

Significant Prayer Event #8 Montgomery, Alabama, January 27th, 1956

*But if I say, "I will not mention him or speak any more in his name,"
His word is in my heart like a fire, a fire shut up in my bones.
I am weary of holding it in; indeed, I cannot.
I hear many whispering, "Terror on every side! Report him! Let's report him!"
All my friends are waiting for me to slip, saying,
"Perhaps he will be deceived; then we will prevail over him
and take our revenge on him."
But the LORD is with me like a mighty warrior;
so my persecutors will stumble and not prevail. **Jeremiah 20:9-11***

Dear Ones,

Thus far in these series of articles on the Significant Prayer Events in United States History, I have chosen prayers, prayer meetings, and calls to prayer that occurred in public. The next two prayer events that I set out to describe were intensely private events that nonetheless had profound effects on the course of the history of our country. Much of the material that follows is drawn from the Autobiography of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.



On December 1, 1955 Rosa Parks, a forty-two year old black department store clerk who also served as secretary to the Montgomery, Alabama, chapter of the NAACP, refused to give up her seat in the Colored section of a city bus to a White rider. The Black leaders of the city called for a boycott of the segregated bus system in Montgomery, beginning December 4, 1955. The following day fewer than twenty of these leaders met to form the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA) and elected as the MIA president the young pastor of Dexter Ave. Baptist Church, a newcomer to the city, the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. The election was a matter of moments, and it happened before Dr. King had any chance to reflect on what it meant to accept the nomination and election.

On December 5, 1955 no one could have predicted that the Montgomery Bus Boycott would drag out for more than a year and would be the opening battle in a struggle to bring about a non-violent revolution to transform American Society—the attempt to finally undo the legacy of slavery and to make good on the promises of the 13th, 14th, and 15th amendments to the Constitution. The demands that Dr. King and the MIA made at the beginning of the boycott sought not the ending of segregation in Montgomery, not even the end of segregated public transportation, but merely courteous and fair treatment of Negro passengers under segregation, and the possibility of Blacks being employed by the city bus company. The reaction of the city government to the boycott convinced King that “Justice and equality would never come while segregation

remained, because the basic purpose of segregation was to perpetuate injustice and inequality.”

The bus boycott became a mythical event. 75% of the riders on the buses were black, and they needed those buses to get to and from work. White leadership was confident that the boycott would soon be broken by that need. Black taxi companies stepped up to offer rides for the same 10 cent bus fair. City leaders then let it be known that by city statute it was illegal for taxis to charge less than 45 cents per ride. The black community responded by setting up a vast carpooling operation, marvelous in the speed and efficiency in which it came into being. It was aided by many Negroes who chose to walk, as a visible and public sign of solidarity, and by unsympathetic white housewives who, regardless of their feelings regarding segregation and unwilling to face the daily grind without their trusted and beloved Black domestic servants, drove to the Black sections of town every day to pick them up. Dr. King told of one such white woman who, having picked up her elderly servant (the matriarch of a large family), said to her “Isn’t this bus boycott terrible?” “Yes’m,” the older lady responded, “It sure is, and I just told all my young’uns that this kind of thing is white folks’ business and we just stay off the buses till they get this whole thing settled.” On January 22, 1956, the white city leaders announced in the newspapers that they had come to an agreement with several prominent Negro ministers. It was a trick to get Blacks back on the buses thinking that the boycott was over. The Black ministers in the community denounced the trick in their pulpits and then went around visiting all of the saloons and nightclubs to let non-churchgoers know the boycott was still on.

As tensions rose in the community, Dr. King became the focal point of white anger. Rumors were spread about him, the fact that he was a newcomer to the city and educated back east was used to discredit him, and threatening anonymous calls and letters poured into his home. In the face of such opposition, he steadfastly preached “Christian Love,” a concept derived from Jesus and later distilled by Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Ghandi into the doctrines of non-violent civil disobedience. These ideas would find their clearest written expression in King’s *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*, perhaps the single greatest piece of Christian literature coming from the United States in the second half of the 20th century (if you haven’t read it—do!).

