescribable terror and inimitable trauma of being black in white supremacist America, during slavery, Jim Crow, Sr., or Jim Crow, Jr.

King's work and witness is a kind of prophetic pneumatology in motion—a kinetic orality of passionate physicality, and combative spirituality that wedded mind to movement, soul to sustenance, and body to empowerment. Like his most worthy theological precursor, Howard Thurman, King pulled from the rich insights of Western thinkers, yet he elevated the lived experiences of wounded, scarred, and bruised bodies of enslaved and Jim-Crowed black peoples to enact radical love.

King's radical love put a premium on artistic performance and existential praxis. His sermons were performances that authorized an alternative reality to the way the world is. His living radiated radical tenderness, subversive sweetness, and militant gentleness. He found great joy in serving others.

Like his great contemporary Dorothy Day, the Catholic saint who looked at the world through the lens of her heart, Dr. King understood radical love as a form of death—a relentless self-examination in which a fearful, hateful, egoistic self dies daily to be reborn into a courageous, loving, and sacrificial self. For both Day and King, this radical love flows from an imitation of Christ, a respon-

to an invitation of self-surrender in order to emerge fully equipped to fight for justice in a cold and cruel world of domination and exploitation. The scandal of the Cross is precisely the unstoppable and unsuffocatable love that keeps moving in a blood-soaked history, even in our catastrophic time. There is no radical King without his commitment to radical love.

This book unearths a radical King that we can no longer sanitize. His revolutionary witness—embodied in anti-imperial, anti-colonial, anti-racist, and democratic socialist sentiments—was grounded in his courage to think, his courage to love, and his courage to die. Could it be that we know so little of the radical King because such courage defies our market-driven world?

**RADICAL  
LOVE**



*Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., pulls up a cross that was burned on the front lawn of his home on April 26, 1960. To his left stands his son Martin Luther King III, aged two.*

**RADICAL LOVE** sits at the center of the radical King. All the individual success, professional achievement, sharp analysis, and strategic calculation are but sounding brass and tinkling symbol without radical love. For King, radical love emerges from catastrophe, perseveres through crisis, and yields an indomitable spiritual center—a radical humility and radical integrity.

In this collection's first essay, "The Violence of Desperate Men," we see the source of King's radical love: his spiritual mountaintop experience in his kitchen in Montgomery, Alabama, just as he assumes leadership of the Montgomery Improvement Association. Following the pioneering work of David Garrow, James Cone, and Vincent Harding, I understand the radical King as a spiritual warrior equipped with Christian armor willing to love, serve, and die for his people. Radical love requires the cowardly self to die in order for the courageous self to live—daily. This death-in-life conversion sustains the self in the face of terror and trauma. King's kitchen experience is a kind of 9/11 moment—he and his precious family are unsafe, unprotected, subject to random violence, and hated for who he and they are. These 9/11 moments are integral to being black in America. King's loving parents, Martin and Alberta King, and supportive church and school, Ebenezer Baptist Church and Morehouse College, laid his strong foundations. But the love he received from them was radicalized—dipped in the dark pit of catastrophe and tested in the fierce fire of crisis—in Montgomery. His spiritual call for help came in the form of God's radical love for him.

The major intellectual and practical challenge to King's radical love came from the critiques of religion put forward by Karl Marx and Friedrich Nietzsche. King spent much time wrestling with these figures in his studies and in his life. Marx's claim was that religion was the opiate of the people—the instrument of those who rule in that it disinvests people of their own powers by investing God with all power and thereby rendering them submissive and deferential toward the status quo.

Nietzsche's view of Christian love as a form of resentment and revenge of the powerless and impotent toward the powerful and the strong led King briefly to "despair of the power of love in solving social problems."<sup>1</sup> Prophetic religion could empower people to fight against oppression and struggle for freedom—so Marx was only partly right. But could the love ethic of Jesus Christ be applied to groups, nations, or classes as well as to individuals? The Gandhian method of love-motivated (agapic) nonviolent resistance provided the radical King with a response to Marx and an answer to Nietzsche. Radical love was a moral and practical method—a way of life and a way of struggle in which oppressed people could fight for freedom without inflicting violence on the oppressor, humiliating the opponent, and hence, possibly transforming the moral disposition of one's adversary.

King's radical love—following Gandhi's great breakthrough—is often celebrated for his love of white oppressors. This misses the point. King's radical love of an often unloved people—black people—is the basis of his much-heralded love of white people. His radical love is inseparable from the radical freedom he wants for an unfree people—and for all others. A fuller discussion of King's radical love requires a comparative analysis of Malcolm X's radical love or Ella Baker's radical love—just as Gandhi's radical love should be contrasted with Ambedkar's radical love.

King's two sermons "Palm Sunday Sermon on Mohandas K. Gandhi" and "Loving Your Enemies," as well as his autobiographical "Pilgrimage to Nonviolence," lay bare his profound and poignant hammering out the idea and practice of radical love.

