

# The Life and Legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

By Presley Richards



Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was a prominent civil rights activist who fought for equal rights through what he called "civil disobedience." In his 1963 essay "Letter from Birmingham Jail," he describes civil disobedience as the nonviolent refusal of government demands. Rather than lawlessness, King thought of civil disobedience as a higher form of lawfulness, bringing together man-made law and divine law. King stated, "An individual who breaks a law that conscience tells him is unjust, and who willingly accepts the penalty of imprisonment in order to arouse the conscience of the community over its injustice, is in reality expressing the highest respect for the law."

Dr. Martin Luther King was born in Atlanta, Georgia, in 1929. He attended segregated public schools and graduated from High School at age 15. After graduating with a B.A in sociology from Morehouse College, where he was Class President, he began a career as a pastor. Inspired by the teachings of Jesus, Mahatma Gandhi, and Henry David Thoreau, he quickly became one of the most significant contributors to the

American Civil Rights Movement. He first became a leader of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, a social campaign against racial segregation inspired by Rosa Parks. The campaign lasted over a year until the Supreme Court ruling *Browder v. Gayle* declared the segregation of buses illegal.

After the Montgomery Bus Boycott, MLK dedicated his life to fighting for racial justice, education, wage equity, and economic justice. King continued to practice civil disobedience and led many remarkable protests, such as the March on Washington and the Selma March. King was arrested a striking 29 times throughout his life, yet he never abandoned his ideas of civil disobedience, meeting every unjust detainment with peace and patience. At age 35, he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize and, at the time, was the youngest ever to receive the award. He pledged all the prize money, almost \$55,000, to the advancement of the civil rights movement. Four years later, when he was just 39 years old, Dr. King was assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee. In 1983, President Reagan created a federal holiday to honor King on his birthday, January 15th. King is one of only four Americans that have had their birthday recognized as a national holiday.