



## Letter from Birmingham Jail

*Martin Luther King Jr.*

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**Letter from Birmingham Jail** Martin Luther King Jr.  
**'Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.'**

This landmark missive from one of the greatest activists in history calls for direct, non-violent resistance in the fight against racism, and reflects on the healing power of love.

This edition also contains the sermon 'The Three Dimensions of a Complete Life'.

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## Letter from Birmingham Jail Details

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Author : Martin Luther King Jr.

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## **From Reader Review Letter from Birmingham Jail for online ebook**

### **Ashish says**

The short book consists of 2 parts, the first is the letter as the title suggests, a letter written by MLK jr while he was held in Birmingham jail for his protest activities. It is a really erudite piece of literary work wherein he addresses the clergyman who had criticised the methods employed by him and other protestors. He puts across his points beautifully and succinctly, does not lose his composure despite being in a position of obvious disadvantage and with his back against the wall, literally. Some of the things he says make way too much sense and provide a perspective of tremendous calm and common sense in what is a topic of great emotional and socio-political upheaval. He defends the methods used and why they do what they do towards the goal of the emancipation of the blacks. It makes me feel like we need a voice of sanity like this in the present times where emotions run high and there are so much banal frivolity and empty rhetoric prevalent in contemporary political dialogue and discussions.

The second part is a sermon that he delivered where he highlights the tenets of his faith and what it means to be true to it despite trying times and using it as a support system and to not veer from it despite resistance from the church itself. He makes a point asking for honest living and being faithful and to work towards the common good.

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### **Alice Lippart says**

Inspiring.

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### **Kier (Myn Kobayashi) says**

"We will have to repent in this generation not merely for the vitriolic words and actions of the bad people but for the appalling silence of the good people."

This was incredible. I don't have words, it had no error.

Let him speak for himself:

"Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere"

"You deplore the demonstrations that are presently taking place in Birmingham. But I am sorry that your statement did not express a similar concern for the conditions that brought the demonstrations into being."

"History is the long and tragic story of the fact that privileged groups seldom give up their privileges voluntarily"

"and see the depressing clouds of inferiority begin to form in her little mental sky"

"never knowing what to expect next, and plagued with inner fears and outer resentments; when you are forever fighting a degenerating sense of "nobodyness" -- then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait."

"The answer is found in the fact that there are two types of laws: there are just laws, and there are unjust laws. I would agree with St. Augustine that "An unjust law is no law at all."

"We can never forget that everything Hitler did in Germany was "legal" and everything the Hungarian freedom fighters did in Hungary was "illegal."

"I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in the stride toward freedom is not the White Citizens Councillor or the Ku Klux Klanner but the white moderate who is more devoted to order than to justice"

"It is the strangely irrational notion that there is something in the very flow of time that will inevitably cure all ills. Actually, time is neutral. It can be used either destructively or constructively."

"We will have to repent in this generation not merely for the vitriolic words and actions of the bad people but for the appalling silence of the good people."

"a force of complacency made up of Negroes who, as a result of long years of oppression, have been so completely drained of self-respect and a sense of "somebodyness" that they have adjusted to segregation"

"But as I continued to think about the matter, I gradually gained a bit of satisfaction from being considered an extremist. Was not Jesus an extremist in love? -- "Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, pray for them that despitefully use you." Was not Amos an extremist for justice? -- "Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream." Was not Paul an extremist for the gospel of Jesus Christ? -- "I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus." Was not Martin Luther an extremist? -- "Here I stand; I can do no other so help me God." Was not John Bunyan an extremist? -- "I will stay in jail to the end of my days before I make a mockery of my conscience." Was not Abraham Lincoln an extremist? -- "This nation cannot survive half slave and half free." Was not Thomas Jefferson an extremist? -- "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal." So the question is not whether we will be extremist, but what kind of extremists we will be. Will we be extremists for hate, or will we be extremists for love? Will we be extremists for the preservation of injustice, or will we be extremists for the cause of justice?"

"but I have longed to hear white ministers say, follow this decree because integration is morally right and the Negro is your brother."

