possible for all of us to have eternal life. We thank you, oh God. And God grant that we will be grateful recipients of thy eternal blessings. In the name and spirit of Jesus, we pray. Amen.

At MLKC ET-20

The Rewards of Worship, Sermon Delivered at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church

[28 April 1957]
[Montgomery, Ala.]

King encourages his congregation to appreciate participation in communal worship. He highlights several rewards of worship: it elevates participants beyond the dull monotony of life, it satisfies the human need for companionship, and it provides the resources to face life's difficulties. "I'm so glad when ever Sunday morning comes about, and I can hear something within saying, 'Let us go into the house of the Lord,' because sometimes I get a little arrogant out in the world," King proclaims.

"But when I get up enough nerve to come to the house of God, it comes out in my soul and my conscience begins to ring out. And something says to me that 'You're made for the everlasting, born for the stars, created for eternity.'" The following text was taken from an audio recording of the service.

"I was glad when they said unto me, Let us go into the house of the Lord." Dr. [William Ernest] Hocking, a former professor of philosophy at Harvard University, has said somewhere that all life is divided into work and worship. What we do ourselves and what we let the higher-than-ourselves do. Worship is as much a part of the human organism as the rising of the sun is to the cosmic order. Men always have worshiped, and men always will worship. This has been true in every nation, it has been true in every age, it has been true in every culture. Men find themselves unconsciously worshiping God. Buddhism, a religion theoretically without a god, would give one the impression that it is devoid of worship, but if you go into any land today where Buddhism is present, you will find worship also present. You will remember centuries ago that Confucius urged his followers not to worship and not to be concerned about the gods. But as soon as Confucius died, his followers deified him, and today hundreds and thousands of people worship Confucius.

If you will wander across the borders of Christianity into the plains of Mohammed.

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1. This recording was dated according to an audio inventory of the Martin Luther King, Jr., Library and Archive at the King Center in Atlanta, Georgia.
2. Psalm 122:1
3. Fosdick, Successful Christian Living, pp. 173-174. "Professor Hocking is right in saying that all man's life can be reduced to two aspects, work and worship—what we do ourselves, and what we let the higher than ourselves do to us."
anism, you will discover there men and women praying five times a day. Just the other
day, Mrs. King and I were in Kano, Nigeria, which is a Muslim town, and we spent a
day and a night there and went around that town. And it was an interesting thing to
notice the people as they ran back and forth to the temple. They call it the mosque.
And we were out sightseeing one day, and the young man who was driving for us dis-
appeared, and we asked the guide what happened to him. And he said, "He's gone
over to pray. And this is our custom—that five times a day we go to the mosque to
pray."

This seems to be the elemental function, or rather the elemental longing, of
human nature. This quest and this desire to somehow be attached to something
beyond self. And this isn't only true of the so-called religious man. Every man wor-
ships. It isn't only true of the man who is a devotee to Christianity or Mohammedan-
ism or Sikhism or Hinduism or Jainism or Buddhism or any of the great religions
of the world. It is true even of the so-called irreligious man. Voltaire was right, that if a
man can't find God, he'll make him a god. And somehow, no man can be satisfied
with the sheer longing and worship of self. There must be something beyond self
because there is this inner drive and this inner urge for some power outside. Men
may be atheists philosophically, but they can never be psychologically. And even if
a man disbelieves in God in the top of his mind, he inevitably believes in God in the
bottom of his heart because there is something within the very psychological
makeup of human nature that demands a god. And if man can't find the legitimate
God of the ages, he makes him one. It might be some abstract something out here
that he calls humanity. It might be something that he calls communism. But pretty
soon he gets his relics and his saints, and he bows down before [Joseph] Stalin and
Lenin [Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov] and [Karl] Marx and somebody else because there
is that basic drive and that basic urge that cries out for the eternal and something
beyond self. Man is innately religious, man worships unconsciously.

But the important thing is to be sure that the worship drive is directed into the
proper channel. That is the thing that we must always be concerned about—that
our worship drive is directed into the proper channel so that we must be sure that
we worship nothing short of the eternal God of the universe. And so many men
have found themselves directing their worship instincts into improper, illegitimate
channels. And they have ended up frustrated and disillusioned because their god
wasn't big enough. Their god was a little too small.

