



Gospel of Freedom: Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Letter from Birmingham Jail and the Struggle That Changed a Nation

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"I am in Birmingham because injustice is here," declared Martin Luther King, Jr. He had come to that city of racist terror convinced that massive protest could topple Jim Crow. But the insurgency faltered. To revive it, King made a sacrificial act on Good Friday, April 12, 1963: he was arrested. Alone in his cell, reading a newspaper, he found a statement from eight "moderate" clergymen who branded the protests extremist and "untimely."

King drafted a furious rebuttal that emerged as the "Letter from Birmingham Jail"-a work that would take its place among the masterpieces of American moral argument alongside those of Thoreau and Lincoln. His insistence on the urgency of "Freedom Now" would inspire not just the marchers of Birmingham and Selma, but peaceful insurgents from Tiananmen to Tahrir Squares.

Scholar Jonathan Rieder delves deeper than anyone before into the Letter-illuminating both its timeless message and its crucial position in the history of civil rights. Rieder has interviewed King's surviving colleagues, and located rare audiotapes of King speaking in the mass meetings of 1963. *Gospel of Freedom* gives us a startling perspective on the Letter and the man who wrote it: an angry prophet who chastised American whites, found solace in the faith and resilience of the slaves, and knew that moral appeal without struggle never brings justice.

Gospel of Freedom: Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Letter from Birmingham Jail and the Struggle That Changed a Nation Details

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From Reader Review Gospel of Freedom: Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Letter from Birmingham Jail and the Struggle That Changed a Nation for online ebook

Alan Marr says

I am a sucker for anything about Martin Luther King but I reckon if the New Testament were being compiled today his "Letter from the Birmingham Jail" would be included. This book tells the story of the drama that birthed it and what happened after it. It deals with the troubled courageous soul of MLK as well as those around him. I was left wondering about the 8 clergy to whom the letter was addressed. The book gives a little information about them but I would like to know more. I feel the same about Bull Connor. Did he die a happy man? This book is a well-written exegesis of the letter. I found it deeply moving.

David Campton says

This letter is arguably one of the most important religious and political texts of the 20th century and this looks at it from a biographical, social, political and literary perspective. Whilst Rieder does refer to its subsequent influence outside of its original context, he sadly doesn't look at its current relevance in US race relations which seem to have gone backwards since the heady days of President Obama's first election.

Melody says

It did provide extra on the background dynamics of the civil rights movement.

Clif Hostetler says

This book reviews the historical events leading up to the writing of the *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, describes the context of events within which it was written, parses its text with careful comparison to King's sermons and speeches, and then reports on the aftermath and responses to the letter. I think the author has done a fine job of illuminating the text and explaining its significance as part of the civil rights movement. The full text of the letter is included in the appendix of the book.

All through the book I was wondering what the reaction was in later years of the eight white pastors to which the *Letter* was addressed. The *Letter* was not mailed to them directly, but as the *Letter* became widely published they all found out about it. The epilog of this book addresses this question and describes the reactions of some of the pastors. The reactions varied from defiant and resentful to apologetic. When they signed their names to the newspaper article they had no idea that their names would forever be associated with a famous work of literature written in reply. The following quote from one of the the pastors gives a taste of what they have experienced.

"Now this letter is studied in English courses and sociology courses, and I get at least one letter

a semester asking me if I'm still a bigot."

I learned about this book from the following short description found on my Book Lover's Calendar for January 19, 2015 (Martin Luther King Day).

Martin Luther King Jr. came to Birmingham, Alabama, in 1963, convinced that massive protests could topple Jim Crow. But the movement failed, and to revive it, King allowed himself to be arrested. While he was in his cell, he read a newspaper article written by eight clergymen who objected to the protests. King drafted an indignant rebuttal that became the "Letter from Birmingham Jail," which would take its place among works by Thoreau and Lincoln as a signpost of moral argument. Scholar Jonathan Rieder provides a fresh and startling perspective on both the letter and the man who wrote it.

