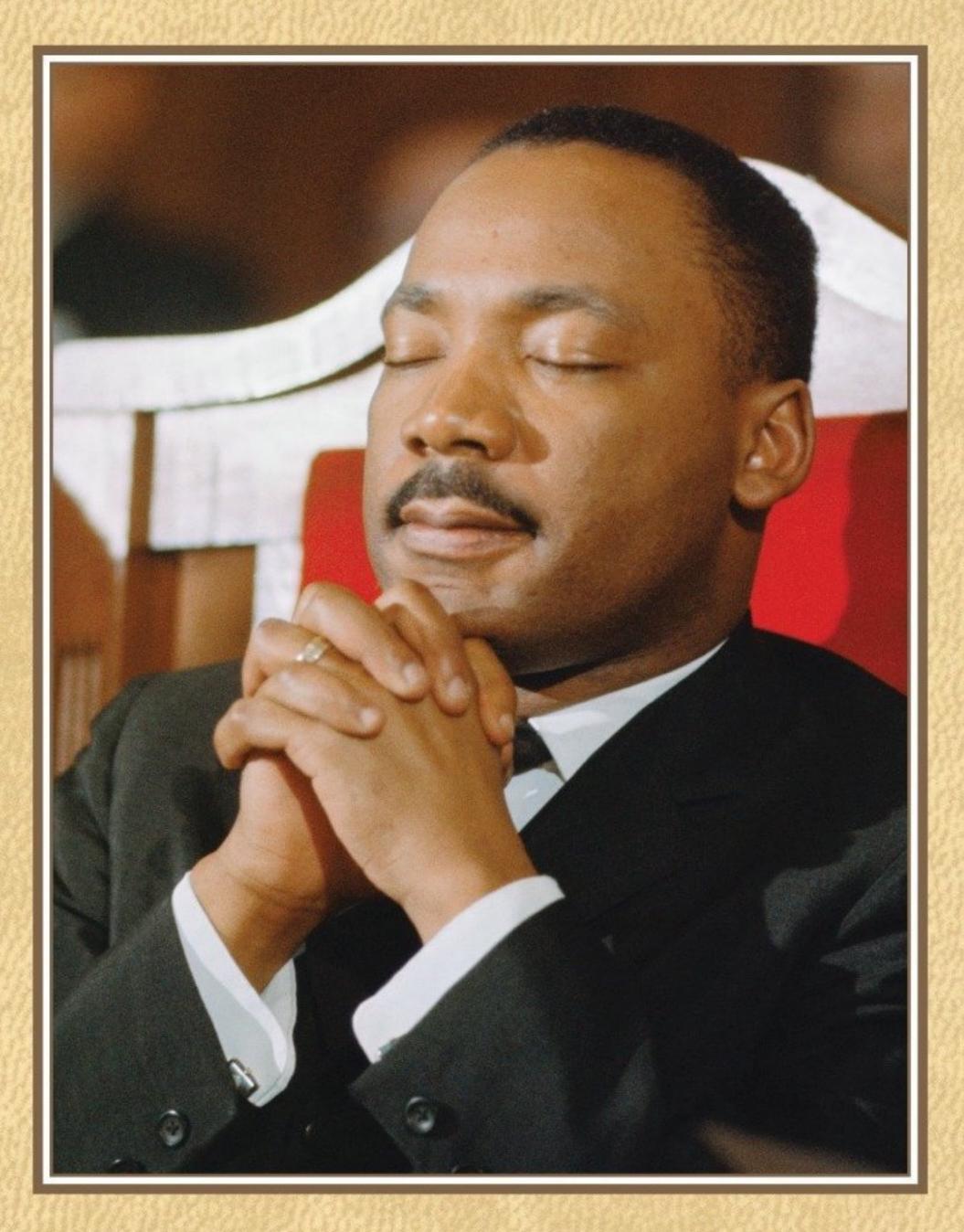
"Thou, Dear God"

PRAYERS THAT OPEN HEARTS AND SPIRITS



The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

EDITED AND INTRODUCED BY Lewis V. Baldwin

FOREWORD BY The Reverend Dr. Julius R. Scruggs

THROUGHOUT HIS LIFE, THE REVEREND DR. Martin Luther King, Jr., turned to prayer for his own spiritual fulfillment while also delivering prayers to the public as a way to inspire and reaffirm a quest for peace and social justice. *"Thou, Dear God"* is the first and only collection of prayers by Dr. King.

Arranged thematically for all seasons of life—including prayers for spiritual guidance, special occasions, and times of adversity and trial—each section is introduced by minister and scholar Lewis V. Baldwin. From the private words King recited as a seminarian and graduate student to the powerful public sermons he delivered as a preacher and civil rights leader, these prayers will prick the conscience, stimulate the intellect, and rekindle the spirit.

The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929– 1968), Nobel Peace Prize laureate and architect of the nonviolent civil rights movement, was among the twentieth century's most influential figures. In 1954 Dr. King became pastor of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama, and in 1960 he joined his father as co-pastor of Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta. One of the greatest orators in U.S. history, King was the author of several books, including *Stride Toward Freedom, The Trumpet of Conscience, Why We Can't Wait*, and *Where Do We Go from Here*.

(continued from front flap)

Lewis V. Baldwin is professor of religious studies at Vanderbilt University, an ordained Baptist minister, and the author or co-author of seven books on Martin Luther King, Jr.

The Reverend Dr. Julius R. Scruggs is the president of the National Baptist Convention.



"There are many books about Dr. King's work and his thought, but '*Thou, Dear God*' provides a unique and needed window into his spiritual life." —**Brian D. McLaren**, author of *A New Kind of Christianity*



Jacket design: Bob Kosturko

Jacket art: Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., prays at a memorial service . © Steve Schapiro/Corbis.

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Martin Luther King, Jr., and Coretta Scott King say grace with their children Yolanda King and Martin Luther King III, 1961. Photo by William Diehl.