And so this morning, I'm thinking in terms of a worship that is directed into the
proper channel and the type of worship that does something to the soul. I'm think-
ing of the type of worship that is directed towards the eternal God whose purpose
changes not. And it is this type of worship that is very rewarding. It is this type of wor-
ship that the Psalmist was talking about. I'm sure, when he said, "I was glad when
they said unto me, 'Let us go into the house of the Lord,'" for the kind of worship
that I'm talking about is a rewarding worship and he was glad to get to it. It has all

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4 Following his trip to Ghana, King visited Nigeria 12–14 March 1957.
5 Voltaire, *Épîtres a l'auteur du livre des "Trois Imposteurs"* (1877). "If God did not exist, it would be nec-
essary to invent him."
of the rewards that come to the point of making life meaningful. It lifts us above something to something higher.

And I want you to think with me on the rewards of worship when it is directed into the proper channel. What does it do? So many of us worship God in diverse ways, ways that really have no basic meaning. And we get nothing out of it, and we begin to wonder why. It is because we aren't worshiping properly. You see, worship is not entertainment, for instance, and so often we have made worship merely a sort of passing state of entertainment. Oh, I go into so many places. How easy do we face the temptation of making worship merely a state of entertainment? How many preachers of the gospel go into the pulpit more concerned about the volume of their voices and how they can twist their moan to the point of entertaining the people? How much of our music has been relegated to a sort of gospel bebop where men do not get the real quality of religion but they are thrown out to a sort of secular, meaningless, jazzy type of thing that throws God out on the periphery of life? That isn't real music. That isn't real religion. That isn't real worship. It's merely entertainment.

Oh, we are not supposed to enjoy church. We are supposed to appreciate it. We enjoy entertainment, we enjoy a show. And I realize that so often our worship services degenerate into a sort of show, a sort of ecclesiastical circus where men merely show themselves off with their secular methods that have no meaning. That isn't worship. Men wonder why they don't get anything out of it. It is because it is a merely an arena of entertainment. Also, worship is not a state of cold, abstract dignity where men come to reveal what they do not know, thinking that they know. It is not a place where we come to show ourselves but we come to unfold ourselves to the Almighty God and to the ever-flowing power of His grace. And so many of us have made religion and the church little more than a sort of secular social club with a thin veneer of religiosity. And it becomes a sort of cold religion, devoid of all of the fire and power and passion and fervor that goes with real worship. So worship is neither entertainment nor is it cold, abstract, meaningless dignity. Worship is the everlasting, eternal cry for the eternal and almighty God. Worship is something of man's quest for the eternal and his communion with the Almighty. And only then is it meaningful. It has its rewards when it comes to that point.

Now, what are some of the these rewards of worship that I'm trying to think about this morning? I think the first reward of worship is that it lifts one above the dull monotony of life. That is what worship does at its best. It is one of the best forms of escape. We are always trying to find ways to escape the monotony of life. We're always trying to run from the dullness and the dull problem of sameness, and we use so many methods to do this. Some people run out into a mad world of pleasure. Some people get themselves involved and involved in the round and round of existence, trying to get away from it. But religion comes out and says that worship is the best channel. It is the best means of escape from the dull monotony of life, and every man needs this, every woman needs this. Oh, so often life is a sort of round of

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6 King also preached on the merits of “true” worship in “Worship at Its Best,” Sermon at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, 14 December 1958, pp. 349–351 in this volume.
going to work to make the money, to buy the bread, to gain the strength to go back to work. And oh, how tiring that can be, just going around in a circle, working, making money, going back to work, making more money. And life becomes somewhat monotonous. It becomes a dull round of sameness. And there is something tiring, there is something tiring and dull about it. There is something monotonous, and it can even become frustrating.

