

Martin Luther King Jr. & Leadership

"I Have a Dream Today"

Learn more about this topic! Each section gives more detail on one of the lyrics from the song. Read each section, and then respond by answering the question or taking notes on key ideas.

1. As a child, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. attended segregated public schools. The law said that black students like King had to go to their own schools, separate from white students. King was a good student, and he graduated high school three years earlier than most people do. He went to college in Atlanta, Georgia. King then went on to study theology, the study of religious faith, at a school in Pennsylvania. This school was not segregated. In fact, King's senior class was mostly white, and he was elected president of it. King's education wasn't finished yet. In 1953, he got yet another degree from a school in Boston: a doctorate in theology. A doctorate is the highest degree that universities give out. This is why King is called "Dr. Martin Luther King Jr."

Notes

2. In Montgomery, Alabama, and throughout the South, public transportation like the bus system was segregated. Black passengers had to sit in the backs of buses while white passengers sat in the front. As more white passengers got on, black passengers were asked to give up their seats for them. On December 1, 1955, a civil rights activist named Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat to a white passenger when a bus driver asked her to. "I don't think I should have to stand up," Parks said. She was arrested.

Notes

3. After Rosa Parks' arrest, King helped organize a boycott of the Montgomery buses. When people boycott, they refuse to buy, use or do something to show that they're unhappy with a situation. During the Montgomery Bus Boycott, thousands of African-American people stopped riding the buses to protest bus segregation. Instead, they walked or carpooled. African-American taxi drivers also charged people less money so that more people could take taxis. The boycott lasted for 381 days. Ultimately, the Supreme Court ruled that bus segregation was against the US Constitution.

Notes

4. During King's time studying theology, he learned about the work of Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhi was an activist in the country of India. He used nonviolent, or peaceful, tactics to win freedom for his country. King admired Gandhi's work. He began to think that African-American people in the United States could also use nonviolence to protest unjust laws. King traveled over 6 million miles around the US, giving speeches and supporting nonviolent protests. He led marches and boycotts and joined sit-ins. A sit-in is a form of protest in which people sit in a place and refuse to leave. During the Civil Rights Movement, African Americans held sit-ins at restaurants that wouldn't serve them.

Notes

5. In 1963, King helped organize large, nonviolent civil rights demonstrations in Birmingham, Alabama. The police reacted violently. They brought dogs and sprayed water from firehoses on the black people who attended. Images of the violence were caught on camera and shown on television across the nation. This shocked many people and caused them to support civil rights. King and many other protesters were arrested and put in jail during the Birmingham demonstrations. Throughout his fight for civil rights, King was arrested 20 times. He was also threatened and attacked.

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6. In August 1963, about 250,000 people marched through Washington, DC. They did this to call attention to the unequal treatment of African Americans and to show their support for civil rights. At this march, King gave a powerful speech. He talked about his dream for the United States. He said that he very much wanted everyone, no matter what they looked like, to have equal rights.

Notes

In 1964, King became the youngest person to win a Nobel Peace Prize. This prize is awarded once a year to a person who has done great work to create peace. When he accepted his Nobel Prize, King gave a similarly powerful speech. He described how he believed that truth and love would conquer evil.

7. King's work helped the Civil Rights Act of 1964 get passed. The Civil Rights Act ended segregation in public places like schools. It also said that someone could not be turned down for a job based on their skin color, their religion, where they come from, or whether they are male or female. President John F. Kennedy first suggested the Civil Rights Act. Some lawmakers from the South were against it. However, Congress ultimately passed it. It was signed into law by the president who came after Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson. King and other civil rights leaders were there for the signing.

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