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In Association With



The prayers in this book were taken from a variety of written archival sources and transcriptions, and reflect the grammatical style of the originals.

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For People of Faith Everywhere

There can be no gainsaying of the fact that prayer is as natural to the human organism as the rising of the sun is to the cosmic order. Prayer is indigenous to the human spirit. It represents a throbbing desire of the human heart. As [Thomas] Carlyle stated in a letter to a friend: "Prayer is and remains the native and deepest impulse of the soul of man." We often try to call prayer "absurd and presumptuous." But a yearning so age-old and deep-rooted cannot be slain by a couple of objectives. Men have often tried to dismiss it by affirming that pressing the rigidity of natural law makes it impossible. But such a declaration is unconvincing; for there is something deep down within us that makes us know that God works in a paradox of unpredictable newness and trustworthy faithfulness.

> THE REVEREND DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. "The Misuse of Prayer"¹

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Foreword

Martin Luther King, Jr., is without a doubt one of the most influential men of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. His life and ministry continue to impact Christendom and other religions throughout the global community. Because his life was intellectually respectable, socially relevant, and spiritually redemptive, he will continue to positively influence and impact future generations.

One of the reasons that Dr. King's life has been and will be so impactful is because of his relationship to God in Christ. That relationship is keenly felt and sensed in his prayer life. Dr. Lewis Baldwin has rendered a tremendous service by helping us see and feel the amazing prayer life that King experienced. As Baldwin notes, "King spoke of prayer as the sacred heart of faith, as the foundation of devotional life, as an essential component of prophetic social witness, and as a vital ingredient in the overall effort to free, humanize, and empower humanity."

All of our lives can be made richer and more service oriented by reflecting on the context that shaped and molded the prayer life of Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. One can sense the profound depth and breadth of King's spirituality through reading his prayers, which were richly grounded in scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. Dr. Baldwin insightfully observes that, as a whole, King's prayers blend adoration, confession, supplication, intercession, petition, and thanksgiving, while also affirming that some of the most complex and necessary facts of the authentic spiritual life are altruistic love, humility, forgiveness, reconciliation, community, and service to humanity.

This special book illustrates that Dr. King knew how to pray in all seasons of life, especially finding God to be a source of strength, comfort, and guidance during times of adversity. King references the time during the Montgomery bus boycott when the bigots threatened to kill him and blow up his home. He retreated to the kitchen and laid his soul bare before God, praying for strength and guidance, and God sustained him then and throughout his difficult and challenging pilgrimage. *"Thou, Dear God"* allows us to peek into the soul of this prayerful prophetic preacher and will be a cherished book for generations to come.

How I wish that someone in Dr. King's congregation had recorded all of his prayers so that we could have an even more comprehensive record. Since that isn't possible, we are deeply indebted to Dr. Baldwin for not only gathering these prayers but penning a masterful exegetical commentary on the prayer life of this legendary preacher and iconic leader for justice and peace.

THE REVEREND DR. JULIUS R. SCRUGGS

Introduction

"Thou, Dear God" is the first compilation of prayers by the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. These sixty-eight prayers rekindle the spirit, prick the conscience, and stimulate the intellect even today and are the most fruitful and accessible sources for probing Dr. King's devotional life and spirituality. They expose the soul of a man who realized that the whole of life is lived in a God-centered universe, and that God is able to work wonders and even miracles in nature and in history. For Dr. King, such affirmations were expressed theologically in the concepts of God's omnipotence, omnipresence, omniscience, and omnibenevolence.

The seed of faith was planted and cultivated in King's heart by the prayers he heard from his elders during his childhood, passed down orally through generations. While growing up in Atlanta, Georgia, in the 1930s and 1940s, King, Jr., and his siblings, Willie Christine and A. D., were taught to always pray at mealtime, and prayers were routinely recited at bedtime, in the mornings, and on Sundays before their parents, Martin, Sr., and Alberta Williams King, took them to Ebenezer Baptist Church. King, Sr., the pastor at Ebenezer, literally lived by the power of prayer, and he and his wife modeled the kind of praying for which generations of their slave forebears were known. King, Jr., actually learned to pray by imitating his parents and other elders, and the prayers in *"Thou, Dear* *God,* " when studied for their content, language, and imagery, reflect something of the power of that unbroken tradition. In short, these prayers affirm King's fidelity to black church culture, and they are part of that cultural and spiritual bond connecting King to traditions stretching back generations in slavery and many more in Africa.

Different definitions of prayer are reflected here. The idea of prayer as communicating with God, or as talking to God and sharing in the presence of God, comes through clearly. King also referred variously to prayer as humanity's "response to God," as "one of the elemental functions of human life," as "indigenous to the human spirit," and as "the native and deepest impulse of the soul of" humanity. Moreover, King spoke of prayer as the sacred heart of faith, as the foundation of devotional life, as an essential component of prophetic social witness, and as a vital ingredient in the overall effort to free, humanize, and empower humanity. The theoretical and the practical conflated in King's mind whenever he pondered the meaning of prayer. The point is that prayer must be defined not only in words or concepts but also by how it bears on practical reality, a matter of primary consideration in the black church tradition.

These prayers reveal King's tendency to pray for both the proximate (i.e., worldly, in time and space) and the ultimate (i.e., otherworldly, beyond time and space) needs and concerns of life, a tendency that also reflected both King's religious-cultural background and his own religious selfunderstanding. In other words, King prayed for health, strength, shelter, jobs, better race relations, peace, and other basic necessities of life, and also for wisdom and guidance in seeking God's kingdom and God's righteousness in facing death and in achieving salvation in the next world. In declaring that prayer should address both the preliminary concerns and the ultimate concerns of persons, King was making a more general observation; namely, that religion true to its nature focuses on both earth and heaven, both time and eternity.