And oh, I’m so glad when Sunday comes around. And I’m so glad when it is said to me, “Let us go into the house of the Lord.” For this is the moment that this dull round can be broken and I can forget about making a living and all of the problems that surround life and come into the house of God and gain a little bread, a little spiritual bread that is much more powerful than that physical or material bread that we work so hard to gain. You see, after all, the acquisitive desires of human nature are insatiable. And the more you get, the more you want. And life loses its full meaning because we get out in here trying to satisfy our desires and then we satisfy our desires and then more desires crop up. We get a thousand dollars, and we want five thousand. We get five thousand, and we want ten thousand. And then we get a million, and we want two million. And we get two million, and we want five million. And there is that round of life. These acquisitive desires of human nature finding themselves insatiable. And all of this becomes dull and monotonous. There needs to be something to bring us to balance, and that is what worship does. Worship lifts us above the round, the dull round, if you please, of existence and places us in tune with the infinite. And it is a beautiful break. Haven’t you seen people in life work all the time? All the time. And they get so busy that nothing counts but their work. They work all the time, and all the time, and they kill their health. They kill their everything. They kill their internal being. And they never find time to break off from the chain of work and come into the house of God, not realizing that by coming into house of God every Sunday it gives them a little more power to do the work a little better. But they get so involved in the chain of existence and making a living and producing a record and producing this within the working routine, that life loses something. And oh, those persons walk the streets of life with a dull meaningless existence, and they begin to wonder why. It is because they only fulfill one side of the great polar, the great pendulum of life which swings between work and worship. They begin to worship, and their worship becomes their work. It is not this legitimate work which moves over from the worship, but work itself becomes worship. But worship at its best breaks us loose from that, and it gives us a power to go back once more and pick up the work and keep going. It lifts us above the dull round of monotonous sameness, and it gives us something that makes us one with the infinite. And gives us renewed power and strength to carry on. That is one of the great rewards of worship.

Not only that, worship provides the most thorough channel of fellowship that we can ever find. There is always the desire in human life for fellowship, and worship provides that in a way that we find it nowhere else. It provides the most thorough avenue of fellowship that we can find anywhere. [Motorcycle is heard in background] Don’t worry about the motorcycle, we’re having worship in here. We’re trying to worship now. You see, that’s what I’m talking about. The motorcycles have taken us away from worship. Worship somehow provides for us the channels of fellowship that we can find nowhere else, and this is something that life needs so much. We go all of the week, and we’re involved in our work, we are involved in all of these.
things of life that we must do to make our living. And somehow we need to break away from that and forget about all of that and come to a point where we become united with God. And that's what worship does, you see. It provides fellowship to the highest degree.

Now somebody says to me, "I'm sure that that is true and we don't have to go to church to worship. We can worship at home. We can turn on the radio. They have sermons on the radio on Sunday. And there are many experiences that we can have at home and out in the regulars, the avenues of life that will provide as much worship as we can get at church." Well, I agree that it's true we can worship at home in some form, we can worship outside in some form. No one can look at the beauties of nature and fail to worship, if that person has any type of sensitive capacity for the divine. And one looks at the beauty of the sunset. And one notices the beautiful stars as they bedeck the heavens. And one notices the clouds and the skies with all of their radiant beauty. And one listens to a Wagnerian opera or a Beethoven symphony. One has to worship if one has any sense of the urgency of the divine. I grant you that.

But my friends, these, none of these can be substitutes for going into the house of God and worshiping God there. Why? Because worship at its best is a social experience where men come together in a deep sense of fellowship and where they forget themselves, where they forget their offices, where they forget their life's work and come here and meet the divine, and this is the beauty of worship. And at its best, men come and realize that they are the children of a common father. This is the one place where we come and forget our degrees. And we come and forget our, the fact that we are Professor This or Dr. That or Attorney This or Mr. This. This is the one place where we come before God and forget our stations in life. It provides the best channel of fellowship, where men of all levels of life come together in a sense of unity and oneness. And they come to see that they are not doctors here. They come to see that they are not lawyers here. They come to see that they are not Ph.D.'s here, but they are all children of a common father. And worship brings us together where we somehow forget our external attachments. And I'm so glad when Sunday comes. Don't have to worry about tides. Don't have to worry about all of these things that we have in the external world that makes for our positions and our prestige and our this-and-that. This is where we come and bow before the Almighty God and forget these things because before God they aren't important anyway.