King was deeply concerned with bequeathing the rich tradition of radical love to the younger generation. He understood the deep insights of the Black Nationalist heritage, represented by giants such as Marcus Garvey and Malcolm X, who highlighted black self-respect, black self-defense, and black self-determination. He also knew that his Southern Christian style did not always resonate with Northern urban youth. Yet King always extended his radical love to them—in a sincere and authentic way. In his speech to high school students in Philadelphia, we see another side of King: a love warrior focused on fostering black self-love in youth. Based on my own teaching, including work in high schools and prisons, I decided to end part 1 with King's more personal and intimate directive to black youth and their future.



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# THE VIOLENCE OF DESPERATE MEN

The following is a chapter from Dr. King's memoir of the Montgomery bus boycott, *Stride Toward Freedom* (1958), which King described as "the chronicle of 50,000 Negroes who took to heart the principles of nonviolence, who learned to fight for their rights with the weapon of love, and who, in the process, acquired a new estimate of their own human worth."

After the "get-tough" policy failed to stop the movement the diehards became desperate, and waited to see what their next move would be. Almost immediately after the protest started we began to receive threatening telephone calls and letters. Sporadic in the beginning, they increased in number as time went on. By the middle of January, they had risen to thirty and forty a day.

Postcards, often signed "KKK," said simply "get out of town or else." Many misspelled and crudely written letters presented religious half-truths to prove that "God do not intend the White People and the Negro to go to gather if he did we would be the same." Others enclosed mimeographed and printed materials combining anti-Semitic and anti-Negro sentiments. One of these contained a handwritten postscript: "You niggers are getting your self in a bad place. The Bible is strong for segregation as of the jews [sic] concerning other races. It is even for segregation between the 12 tribes of Israel. We need and will have a Hitler to get our country straightened out." Many of the letters were unprintable catalogues of blasphemy and obscenity.

Meanwhile the telephone rang all day and most of the night. Often Coretta was alone in the house when the calls came, but the insulting voices did not spare her. Many times the person on the other end simply waited until we answered and then hung up.

A large percentage of the calls had sexual themes. One woman, whose voice I soon came to recognize, telephoned day after day to hurl her sexual accusations at the Negro. Whenever I tried to answer, as I frequently did in an effort to explain our case calmly, the caller would cut me off. Occasionally, we would leave the telephone off the hook, but we could not do this for long because we never knew when an important call would come in.

When these incidents started, I took them in stride, feeling that they were the work of a few hotheads who would soon be discouraged when they discovered that we would not fight back. But as the weeks passed, I began to see that many of the threats were in earnest. Soon I felt myself faltering and growing in fear. One day, a white friend told me that he had heard from reliable sources that plans were being made to take my life. For the first time I realized that something could happen to me.

One night at a mass meeting, I found myself saying: "If one day you find me sprawled out dead, do not want you to retaliate with a single act of violence. I urge you to continue protesting with the same dignity and discipline you have shown so far." A strange silence came over the audience.

Afterward, to the anxious group that gathered around, I tried to make light of the incident by saying that my words had not grown from any specific cause, but were just a general statement of principle that should guide our actions in the event of any fatality. But Ralph Abernathy was not satisfied. As he drove me home that night, he said:

"Something is wrong. You are disturbed about something."

I tried to evade the issue by repeating what I had just told the group at the church. But he persisted. “Martin,” he said, “you were not talking about some general principle. You had something specific in mind.”

Unable to evade any longer, I admitted the truth. For the first time I told him about the threats that were harassing my family. I told him about the conversation with my white friend. I told him about the fears that were creeping up on my soul. Ralph tried to reassure me, but I was still afraid.

The threats continued. Almost every day someone warned me that he had overheard white men making plans to get rid of me. Almost every night I went to bed faced with the uncertainty of the next moment. In the morning I would look at Coretta and “Yoki” and say to myself: “They can be taken away from me at any moment; I can be taken away from them at any moment.” For once I did not even share my thoughts with Coretta.

One night toward the end of January I settled into bed late, after a strenuous day. Coretta had already fallen asleep and just as I was about to doze off the telephone rang. An angry voice said, “Listen, nigger, we’ve taken all we want from you; before next week you’ll be sorry you ever came to Montgomery.” I hung up, but I couldn’t sleep. It seemed that all of my fears had come down on me all at once. I had reached the saturation point.

I got out of bed and began to walk the floor. Finally I went to the kitchen and heated a pot of coffee. I was ready to give up. With my cup of coffee sitting untouched before me I tried to think of a way to move out of the picture without appearing a coward. In this state of exhaustion, when my courage had all but gone, I decided to take my problem to God. With my head in my hands, I bowed over the kitchen table and prayed aloud. The words I spoke to God that midnight are still vivid in my memory. “I am here taking a stand for what I believe is right. But now I am afraid. The people are looking to me for leadership, and if I stand before them without strength and courage, they too will falter. I am at the end of my powers. I have nothing left. I’ve come to the point where I can’t face this alone.”