The theme of deliverance courses through many of King's prayers, making them interesting, dynamic, and provocative. King actually reclaimed the language of deliverance in the prayers of his elders and slave forebears, and he gave expression to it in the sacred arena of the pulpit and in the most celebrated civil rights crusades in American history. Like generations of blacks who preceded him, King prayed with the hope that he and all oppressed people would ultimately be delivered from the Egypt of slavery and from the wilderness of segregation, and that they would one day reach the promised land of freedom, justice, human dignity, and equality of opportunity. Thus, King was part of a prayer tradition defined in some measure by historic continuity, and the prayers reveal to a considerable degree the lived theology of King and his people. That is, they are not merely the simple, poignant expressions of one man's hopes, dreams, and heartfelt desires.

But King also drank from the wellsprings of that larger Christian tradition. The prayers in all the categories of this work show that he majored in the traditional trajectories of Christian prayer; namely, adoration, confession and supplication, petition, thanksgiving, intercession, meditation, and contemplation. King understood that all of these devotional forms were central to the well-defined and practiced prayer life. Here he was indebted to the whole Christian tradition, extending back to the ancient church. He had a high regard for the normative authority of the apostolic church, and his sense of the strict discipline of devotion among the early Christians, who went to the chopping blocks and the lions' dens with prayers on their lips, was a prime motivation for his own prayer habit and life. This history and tradition figured prominently in King's thinking whenever he reflected on prayer as part of a *lived tradition*.

Although the prayers included in "*Thou, Dear God*" are deeply personal, the concern for "the neighbor" and "other selves" is obviously a prominent theme. Put another way, the prayers are both self-directed and other-directed. They most certainly reveal King's tendency to major in intercessory prayer, or prayers for others. King often said that the first law of life is not self-preservation but other-preservation, and this has important implications as far as the study of his prayers is concerned. King believed that intercession constituted prayer in its highest and most authentic expression, and this reflected something quite profound about his vision of the beloved community, or the completely integrated society. King knew that he could never become what he should be until others became what they ought to be.

This book is a serious effort to share King's prayers with the nation and the world he sought so desperately to save. Interestingly enough, he prayed as if the world was his parish. Some of the prayers that follow express his yearning and quest for a liberated humanity and a new world order in which people of all races, colors, and creeds would sing, pray, and live together. Also, King prayed out of a deep and genuine respect for other world religions, which suggests that his prayers have both an ecumenical and a panreligious appeal. Nothing less could have been expected of one who associated and marched with Protestants, Catholics, Jews, and people of other faiths. King was unalterably convinced that all the great faith traditions had cultivated a sense of the supreme unifying principles of life, and that their representatives bow before and are dependent upon the one and only God. The ecumenical and interfaith spirit of some of King's prayers must be taken seriously, for they reveal the dimensions and sheer profundity of his worldview.

In my earlier book about King's prayer life, *Never* to *Leave Us Alone*, I described King's prayers as essentially "prayers of persuasion" and as sources of "creative energy." King's prayers amount to a call to mission and action, an animating spirituality that empowers the human spirit, and an affirmation that activism prefaced by prayer can be amazingly productive and successful. King understood the persuasive power of prayer when dealing with people who confronted fears, uncertainties, and inadequacies in a social movement, and he knew that prayer afforded energy, courage, and perseverance that came from above and not from human sources.

King's prayers were heavily informed and enriched with insight and wisdom from a variety of intellectual and spiritual sources, from the Bible and the Judeo-Christian tradition to African American religion and culture to Josiah Gilbert Holland's "Wanted" (1872). King's favorite prayer lines and passages on prayer from scripture and the Christian tradition are included in part 7. These biblical, religious, experiential, and oral sources came together in King's consciousness whenever he prayed or spoke and wrote about prayer, thus revealing that spirituality for him was both a deeply lived experience and a disciplined exercise of the mind.

King actually paraphrased and turned Holland's poetic work "Wanted" into a prayer that he frequently uttered when issuing the call for both prophetic leadership and radical discipleship:

God give us leaders! A time like this demands great leaders; Leaders whom the lust of office does not kill; Leaders whom the spoils of life cannot buy; Leaders who possess opinions and a will; Leaders who have honor; Leaders who will not lie. Leaders who can stand before a demagogue and damn his treacherous flatteries without winking! Tall leaders, sun crowned, who live above the fog in public duty and private thinking.

King recognized a certain timelessness about the concerns lifted in this prayer, and it is most certainly meaningful and relevant in this contemporary, self-centered culture, in which political leaders, and even religious leaders, are more committed to exercising power, preserving the status quo, and imposing their wills than to principle, higher human values, and the common good.

Prayer lines from black church and cultural sources found their way into King's body of prayers, thus reflecting the diversity of sources on which he drew. In making his point that a "new Negro" was born in the bosom of the civil rights movement, King frequently quoted the prayer from the old slave preacher: "Lord, we ain't what we ought to be; we ain't what we want to be; we ain't what we gonna be; but thank God, we ain't what we was." King was also prone to quote from James Weldon Johnson's "Negro National Anthem": "God of our weary years, God of our silent tears, thou who hast brought us thus far along the way." Although these prayer lines are excluded from this work, references to them are necessary if the prayers in the seven parts of "Thou, Dear God" are to be fully understood. Generally speaking, they show that King's prayers were richly grounded in scripture, tradition, reason, and experience.

Two other points are important when exploring the question of what appears and does not appear in this little book. Obviously, there is no way to include here the many unvoiced prayers for which King was known in those moments of quiet brooding and sacred stillness. King had his self-imposed days of silence, during which he retreated to his pastor's study, to a designated room in his home, or to some hotel room specifically for a day of prayer and meditation. At such times, he combined a rigorous discipline of thinktime with short seasons of equally earnest and soul-searching prayer and meditation. These were times when King poured his heart out to God, confessing his shortcomings, fears, doubts, inadequacies, and vulnerabilities. Undoubtedly, the prayers in this work suggest something of the content and spirit of those unvoiced prayers or the prayers recited during King's private prayer retreats.