"I have heard so many ministers say, "Those are social issues which the gospel has nothing to do with," and I have watched so many churches commit themselves to a completely otherworldly religion which made a strange distinction between bodies and souls, the sacred and the secular."

"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, to use moral means to preserve immoral ends."

"but what else is there to do when you are alone for days in the dull monotony of a narrow jail cell other than write long letters, think strange thoughts, and pray long prayers?"

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### **melmarian says**

Here I am, well over fifty years after his time, and I felt goosebumps just by reading MLK's words. Even after so much hate thrown upon him, he showed only love. Fifty years after he's gone, his legacy shone on. Great man.

I'm overjoyed I chose this book to start the year 2019.

Complete review: <https://surgabukuku.wordpress.com/201...>

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### **Hestia Istiviani says**

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

Sebuah buku yang bagus untuk dibaca. Tidak sekedar untuk mengisi waktu luang, namun mempertanyakan kembali apa arti kebebasan, apa arti menjadi ekstrimis, dan apa arti hidup dengan menerima keadaan diri.

Kurang dari 100 halaman, tapi menyimpan pesan yang sangat kuat.

Sebuah bacaan yang harus dibaca oleh semua orang.

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### **Chaunceton Bird says**

Inspirational, monumental, and essential.

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### **Nina says**

Such an important book and an absolute must-read!

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### **Peter says**

The first half of this is a compelling piece of writing of a man looking for equality and the right way to achieve those goals.

Very powerful writing.

The backup feature, "The Three Dimensions of a Complete Life" is dull and pulled only a small amount of emotional involvement. A stark contrast to the title piece.

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### **Nabilah Firdaus says**

One of the best pieces of literature written in American history that represents the civil rights movement. It's amazing how much restraint, hope and resolve these people had. A must read for everyone.

Rest in peace, Martin Luther King.

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### **ruby healy says**

I know such a phrase get's thrown about by critics to the point where it now feels like a shallow and benign compliment, but I don't think I could write an honest review of Dr.King's "Letter From Birmingham Jail" without admitting that I find this book to be an absolute must-read; that every person on this earth has to buy and read the words that Dr. King wrote in the margins of a newspaper while wrongly imprisoned 45 years ago over and over again, until they take his ideas to heart. The book itself cost me just €1.50, so it's one of the cheapest books on the market. It's merely the size of my hand, so it won't take up much room in your collection. It takes just under an hour to read, so all you need is a quiet lunch break or a free moment during your weekend to read it cover to cover. While I'm old fashioned and prefer to own physical copies of the art I consume, if you don't want to or can't fork over the cash for a copy, you can go to your local library, find it, sit in a nice, quiet corner, read it, and then return it in one afternoon. And, if going into the real world is too much hassle and you have a good internet connection, .pdfs of the letter can easily be found with a cursory Google search. So, most of you haven't a single excuse as to why you can't already quote half of the letter from memory.

Though I suppose I can't open with such a lofty request without making a strong case for myself, can I?

So, this particular paperback edition of "Letter from Birmingham Jail", published as the first of the fantastic "Penguin Modern" collection, is separated into two chapters, for the titular letter is merely 30 pages long, even on such small pages, so some padding is required.

The second chapter is a transcript of one of Dr. King's many sermons, "The Three Dimensions of a Complete Life" and it's, well, not a selling point in the book's favour. True to it's nature as a sermon, it's not an emotionally charged yet painstakingly articulate and intelligent cry for justice, and more like a priest trying to pad out his analysis of that day's gospel by trying to tie it's moral lessons into some strange framing device he decided on just before walking out. It's not...terrible? I'd call it more on the boring side of mediocre. Despite it's extremely short length, I found my eyes glazing over every couple of lines and completely skipping over multiple paragraphs, and coming out having neither gained new insights nor having any emotions stirred within me other than apathy. It's a shame, considering how many great sermons and speeches from Dr. King they could have chosen ("A Time To Break Silence" possibly?), but it can't be helped now. With any other book, having just under half of it be an absolute bore would obviously negatively impact it's score, but the first 30 pages are so masterfully written and important, and the book itself is such a nice, accessible physical copy of said work, that it's mediocrity can't tarnish it's five star score.

