"God will take care of you, through every day,
"O're all the way.
He will take care of you,
God will take care of you."

{But helpless pieces of the game he plays upon this chequer Board of Nights and
days.}

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44 King quotes Evilla D. Martin’s hymn “God Will Take Care of You” (1904)
45 Khayyám, Rubáiyát, LXIX

The Martin Luther King, Jr. Papers Project
Draft of Chapter XIII, “Our God Is Able”

[July 1962—March 1963]
[Atlanta, Ga]

King reminds his readers that “God is able to subdue all the powers of evil” and
that “evil does not have the final word.” As examples of this, King discusses the
dissintegration of colonialism in Africa and Asia and the slow but sure decline of
legal segregation in this country, noting that they “represent the passing of a system
that was born in injustice, nurtured in inequality and raised in exploitation.” He
accounts a transformative experience from the bus boycott during a night when, he
admits, “I was ready to give up.” As King prayed for guidance, he heard “the quiet
assurance of an inner voice saying ‘Stand up for righteousness, stand up for
truth, and God will be at your side forever.’” King preached a version of this
sermon during the early days of the Montgomery bus boycott.

“Now unto Him that is able to keep you from falling” Jude 1:24

At the center of the Christian faith is the conviction that there is a God of Power
in the universe who is able to do exceedingly abundant things in nature and history.
This conviction is stressed over and over again in the Old and New Testaments.

Theologically, it is expressed in the doctrine of the omnipotence of God. The God
that we worship is not a weak and incompetent God. He is able to beat back gigan-

1 King, “Our God Is Able,” 1 January 1956, pp. 243–246 in this volume
2 Meek, “Our God Is Able, A sermon preached in the Old South Church in Boston,” 4 January 1953
3 Meek, “Our God Is Able.” “Believe me, it is not a weak God, it is not an incompetent God with
Whom we have to deal.”

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tuc waves of opposition and bring low prodigious mountains of evil. The ringing cry of the Christian faith is that God is able.

There are those who would seek to convince us that only man is able. This desperate attempt to substitute a man-centered universe for a God-centered universe is not exactly new. It had its beginning in the sixteenth century with the coming of the Renaissance and the so-called Age of Reason. Gradually man came to feel that God was an unnecessary item on the agenda of life. Then came the Industrial Revolution in England. This revolution brought certain gadgets and contrivances into being which further convinced man that God was irrelevant. And so the laboratory began to replace the church, and the scientist became a substitute for the prophet. The whole chorus of modernity joined, with Swinburne, in the singing of a new song “Glory to man in the highest! for man is the master of things.”

The devotees of the new man-centered religion pointed to the spectacular advances of modern science as justification for their faith. Through science and technology man has assiduously enlarged his body. Through the telescope and television he has enlarged his eyes. Through the telephone, radio, and microphone he has strengthened his voice and ears. Through the automobile and airplane he has lengthened his legs. Through the wonder drugs he has prolonged his life. Pointing to these amazing achievements, numerous people contended that only man was able.

But alas! Something has happened to shake the faith of those who made the laboratory “the new cathedral of men’s hopes.” The instruments that they yesterday worshiped as gods today contain cosmic death, and there is the danger that all of us will be plunged into the abyss of annihilation. No, man is not able to save himself or the world, and unless he is guided by God’s spirit his new-found scientific power will be transformed into a devastating Frankenstein that will bring his earthly life to ashes.

There are other forces that at times cause all of us to question the ableness of God. When we notice the stark and colossal reality of evil in the world—that something that Keats calls “the giant agony of the world,”—when we notice the long ruthlesslessness of floods and tornadoes wiping away people as if they were weeds in an open field, when we behold ills like insanity falling on some individuals at birth leaving them living their days in a tragic cycle of meaninglessness, when we experience the madness of war and the barbarity of man’s inhumanity to man; we find ourselves asking why do all of these things occur if God is able to prevent

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4 In the published version of this sermon the phrase “this desperate” was replaced by the word “their” (King, Strength to Love, p 101)

5 The preceding two sentences were altered in the published version “It had its modern beginnings in the Renaissance and subsequently in the Age of Reason, when some men gradually came to feel that God was an unnecessary item on the agenda of life” (p 101)

6 The preceding two sentences were combined and the phrase “This revolution brought certain gadgets and contrivances into being which further convinced man that” was replaced by “others questioned whether” in the published version (p 101)