King had countless moments of unvoiced prayer, in private and public spaces. Such prayers surged up from King's heart and mind not only in those quiet, sacred spaces during self-imposed days of silence and retreat but also in pulpits, jail cells, and during street marches and demonstrations. King often sat or stood in silent prayer before he spoke and as he found himself among large gatherings of people at the beginning and climax of protest activities. Needless to say, King delighted in the serenity of silent prayer because it was spiritual food for his inner life. Also, such experiences allowed him to encounter God in all of his emptiness and loneliness, and to share personal thoughts, emotions, and insecurities that he did not feel comfortable sharing with people who found a special courage and strength in his leadership. Although we can never know all that King prayed for in those special moments of silent prayer and reflection, a serious engagement with the prayers in this volume most certainly offers some clues.

In his sermons, speeches, writings, and especially his Stride toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story (1958), King gave us a glimpse into the content and spirit of his prayers on a couple of occasions when he was alone and only in the presence of God. One account highlighted the feelings of anxiety and inadequacy that came over King on December 1, 1955, after he was hastily selected to head the Montgomery Improvement Association, the organization that led the bus boycott. Having only twenty minutes to prepare the most important speech in his life, King retreated to his pastor's study to ask for guidance and strength. On another occasion, dated January 27, 1956, he had to retreat to his kitchen at midnight to pray, after receiving a telephone call from a bigot, who threatened to kill him and to blow up his home. King's prayer in the kitchen at midnight is included in part 3, "Prayers in Times of Adversity."

The second point relates to King's tendency to major in one line or single sentence prayers, which was also typical of two of his intellectual and spiritual sources, Mohandas K. Gandhi and Howard W. Thurman. Many of King's sermons and mass meeting speeches are peppered with one line or single sentence prayers. In one short prayer, King petitioned God, "Lead me. Guide me. Be with me as I journey the road of life." In other prayers, he asked for God's help in forging strong and dedicated leadership for his people: "God grant that the leadership of the Negro race will remain true to these basic principles." Numerous one line or single sentence prayers also sought God's direction in serving humanity, in maintaining a spirit of restraint in the face of violence and brutality, and in reaching for the highest and most noble ideal in life. It was not feasible to include all of these short prayers in this volume, but a few are provided for readers who might be interested in this side of King's habit of prayer.

The prayers in "*Thou, Dear God*" did not come out of a prayer book or primer on prayer. For King, this would have been a radical departure from black church traditions, which have always given priority to extemporaneous, informal, and unrehearsed prayers and praying. The prayers in this volume are expressions of King's own heart and mind; they are *memorized* and *voiced* prayers that express the longings, hopes, dreams, and aspirations of one who felt called by God to speak for and to lead a despised and victimized people. To be sure, King's prayers became the prayers of his people. In a more general sense, they are the prayers of all freedomloving people, irrespective of race, nationality, religion, and cultural differences.

The sixty-eight prayers in this work are divided into six categories; namely, "Prayers for Spiritual Guidance," "Prayers for Special Occasions," "Prayers in Times of Adversity," "Prayers for Strength in Times of Trial," "Prayers for Uncertain Times," and "Prayers for Social Justice." The seventh and final section in the book brings together King's favorite prayers from scripture and the Christian tradition. The prayers in each of the first six parts are preceded by a short note to provide context about the larger message being conveyed from sermons, speeches, and other sources in which prayers appear.

King occasionally repeated words, phrases, and themes in his prayers, but this typically happens with devotional sources, and especially prayers, which are most often recited out of theforce of habit and also extemporaneously or without notes. As in the case of sermons and songs, repetitiveness is characteristic of prayers in black church settings, and King clearly reflected the influence of this in his own prayers. I chose not to delete words, phrases, or themes that are repeated in prayers here and there, because this would have compromised the content, the poetic quality, and the rhythm of the prayers.

Most of these prayers were uttered while King was either delivering sermons, serving in a pastoral role, or involved in civil rights activities. In all of these contexts, King prayed in language, words, and concepts that were understandable and accessible to all who heard him. In short, this volume makes prayer real, accessible, and inviting, and it also challenges the reader to think about prayer in new and more profound ways. The prayers here, in all their simplicity, beauty, and power of expression, are a wonderful resource for anyone who is in the process of both spiritual and intellectual discernment.

Although King was rooted in his own time and context, his prayers are perennially available and capable of informing our own spiritual journeys today. They resonate with so many of the concerns of contemporary life and the richness of religious faith, and they also make King's pastoral and prophetic voice heard far and wide in this new century and millennium. Furthermore, the prayers in *"Thou, Dear God"* remind us of the extent to which King's voice remains a treasure in our society and world, a treasure from which flows a spring of living water to nourish the heart, soul, and mind. To be sure, Dr. King is a man for all times, and especially for our own time.

The prayers in this book should compel readers to rethink King's life and legacy. When considered as a whole, the prayers offer a window into the soul of a man who had a deep spiritual hunger, who was a spiritual searcher all his life, who took seriously the sacred imperative to pray, and who followed the prophet Isaiah's words about being a light to others. In short, the prayers contain all the ardor of ,a mission-driven man filled with love for his God, and also passionately alive for God. For first-rate, power-laden prayers of love and longing, of faith and passion, these are difficult to ignore.

King modeled what it means to be a spiritual leader, and one finds in his prayers words that comfort, challenge, encourage, and empower, and also practical suggestions for developing a rich, disciplined, and healthy prayer life. Indeed, the prayers offer a philosophy and theology of prayer and, more specifically, clear paths to prayerful reflection. Put another way, there is here a treasure chest pulsating with reallife experiences and down-to-earth insights and wisdom, and this is why King's prayers will be cherished for generations to come.