Meanwhile, the first chapter is of course, the seminal letter itself. While I feel required to provide some context, I doubt too much is needed. Everyone is at least passingly familiar with Dr.King's work as a civil

rights activist, having no doubt heard the excerpts of "I Have A Dream" that us white folk like to quote when (incorrectly) whitesplaining racism to the people who actually experience it; warping Martin Luther King Jr. into some strange, ethereal Black Friend who takes your side in every argument because of a couple, out-of-context lines from just one of his speeches. That, and the book's second page, the page across from its title page, contextualises the letter, does the same for 'Three Dimensions', and also adds his date of birth, date of death, and other books published by Penguin that were written by him.

But indulge me as I quote it none the less:

"'Letter from Birmingham Jail' is a response to eight white Alabama clergymen, who argued that the battle against racial segregation should be fought in the courts - not the streets."

And, as I mentioned before, Dr. King was writing this while imprisoned for his activism, forced to write the letter on a newspaper while mulling over his thoughts on the situation. And one by one, while stuck with only his own thoughts, he addresses every criticism these clergymen threw his way. These arguments are echoed by modern conservatives and moderates who are critical of the likes of, say, Black Lives Matter; thinking they're making bold new arguments when really they're repackaging the same delusional excuses that have been evolving with language for as long as prejudice and immoral hierarchies have been a key building blocks in the foundation of civilisations (which is to say, from the dawn of human consciousness). These clergymen feel like the monolithic embodiment of the clueless moderate; not the vile bigots who'd happily have a swastika inked onto their skin in order to tell everyone they meet, without having to say a single word, that they'd happily take direct action against anyone considered 'other', but the ignorant with a grasp on basic human decency, who's bigotry is casually sewn into their worldview, unbeknownst to them, and who will stand by and watch as the bigot takes action because they want to keep order. Similarly, Dr. King's replies feel like the collective cries of the oppressed channeled into coherent, biting metaphors, the wild emotions of millions turned into a calm, well-educated deconstructions, backed by the words of ancient philosophers, of criticisms built on pillars of sand held together by the blood of the oppressed.

I'm honestly disappointed with the ability of my own words to capture the magic and power of Dr. King's, so, to close, let me share with you my favourite excerpt from the entire book (which was hard to pin down, but I managed):

"I must make two honest confessions to you, my Christian and Jewish brothers. First, I must confess that over the last few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in the stride toward freedom is not the White Citizens Councillor or the Ku Klux Klanner but the white moderate who is more devoted to order than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says, "I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I can't agree with your methods of direct action"; who paternalistically feels that he can set the timetable for another man's freedom; who lives by the myth of time; and who constantly advises the Negro to wait until a "more convenient season."

"Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection. In your statement you asserted that our actions, even though peaceful, must be condemned because they precipitate violence.

"I had hoped that the white moderate would understand that law and order exist for the purpose of establishing justice and that when they fail in this purpose they become the dangerously structured dams that

block the flow of social progress. I had hoped that the white moderate would understand that the present tension in the South is a necessary phase of the transition from an obnoxious negative peace, in which the Negro passively accepted his unjust plight, to a substantive and positive peace, in which all men will respect the dignity and worth of human personality. Actually, we who engage in non-violent direct action are not the creators of tension. We merely bring to the surface the hidden tension that is already alive. We bring it out in the open, where it can be seen and dealt with." "-to the light of human conscience and the air of national opinion before it can be cured.

"In your statement, you assert that our actions, even though peaceful, must be condemned because the precipitate violence. But is this a logically assertion? Isn't this like condemning the robbed man because his possession of money precipitated the evil act of robbery? Isn't this like condemning Socrates because his unswerving commitment to truth and his philosophical delvings precipitated the misguided popular mind to make him drink the hemlock? Isn't this like condemning Jesus because His unique God-consciousness and never-ceasing devotion to His will precipitated the evil act of crucifixion? We must come to see, as federal courts have consistently affirmed, that it is immoral to urge an individual to withdraw his efforts to gain his basic constitutional rights because the quest precipitates violence. Society must protect the robbed and punish the robber.