The important thing is that we are united and one with Him. And as one great Lord said as he wandered into the Church of England and the ushers moved along and tried to make the way clear and find a special seat, and he looked over to the usher and said, "No, don't do this, for there are no lords here." And that is what the house of God means, that there is no special person there, but that all men come before the throne of God and realize something that makes them one. And this is the rewarding aspect of it. We are not rich here. We are not poor here. We are not educated here. We are not uneducated here. We are not young here. We are not old.

7. King refers to nineteenth-century German composers Richard Wagner and Ludwig van Beethoven.
here. But we are all one in Christ Jesus. And worship gives us that leveling reality
that makes our lives united with our brothers because our lives are united with God.
It provides that for us. [recording interrupted] It brings us into relationship with that
which is better than the best that we have in ourselves, and thereby, it provides us
with a spiritual humility that we need to live life at its best.

You see, when we are moving around in everyday life, we have nothing to compare
ourselves to but our brothers and sisters round about us. And in so many
instances, we are a little better than they are. Sometimes our morals are better,
sometimes our characters are better. And that gives us a sense of arrogance some-
times, a sense of spiritual pride. And we look over here and say, “I’m so glad that I’m
not like other men. I thank God that I’m not like these people.” That’s what happens
when we just live from Monday to Saturday because we see so many people
that we are a little better. We are not drunkards. We do not indulge in the things
that our society considers bad. And so we are better than they are on the basis of
societal norms. But then we come to the church of God on Sunday. And the norm
of comparison is no longer our brother beside us, but the norm of comparison
becomes the life and the teachings and the principles of Jesus Christ. And we dis-
cover there that there is something wrong in our souls. There is something that
causes us to cry out when we walk into the church. [recording interrupted] “God of
love, be merciful unto me a sinner.” Out in life you cried, “Thank God that I’m not
like other men,” but when you come in here you discover that you’re a sinner
because your norm of comparison is different. Out in the world, you compare your-
selves with the mundane agencies, with your brothers and sisters round about you.
But when you come in here, you discover that there is a tragic gap between the
“oughtness” and the “isness.” You discover that there is a tragic gap between what
you actually are and what you know that you ought to be. You discover when you
come in here that your best self is separated from that other self, that worse self.
And you see there something of a civil war within dividing you up, making you schiz-
ophrenic, making you split up against yourself. That’s what happens when you
come here. And no man is ever at his best until he stands over and over again in the
face of his better best, that which is better than his best. And that is what happens
when you come here.

The house of God provides you with a norm of comparison which far outdis-
tances that norm which you discover in everyday life. You begin to sit down before
the Almighty and discover what you’re made for. We forget out in life, don’t we? We
move around every day, and it’s so easy for us to forget. We forget what we are made
for because our lives are so bent on the earthly, so bent on those things which pass
by in everyday life, and we so easily forget. Then when somebody cries out to us,
“Let us go into the house of the Lord,” there is something there that reminds
Every now and then, we discover. Every now and then, we hear something calling us
to the hills. Every now and then, something cries out in our souls for the peaks.

8 Cf Luke 18:11
9 Cf Luke 18:13
10 Cf Reinhold Niebuhr, Beyond Tragedy, pp 137–138
11 Fosdick, On Being a Real Person, p 52
Every now and then, we begin to breathe the stars. Every now and then, we discover that we are made for eternity. And this is what the church does for us. This is what the house of God does. It reminds us that we are not made for the valleys and the plains, but we are made for the hills and the mountains and the peaks. And when we go into the house of God, that truth comes ringing out to us with new meaning. It comes over and over again.

And so I'm so glad whenever Sunday morning comes about, and I can hear something within saying, "Let us go into the house of the Lord," because sometimes I get a little arrogant out in the world. I think I'm a pretty good fellow. And I move around the streets of life and see so many things that I don't do and I'm proud about it, but then I come into the house of God and discover that I'm not so good after all. And that there are so many areas that I could improve in. And something cries out saying, "King, you are not made for the plains, but you are made for the mountains. You are not made for the far country, but you're made for your Father's house." And so long as I stay out in the world, I miss that. But when I get up enough nerve to come to the house of God, it cries out in my soul and my conscience begins to ring out. And something says to me that "You're made for the everlastung, born for the stars, created for eternity." That is what worship does. It throws you in relationship to the best that reality offers, and your norm of comparison becomes greater than all of the things that you can find in everyday life.