Despite its usefulness for our time, this is not a comprehensive guide to prayer. It is, rather, an effort to treat the prayers as a source of inspiration and direction for those who wish to advance the quality of their personal and social lives. Here one encounters the spiritual wisdom of a man who not only set a high standard for modern oratory but also had the gift of imparting spiritual wisdom and sharing profound ideas in all of his oral presentations, including his prayers. Thus, the prayers are essential reading when considering the powerful and soaring ideas and rhetoric that helped make King such a towering intellectual and spiritual leader.

Even a casual engagement with King's prayers reveals his common usage of the words *Negro* and *man*. He was clearly speaking and writing in a context in which such words were in vogue. In the 1950s and 1960s, blacks in America were most commonly referred to, by themselves, whites, and others, as Negroes, and the word *man* was almost always taken to mean humanity as a whole. This reflected the patriarchal or male-dominated culture into which King had been thoroughly socialized. The need to read and understand King in his own context weighed heavily in the decision not to remove the words *Negro* and *man* from those prayers in which they appear. While it is important to highlight the meaningfulness and richness of King's prayers for our own age, this does not justify imposing on him words and language from our own contemporary historical and cultural context.

The effort to compile this work involved some frustration and difficulties. First, certain unpublished materials in the Martin Luther King, Jr., collections at Boston University and Morehouse College were not very accessible to scholars until recently. Also, a survey of many of King's writings, sermons, and speeches at these locations did not produce all of his prayers, as one might imagine. Undoubtedly, there are prayers buried in the King papers and in tape recordings of King's sermons and speeches that are not included in *"Thou, Dear God."* Even so, many of King's best prayers are included here, and the selections represent well the content of his prayers, of his prayer life, and of his perspective on prayer.

Collecting these prayers over the years has really amounted to a labor of love, despite the problems and challenges involved. I benefited immensely, intellectually and spiritually, from reconstructing this highly important but little-known dimension of King's spirituality. Reading these prayers is an even more stimulating experience, for they give one the sense of being on a spiritual and intellectual journey with King. One is exposed to a rich store of sources that capture and pass on the wisdom, imagination, and faith of King. The prayers attract, engage, educate, and spiritually inspire and empower readers in so many ways. Undoubtedly, they show that powerful words can outlive powerful individuals.

LEWIS V. BALDWIN

PART I

Prayers for Spiritual Guidance

The PRAYERS THAT FOLLOW TESTIFY TO THE SPIRITUAL dynamics of prayer, or prayer as the kind of communication by which the believer seeks religious inspiration, personal growth, and an intimate relationship with the God of the universe. These prayers cover the period extending from King's graduate school years at Boston University up to his years as a preacher, pastor, and civil rights leader. Most of the prayers were movingly delivered in church settings, and they attest to King's view of the church as essentially a house of prayer. Here the spiritual journey is pictured as an ongoing discovery of the self and its relationship to the living God, who not only creates and sustains all life but also acts in history, bringing what King termed "all disjointed elements of reality into a harmonious whole."

These prayers unearth King's real spirituality and reveal the God-centered faith that sustained and empowered him in every walk of life. King's great joy in what he called his "cosmic companion" shines through. The prayers as a whole blend adoration, confession, supplication, intercession, petition, and thanksgiving, while also affirming that some of the most complex and necessary facets of the authentic spiritual life are altruistic love, humility, forgiveness, reconciliation, community, and service to humanity. Clearly, prayer was central to King's spiritual practice, and he had a rare openness to discovering God's will for his life. King's prayer life was grounded in the fundamental virtue of obedience, and one finds in his prayers an abundance of insight into the Christian life in particular and the spiritual life in general. The idea of *living* prayer daily comes through clearly and powerfully, thus enhancing King's image as the quintessential spiritual model in modern times.

King viewed prayer as one of the salient features of Christian spirituality, and the prayers in this part I show that he exemplified a uniquely Christian spirituality, which took seriously Christ's call to a radical holiness. But King was equally clear in noting that prayer is a subject that touches the hearts of all people of faith, including Hindus, Buddhists, Jews, and Muslims. Thus, he located prayer at the very center of authentic religious experience as a whole, sensing that it involved a life of self-surrender and a living encounter with the living God for all religions.

Sensitive readers can benefit in so many ways from a careful study of these prayers. First, they can help us to reconnect with the *why* and *how* of our spiritual lives. King reminded us that the spiritual quest involves not so much a searching for God but an openness to and an active waiting on God. It also entails discovering the efficacy and the special rewards of daily praying as an avenue to the truly virtuous life, or a truly balanced or complete life.

Second, these prayers might become a companion for our own spiritual journeys, especially for those who are dissatisfied with the poverty of their own spirituality and are interested in deepening their prayer lives or in seeking a discipline of daily devotion through moving prayers. King believed that prayer acts as an anchor for one's spiritual life, and the prayers that follow testify to this perspective. They

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lead readers through the path of spiritual discovery to worlds filled with the mystery, glory, and power of God.

Third, the prayers in this section could benefit persons who are seeking new wisdom and guidance in prayer, and also new meaning and fulfillment in life. King believed in new adventures in prayer, for such, in his estimation, was essential for cultivating the inner life and, more generally, for growing toward spiritual maturity. The prayers here yield core spiritual values for persons who are determined to begin a renewal and transformation of their faith.

Finally, the prayers that follow actually challenge readers to focus in creative or innovative ways on the relationship between spiritual well-being and a progressive social consciousness and vision. King deemed any idea that separated the two as short sighted and indeed false, a point that will be further highlighted in the introduction to the prayers in part 6 in this volume.