"I had also hoped that the white moderate would reject the myth of time. I received a letter this morning from a white brother in Texas which said, "All Christians know that the colored people will receive equal rights eventually, but is it possible that you are in too great of a religious hurry? It has taken Christianity almost 2000 years to accomplish what it has. The teachings of Christ take time to come to earth."

"All that is said here grows out of a tragic misconception of time in relation to the struggle for freedom. It is the strangely irrational notion that there is something in the very flow of time that will inevitably cure all ills. Actually, time is neutral. It can be used either destructively or constructively. I am coming to feel that the people of ill will have used time much more effectively than the people of good will. We will have to repent in this generation not merely for the vitriolic words and actions of the bad people but for the appalling silence of the good people. Human progress never rolls in on the wheels of inevitability; it comes through the tireless efforts and persistent work of men willing to be co-workers with God, and without this hard work, time itself will become an ally of the forces of social stagnation. We must use time creatively, in the knowledge that the time is always ripe to do right."

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### **Sean Barrs the Bookdragon says**

The fact that a man such as Martin Luther King spent time in prison demonstrates the fundamental wrongness that permeates humanity.

Laws are there to protect people, though which people are they protecting? MLK understood that the laws of society are not necessarily true laws, or what he saw as god's laws, and he knew that they needed to be fought and changed for the betterment of mankind. His rhetoric is honest, compassionate and full of purpose.

King's words were powerful and heroic. Despite the hatred that was thrown at him, he only had love to give in response. And that bespeaks the moral integrity of such a man. He could have rallied his followers to a

more aggressive approach, though he never stooped so low. He knew what the world needed to heal, and he put as much of it out there as possible. Certainly, an example to follow for any invested in activism. Even here he only has kindness to impart.

The fact that he died at the hand of violence shows how feared he was and how strong he was becoming. If MLK saw the face of the world today he would be proud at how far we have come, and he would also understand how much further we still have to go.

This letter is testimony to his unshakable will in the face of tyranny.

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### **7jane says**

This book has two parts: one is the one named on the cover, the other one is "The Three Dimensions Of A Complete Life". The first focuses on defending direct, non-violent resistance of racism, written on the margins of a newspaper in 1963; the other is a sermon delivered in Chicago, April 1967, a recording that is cut short by some interruption, but that point is well towards the end, so not much was left to say in it anyway.

On the first part: where MLK talks of underlying reasons for demonstration. There has been so much refusal of communication, of broken promises, and a long, long time of everyday moments of oppression (and its impact), that just doing the 'wait and see' is no longer enough. The action is meant to push on the chance of negotiation; waiting often ends up being infinite-waiting. He talks of law: one should obey the just ones, not the (degrading) unjust ones. He is disappointed at the white moderates' lukewarm and silent behavior (this includes white churches). He feels that his manner of resistance stands between the apathetic adjusted ones, and the ones geared towards violence, ends.

The second part is more about how to live life (and more religious): To live the length, breadth, and height of it (see also John Bunyan's "All Love Excelling", which deals with dimensions too, this time of Christ's love - this came to mind immediately).

The length is about the developing of inner power of self: having a healthy self-love/acceptance (own's tools and limits), of what we can do work-wise (and to do it well, even when pretty plain and ordinary).

The breadth is about concern for others' welfare: MLK talks about the Good Samaritan (I learn something new); of one's duty to act and help; humanity is tied together (the source of one's everyday products is an example).

The height is often missed by non-believers - it is the need of God: to search for Him, to go on in life because of Him (and His care for you).

Things end cut short, and one can feel the same about MLK's life. But these two texts are powerful, and well re-readable, quick yet deep. I'm glad I got this little book.

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### **Kirsty says**

I received the wonderful boxed collection of the new Penguin Moderns series for my birthday, and have decided to read and review them in order. The first book in the collection, and therefore my first review, is black rights activist Martin Luther King Jr.'s *Letter From Birmingham Jail*. The blurb states that this

'landmark missive from one of the greatest activists in history calls for direct, non-violent resistance in the fight against racism, and reflects on the healing power of love.' Despite its being written in 1963, in the margins of a newspaper in Alabama, it still seems incredibly current in the issues and widespread disparity which it addresses.

