

MARTIN LUTHER KING

Young Martin did not understand. Why was his friend Warren not at the same school with him? He soon learned the answer. Warren was white, and Martin was black – and that meant different schools and different futures in the USA of the 1930s.

But as Martin grew up, he began to dream of a better future for black people – a future in which black people had better jobs, better schools, and could vote. And he wanted to change things peacefully, without bombs and deaths.

In 1964, Martin Luther King became the youngest person, the first black, and the second American to win the Nobel Peace Prize. He had made an extraordinary journey – but death was not far away . . .

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Martin Luther King



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1 The man from Alabama

In 1963 a black minister from a small town in Alabama in the South of the United States led a march of more than 250,000 people to Washington DC. There he made a speech that became famous. 'I have a dream,' he said. He dreamed of all the people of America, black and white, living together in peace and freedom. He said that all men and women should be equal. Many of the marchers cried as they listened to him. The minister's speech was shown on television all over the world, and he became a hero to millions of people who saw and heard the speech.

But there were also people who hated this man and his ideas. They did not want black people to be free. They did not want them to have equal rights. In 1968, less than five years after his famous speech, a white man shot him dead. The minister was only thirty-nine years old. When people heard of his death, there was much sadness, and people cried in the streets. But many people were very angry too, and there were riots in the big cities. In Chicago and Washington black people burned buildings and fought the police. Hundreds of black people were killed in these riots.

Fifteen years after his death, the government of the United States made his birthday a holiday. Today he is remembered as one of the greatest Americans of the twentieth century.

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Who was this man? Why did so many people love him? Why did others hate him?

The man from Alabama, the man who had a dream, was Martin Luther King. And the story of his life is the story of a people's fight for freedom.

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2

Growing up in the South

Martin Luther King was born on 15 January 1929 in Atlanta, Georgia. His father, who was also called Martin Luther King, was the minister in an Atlanta church. The King family were not poor. They lived in a good neighbourhood of Atlanta and they had enough money to live comfortably. When Martin thought about his early years in Atlanta, he remembered a loving family and friendly neighbours.

But the King family were black. Less than a hundred years before Martin Luther King was born, his people were slaves. Even in 1929 black people in the South of the United States did not have the same rights as white people. Blacks and whites lived in different worlds. When blacks travelled on buses, they had to sit at the back of the bus. They could not sit beside whites. Most restaurants did not sell food to black people. There were different schools for black children and white children. It was like this all over the South. Blacks and whites lived in the same places, but they were kept away from each other. This was called segregation.

‘Segregation is wrong, but things will get better in time,’ said Martin’s father. ‘White people will start to think differently one day. We should be patient and wait, because you can’t hurry change. It will come, but not soon. We have to wait for it.’

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Young Martin did not agree with his father. ‘If you want to change things, you have to act,’ he thought. He knew himself what segregation meant. When he was very small, he played with a little white boy across the street from his house. His friend’s name was Warren. When Martin started school, he looked for Warren, but he was not there. After school he went to Warren’s house and asked to play with him. The boy’s mother said that Martin could not play with Warren any more, because Martin was black and his friend was white.

When Martin came home that day, he was crying. He told his mother what had happened. ‘It doesn’t matter what other people think,’ she told him, ‘you’re as good as anyone else. Don’t you ever forget that!’

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Martin remembered his mother's words. He knew that she was right. He was as good as any white boy. But as he grew older, he saw how white people treated black people in Atlanta.

Once when he was in the centre of town, he walked into a white woman. It was an accident, but the white woman hit him on the face. When someone asked her why she had done this, the woman replied, 'That little black bastard stepped on my foot.' Martin's face hurt, but the name that she called him – 'little black bastard' – hurt him even more.

When he started high school at the age of eleven, Martin began to make speeches. Of course, he often spoke in church, but at school he talked about the need for change in the South. When Martin was fourteen years old, he won a prize for one of his speeches. He travelled to Washington with his teacher to get his prize, and they returned to Atlanta by bus. When a white man got on the bus, there were no empty seats, so the driver told Martin to get up and give the white man his seat. Martin refused. Why should he give his seat to this man? The bus driver became angry and called him bad names. Finally, Martin gave the white man his seat because he did not want to make trouble for his teacher. But he was angry. It was not fair that he had to stand while a white man sat in his seat. He did not want to hate white people, but sometimes it was hard *not* to hate them.

YOU HAVE REACHED THE END OF THE SAMPLE.

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