At that moment I experienced the presence of the Divine as I had never experienced Him before. It seemed as though I could hear the quiet assurance of an inner voice saying: “Stand up for righteousness, stand up for truth; and God will be at your side forever.” Almost at once my fears began to go. My uncertainty disappeared. I was ready to face anything.

Three nights later, on January 30, I left home a little before seven to attend our Monday evening mass meeting at the First Baptist Church. A member of my congregation, Mrs. Mary Lucy Williams had come to the parsonage to keep my wife company in my absence. After putting the baby to bed, Coretta and Mrs. Williams went to the living room to look at television. About nine-thirty they heard a noise in front that sounded as though someone had thrown a brick. In a matter of seconds an explosion rocked the house. A bomb had gone off on the porch.

The sound was heard many blocks away, and word of the bombing reached the mass meeting almost instantly. Toward the close of the meeting, as I stood on the platform helping to take the collection, I noticed an usher rushing to give Ralph Abernathy a message. Abernathy turned and ran downstairs, soon to reappear with a worried look on his face. Several others rushed in and out of the church. People looked at me and then away; one or two seemed about to approach me and then changed their minds. An usher called me to the side of the platform, presumably to give me a message, but before I could get there S. S. Seay had sent him away. By now I was convinced that whatever had happened affected me. I called Ralph Abernathy, S. S. Seay, and E. N. French and asked them to tell me what was wrong. Ralph looked at Seay and French and then turned to me and said hesitantly:

“Your house has been bombed.”

I asked if my wife and baby were all right.

They said, “We are checking on that now.”

Strangely enough, I accepted the word of the bombing calmly. My religious experience a few nights before had given me the strength to face it. I interrupted the collection and asked all present to give me their undivided attention. After telling them why I had to leave, I urged each person to go straight home after the meeting and adhere strictly to our philosophy of nonviolence. I admonished them not to become panicky and lose their heads. “Let us keep moving,” I urged them, “with the faith that what we are doing is right, and with the even greater faith that God is with us in the struggle.”

I was immediately driven home. As we neared the scene I noticed hundreds of people with angry faces in front of the house. The policemen were trying, in their usual rough manner, to clear the streets, but they were ignored by the crowd. One Negro was saying to a policeman, who was attempting to push him aside: “I ain’t gonna move nowhere. That’s the trouble now; you white folks always pushin’ us around. Now you got your .38 and I got mine; so let’s battle it out.” As I walked toward the front porch I realized that many people were armed. Nonviolent resistance was on the verge of being transformed into violence.

I rushed into the house to see if Coretta and “Yoki” were safe. When I walked into the bedroom and saw my wife and daughter uninjured, I drew my first full breath in many minutes. I learned that fortunately when Coretta and Mrs. Williams had heard the sound of something falling on the front porch, they had jumped up and run to the back of the house. If instead they had gone to the porch to investigate, the outcome might have been fatal. Coretta was neither bitter nor panicky. She had accepted the whole thing with unbelievable composure. As I noticed her calmness I became even more calm myself.

Mayor Gayle, Commissioner Sellers, and several white reporters had reached the house before I did and were standing in the dining room. After reassuring myself about my family’s safety, I went to speak to them. Both Gayle and Sellers expressed their regret that “this unfortunate incident has taken place in our city.” One of the trustees of my church, who is employed in the public school system of Montgomery, was standing beside me when the mayor and the commissioner spoke. Although in a vulnerable position, he turned to the mayor and said: “You may express your regrets, but you must face the fact that your public statements created the atmosphere for this bombing. This is the end result of your ‘get-tough’ policy.” Neither Mayor Gayle nor Commissioner Sellers could reply.

By this time the crowd outside was getting out of hand. The policemen had failed to disperse them and throngs of additional people were arriving every minute. The white reporters inside the house wanted to leave to get their stories on the wires, but they were afraid to face the angry crowd. The mayor and police commissioner, though they might not have admitted it, were very pale.

In this atmosphere I walked out to the porch and asked the crowd to come to order. In less than a moment there was complete silence. Quietly I told them that I was all right and that my wife and baby were all right. “Now let’s not become panicky,” I continued. “If you have weapons, take them home; if you do not have them, please do not seek to get them. We cannot solve this problem through retaliatory violence. We must meet violence with nonviolence. Remember the words of Jesus: ‘He who lives by the sword will perish by the sword.’” I then urged them to leave peacefully. “We must love our white brothers,” I said, “no matter what they do to us. We must make them know that we love them. Jesus still cries out in words that echo across the centuries: ‘Love your enemies; bless them that curse you; pray for them that despitefully use you.’ This is what we must live by. We must meet hate with love. Remember,” I ended, “if I am stopped, this movement will not stop, because God is with us.”

the movement. Go home with this glowing faith and this radiant assurance.”