'Letter From Birmingham Jail' was written as a 'response to eight white clergymen in Alabama, who argued that the battle against racial segregation should be fought in the courts - not the streets'. Whilst discussing at the beginning of his letter why he finds himself in Alabama, King writes: 'I am in Birmingham because injustice is here... I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and voices. I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.' He has such compassion for those who feel they have been forced to fight for their rights as citizens: 'It is unfortunate that demonstrations are taking place in Birmingham, but it is even more unfortunate that the city's white power structure left the Negro community with no alternative.' King goes on to say: 'We know through painful experience that freedom is never inherently given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed.'

Along with the issues which King is currently fighting for from his prison cell, he sets out the historicity of black people, and the glaring lack of freedom which they have in the United States: 'The nations of Asia and Africa are moving with jetlike speed toward gaining political independence, but we still creep at horse and buggy pace toward gaining a cup of coffee at a lunch counter.' King poses many interesting questions and comparisons upon what makes a law 'just' or 'unjust', and the terrible things which he has had to face as a black man in a segregated society.

In conclusion to his highly respectful, engaging, and insightful letter, King muses that his creation of the piece was a direct consequence of his being imprisoned: 'Never before have I written so long a letter. I'm afraid it is much too long to take your precious time. I can assure you that it would have been much shorter if I had been writing from a comfortable desk, but what else can one do when he is alone in a narrow jail cell, other than write long letters, think long thoughts and pray long prayers?'

The second piece in this collection, 'The Three Dimensions of a Complete Life', was delivered as a sermon in Chicago in April 1967. This follows on from the disappointment with the church which he says he has in 'Letter From Birmingham Jail', when the 'white church' is happy enough to sit back and not get involved in the plight of fellow Christians. The sermon has been transcribed from a recording, and was delivered under the premise that 'if life itself is to be complete, it must be three-dimensional'. Circumstantially, this piece is very involved with Christianity. King's faith is a constant throughout both of these pieces, but it is more explicitly depicted in this second piece.

Throughout this collection, King's words are searching and intelligent. The pieces here are moving, and ought to be read by everyone, regardless of their race or creed. The proposals which King gives, and the ideas which he thoughtfully discusses, could serve to make our world a better, and more peaceful, place.

King inspires throughout; he shows that a single voice has the ability to change the way in which people act, and challenge how we view one another. I shall end this review with an incredibly powerful and empowering fragment taken from 'The Three Dimensions of a Complete Life': 'Too many Negroes are ashamed of themselves, ashamed of being black. A Negro got to rise up and say from the bottom of his soul, "I am somebody. I have a rich, noble, and proud heritage. However exploited and however painful my history has been, I'm black, but I'm black and beautiful."'

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### **Linton Newton says**

The titular text is brilliant. Written to those who opposed King's non-violent protests, King defends his actions and justifies their causes brilliantly. He does oppose the idea of violent protest on Christian grounds, which I myself do not agree with but his point is well made and certainly defensible.

The other text in this work is a speech on how to live a complete life. This work blends Aristotelian ideas of friendship and the relation of the self with Christian theology. I did not find this work appealing or particularly interesting. Given that it was originally a speech the text version is not as powerful or as well-written as its original counterpart.

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### **Olivia-Savannah Roach says**

The Letter from Birmingham Jail was a text I'd studied many a time in class and referred to. But I'd never read it in completion and I'm glad I did. Basically, it shows me that MLK has mastered the art of responding to criticism. His points are thought out, precise and well developed. I couldn't, and didn't, disagree with a single word written. But it's in the second part of this little classic that I was blown away.

The Three Dimensions of a Complete Life is one of the few essays I would tell EVERYONE to read. I rarely say that with books but this... this is something else. There are some religious references (Christian) but that doesn't really matter for understanding the essence of what he is trying to say. You'll be able to agree with the essay and learn from it anyway, excluding those parts. I think he says some incredibly true things about life. I've never seen life – which seems like an unexplainable enigma sometimes – broken down into three clear parts that I could understand. I especially think the first 2 dimensions he mentions are so relevant and have changed my way of viewing myself and what I do for others. A must read!

This review was originally posted on Olivia's Catastrophe: <https://oliviascatastrophe.com/2019/0...>

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