7 King quotes the final line of Algernon Charles Swinburne’s poem “Hymn of Man” (1871). In the published version the phrase “the whole chorus of modernity” was replaced by “not a few” (p 101)
Can a God who is both all-powerful and all-loving allow such glaring evils to exist? To answer this question would require another sermon altogether. It would mean a lengthy discussion on that problem that has plagued the mind of man since the days of ancient philosophy, namely the problem of evil. So this morning I can only say in passing that much of the evil which we experience in the world is due to man’s folly and ignorance, the misuse of his freedom. Beyond this, I can only assert that there is and always will be a penumbra of mystery surrounding God, and what appears evil for the moment may have a purpose that our finite minds are incapable of comprehending. So in spite of the pressure of evil and the occasional doubts that lurk in our minds we are constantly driven back to the conviction that our God is able.

Let us notice first that God is able to sustain the vast scope of the physical universe. Here again, we are tempted to feel that man is the true master of the physical universe. When we notice man-made jet planes compressing into minutes distances that once took days and man-made space ships carrying cosmonauts through outer space at a speed of 18,000 miles per hour, we begin to wonder if God is not being replaced in his mastery of the cosmic order. But before we go too far in our man-centered arrogance, let us take a broad look at the universe. We will soon discover that our man-made instruments are barely moving in comparison to the movement of the God-created solar system. Think about the fact, for instance, that the earth is moving around the sun so fast that the fastest jet racing it would be left behind sixty-six thousand miles in the first hour of the race. Since I started preaching this sermon, about seven minutes ago, our earth and you have hurtled through space more than eight thousand miles.

Notice the sun which scientists tell us is the center of the solar system. Our earth revolves around this cosmic ball of fire once each year, traveling 584,000,000 miles in that year at the rate of 66,700 miles per hour or 1,600,000 miles per day. This means that this time tomorrow we will be 1,600,000 miles from where we are at this hundredth of a second. Look at that sun again. It may look rather near. But it is really...
93,000,000 miles from the earth. In six months from now we will be on the other side of the sun,—93,000,000 miles beyond it—and in a year from now we will have swung completely around it and back to where we are right now. So when we behold the illimitable expanse of the solar system in which we are compelled to measure stellar distance in light years, and in which heavenly bodies travel at incredible speed, we are forced to look beyond man and affirm anew that God is able.

Let us notice again that God is able to subdue all the powers of evil. In affirming that God is able to conquer evil we are admitting its reality. Christianity has never dismissed evil as illusory or an error of the mortal mind. It sees it as a force that has objective reality. But it contends that evil does not have the final word. It carries the seed of its own destruction. There is a checkpoint in the universe. Evil cannot permanently organize itself. History is the long and tragic story of evil forces rising high only to be crushed by the battling rams of the forces of justice.

There is a law in the moral world,—a silent, invisible imperative,—akin to the laws in the physical world, which reminds us that life will only work a certain way. The Hitlers and the Mussolinis may have their day, and for a period they may wield great power, spreading themselves like a green bay tree, but soon they are cut down like the grass and wither as the green herb.

Go back to another century. Victor Hugo is describing the Battle of Waterloo in Les Misérables. He concludes his graphic account with these pointed words: "Was it possible that Napoleon should win this battle? I answer 'No,' because of Wellington; 'No,' because of Blucher; 'No'—because of God. Waterloo is not a battle, it is a change in the front of the universe!"

In a real sense, Waterloo is a symbol of the doom of every Napoleon. It is an eternal reminder to a generation drunk with military power that in the long run of history might does not make right and the power of the sword cannot conquer the power of the spirit.

Let us look at our own day. We saw an evil system known as colonialism soar high. Like a plague, it swept across Africa and Asia, bringing more than 1,600,000 people under its gripping yoke. Like any system of oppression, colonialism is evil because it is based on a contempt for life. It stripped millions of people of their self-respect, robbed them of their sense of dignity, and treated them as if they were...
things rather than persons. But then the quiet invisible law began to operate. As Prime Minister MacMillan said, "the wind of change began to blow."19 The powerful colonial empires began to disintegrate like stacks of cards, and new, independent nations began to emerge like refreshing oases in deserts sweltering with the heat of injustice. In less than fifteen years independence has swept through Asia and Africa like an irresistible tidal wave, releasing more than 1,500,000 people from the crippling manacles of colonialism.