King's prayers for spiritual guidance should be understood in the context of the greater message being shared in the sermons in which they appear, and they are presented here with a vigor and power fresh for our times. They are a daily inspirational read; wonderfully and lovingly crafted prayers from the heart of one of the most creative spiritual thinkers in this nation's history. This is one of several prayers that King recited during his radio broadcasts from Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia, beginning on July 5 and ending on September 6, 1953. The prayers were prepared specifically for the radio broadcasts. At this point, King was a graduate student at Boston University, pursuing a PhD in philosophical theology, but he was still spending summers at Ebenezer with his father, assisting as an associate minister. It is clear that the New Testament, and especially the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5, which sanctioned the ethics of love and nonviolence, were important to King even at this early stage in his life, or long before he became a civil rights leader. King quotes Matthew 22:37 and Matthew 5:41–43.¹

"Forgive Us for What We Could Have Been but Failed to Be"

O thou Eternal God, out of whose absolute power and infinite intelligence the whole universe has come into being We humbly confess that we have not loved thee with our hearts, souls and minds, and we have not loved our neighbors as Christ loved us. We have all too often lived by our own selfish impulses rather than by the life of sacrificial love as revealed by Christ. We often give in order to receive, we love our friends and hate our enemies, we go the first mile but dare not travel the second, we forgive but dare not forget. And so as we look within ourselves we are confronted with the appalling fact that the history of our lives is the history of an eternal revolt against thee. But thou, O God, have mercy upon us. Forgive us for what we could have been but failed to be. Give us the intelligence to know thy will. Give us the courage to do thy will. Give us the devotion to love thy will. In the name and spirit of Jesus we pray. Amen.

This is also a prayer King gave as part of his radio broadcasts from Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia, July 5–September 6, 1953.²

"Grant Us Visions That Shall Lift Us"

O God our eternal Father, we praise thee for gifts of mind with which thou hast endowed us. We are able to rise out of the half-realities of the sense world to a world of ideal beauty and eternal truth. Teach us, we pray Thee, how to use this great gift of reason and imagination so that it shall not be a curse but a blessing. Grant us visions that shall lift us from worldliness and sin into the light of thine own holy presence. Through Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

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This is yet another prayer from King's radio broadcasts, also shared at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia, July 5–September 6, 1953. These prayers indicate that King, unlike most young ministers in the South in his day, had gained some measure of popularity very early, and he was thus using radio. the all-black Atlanta Daily World newspaper, and other media sources to promote his ministry through sermons and prayers. This was most certainly occurring by the time King finished his education at Crozer Theological Seminary in Chester, Pennsylvania. During young King's summer vacations, when he was not required to take classes at Crozer, he usually associated with his father in the ministry at Atlanta's Ebenezer Baptist Church, and that connection, in and of itself, brought a high measure of exposure.³

"Lead Us into Fruitful Effort"

Our Holy Father, we confess the weakness and sinfulness of our lives. We have often turned away from thee to seek our own desires. And often when we have done no evil, we have undertaken nothing of good, and so have been guilty of uselessness and neglect. From this sin of idleness and indifference set us free. Lead us into fruitful effort, and deliver us from profitless lives. We ask in the name of Jesus. Amen. Delivered in Atlanta, Georgia, on August 2, 1953, this prayer came at the close of King's radio sermon entitled "First Things First," in which the young minister commented on national and international affairs white supremacy, economic exploitation, colonialism, and imperialism—while declaring that "only through placing love, mercy, and justice first can we have peace." The "Kingdom of God" (Luke 12:31) was clearly a kind of metaphor King used to capture the vision of a world in which love, compassion, peace, and justice ring supreme. King quotes Matthew 6:33.⁴ "Seek Ye First the Kingdom of God"

God help us as individuals and as a world to hear it now before it is too late: "Seek ye first the Kingdom of God and His Righteousness and all these other things shall be added unto you." This short prayer line was part of a message King delivered at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, Montgomery, Alabama, the congregation that was considering him to replace Vernon Johns as its senior pastor, on January 24, 1954. The message was entitled "The Dimensions of a Complete Life," and it would become one of King's most famous sermons. King would be selected as Dexter's pastor a couple of months later. In any case, this prayer should undermine any idea or claim that King, by some accident of history, entered the arena of civil rights activism during the Montgomery bus protest in 1955. The pilgrimage from Montgomery to Memphis became possible in part because King had a sense of social responsibility before going to Dexter Church.⁵ Humanity Prayer

Lord teach me to unselfishly serve humanity.

This prayer came at the end of King's sermon "Rediscovering Lost Values," which was preached at Second Baptist Church in Detroit, Michigan, on February 28, 1954. The sermon cautioned his listeners to keep their priorities in order, and, more specifically, not to substitute material possessions for God. King quotes Numbers 6:24–26.⁶ "The Lord Make His Face to Shine Upon Thee"

The Lord bless thee and keep thee. The Lord make His face to shine upon thee. The Lord lift up the light of His countenance unto thee, and be with thee in thy going out and coming in, in thy labor and in thy leisure, in thy moments of joy and in thy moments of sorrow, until the day when there shall be no sunset and no dawning. These prayerful reflections can be found toward the end of King's sermon "Living Under the Tensions of Modern Life," delivered at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, Montgomery, Alabama, in September 1956. This is a prayer for inner peace, without which the genuinely spiritual life is impossible. King quotes Philippians 4:7, and he also paraphrases Matthew 11:28 and John 14:27.⁷

"A Peace That Passeth All Understanding"

Come unto me, all ye that are laborers, beat down and burdened down because of the problems of modern life. Come unto me and I will give you rest that will carry you through the generations. I will give you a peace that the world can never understand. My peace I leave with you, not as the world giveth, but a peace that passeth all understanding. God grant, if we will discover this, we will be able to live amid the tensions of modern life. A prayer that followed King's sermon "The Rewards of Worship" at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, Montgomery, Alabama, on April 28, 1957. This prayer has the flavor of a pastoral prayer, as do many of King's sermonic prayers. The distinction between the two types of prayers is not always easy to explain, especially from the angle of content. However, sermonic prayers in this case are always associated directly with sermons or preaching.⁸

"We Thank Thee for the Privilege to Worship Thee"