The mayor announced a “get tough” policy with regard to the boycott, and the city police began hampering the car pool by arresting drivers for trivial traffic violations. Dr. King was one of those arrested. When he was loaded into a patrol car and it took off

in a direction that didn’t seem to be the direction of the county jail, King was gripped by fear—thinking that the officers might be driving him to a rendezvous with a lynch mob. He says that he was relieved to be thrown into a dark, stinking cell at the (also segregated) jail.



All of this wore on his commitment and resolve. Thinking that the idea that he was an “outsider” was discrediting his leadership, M.L. King offered his resignation to the MIA. It was unanimously rejected.

On the night of January 27, 1956, Martin and Coretta King retired late to bed. The phone rang just as he was drifting off. When he answered it, a voice growled, “Listen n---r, we’ve taken all we want from you; before next week

you'll be sorry you ever came to Montgomery." He had heard it before, but this time it was the straw that broke the camel's back.

Unable to sleep, Martin Luther King went to the kitchen to make coffee and tried to figure out a way to resign, to abandon Montgomery and the boycott, with some measure of dignity and grace. He began to pray: "Lord, I'm down here trying to do what's right. I think I'm right. I am here taking a stand for what I believe is right. But Lord, I must confess that I'm weak now, I'm faltering. I'm losing my courage. Now, I am afraid. And I can't let the people see me like this because if they see me weak and losing my courage, they will begin to get weak. 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 it alone."

Martin Luther King, Jr. came to his Christian faith by way of inheritance. He was the son and the grandson of preachers. His liberal education at Crozer Seminary and Boston University's School of Theology did not emphasize a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. He had not had a dramatic conversion experience.



He had one now. In his autobiography he says, "At that moment I experienced the presence of the Divine as I had never experienced Him before." He sensed Jesus speaking to him personally, telling him to continue his stand for Justice and promising to be with him always. The paralyzing fear never returned.

Three nights later the MIA celebrated a mass meeting. During the meeting a bomb was thrown through the window of the Kings' residence, and the front of the house was blown away. Coretta and baby Yolanda were inside.

When King arrived home he found them safe, and Coretta's calm calmed him. A crowd quickly gathered and became nasty when the police tried to clear the streets. Dr. King realized that many of the Black people present were armed, and ready to take matters into their own hands upon the police and upon the mayor, police commissioner and white reporters who had quickly arrived at the house.

In one of the many miraculous moments that convinced many civil rights leaders that the Lord Jesus was indeed personally present in their struggle, Dr. King defused an imminent riot. He told the crowd that he and his family were unhurt, and then said: "*We believe in law and order. Don't get panicky. Don't do anything panicky at all. Don't get your weapons. He who lives by the sword will perish by the sword. Remember that is what God said. We are not advocating violence. We want to love our enemies. I want you to love our enemies. Be good to them. Love them and let them know you love them. I did not start this boycott. I was asked by you to serve as your spokesman. I want it known the length and breadth of this land that if I am stopped this movement will not stop. If I am stopped our work will not stop. For what we are doing is right. What we are doing is just. And God is with us.*"

On November 13, 1956 the Supreme Court of the United States ruled that bus segregation is unconstitutional, although the bus boycott managed to reach its 1st anniversary since the court order ending segregation on Montgomery buses reached the city on December 20, 1956. It was the opening scene of an incredible drama that

included Albany, St. Augustine, Birmingham, Selma, and finally his tragic assassination in Memphis—a drama that forced the hand of the United States Congress into ending legalized segregation in the United States and extending the right to vote to African Americans in the South. Ultimately, political and social reality in the United States was transformed, driving the perennial struggle against racism in our country away from the political realm and into the realm of hearts and minds.



Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr was no model of perfection. All of his adult life he struggled to control his sexuality and lived with a crushing burden of guilt because of his failings both in that area and to his own ideal of loving nonviolence. But the Lord was indeed with him as He had promised to be at that kitchen table in Montgomery in 1956. When Dr. King was cut down by James Earl Ray's bullets on the balcony of the Loraine Motel on April 4, 1968, his death was that of a martyr, someone who by

grace had borne witness to the love of Jesus Christ to the end—and by his witness had altered the course of history.