As I finished speaking there were shouts of “Amen” and “God bless you.” I could hear voices saying: “We are with you all the way, Reverend.” I looked out over that vast throng of people and noticed tears on many faces.

After I finished, the police commissioner began to address the crowd. Immediately there were boos. Police officers tried to get the attention of the Negroes by saying, “Be quiet—the commissioner is speaking.” To this the crowd responded with even louder boos. I came back to the edge of the porch and raised my hand for silence. “Remember what I just said. Let us hear the commissioner.” In the ensuing lull, the commissioner spoke and offered a reward to the person or persons who could report the offenders. Then the crowd began to disperse.

Things remained tense the whole of that night. The Negroes had had enough. They were ready to meet violence with violence. One policeman later told me that if a Negro had fallen over a brick that night a race riot would probably have broken out because the Negro would have been convinced that a white person had pushed him. This could well have been the darkest night in Montgomery’s history. But something happened to avert it: the spirit of God was in our hearts; and a night that seemed destined to end in unleashed chaos came to a close in a majestic group demonstration of nonviolence.

After our many friends left the house late that evening, Coretta, “Yoki,” and I were driven to the home of one of our church members to spend the night. I could not get to sleep. While I lay in the quiet front bedroom, with a distant street lamp throwing a reassuring glow through the curtained window, I began to think of the viciousness of people who would bomb my home. I could feel the anger rising when I realized that my wife and baby could have been killed. I thought about the commissioners and all the statements that they had made about me and the Negro generally. I was once more on the verge of corroding hatred. And once more I caught myself and said: “You must not allow yourself to become bitter.”

I tried to put myself in the place of the three commissioners. I said to myself these men are not bad men. They are misguided. They have fine reputations in the community. In their dealings with white people they are respectable and gentlemanly. They probably think they are right in the methods of dealing with Negroes. They say the things they say about us and treat us as they do because they have been taught these things. From the cradle to the grave, it is instilled in them that the Negro is inferior. Their parents probably taught them that; the schools they attended taught them that; the books they read, even their churches and ministers, often taught them that; and above all the very concept of segregation teaches them that. The whole cultural tradition under which they have grown—a tradition blighted with more than 250 years of slavery and more than 90 years of segregation—teaches them that Negroes do not deserve certain things. So these men are merely the children of the culture. When they seek to preserve segregation they are seeking to preserve only what their local folkways have taught them was right.

Midnight had long since passed. Coretta and the baby were sound asleep. It was time for me too to get some rest. At about two-thirty I turned over in bed and fell into a dazed slumber. But the night was not yet over. Some time later Coretta and I were awakened by a slow, steady knocking at the front door. We looked at each other wordlessly in the dim light, and listened as the knocking began again. Through the window we could see the dark outline of a figure on the front porch. Our hosts were sound asleep in the back of the house, and we lay in the front, frozen into inaction. Eventually the sound stopped and we saw a shadowy figure move across the porch and start down the steps to the street. I pulled myself out of bed, peered through the curtains, and recognized the stocky, reassuring back of Coretta’s father.

Obie Scott had heard the news of the bombing over the radio in Marion, and had driven Montgomery to take Coretta and “Yoki” home with him, “until this thing cools off.” We talked together for some time, but although Coretta listened respectfully to her father’s persuasions, she would not leave. “I’m sorry, Dad,” she said, “but I belong here with Martin.” And so Obie Scott drove back to Marion alone.

Just two nights later, a stick of dynamite was thrown on the lawn of E. D. Nixon. Fortunately again no one was hurt. Once more a large crowd of Negroes assembled, but they did not lose control. And so nonviolence had won its first and its second tests.

After the bombings, many of the officers of my church and other trusted friends urged me to hire a bodyguard and armed watchmen for my house. I tried to tell them that I had no fears now, and consequently needed no protection. But they were insistent, so I agreed to consider the question. I also went down to the sheriff’s office and applied for a license to carry a gun in the car; but this was refused.

Meanwhile I reconsidered. How could I serve as one of the leaders of a nonviolent movement and at the same time use weapons of violence for my personal protection? Coretta and I talked the matter over for several days and finally agreed that arms were no solution. We decided then to get rid of the one weapon we owned. We tried to satisfy our friends by having floodlights mounted around the house, and hiring unarmed watchmen around the clock. I also promised that I would not travel around the city alone.

