

## "I Have a Dream" speech, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

I am happy to join with you today in what will go down in history as **the greatest demonstration for freedom in the history of our nation.**

**Five score years ago, a great American, in whose symbolic shadow we stand today,** 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. *One hundred years later*, the Negro lives on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material **prosperity.** *One hundred years later*, the Negro is still languished in the corners of American society and finds himself an **exile** in his own land. And so we've come here today to dramatize a shameful condition.

In a sense we've come to our nation's capital to **cash a check.** When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the **Constitution** and the **Declaration of Independence**, they were signing a **promissory note** to which every American was to fall heir. This note was a promise that all men - yes, black men as well as white men - would be guaranteed the unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

It is obvious today that America has **defaulted** on this promissory note insofar as her citizens of color are concerned. Instead of honoring this sacred obligation, America has given the Negro people a **bad check**, a check that has come back marked "**insufficient funds.**"

But *we refuse to believe* that the bank of justice is **bankrupt.** *We refuse to believe* that there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity of this nation. And so we've come to cash this check, a check that will give us upon demand the riches of freedom and security of justice. We have also come to this hallowed spot to remind America of the fierce urgency of now. This is no time to engage in the luxury of cooling off or to take the tranquilizing drug of gradualism. *Now is the time* to make real the promises of democracy. *Now is the time* to rise from the dark and desolate valley of segregation to the sunlit path of racial justice. *Now is the time* to lift our nation from the quicksands of racial injustice to the solid rock of brotherhood.

## Notes on the speech, Corey Green

**The greatest demonstration for freedom:** more than 200,000 people demonstrated in Washington, DC that day.

**Five score years ago:** a reference to Lincoln's Gettysburg address "Four score and seven years ago..." (A score is 20 years.) Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863, one hundred years earlier, freeing the slaves in Confederate-held territory. This speech was given at the Lincoln Memorial.

**One hundred years later:** King uses a technique called anaphora, repeating words and phrases in his speech. This is the first example.

**Segregation:** the policy of separating people based on race, class, etc. as a form of discrimination

**Prosperity:** success (wealth)

**Exile:** someone banished (kicked out) from his native country

**Cash a check:** a check is worth money. When you cash it, you get the money it's worth.

**Constitution:** established our government and its laws. The Bill of Rights outlined our rights.

**Declaration of Independence:** declared our independence and explained our reasons for separating from Great Britain.

**Promissory note:** a written promise to pay a sum of money: an IOU

**Defaulted:** failed to perform a task or obligation

**Bad check; insufficient funds:** when you don't have enough money in your account to pay for the check you wrote

**Bankrupt:** broke, no money, can't pay what you owe

*Now is the time* to make justice a reality for all of God's children.

It would be fatal for the nation to overlook the urgency of the moment. **This sweltering summer of the Negro's legitimate discontent** will not pass until there is an invigorating autumn of freedom and equality. Nineteen sixty-three is not an end but a beginning. Those who hoped that the Negro needed to blow off steam and will now be content will have a rude awakening if the nation returns to business as usual. There will be neither rest nor tranquility in America until the Negro is granted his citizenship rights. The whirlwinds of revolt will continue to shake the foundations of our nation until the bright day of justice emerges.

But there is something that I must say to my people who stand on the warm threshold which leads into the palace of justice. In the process of gaining our rightful place we must not be guilty of wrongful deeds. Let us not seek to satisfy our thirst for freedom by drinking from the cup of bitterness and hatred. **We must forever conduct our struggle on the high plane of dignity and discipline.** We must not allow our creative protest to degenerate into physical violence. Again and again we must rise to the majestic heights of meeting physical force with soul force. 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. We cannot walk alone.

And as we walk, we must make the pledge that **we shall always march ahead. We cannot turn back.** There are those who are asking the devotees of civil rights, "When will you be satisfied?" ***We can never be satisfied*** as long as the Negro is the victim of the unspeakable horrors of police brutality. ***We can never be satisfied*** as long as our bodies, heavy with the fatigue of travel, cannot gain lodging in the motels of the highways and the hotels of the cities. ***We cannot be satisfied*** as long as the Negro's basic mobility is from a smaller ghetto to a larger one. ***We can never be satisfied*** as long as our children are stripped of their selfhood and robbed of their dignity by signs stating "for whites only." ***We cannot be satisfied*** as long as a Negro in Mississippi cannot vote and a Negro in New York believes he has nothing for which to vote. *No, no we are not satisfied* and we will not be satisfied until **justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.**

I am not unmindful that some of you have come here out of

**Negro:** an acceptable term, the common term at the time, meaning black person

**Summer of the Negro's...discontent:** a reference to Shakespeare, "now is the winter of our discontent" from the historical play *King Richard the Third*. It describes a civil war in England.