Oh God, our gracious Heavenly Father, we thank Thee for the privilege above all privileges, and that is the privilege to worship Thee. Grant that we will never misuse worship, that we will direct it in the proper channel and receive all of the great rewards that come as a result of our kneeling before Thee in humble submission and worshipping Thee throughout the whole wide world. In the name and spirit of Jesus, we pray. Amen. King uttered this prayer at the beginning of his sermon, "Conquering Self-Centeredness," which was delivered at the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama, on March 11, 1957. The prayer came after King talked briefly to his congregation about giving "liberally with open hearts and open spirits for the causes ahead." King respected people who tithed, but there is no evidence that he consistently stressed it or that he went to great lengths to defend the practice biblically and theologically. "We say we love the church," King said in another sermon, "but admit to ourselves that even when we give we do it grudgingly and we give the leftovers to God."⁹ "With Open Hearts and Spirits"

O God, our Heavenly Father, we thank Thee for life and we thank Thee for health. We thank Thee for the ability to work and to live in this society. Help us to realize that as we make our money that we owe a portion of it to Thee. And help us to give it with open hearts and spirits, realizing that as we give, we give for the ongoing of Thy kingdom here on earth. Amen. This prayer came at the conclusion of King's sermon "Conquering Self-Centeredness" in Montgomery, Alabama, on August 11, 1957, and it expressed King's conviction that self-centeredness is not the path to God or to the most productive and meaningful life, espècially for the truly moral and rational person. Perhaps King's most interesting sermon on the problem of selfcenteredness is "Pride versus Humility: The Parable of the Pharisee and the Publican," which he preached at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church on September 25, 1955. King delighted in using Jesus's parables as the hermeneutical basis for his sermons on what should be the content of character before God.¹⁰

"Help Us to Rise Out of Our Egotism"

O God, our gracious Heavenly Father, help us to rise out of our attitude of self-centeredness, out of our egotism. Help us to rise to the point of having faith in Thee and realizing that we are dependent on Thee. And when we realize this, O God, we will live life with a new meaning and with a new understanding and with a new integration. We ask Thee to grant all of these blessings in the name and spirit of Jesus. Amen. This prayer was recited after another version of King's sermon "The Three Dimension of a Complete Life" was delivered at the Unitarian church in the Germantown section of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, on December 11, 1960. Again, King maintains that there are three dimensions to a complete life; namely, a love for self, for others, and for God. On one level, King places stress in this prayer on the need "to be concerned about ourselves," a point that suggests a keen understanding that self-preservation is an important dimension of the gospel. In any case, King's point undermines any claim that he emphasized the love of God and others while minimizing self-love. For King, sacrificial, altruistic, unselfish, or disinterested lovedid not amount to a negation of self-love.¹¹

"Those Dimensions That Will Bring Completeness"

Let us pray. Eternal God, our Father, we thank thee for the insights of old, the insights of prophets and those who have lived near to thee. Grant that as we continue to live we will seek to develop all of those dimensions that will bring completeness to us. Grant somehow that we will learn to be concerned about ourselves, but at the same time give us that great concern for other selves. At the same time, help us to be concerned about thee and to worship thee in spirit and truth. Grant that somehow we will come to the great conclusion that unless we have all three of these we somehow live lives that are incomplete. Amen.

PART II

Prayers for Special Occasions

HE ROLES OF PREACHER AND PASTOR FOR MARTIN LUTHER King, Jr., inevitably involved praying on special occasions. During his twenty years of public ministry (1948-68), he must have recited hundreds of prayers at annual church conferences and anniversaries, family reunions, watch night services, weddings, funerals, and other special events. It is also conceivable that King routinely offered prayers at Thanksgiving, during the Christmas and Easter seasons, and on numerous other holidays. Unfortunately, those prayers have not survived in great abundance, mainly because King failed to commit them to paper or to preserve them as audio recordings. King also occasionally left handwritten or typed versions of sermons and speeches, which most likely contained prayers, in the seat pockets on planes once he was finished with them. In any case, a few of these prayers have been discovered, and eight of them are included in part 2.

A breakdown of the prayers that follow is useful for placing them in proper context and perspective. They include a standard wedding prayer King prepared and probably used for the first time in August 1948, three Palm Sunday prayers, two Easter prayers, an interfaith prayer given after a sermon on Gandhi on Palm Sunday in 1959, and a funeral prayer. King recited most of these prayers in his capacity as preacher and pastor. The wedding prayer, prepared when King was about to pursue seminary training, combines adoration, intercession, and petition into a single occasion of prayer. The prayer reveals King's sense of an encounter with the holiness, majesty, and benevolence of God; his prayerful concern for couples who commit to each other; and his request for blessings as a recognition of humanity's creaturely dependence upon God.

The Palm Sunday and Easter prayers suggest that the images of Holy Week and of Jesus drinking of the bitter cup, dying on the cross, and achieving ultimate victory over death became essentially one in King's consciousness with images of dedicated civil rights activists suffering and dying in the streets for the redemption and transformation of America and indeed the world. These prayers also reflect King's view of prayer as *lived experience* and *lived tradition* and as a matter for practical theology.

The interfaith prayer included in this section speaks to King's broad and inclusive vision, and especially his respect for the ethical and theological traditions of the world's great religions. This is a prayer that all people of faith need to read, hear, and understand, for it was voiced by a visionary who once echoed Harry Emerson Fosdick's suggestion that there is essentially nothing wrong with praying in Buddhist temples, in Confucianist shrines, in Muslim mosques, and in Jewish synagogues. We live in a wonderfully diverse and yet deeply confused world of conflict and suffering, a world in which ignorance and misunderstanding too often greet religious pluralism. Also, our world is becoming ever more globalized, and we are increasingly confronted with and challenged by a diversity of religious belief and practice. King's interfaith prayer has something to teach humans as they seek a secure place in this world of plurality and difference.

Although the prayers in part 2 show that King was highly mindful of the special occasions during which he prayed, the prayers are not significantly different from those in other parts of this book, especially in their striking imagery, poetic quality, utter clarity, and gracious wisdom. The prayers are also similar in that they, when considered as a whole, combine adoration, confession, supplication, intercession, petition, and thanksgiving.

