Unfulfilled Hopes

[5 April 1959]
[Montgomery, Ala.]

King draws on themes from Frederick Meek's homily "Strength in Adversity." In an audio recording of the sermon, King expounds on these ideas using the story of the Apostle Paul's "blasted hopes and shattered dreams." He reflects on attending Little Rock Central High School's 1958 commencement exercises and describes the "creative" and "dynamic will" of African Americans who have known the challenges of slavery and racism. "Out of these black men and these black women came something that keeps the generations going," King remarks, "If they had turned to the first method of bitterness, it wouldn't have come. If they had withdrawn and turned to silent hate, it wouldn't have come."

The Martin Luther King, Jr. Papers Project

Unfulfilled Hopes, Sermon outline

I. Our sermon today brings us face to face with one of the most persistent realities in human experience. Very few people are privileged to live life with all of their dreams realized and all of their hopes fulfilled. Who has not had to face the agony of blasted hopes and shattered dreams?

II. We may turn back to the life of the Apostle Paul and find a very potent exam-
people of this problem of unfulfilled hopes. In the Fifteenth Chapter of his letter to the Christians at Rome, Paul writes this “When I take my journey into Spain, I will come unto you.” It was one of Paul’s greatest hopes to go to Spain, the edge of the then known world, [strikeout illegible] where he could further spread the Christian gospel. And on his way to Spain, he planned to visit Rome, that valiant group of Christians in the city of Rome, the capital city of the world. He looked forward to the day that he would have personal fellowship with those people whom he greeted in his letter as “Christians in the household of Caesar.” The more he thought about it, the more his heart exuded with joy. All of his attention now would be turned toward the preparation of carrying the gospel to the city of Rome with its many gods, and to Spain, the end of the then known world.

But notice what happened to this [glowing?] dream and this promising hope which gripped Paul’s life. Paul never got to Spain, did get to Rome. He never went there only as a prisoner and not as a free man. He spent his days in that ancient city in a little prison cell, held captive because of his daring faith in Jesus Christ. And Paul was never able to walk the dusty roads of Spain, or to see its curvaceous slopes, or watch its busy coast life, because he died a martyr’s death in Rome before his hope could be fulfilled. The story of Paul’s life was the tragic story of blasted hopes and unfulfilled dreams.

This is the persistent story of life. There is hardly anyone here this morning who has not set out for some distant Spain, some momentous goal, some glorious realization, only to find that he had to settle for far less. We were never able to walk as free men through the streets of our Rome. Instead we were [forced?] to live our lives in a little confining cell which circumstance had built around us.

III What does one do under such circumstances

3 Romans 15:24
4 Cf. Philippians 4:22
5 Meek, “Strength in Adversity” “Paul had high hopes of going to Spain, the edge of the then known world, that he might take there his word about the Christian Gospel. And on the way he planned to visit the Christian folk in Rome, the capital city of the world. Paul wanted to see that valiant group of Christians, folk whom he saluted in his letter as ‘Christians in the household of Caesar.’ The more he thought about his planned journey, the more his heart was warmed by it. Imagine, Rome with its many gods and with its great power, subject to the Christian Gospel.”
7 Meek, “Strength in Adversity” “Paul did get to Rome, but he went as a prisoner and not as a free man. Paul lived in Rome at the expense of the Roman government in a prison cell, held captive because of his faith. And Paul never saw the mountains and the plains and the coast life of Spain, because he died a martyr’s death before the hope of his mission could ever be fulfilled.” Someone other than King wrote the word “martyr’s” next to the misspelled word “mytres.”
8 Meek, “Strength in Adversity” “How many of us in one way or another have dreamed our dreams of going to Spain, of fulfilling some far reaching hope, of doing valiantly for a great cause. But we never reached the Spain of our dreams. We had to settle for a far shorter journey. We were never able to wander freely about the streets of our Rome. Instead, we looked out through the little windows of some confining cell which the circumstances of life had built around us.”
a It is quite possible for one to seek to solve this problem by making everything and everybody atone for one's predicament. All of their frustration are distilled into a core of bitterness that expresses itself in hardness of attitude and a total mercilessness. They take out their disappointment on someone else. You have seen people like that:

(1) cruel to their mate
(2) inhuman to children
In short they are mean:

(a) they are bitter
(b) They are cynical
(c) they are loveless
(D) They find fault in everything and everybody. They always complain. They have a demoniacal grudge against life. 9

b Some people try to deal with the problem by withdrawing completely into themselves

c The final alternative is creative. It involves the exercise of a great and creative will. 10

Unfulfilled Hopes, Sermon Delivered at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church

Our sermon today brings us face to face with one of the most persistent realities in human experience. Very few people are privileged to live life with all of their dreams realized and all of their hopes fulfilled. Who here this morning has not had to face the agony of blasted hopes and shattered dreams? 8

One of the best examples of this problem is found in the life of the Apostle Paul. In the fifteenth chapter of the Book of Romans, which we read in the scripture lesson for the morning, we find Paul writing these words to the Roman Christians: “Whenever I go into Spain, I will come unto you.” In other words, “Whenever I go to Spain, I will stop by to see you.” This was one of the high hopes of Paul’s life, the desire to go to Spain, the edge of the then known world, and carry the gospel of Jesus Christ to that distant land. And on his way to Spain he would stop by to see the Christians in Rome, the capital city of the world. He looked forward to the day that he would have personal fellowship with that little group of people that he referred to in the greetings of his letter as “Christians in the household of Caesar.” This was his great hope. This was his great dream. And all of his life now would be turned

9 Thurman, Deep River, p. 37. "It is quite possible to become obsessed with the idea of making everything and everybody atone for one’s predicament. All one’s frustrations may be distilled into a core of bitterness and disillusionment that expresses itself in a hardness of attitude and a total mercilessness—in short, one may become mean. You have seen people like that. They seem to have a demoniacal grudge against life." King paraphrased this text on the verso of a 12 October 1960 letter from Coretta Scott King to Velma Hall.

10 King added this final section (beginning with Roman numeral III) in a second pen.