This was a comparatively easy promise to keep, thanks to our friend, Bob Williams, professor of music at Alabama State College and a former collegemate of mine at Morehouse. When I came to Montgomery, I had found him here, and from the moment the protest started he was seldom far from my side or Coretta’s. He did most of my driving around Montgomery and accompanied me on several out-of-town trips. Whenever Coretta and “Yoki” went to Atlanta or Marion, he was always there to drive them down and to bring them back. Almost imperceptibly he had become my voluntary “bodyguard,” though he carried no arms and could never have been as fierce as the name implied.

In this crisis the officers and members of my church were always nearby to lend their encouragement and active support. As I gradually lost my role as husband and father, having to be away from home for hours and sometimes days at a time, the women of the church came into the house to keep Coretta company. Often they volunteered to cook the meals and clean, or help with the baby. Many of the men took turns as watchmen, or drove me around when Bob Williams was not available. Nor did my congregation ever complain when the multiplicity of my new responsibilities caused me to lag in my pastoral duties. For months my day-to-day contact with my parishioners had almost ceased. I had become no more than a Sunday preacher. But my church willingly shared mine with the community, and threw their own considerable resources of time and money into the struggle.

Our local white friends, too, came forward with their support. Often they called Coretta to say an encouraging word, and when the house was bombed several of them, known and unknown to us, came by to express their regret. Occasionally the mail would bring a letter from a white Montgomerician saying, “Carry on, we are with you a hundred percent.” Frequently these were simply signed “a white friend.”

Interestingly enough, for some time after the bombings the threatening telephone calls slowed up. But this was only a lull; several months later they had begun again in full force. In order to sleep at night, it finally became necessary to apply for an unlisted number. This number was passed out to all the members of the church, the members of the MIA, and other friends across the country. And although it had sometimes been suggested that our own group was responsible for the threats, v



never received another hostile call. Of course, the letters still came, but my secretaries were discreet enough to keep as many of them as possible from my attention.

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When the opposition discovered that violence could not block the protest, they resorted to mass arrests. As early as January 9, a Montgomery attorney had called the attention of the press to an old state law against boycotts. He referred to Title 14, Section 54, which provides that when two or more persons enter into a conspiracy to prevent the operation of a lawful business, without just cause or legal excuse, they shall be guilty of a misdemeanor. On February 13 the Montgomery County grand jury was called to determine whether Negroes who were boycotting the buses were violating this law. After about a week of deliberations, the jury, composed of seventeen whites and one Negro, found the boycott illegal and indicted more than one hundred persons. My name, of course, was on the list.

At the time of the indictments I was at Fisk University in Nashville, giving a series of lectures. During this period I was talking to Montgomery on the phone at least three times a day in order to keep abreast of developments. Thus I heard of the indictments first in a telephone call from Ralph Abernathy, late Tuesday night, February 21. He said that the arrests were scheduled to begin the following morning. Knowing that he would be one of the first to be arrested, I assured him that I would be with him and the others in my prayers. As usual he was unperturbed. I told him that I would cut my trip short in Nashville and come to Montgomery the next day.

I booked an early morning flight. All night long I thought of the people in Montgomery. Would these mass arrests so frighten them that they would urge us to call off the protest? I knew how harassed they had been. For more than thirteen weeks they had walked, and sacrificed, and worn down their cars. They had been harassed and intimidated on every hand. And now they faced arrest on top of all this. Would they become battle-weary, I wondered. Would they give up in despair? Would this be the end of our movement?

I arose early Wednesday morning and notified the officials of Fisk that I had to leave ahead of time because of the situation in Montgomery. I flew to Atlanta to pick up my wife and daughter whom I had left at my parents' home while I was in Nashville. My wife, my mother, and father met me at the airport. I had told them about the indictments over the phone, and they had gotten additional information from a radio broadcast. Coretta showed her usual composure; but my parents' faces wore signs of deep perturbation.

My father, so unafraid for himself, had fallen into a constant state of terror for me and my family. Since the protest began he had beaten a path between Atlanta and Montgomery to be at our side. Many times he had sat in on our board meetings and never shown any doubt about the justice of our action. Yet this stern and courageous man had reached the point where he could scarcely mention the protest without tears. My mother too had suffered. After the bombing she had had to take to bed under a doctor's orders, and she was often ill later. Their expressions—even the way they walked, I realized—when they came toward me at the airport—had begun to show the strain.

As we drove to their house, my father said that he thought it would be unwise for me to return to Montgomery now. "Although many others have been indicted," he said, "their main concern is to get you. They might even put you in jail without a bond." He went on to tell me that the law enforcement agencies in Montgomery had been trying to find something on my record in Atlanta which would make it possible to deport me from Alabama. They had gone to the Atlanta police department, and were disappointed when Chief Jenkins informed them that I did not have even a minor police record. "All of this shows," my father concluded, "that they are out to get you."