**"We must forever..."** King advocated peaceful protest, and did not want it to turn into a violent revolt.

**"Must not lead to a distrust..."** King says that the Negro community should not distrust all white people—many agreed with them, and there were white people at the demonstration. Some white people believed that no one could be free until everyone was free.

**"We shall always march ahead. We cannot turn back:** the goal is equality. We cannot be satisfied until there is equality and justice.

**We can never be satisfied.**..notice the repetition, and the resemblance to the Letter from Birmingham Jail.

**Justice rolls down like waters...**an allusion to Amos 5:24. Social justice and concern for the disadvantaged are themes in the Book of Amos.

great trials and tribulations. Some of you have come fresh from narrow jail cells. Some of you have come from areas where your quest for freedom left you battered by storms of persecution and staggered by the winds of police brutality. You have been the **veterans** of creative suffering. Continue to work with the faith that unearned suffering is **redemptive**.

*Go back to* Mississippi, *go back to* Alabama, *go back to* South Carolina, *go back to* Georgia, *go back to* Louisiana, go back to the **slums and ghettos of our northern cities**, knowing that somehow this situation can and will be changed.

Let us not wallow in the valley of despair. **I say to you today my friends - so even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream.**

*I have a dream* that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: "**We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.**"

*I have a dream* that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.

*I have a dream* that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an **oasis** of freedom and justice.

*I have a dream* that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.

*I have a dream* today.

*I have a dream* that one day down in **Alabama, with its vicious racists, with its governor** having his lips dripping with the words of **interposition** and **nullification** - one day right there in Alabama little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers.

*I have a dream* today.

*I have a dream* that one day every valley shall be **exalted**, and every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh

**Veteran:** someone who has had long experience with something (usually military service)

**Redemptive:** redemption: deliverance from sin; salvation

**Go back to:** another anaphora. Notice King starts with Southern places and ends with Northern.

**Ghetto:** an area populated by a minority, a poor slum of a neighborhood, often created as a result of economic restriction, pressure, and hardship. King makes the point that black people in the north are suffering, too.

**"I still have a dream"** The dream imagery reminds listeners of Joseph, Daniel and Joel, and their dreams and prophecies.

**"We hold these truths..."** from the Declaration of Independence

**Oasis:** a small fertile area in a desert region, or a refuge

**The governor of Alabama** was George Wallace, who was opposed to desegregation. In June of 1963, he stood at the doors of the University of Alabama to prevent desegregation.

**Interposition:** the doctrine that a state may oppose the federal government if it believes the government is stepping on its authority

**Nullification:** the refusal of a US state to enforce federal laws within its limits

**Exalted:** raised or elevated

shall see it together.

This is our hope. This is the faith that I go back to the South with. *With this faith* we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. *With this faith* we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. *With this faith* we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day.

This will be the day, this will be the day when all of God's children will be able to sing with new meaning "**My country 'tis of thee, sweet land of liberty, of thee I sing. Land where my father's 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. And 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 the heightening Alleghenies of Pennsylvania.

*Let freedom ring* from the snow-capped Rockies of Colorado. *Let freedom ring* from the curvaceous slopes of California.

But not only that; *let freedom ring* from Stone Mountain of Georgia.

*Let freedom ring* from Lookout Mountain of Tennessee.

*Let freedom ring* from every hill and molehill of Mississippi - **from every mountainside.**

*Let freedom ring.* And when this happens, and when we allow *freedom ring* - when we *let it ring* from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children - black men and white men, **Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics** - will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old **Negro spiritual: "Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!"**

**My country tis of thee:** American song; written by Samuel Francis Smith, a poet and clergyman. The tune comes from the English "God Save the King."

**"Let freedom ring"** From the song "My country tis of thee"

**From every mountainside:** a quote from "My country tis of thee"

**Jews and Gentiles:** Gentile means non-Jew

**Protestants and Catholics:** Protestants split from the Catholic Church

**Free at last:** allusion to an old spiritual, religious folk songs in the African-American musical tradition. The quote is inscribed on King's tomb.