In our own nation we have seen an evil system known as segregation rise to the throne. For almost one hundred years this unjust system has inflicted the Negro with a sense of inferiority, robbed him of his personhood, and denied him life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

For all of these years segregation has been the Negroes' burden and America's shame. But as on the world scale, so in our nation, the wind of change began to blow. Since May 17, 1954, when the Supreme Court rendered its historic decision, one event has followed another to bring a gradual end to the system of segregation. So that today we can all say with certainty that segregation is dead and the only question left now is how costly the south will make the funeral.

These great changes taking place in the world today are not just political and sociological shifts. They represent the passing of a system that was born in injustice, nurtured in inequality and raised in exploitation. They represent the inevitable decay of any system based on principles out of harmony with the moral laws of the universe. When in future generations men look back upon these turbulent, tension-packed days through which we are passing, they will see God working through history for the salvation of man, they will see the gradual fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy: "Every valley shall be exalted and every mountain shall be made low; the rough places shall be made plain, and the crooked places straight; and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed," they will see that God was working through some men who had the vision to see that no nation could survive half slave and half free.20

Yes, God is able to conquer the evils of history. His control is never usurped. His ways may seem slow, but his mills are grinding exceedingly fine.21 If at times we begin to despair because of the relatively slow progress being made in ending racial discrimination, and become disappointed because of the silence of people whose support is so urgently needed, and because of the undue cautiousness of the federal government, let us gain consolation from the fact that God is able, and in our sometimes difficult and lonesome walk up freedom's road, we do not walk alone, but God walks with us. He has placed in the very structure of this universe certain absolute moral laws. No matter how much we try, we cannot defy or break them, if

19 King refers to a controversial speech British prime minister Harold Macmillan delivered to the South African Parliament on 3 February 1960 in which he frankly criticized the system of apartheid. Macmillan said of the growing national consciousness in African nations that a "wind of change is blowing through the continent" and that South Africa must "face up to it." (Leonard Ingalls, "Macmillan, in South Africa, Censures Apartheid Policy," New York Times, 4 February 1960)
20 Cf Isaiah 40:4-5
21 Euripides Bacchae 882-887
July 1962–March 1963 we disobey them, they end up breaking us. The force of evil may temporarily conquer truth, but truth has a way of ultimately conquering its conqueror. Our God is able. James Russell Lowell was right.

> Truth forever on the scaffold  
> Wrong forever on the throne  
> Yet that scaffold sways the future,  
> And behind the dim unknown,  
> Stands God within the shadow  
> Keeping watch above His own.  

Let us notice finally that God is able to give us interior resources to confront the trials and difficulties of life. Each of us confronts circumstances in life which compel us to carry heavy burdens of sorrow, moments when jostling winds of adversity come with hurricane force and glowing sunrises are transformed into darkest nights. There are moments when our highest hopes are blasted and our noblest dreams are shattered.

Christianity has never overlooked these experiences of disappointment. They will inevitably come. Like the rhythmic alternation in the natural order, life has its glittering daybreaks and its desolate midnights. Like the glittering sunlight of its summers and the piercing chill of its winters, its moment of unutterable joy and its moments of overwhelming sorrow. Like the everflowing waters of the river, life has its moments of flood and its moments of drought. When these dark moments of life emerge, many find themselves crying out with Paul Lawrence Dunbar.

> A crust of bread and a corner to sleep in,  
> A minute to smile and an hour to weep in,  
> A pint of joy to a peck of trouble  
> And never a laugh but the moans come double  
> and that is Life.

Admitting that moments will inevitably come when the weight of problems and staggering disappointments will invade your lives, Christianity goes on to affirm that God is able to give us the power to meet them. He is able to give us the inner equilibrium to stand up amid the trials and burdens of life. He is able to provide inner peace amid outer storms. This inner stability of the man of faith was Christ's chief legacy to his disciples. He left them with neither material resources nor a magical formula that would exempt them from suffering and persecution. But he left them an imperishable gift. “My peace I leave with thee.” This is that peace which passeth all understanding.