I listened to him attentively, and yet I knew that I could not follow his suggestion and stay in Atlanta. I was profoundly concerned about my parents. I was worried about their worry. I knew that

I continued the struggle I would be plagued by the pain that I was inflicting on them. But if I eased off now I would be plagued by my own conscience, reminding me that I lacked the moral courage to stand by a cause to the end. No one can understand my conflict who has not looked into the eyes of those I love, knowing that he has no alternative but to take a dangerous stand that leaves them tormented.

My father told me that he had asked several trusted friends to come to the house in the early afternoon to discuss the whole issue. Feeling that this exchange of ideas might help to relieve his worries, I readily agreed to stay over and talk to them. Among those who came were A. T. Walden, distinguished attorney; C. R. Yates and T. M. Alexander, both prominent businessmen; C. A. Scott, editor of the *Atlanta Daily World*; Bishop Sherman L. Green of A. M. E. Church; Benjamin E. May, president of Morehouse College; and Rufus E. Clement, president of Atlanta University. Coretta and my mother joined us.

My father explained to the group that because of his respect for their judgment he was calling on them for advice on whether I should return to Montgomery. He gave them a brief history of the attempts that had been made to get me out of Montgomery. He admitted that the fear of what might happen to me had caused him and my mother many restless nights. He concluded by saying that he had talked to a liberal white attorney a few hours earlier, who had confirmed his feeling that I should not go back at this time.

There were murmurs of agreement in the room, and I listened as sympathetically and objectively as I could while two of the men gave their reasons for concurring. These were my elders, leaders among my people. Their words commanded respect. But soon I could not restrain myself any longer. "I must go back to Montgomery," I protested. "My friends and associates are being arrested. It would be the height of cowardice for me to stay away. I would rather be in jail ten years than desert my people now. I have begun the struggle, and I can't turn back. I have reached the point of no return." At the moment of silence that followed I heard my father break into tears. I looked at Dr. Mays, one of the great influences in my life. Perhaps he heard my unspoken plea. At any rate, he was so strongly defending my position. Then others joined him in supporting me. They assured my father that things were not so bad as they seemed. Mr. Walden put through two calls on the spot to Thurgood Marshall, general counsel of the NAACP, and Arthur Shores, NAACP counsel in Alabama, both of whom assured him that I would have the best legal protection. In the face of all of these persuasions my father began to be reconciled to my return to Montgomery.

After everybody had gone, Coretta and I went upstairs to our room and had a long talk. She, too, was glad to find, had no doubt that I must go back immediately. With my own feelings reinforced by the opinions of others I trusted, and with my father's misgivings at rest, I felt better and more prepared to face the experience ahead.

Characteristically, my father, having withdrawn his objections to our return to Montgomery, decided to go along with us, unconcerned with any possible danger or unpleasantness to himself. He secured a driver and at six o'clock Thursday morning we were on the highway headed for Montgomery, arriving about nine. Before we could get out of the car, several television cameras were trained on us. The reporters had somehow discovered the time of our arrival. A few minutes later Ralph Abernathy, released on bail after his arrest the previous day, came to the house. With Ralph and my father, I set out for the county jail, several of my church members following after.

At the jail, an almost holiday atmosphere prevailed. On the way Ralph Abernathy told me how people had rushed down to get arrested the day before. No one, it seems, had been frightened. No one had tried to evade arrest. Many Negroes had gone voluntarily to the sheriff's office to see if their names were on the list, and were even disappointed when they were not. A once fear-ridden people had

been transformed. Those who had previously trembled before the law were now proud to be arrested for the cause of freedom. With this feeling of solidarity around me, I walked with firm steps toward the rear of the jail. After I had received a number and had been photographed and fingerprinted, one of my church members paid my bond and I left for home.

The trial was set for March 19. Friends from all over the country came to Montgomery to be with us during the proceedings. Ministers from as far north as New York were present. Negro congressman Charles C. Diggs (D-Mich.) was on hand. Scores of reporters representing publications in the United States, India, France, and England were there to cover the trial. More than five hundred Negroes stood in the halls and the streets surrounding the small courthouse. Several of them wore crosses on their lapels reading, "Father, forgive them."

Judge Eugene Carter brought the court to order, and after the necessary preliminaries the state called me up as the first defendant. For four days I sat in court listening to arguments and waiting for a verdict. William F. Thetford, solicitor for the state, was attempting to prove that I had disobeyed the law by organizing an illegal boycott. The defense attorneys—Arthur Shores, Peter Hall, Oze Billingsley, Fred Gray, Charles Langford, and Robert Carter—presented arguments to show that the prosecution's evidence was insufficient to prove that I had violated Alabama's antiboycott law. Even if the state had proved such action, they asserted, no evidence was produced to show that the Negro did not have just cause or legal excuse.

In all, twenty-eight witnesses were brought to the stand by the defense. I listened with a mixture of sadness and awe as these simple people—most of them unlettered—sat on the witness stand without fear and told their stories. They looked the solicitor and the judge in the eye with a courage and dignity to which there was no answer.

