

## INFINITE HOPE

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One week before Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated, he led a protest march in Memphis on behalf of striking sanitation workers. Jonathan Eig tells the story in his exhaustively researched and eloquently written new biography titled *King: A Life*. King had urged the strike's organizers to expand their demands to make Memphis the start of his national campaign to end poverty — an effort he called the Poor People's Campaign. King urged all the Black people in Memphis to stop working if the city refused to meet the strikers' demands.

This shift in scope transformed the strike from a union action into a racial protest. White city leaders and the FBI predicted that the protest march through central Memphis would turn into a riot, which it did. A Black street gang shattered windows, stores were looted, and dozens of people were injured. Police shot a 16-year-old Black youth and arrested more than 200 people.

"We are in serious trouble," King said in the aftermath of the riot. He feared his critics would denounce his nonviolent approach as ineffective and hypocritical, which they did. Newspapers across the country questioned King's ability to maintain nonviolence, and the main newspaper in Memphis said the riot had wrecked King's reputation as a leader.

Using recently-released source materials, including some of King's personal papers, Eig reports that King fell into a depression after the riot, and he talked about going on a hunger strike. He wondered if the leaders of the civil rights movement, which had become divided on the question of continuing nonviolence, would coalesce around his deathbed.

In the meantime, King announced to his staff several days later that he would postpone the Poor People's Campaign and instead return to Memphis and lead another march. King's senior staffers — Andrew Young and Jesse Jackson among them — pushed back against King's plan to return to Memphis, fearing that a repeat march would threaten the future of the movement and put King's life in peril. King reacted badly to this resistance, berated his team, and walked out. In response, his staff decided to divide their efforts, with some going to Memphis to plan another march and others remaining in Atlanta to promote the Poor People's Campaign.

On Wednesday, April 3, the day before King was assassinated, he flew back to Memphis, where he learned that the city had obtained a federal injunction banning him and his associates from leading any demonstrations for ten days. King dispatched six

lawyers to fight the order, and then he phoned his wife Coretta and said he would march whether the injunction was lifted or not.

That evening, King was scheduled to speak at a local church, but he asked his chief aide and close friend Ralph Abernathy to fill in for him, saying he felt sick and needed rest. Upon arriving at the hall, Abernathy phoned King and insisted that he come. “The people who are here want you, not me,” Abernathy said.

Eig describes King’s final speech of his life, which he delivered without notes during a raging thunderstorm, as “a mental flight through human history.” King spoke about the people of Israel and their escape from slavery in Egypt and about Greek philosophers, Roman emperors, and the Renaissance. He spoke about his namesake, Martin Luther, and Abraham Lincoln. He said that if God had given him a choice of living in one of these earlier times, each of which was fascinating in its own way, he would instead have chosen the time he was then living. Why? Because the people were crying out for freedom.

King concluded his speech on a personally ambiguous yet prophetically triumphant note. Most people would probably locate these well-known words in King’s “I Have a Dream” speech, which he delivered five years earlier in Washington DC. But he delivered them less than 24 hours before his death, amidst his despair about the future of his movement and the disarray of his leadership team.

King ended the speech by saying:

Well, I don’t know what will happen now. We’ve got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn’t matter with me now, because I’ve been to the mountaintop... And I’ve looked over. And I’ve *seen* the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land!

So I’m happy tonight! I’m not worried about *anything*! I’m not fearing *any* man! Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord!

Eig reports that the next day, on Thursday, King phoned his office in Atlanta to give them the title of the sermon he would preach at Ebenezer Baptist Church the following Sunday. He said the sermon would be titled “Why America May Go to Hell.”

At about 5 PM that afternoon in his room at the Lorraine Hotel, King received word that the judge had agreed to modify the injunction to permit a demonstration under certain conditions. King dressed for dinner, then shortly before 6 PM stepped out onto the second-floor balcony of his hotel room. He called down to some of his colleagues who had already assembled in the parking lot in preparation for going to dinner. One shot rang out, and an hour later, King was pronounced dead.

King’s premonition that he himself would not get to the Promised Land along with our nation turned out to be tragically correct. Nonetheless, he insisted, we as a

people will eventually get there. We will find our way out of the desert of inequality and injustice to the Promised Land of freedom and equality.

That's what he said, in any event. He obviously believed it needed to be true, but it's not entirely clear that he always believed it would be true. For myself, I'm intrigued by the sermon King never got to preach — the one he would've preached three days after he died: "Why America May Go to Hell."