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22 Lowell, "The Present Crisis" (1844)
23 The preceding two sentences were altered in the published version. "Life brings periods of flooding and periods of drought. When these dark hours emerge, many cry out with Paul Laurence Dunbar" (p. 105)
24 In the published version, "And never a laugh but the moans come double" (p. 105)
25 Dunbar, "Life" (1895)
26 Cf. John 14:27
We may feel at times that we don't need God, but then one day the storms of disappointment will begin to rage, the winds of disaster will begin to blow, and the tidal waves of grief will beat up against our lives, and if we don't have a deep and patient faith our emotional lives will be ripped to shreds. Now, this is why there is so much frustration in the world. We are relying on gods rather than God. For years we have genuflected before the god of science, only to find that it has given us the atomic bomb, producing fears and anxieties that science can never mitigate. We have worshipped the god of pleasure only to find that thrills play out and sensations are short-lived. We have bowed before the god of money only to find that there are things that money can't buy—love and friendship—and that in a world of possible depressions, stock market crashes, and bad business investments, money is a rather uncertain deity. No, these transitory gods are not able to save us or bring happiness to the human heart. Only God is able. It is faith in Him that we must re-discover in this modern world. With this faith we can transform bleak and desolate valleys into sun-lit paths of joy, and bring new light into the dark chambers of pessimism. Is someone here this morning moving toward the evening of life and afraid of that something called death? Why? God is able. Is someone here this morning all but on the brink of despair because of some grave disappointment—the death of a loved one, the breaking of a marriage, the waywardness of a child? Why? God is able to give you the power to endure that which cannot be changed. Is someone here afraid of a bad health? Why? If it comes, God is able.

As I come to the conclusion of my message I would like for you to indulge me as I mention a personal experience. The first twenty-four years of my life were years packed with fulfillment. I had no basic problems or burdens. Because of concerned and loving parents who provided for my every need, I sailed through high school, college, theological school and graduate school without a single interruption. It was not until I came to this community and became a part of the leadership of the bus protest that I really confronted the trials of life. Almost immediately after the protest started we began to receive threatening telephone calls and letters in our home. Sporadic in the beginning, they increased as time went on. When these incidents started, I took them in stride, feeling that they were the work of a few hotheads who would soon be discouraged when they discovered that we would not fight back. But as the weeks passed, I began to see that many of the threats were in earnest. Soon I felt myself faltering and growing in fear.

One night toward the end of January I settled into bed late, after a strenuous day. My wife had already fallen asleep and just as I was about to doze off the telephone rang. An angry voice said, "Listen, nigger, we've taken all we want from you..."

27 The preceding three sentences were altered in the published version. "Is someone here anxious because of bad health? Why be anxious? Come what may, God is able" (p. 106). Meek, "Our God Is Able." "'Am I afraid of death? Why? 'Our God is able.' 'Am I afraid of ill health? Why? Suppose it comes 'Our God is able' as others have proven 'Have I been hurt, defeated, battered by life? Yes. But, "Our God is able.""

28 The phrase "like for you to indulge me as I mention" was replaced by "wish you to permit" in the published version (p. 106).

29 In the published version "After a particularly strenuous day, I settled in bed at a late hour" (p. 107).
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before next week you'll be sorry you ever came to Montgomery." I hung up, but I couldn't sleep. It seemed that all of my fears had come down on me at once. I had reached the saturation point.

I got out of bed and began to walk the floor. Finally I went to the kitchen and heated a pot of coffee. I was ready to give up. With my cup of coffee sitting untouched before me I tried to think of a way to move out of the picture without appearing a coward. In this state of exhaustion, when my courage had all but gone, I decided to take my problem to God. With my head in my hands, I bowed over the kitchen table and prayed aloud. The words I spoke to God that midnight are still vivid in my memory: "I am here taking a stand for what I believe is right. But now I am afraid. 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."

At that moment I experienced the presence of the Divine as I had never experienced Him before. It seemed as though I could hear the quiet assurance of an inner voice saying: "Stand up for righteousness, stand up for truth, and God will be at your side forever." Almost at once my fears began to go. My uncertainty disappeared. I was ready to face anything. The outer situation remained the same, but God had given me the inner calm to face it.

Three nights later, on January 30, as you know, our home was bombed. Strangely enough, I accepted the work of the bombing calmly. My experience with God a few nights before had given me the strength to face it.

Yes, God is able to give us the interior resources to face the storms and problems of life. Go out this morning and let this affirmation be our ringing cry. It will give us courage to face the uncertainties of the future. It will give our tired feet new strength as we continue our forward stride toward the city of freedom. When our days become dreary with low hovering clouds and our nights become darker than a thousand midnights, let us remember that there is a great benign Power in the universe whose name is God, and He is able to make a way out of no way, and transform dark yesterdays into bright tomorrows. This is our hope for becoming better men. This is our mandate for seeking to make a better world.

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31 This sentence was altered in the published version: “My experience with God had given me a new strength and trust” (p. 107)