Perhaps the most touching testimony was that of Mrs. Stella Brooks. Her husband had climbed on a bus. After paying his fare he was ordered by the driver to get off and reboard by the back door. He looked through the crowded bus and seeing that there was no room in back he said that he would get off and walk if the driver would return his dime. The driver refused; an argument ensued; and the driver called the police. The policeman arrived, abusing Brooks, who still refused to leave the bus unless his dime was returned. The policeman shot him. It happened so suddenly that everybody was dazed. Brooks died of his wounds.

Mrs. Martha Walker testified about the day when she was leading her blind husband from the bus. She had stepped down and as her husband was following the driver slammed the door and began to drive off. Walker's leg was caught. Although Mrs. Walker called out, the driver failed to stop, and her husband was dragged some distance before he could free himself. She reported the incident, but the bus company did nothing about it.

The stories continued. Mrs. Sadie Brooks testified that she heard a Negro passenger threatened because he did not have the correct change. "The driver whipped out a pistol and drove the man off the bus." Mrs. Della Perkins described being called an "ugly black ape" by a driver.

I will always remember my delight when Mrs. Georgia Gilmore—an unlettered woman of unusual intelligence—told how an operator demanded that she get off the bus after paying her fare and board again by the back door, and then drove away before she could get there. She turned to Judge Carter and said: "When they count the money, they do not know Negro money from white money."

On Thursday afternoon, March 22, both sides rested. All eyes were turned toward Judge Carter, and with barely a pause he rendered his verdict: "I declare the defendant guilty of violating the state antiboycott law." The penalty was a fine of \$500 and court costs, or 386 days at hard labor in the County of Montgomery. Then Judge Carter announced that he was giving a minimum penalty because

of what I had done to prevent violence. In the cases of the other Negroes charged with the same violation—the number had now boiled down to 89—Judge Carter entered a continuance until a final appeal was complete in my case.

In a few minutes several friends had come up to sign my bond, and the lawyers had notified the judge that the case would be appealed. Many people stood around the courtroom in tears. Others walked out with their heads bowed. I came to the end of my trial with a feeling of sympathy for Judge Carter in his dilemma. To convict me he had to face the condemnation of the nation and world opinion; to acquit me he had to face the condemnation of the local community and those voters who kept him in office. Throughout the proceedings he had treated me with great courtesy, and he had rendered a verdict which he probably thought was the best way out. After the trial he left town for “welcomed rest.”

I left the courtroom with my wife at my side and a host of friends following. In front of the courthouse hundreds of Negroes and whites, including television cameramen and photographers, were waiting. As I waved my hand, they shouted: “God bless you,” and began to sing, “We ain’t gonna ride the buses no more.”

Ordinarily, a person leaving a courtroom with a conviction behind him would wear a somber face. But I left with a smile. I knew that I was a convicted criminal, but I was proud of my crime. It was the crime of joining my people in a nonviolent protest against injustice. It was the crime of seeking to instill within my people a sense of dignity and self-respect. It was the crime of desiring for my people the unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. It was above all the crime of seeking to convince my people that noncooperation with evil is just as much a moral duty as cooperation with good.

So ended another effort to halt the protest. Instead of stopping the movement, the opposition tactics had only served to give it greater momentum, and to draw us closer together. What the opposition failed to see was that our mutual sufferings had wrapped us all in a single garment of destiny. What happened to one happened to all.

On that cloudy afternoon in March, Judge Carter had convicted more than Martin Luther King, Jr. Case No. 7399; he had convicted every Negro in Montgomery. It is no wonder that the movement couldn’t be stopped. It was too large to be stopped. Its links were too well bound together in a powerfully effective chain. There is amazing power in unity. Where there is true unity, every effort to disunite only serves to strengthen the unity. This is what the opposition failed to see.

The members of the opposition had also revealed that they did not know the Negroes with whom they were dealing. They thought they were dealing with a group who could be cajoled or forced to do whatever the white man wanted them to do. They were not aware that they were dealing with Negroes who had been freed from fear. And so every move they made proved to be a mistake. It could not be otherwise, because their methods were geared to the “old Negro,” and they were dealing with a “new Negro.”

*From Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story* (Harper & Row, 1958, reprinted by Beacon Press, 2010).

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# PALM SUNDAY SERMON ON MOHANDAS K. GANDHI

On March 22, 1959, Dr. King returned to his pulpit after an absence of nearly two months and discussed the life of Gandhi, suggesting that “more than anybody else in the modern world” he had “caught the spirit of Jesus Christ, and lived it more completely in his life.”