There is a final thing. And it is a great thing. Worship provides us with the strength and the power to face the most difficult situations of life. It gives us hope amid despair. It gives us something to keep us going and it gives us something to cause us to smile while other men all around are falling down in despair. Worship gives us that. And that's one of the great things about it. And we need this more than anything else.

Sometimes, my friends, you feel like this—that you don't need God. Life is beautiful. It's something like the launching of a ship. That ship stands there getting ready to pull out. And you notice the bands, the cheering and enthusiastic crowds. And they stand there with all of the beauty, the flags very high. This is the beginning, and everything is beautiful. But before that ship reaches its last harbor, it will be faced with long, drawn-out storms, howling and jostling winds, and tempestuous seas that make the heart stand still. And I say to you, life is like that. And before you reach the last harbor of life, you will be forced to stand amid the surging moment of life's restless sea. The chilly winds of adversity will blow all around you. The jostling winds of despair will be in the midst of you. And if you don't have a little something on the inside, you won't be able to make it. Religion gives you something on the inside to stand up.

And I think that's what it means at bottom. Religion never has guaranteed, it doesn't promise you that you aren't going to have any trouble in life, any trials and tribulations. You have a misconception of religion. That's a sort of escape religion. That's the sort of religion that becomes what the Marxists would call the opiate of

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12 Meek, "Strength in Adversity. A sermon preached in the Old South Church in Boston," 19 April 1953. "It is a misunderstanding and a misinterpretation of Christianity to imagine that Christianity's promise is that it will free us from life's crises." King filed a copy of Meek's homily in his sermon file.
the people. \(^{13}\) That's the sort of religion that moves away from the realities of life, but religion at its best has never said that. Oh, there are some preachers who write their books on a guide to confident living. And they produce their "How" cards. And they tell you just the formula to follow and everything will work out all right. And they will talk about the power of positive thinking. \(^{14}\) And religion becomes a sort of shadowy sort of thing, it becomes a thing that escapes the realities of life. It's a sort of "How," and so the Gospel is a sort of "Go ye into all of the world, and keep your blood pressure down, and I will teach you how to relax." \(^{15}\) That's all the Gospel is for these people, but that isn't the Gospel. Religion has a cross in it, and it says that before you can get to Easter you must go by way of Good Friday. That's religion at its best. It has never guaranteed that you wouldn't have the cross. Yes, there is a crown you wear, but before that there is a cross you bear. Religion says that at its best, but it says also that if you are sufficiently committed to God and His way you gain the power and the strength to stand up amid any condition that comes. And men through the ages have been able to prove that. And no matter how great the problems were, if they had faith in God, they were able to stand up.

And I know some of you this morning looking at me, some of you have experienced that. I know there have been moments that you went into life and stood before the universe thinking that you couldn't make it. Some great problem came before you, some disappointing experience, something that took away from you the best that you wanted, and you just felt that you couldn't make it. You didn't know how you were going to make it. Somehow you got enough strength and enough courage to get up on Sunday morning and run by the church of God. You got there, and you heard the sweet music of eternity. You heard a word from the scripture. You heard something from the lips of the Almighty God, and that gave you new strength and new power to carry on. "I was glad when they said unto me, 'Let us go into the house of God,'" because there is something in the house of God that gives us power and strength to stand up amid all of the tragic and difficult experiences of life.

Oh, you know the story of William Cowper, the great hymn writer, the story of how he wrote that great hymn, "God Moves in a Mysterious Way." It's said that one day he got tired, decided that he wanted to give up. Life had lost something of its meaning to him, and he had had a disappointing experience, and he didn't want to face life any longer. And in the midst of this, his emotions ran wild, and he decided to commit suicide. It's said that he walked down the banks of the Seine River in Paris, and there he stood with one foot on the bank and one foot across, getting ready to jump in the river. As he stood there, he could hear within a voice saying, "Don't jump. Don't jump." And so he decided, "Well, I'll do it another way." And he decided to go over and get a cup and drink some poison, and this would be the thing that would destroy his life in a little or no time. And he got the cup, and he

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13 Karl Marx, "Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right: Introduction" (1844)
14 King refers to Norman Vincent Peale's book The Power of Positive Thinking (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1952)
15 King parodies Matthew 28:19–20 "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you, and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen."
decided to drink the poison, but as he put the cup to his lips there was something saying, "Don’t drink Don’t drink"