GOSPEL OF FREEDOM: MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.'S LETTER FROM BIRMINGHAM JAIL AND THE STRUGGLE THAT CHANGED A NATION, by Jonathan Rieder (Bloomsbury, 2013)

Many of the quotations attributed to MLK can be found in the *Letter*. The following are examples:

"Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly."

"We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed."

"So I have tried to make it clear that it is wrong to use immoral means to attain moral ends. But now I must affirm that it is just as wrong, or even more so, to use moral means to preserve immoral ends. "

"One has not only a legal, but a moral responsibility to obey just laws. Conversely, one has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws."

"Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream." (Actually a quote from the *Old Testament, Amos 5:24*)

Jonathan Green says

This is a fantastic peek into the current climate that lead up to King's famous letter from jail. Although the letters weren't an instant hit, this book goes deeply into why the letter was necessary, and how it slowly grabbed the attention of millions.

Carol says

Interesting look at the courage, determination, and faith of MLK ! First time I've read his letter.

Barbara Mayer says

Words for everyone and every day.

I think we need to be reminded of Dr Kings message more today than ever. I am so grateful his words are available to read today and tomorrow, again and again.

Monk says

Solid study of the Birmingham letter and its historical context. Balanced approach, not heavy on the hero worship. Structured very well so that when you go through the letter itself, you understand the references to contemporaneous events. Very much worth a read.

David Campton says

Until last year I had never actually read, in its entirety, MLK's letter from Birmingham jail, which is the focus of this book, and is included in full in the appendix. As such I read the back of the book first, and in my first reading I constantly flicked back and forward from commentary to text. I re-read the whole book again this year at a faster pace, in the wake of the 50th anniversary of MLK's assassination, the post Obama Trump era race politics in the US and the 50th anniversary of the Civil Rights marches here in NI that claimed their inspiration from MLK etc, and yet ironically lead to a prolonged period in this province that was anything but non-violent. As such it made me long for leaders of MLK's stature in America and here in the present day... and believe that this book should be compulsory reading for anyone going into public office or engaging in the public square in the arena of rights and social justice. The author clearly identifies the complex strands of reason, rhetoric and raw emotion in this letter, and makes me want to read more in a similar vein.

Cathy says

Both insightful analysis of Dr. King's brilliant "Letter" and interesting historical background culled from tapes of mass meetings held during the Birmingham Campaign, author interviews with key figures, and a host of textual research. I learned a lot and was moved.

Christine says

It would have been amazing to have really known MLKJ. The more I learn about him, the more I think that to be true!

Eddie says

It is really a 3.5 stars for me. I wanted to like this book more given the subject matter but, I guess the writer and I were not on the same page. Another reviewer (also 3 stars) posted a short hand read of the book as follows:

-Chapter 1

-Appendix (the "Letter" itself)

-Chapter 4

-Epilogue

I wholeheartedly agree.

Robin Friedman says

This year, 2013, marks the 50th anniversary of several key events from the civil rights era of 1963. The historical events include the March on Washington of August 28, 1963, with Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech. They include as well the "Letter from Birmingham Jail" which Dr. King wrote in prison in April, 1963, in the middle of demonstrations against segregation in Birmingham, Alabama. Released in April, 2013 to coincide with the anniversary of the "Letter", Jonathan Rieder's book, "Gospel of Freedom: Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Letter from Birmingham Jail and the Struggle that Changed a Nation", consists of a detailed analysis of the "Letter" and a discussion of its significance for King's work, including the Birmingham demonstrations and the later March. Rieder, professor of sociology at Barnard College, has written an earlier book on Dr. King, "The Word of the Lord is upon Me" (2008) together with an earlier book about the decline of political liberalism in the old Brooklyn neighborhood of Canarsie.