To the cross and its significance in human experience. This is the time in the year when we think of the love of God breaking forth into time out of eternity. This is the time of the year when we come to see that the most powerful forces in the universe are not those forces of military might but the forces of spiritual might. And as we sing together this great hymn of our church, the Christian church hymn number 191, let us think about it again:

*When I survey the wondrous cross,  
On which the prince of glory died,  
I count my richest gains but loss  
And pour contempt on all my pride.*

A beautiful hymn. I think if there is any hymn of the Christian church that I would call a favorite hymn, it is this one. And then it goes on to say, in that last stanza:

*Were the whole realm of nature mine,  
That was a present far too small.  
Love so amazing, so divine,  
Demands my life, my all and my all.*

We think about Christ and the cross in the days ahead as he walks through Jerusalem and he is carried from Jerusalem to Calvary Hill, where he is crucified. Let us think of this wondrous cross.

This, as you know, is what has traditionally been known in the Christian church as Palm Sunday. And ordinarily the preacher is expected to preach a sermon on the Lordship or the Kingship of Christ—the triumphal entry, or something that relates to this great event as Jesus entered Jerusalem, for it was after this that Jesus was crucified. And I remember, the other day, about seven or eight days ago, standing on the Mount of Olives and looking across just a few feet and noticing that gate that still stands there in Jerusalem, and through which Christ passed into Jerusalem, into the old city. The ruins of that gate stand there, and one feels the sense of Christ’s mission as he looks at the gate. And he looks at Jerusalem, and he sees what could take place in such a setting. And you notice there also the spot where the temple stood, and it was here that Jesus passed and he went into the temple and ran the money-changers out.

And so that, if I talked about that this morning, I could talk about it not only from what the Bible says but from personal experience, firsthand experience. But I beg of you to indulge me this morning to talk about the life of a man who lived in India. And I think I’m justified in doing this because I believe this man, more than anybody else in the modern world, caught the spirit of Jesus Christ and lived it more completely in his life. His name was Gandhi, Mohandas K. Gandhi. And after he lived



few years, the poet Tagore, who lived in India, gave him another name: "Mahatma," the great soul. And we know him as Mahatma Gandhi.

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I would like to use a double text for what I have to say this morning, both of them are found in the gospel as recorded by Saint John. One found in the tenth chapter, and the sixteenth verse, and it reads, "I have other sheep, which are not of this fold." "I have other sheep, which are not of this fold." And then the other one is found in the fourteenth chapter of John, in the twelfth verse. It reads, "Verily, verily, I say unto you, he that believeth on me, the works that I do, shall he do also. And greater works than these shall he do because I go unto my Father."

I want you to notice these two passages of scripture. On the one hand, "I have other sheep that are not of this fold." I think Jesus is saying here in substance that "I have followers who are not in the inner circle." He's saying in substance that "I have people dedicated and following my ways who have not become attached to the institution surrounding my name. I have other sheep that are not of this fold. And my influence is not limited to the institutional Christian church." I think this is what Jesus would say if he were living today concerning this passage, that "I have people who are following me who've never joined the Christian church as an institution."

And then that other passage, I think Jesus was saying this—it's a strange thing, and I used to wonder what Jesus meant when he said, "There will be people who will do greater things than I did." And I have thought about the glory and honor surrounding the life of Christ, and I thought about the fact that he represented the absolute revelation of God. And I've thought about the fact that in his life he represented all of the glory of eternity coming into time. And how would it be possible for anybody to do greater works than Christ? How would it be possible for anybody even to match him, or even to approximate his work?

But I've come to see what Christ meant. Christ meant that in his life he would only touch a few people. And in his lifetime—and if you study the life of Christ, and if you know your Bible you realize that Christ never traveled outside of Palestine, and his influence in his own lifetime was limited to a small group of people. He never had more than twelve followers in his lifetime; others heard about him and others came to see him, but he never had but twelve real followers, and three of them turned out to be not too good. But he pictured the day that his spirit and his influence would go beyond the borders of Palestine, and that men would catch his message and carry it over the world, and that men all over the world would grasp the truth of his gospel. And they would be able to do things that he couldn't do. They were able, be able to travel places that he couldn't travel. And they would be able to convert people that he couldn't convert in his lifetime. And this is what he meant when he said, "Greater works shall ye do, for an Apostle Paul will catch my work."

And I remember just last Tuesday morning standing on that beautiful hill called the Acropolis in Athens. And there, standing around the Parthenon, as it stands still in all of its beautiful and impressive proportions, although it has been torn somewhat through wars, but it still stands there. And right across from the Acropolis you see Mars Hill. And I remember when our guide said, "That's the hill where the Apostle Paul preached."

Now when you think of the fact that Athens is a long ways from Jerusalem, for we traveled right over Damascus where Paul was converted, and Damascus is at least five hours by flight from Athens. And you think about the fact that Paul had caught this message and carried it beyond the Damascus Road all over the world, and he had gone as far as Greece, as far as Athens, to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ. This is what Jesus meant, that "somebody will catch my message, and they would be able to carry it in places that I couldn't carry it, and they would be able to do things in their lives that I couldn't do."

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