And though he was about to give up in all types of despair and do everything, he said, "What can I do now?" And he ran on home and he said, "I know what I can do I can end it very quickly I’ll get a pistol, and I’ll shoot a bullet through my skull, and that will end it very quickly." And he went home, and he got his pistol And he put it there and he started to shoot, but there was something in, within saying, "Don’t shoot Don’t shoot" And here he stood, wanting to die, wanting to take his life, and yet there is something saying, "Don’t do it!" His conscience is beating him, something is gripping him Wanting to die, yet he can’t die

And he decided to just walk the streets It is said that as he walked the street in the solemn quietness of the night he walked by one of the great cathedrals of Paris And just out of curiosity he decided to go in, and he heard some singing in there And then after getting in there for a few moments, he saw a man mount the throne, and he started talking about the man who could make a way out of no way He heard him talking about the man of Galilee who could transform darkness into light He heard him talking about one who was the light amid all of the dark moments of life He heard him talking about one who was the way, the truth, and the life

And it is said that Cowper at that moment gained a new courage, he gained new strength And he walked out on the outside of that great cathedral and took a seat on the steps And there under the glaring light of the night he scratched across the pages of history some great words, as if to say, I know why I couldn’t drink that poison I know why I couldn’t jump in that river I know why I couldn’t shoot that gun It is because

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\begin{align*}
\text{God moves in a mysterious way,} \\
\text{His wonders to perform,} \\
\text{He plants His footsteps in the sea} \\
\text{And rides above the storm} \\
\text{Judge not the Lord in feeble sense} \\
\text{But judge Him by His grace,} \\
\text{Behind the crowning providence} \\
\text{He hides a smiling face}\end{align*}
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That’s what worship does It helps us to adjust to the most difficult experiences of life And so let us go out this morning, glad that men said to us, glad that somebody said to us this morning, “Let us go into the house of the Lord I was glad when they said unto me, Let us go into the house of the Lord”

Oh God, our gracious Heavenly Father, we thank Thee for the privilege above all privileges, and that is the privilege to worship Thee Grant that we will never misuse worship, that we will direct it in the proper channel and receive all of the great

\[\text{16 Cf John 14:6 17 Cowper wrote the hymn "God Moves in a Mysterious Way" in 1774 and composed the anti-slavery poem "The Negro’s Complaint" (1788), which King often quoted}\]
5 June 1957 rewards that come as a result of our kneeling before Thee in humble submission and worshiping Thee throughout the whole wide world. In the name and spirit of Jesus, we pray Amen.

At MLK EC ET-62

"The Most Durable Power,"
Excerpt from Sermon at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church on 6 November 1956

5 June 1957
Chicago, Ill

Always be sure that you struggle with Christian methods and Christian weapons. Never succumb to the temptation of becoming bitter. As you press on for justice, be sure to move with dignity and discipline, using only the weapon of love. Let no man pull you so low as to hate him. Always avoid violence. If you succumb to the temptation of using violence in your struggle, unborn generations will be the recipients of a long and desolate night of bitterness, and your chief legacy to the future will be an endless reign of meaningless chaos.

In your struggle for justice, let your oppressor know that you are not attempting to defeat or humiliate him, or even to pay him back for injustices that he has heaped upon you. Let him know that you are merely seeking justice for him as well as yourself. Let him know that the festering sore of segregation debilitates the white man as well as the Negro. With this attitude you will be able to keep your struggle on high Christian standards.

Many persons will realize the urgency of seeking to eradicate the evil of segregation. There will be many Negroes who will devote their lives to the cause of freedom. There will be many white persons of good will and strong moral sensitivity who will dare to take a stand for justice. Honesty impels me to admit that such a stand will require willingness to suffer and sacrifice. So don't despair if you are condemned and persecuted for righteousness' sake. Whenever you take a stand for truth and justice, you are liable to scorn. Often you will be called an impractical idealist or a dangerous radical. Sometimes it might mean going to jail. If such is the case you must honorably grace the jail with your presence. It might even mean physical death. But if physical death is the price that some must pay to free their