When the United States of America initially took shape as a nation, its political, legal, and economic institutions were purpose-built to privilege white males of European descent and subordinate everyone else. In this sense, racism was the original sin of our nation, even as sexism was the original sin of the Judeo-Christian tradition. The challenge ever since has been to find redemption from these original sins, despite inevitable and at times intractable turmoil. There's no going around this turmoil. There's only through — a realization King recognized intellectually even as he came to understand its high cost existentially.

Eig puts King's realization this way: "He warned that materialism undermined our moral values, that nationalism threatened to crush all hope of universal brotherhood, that militarism bred cynicism and distrust. He saw a moral rot at the core of American life and worried that racism had blinded many of us to it. He called himself 'a victim of deferred dreams, of blasted hope.'"

Perhaps because of our collective blindness to the moral rot at the core of our nation, King chose the metaphor of an excruciatingly-long sojourn in the desert to describe the journey from the bondage of slavery to the promised land of freedom. Most people listening to King's last speech in Memphis the night before he died would have recognized the reference. The image of going up the mountain and looking over into the Promised Land comes from a story in the Hebrew Bible.

The prophet Moses had led the people of Israel out of slavery in Egypt and through a tortuous forty-year journey through the desert. They had finally reached the banks of the river Jordan, beyond which lay the land of Canaan, the Promised Land. Advance scouts had reported that the land was lush and fertile, flowing with milk and honey.

Moses desperately wanted to lead the people across the river, but God refused Moses' request, because Moses' faith had not always been steadfast in the past. Moses pleaded with God at least to allow him to see the Promised Land. God relented, the story says, and led Moses up to a mountain peak, from which he could see the land his people would soon inhabit.

I wonder what King saw as he looked over. I wonder what the Promised Land of freedom and equality looked like to him on that night in Memphis. Would he have had the audacity to dream that forty years hence — within what should have been his natural lifetime — a Black man would occupy the White House? Even if he did, he would also have foreseen the backlash that would follow. Like the journey of the Hebrew people

through the desert sands, the journey of our nation through the desert of inequality and injustice has seen countless obstructions and continual setbacks.

King's unpreached sermon title suggests that he remained fearful that our journey as a nation would end in the desert. I may not get to the Promised Land, he said, but his sermon title implies that our nation may not get there either. Would he consider the backlash against civil rights and other rights in recent years going to hell?

In theological terms, the sermon title indicates that the answer to whether America would end up in hell hasn't yet been determined. Maybe we will end up there, King says, but maybe we won't. In this way, King embraces the Baptist belief in freedom of the will and rejects the Calvinist doctrine of predestination. Our ultimate moral destination, on these terms, depends on the choices made by our citizens and our leaders as time passes and history unfolds.

No matter how dangerous the situation nor how daunting the circumstances, no matter how high the obstacles or how distant the goal, the possibility always exists for good people to unite in pursuit of freedom and equality. As King put it, we live in an "inescapable network of mutuality" that binds us all in "a single garment of destiny." Wherever we end up, we will end up there together.

The truth is that we are all God's children – children of love and children of light. Yes, we are all sinners – that's the human tragedy. But we all bear goodness within us and the possibility of change – that's the good news. In this world where sin persists and yet grace abounds, extraordinary things can happen. That's the dream. Someday it may even come true, which is why King insisted that "we must never lose infinite hope."

The hope King promoted wasn't limited by his individual ability to maintain an upbeat attitude. Rather, it emerged from his faith and in his reliance on the people around him, whose strength of purpose sustained him even when his own energies fell to a low ebb. Infinite hope rises not from a solitary source of resolve, but rather from a collective source of faith.

On this point, I close with a story Eig relates about a conversation between King and his wife Coretta.

One day, when [King] missed a flight, he told Coretta he had missed it because, deep down, he didn't want to make the trip.

"I get tired of going and not having any answers," he said.

"He had begun to take this very personally," Coretta recalled. She tried to boost his spirits. "You mustn't believe that people are losing faith in you," she said. "There are millions of people who have faith in you and believe in you and feel that you are our best hope." She added: "I believe in you, if that means anything."

"Yes," he said. "That means a great deal."

"Somehow, you've got to pull yourself out of this and go on," she said.

“I don’t have any answers,” he said.

“Well,” she said, “somehow the answers will come. I’m sure they will.”