Rieder begins by placing the "Letter" in historical context. King had been asked to lead a series of demonstrations in Birmingham, which at the time was among the most violently racist cities in the United States. The demonstrations had as their primary goal ending segregation in the stores. The demonstrations were delayed for negotiations which proved unsuccessful and then delayed further when the notorious "Bull" Connor, the Commissioner of Public Safety ran unsuccessfully for mayor. When the demonstrations were slow in gaining momentum and Connor and the police acted with a degree of restraint, King got himself arrested on Good Friday, April 12, 1963. While he was in jail, a group of eight Birmingham clergymen wrote a public letter critical of King and the Birmingham demonstrations. The letter urged a policy of moderation and gradualism. King wrote his "Letter", dated April 16, 1963, in response to the clergymen. But King clearly had a broader audience in mind. King was released from jail on April 20.

With this background, Rieder presents an exposition of the "Letter". (The text of the "Letter" is included in the book.) Most readers have viewed the letter as primarily a discussion of civil disobedience in the line of Thoreau. Rieder argues that the "Letter" is substantially broader in scope and that it is pivotal in understanding King. Rieder finds the "Letter" falls into roughly two parts and develops two themes. In the first part, the "Letter" shows King as a "diplomat" as he explains politely and eruditely to eight clergymen and to white "moderate" America, the reasons for his activities in Birmingham and their pressing importance. In the second part of the "Letter", King becomes not only a preacher but he also adopts the tone of a "prophet" rather than a "diplomat". This section of the letter is passionate, and emphasizes the need for righteousness, justice, commitment to fight evil, and the deep injustices segregation visited on African

Americans. Rieder argues that in the "Letter", King emphasized African American self-help and advocated a position closer to the views of black nationalists, such as Elijah Muhammad, than is sometimes realized. Thus, under Rieder's analysis, the "Letter" and King saw the struggle for civil rights as more outside American culture, rather than as an extension and fulfillment of the American experience. This reading emphasizes the militant character of Dr. King's vision and work.

The analysis of the "Letter" takes up the body of Rieder's book. He follows it with a discussion of how King used, and modified, the "Letter" in a speech to African Americans upon his release from jail. The modified speech emphasizes even more than the "Letter" the need for African Americans to be responsible for their own destinies by nonviolent resistance of injustice. Rieder discusses the subsequent escalation of the Birmingham demonstrations. While King was in jail, his associates had decided to use children in the demonstrations because the commitment of the adults seemed to be waning. With the use of the children, "Bull" Connor lost control and brought out dogs and hoses. The resulting images of violence shocked the nation and the world. King and the city reached an agreement under which the segregation in Birmingham stores ended. There was further violence in the form of rioting from some demonstrators followed by brutality from the Alabama State Police. On September 15, 1963, racists bombed the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham which had been home to much of the planning for the demonstrations. Four young African American girls were killed in the explosion.

In the final part of the book, Rieder argues that the themes of the "Letter", particularly its emphasis on African American self-help and its rejection of American exceptionalism, pervaded Dr. King's latter work, including the "I Have a Dream" speech. Rieder thus revises the frequently accepted interpretation of the "I Have a Dream" speech which sees King as placing his Dream within the American mainstream. Rieder also argues that the "Letter" includes themes that King developed in his later years, including his opposition to the War in Vietnam, and his increasing militance on matters of economics and poverty.

King's "Letter" has become a key document of the Civil Rights Movements as well as one of the most important works of 20th Century history. It is taught in countless high school and college courses. Rieder offers a thoughtful, provocative interpretation of King's "Letter", its history, and its continuing importance.

Robin Friedman

Hannah says

I'm ashamed that I had not yet read Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "Letter from Birmingham Jail" and also, how much of what I know about the Civil Rights Movement is a series of generalities and "popular history". I'm going to aim to learn more about the history of minorities in the United States. I need a more historically accurate framework in which to place my perspectives on privilege. If anyone has recommendations on that front, I would much appreciate it. As a sidenote, it was refreshing to read analysis again. I'm sure college students must be sick to death of it, but I am woefully underexposed these days. Another literary gap to fill in, I suppose.

"Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly." - Martin Luther King, Jr. in his "Letter from Birmingham Jail".

Jen says

My favorite part of the book was reading King's letter from Birmingham. The rest of the analysis and history was interesting, but I would probably just suggest reading one of King's books instead.