These prayers are a delightful and inspiring read, for they show that prayer and the celebrative life are one. The editorial staff of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Papers Project at Stanford University has concluded that King probably prepared this prayer to use as a standard prayer "for weddings throughout his ministry." Also, King may have recited this prayer when he officiated "in one of his first marriage ceremonies, the August 22, 1948, wedding of Samuel P. Long and Ruth Bussey at Thankful Baptist Church in Decatur, Georgia." King had only recently graduated from Morehouse College in Atlanta, Georgia, and was about to enter Crozer Theological Seminary in Chester, Pennsylvania.¹

"The Primacy of Love": A Wedding Prayer

O God our gracious heavenly father, who art the originator of all life; whose presence brings happiness to every condition; whose favor sweetens every relation. We beseech thy blessings upon these thy servants as they embark upon the great sea of matrimony. Grant that the ship of their marriage will be well anchored and guided by the proper compass, so that they will be able to emerge successfully into the great harbor of peace, happiness and oneness. Give them a deep awareness of the sacredness of this venture. In an age when so many men and women would make marriage a mere perfunctory act with no divine and sacred value, when myriad Hollywood would arise to make of marriage a mere seasonable plaything which must occur at least four or five times in a life time, in such an age help them to realize that marriage is man's greatest prerogative, for it is in and through it that thou hast given man the privilege to aid thee in thy creative activity. Help them to see the primacy of love in this venture. Grant that they will realize that without it a marriage can be dropped into the abyss of meaninglessness where each person will experience the bleakness of nagging despair, but with it the marriage can be lifted to the radiant level of life's most exciting venture.

In this Palm Sunday sermon, called "Garden of Gethsemane," delivered at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama, on January 14, 1957, King, after challenging his listeners to deal courageously "with the bitter cup which you will face from day to day," uttered this prayer. This prayer was clearly consistent with King's view of the Christian life as involving the bearing of a cross, a view that had obvious and profound implications for his own role and the roles of others in the struggle for equal rights and social justice. "To be a Christian one must take up the cross," King maintained, "with all of its difficulties and agonizing and tension-packed content, and carry it until the cross leaves its marks upon us and redeems us to that more excellent way which comes only through suffering." King quotes Matthew 16:24 and 26:39.2

"Help Us to Realize That God Is the Answer": Palm Sunday Prayer

Let us pray. Oh, God our gracious Heavenly Father, in the glory of this Palm Sunday, help us to realize the darkness of the week ahead, with its Gethsemane, yes, with its Calvary, with its dark cross. Oh, God, help us to realize though that in the midst of this, there is a way out as we face life's central test, the test of making the transition from "Let this cup pass from me" to "nevertheless." God grant that we will discover that it can only be faced by giving our ultimate allegiance to Thee and to a religious view of life. Help us to realize that God is the answer. In the midst of all our trials and tribulations, God is the answer. In the midst of all our disappointments, God is the answer. Help us to live with that philosophy. And by that we will be able to live until we meet Thee in all of Thy eternities. In the name and spirit of Jesus, we pray. Amen. This brief prayer also came in the course of King's sermon "Questions That Easter Answers," given in Montgomery, Alabama, on April 21, 1957. King was apparently alluding to the risen Christ at Easter or the victorious triumph over the cross and the suffering that marked Good Friday.³

"Thank God a Third Day Came": Good Friday Prayer

Thank God the crucifixion was not the last act in that great and powerful drama. There is another act. And it is something that we sing out and cried and ring out about today. Thank God a third day came. Thank God a day came when Good Friday had to pass. A prayer King gave after preaching a sermon entitled "Questions That Easter Answers" on April 21, 1957, probably at his Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama. Some of the same images evoked in the previously mentioned Palm Sunday sermon are revealed here, albeit in different terms. King proclaimed that Easter, which celebrates the resurrection or the victory of Christ over the crucifixion and the grave, means the ultimate triumph of the forces of good over the forces of evil, a point that had obvious implications for the struggle against the evils of Jim Crow in the American South. King alludes to 1 Corinthians 15:55.⁴

"We Thank You, This Morning, for Your Son, Jesus": Easter Prayer

Oh God, our gracious Heavenly Father, we come on this Easter morning, thanking Thee for revealing to us the ultimate meaning and the ultimate rationality of the universe. We thank you, this morning, for your Son, Jesus, who came by to let us know that love is the most durable power in the world, who came by to let us know that death can't defeat us, to take the sting out of the grave and death and make it possible for all of us to have eternal life. We thank you, oh God. And God grant that we will be grateful recipients of thy eternal blessings. In the name and spirit of Jesus, we pray. Amen. In the middle of his sermon "Garden of Gethsemane," delivered in Montgomery, Alabama, on April 14, 1957, King offered this prayer, which drew an analogy between Jesus's bitter cup and the cup that dedicated activists must necessarily drink daily for a better world. The civil rights leader prayed that those who were compelled to take up "the cup" of struggle would, like Jesus, move beyond a declaration of "Let this cup pass from me" to an affirmation of "nevertheless, not my will, but Thy will be done" (Matthew 26:39, 42). As indicated previously, the "cup" and the "cross" took on metaphorical significance for King in the struggle for freedom, justice, and peace.⁵

"As You Face the Bitter Cup"

God grant this morning that as you go out and face life with all of its decisions, as you face the bitter cup which you will inevitably face from day to day, God grant that you will learn this one thing and that is to make the transition from "this cup" to "nevertheless."

A prayer offered at the end of King's "Palm Sunday Sermon on Mohandas K. Gandhi," the Indian activist and leader who led his people against British colonial domination, and who was assassinated in 1948. The sermon was delivered at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery on March 22, 1959, and the prayer shows the ecumenical and panreligious outlook for which King was so well known. Having a deep and genuine respect for different cultures, and convinced that there is more truth in all religions combined than in any one religion, King translated this ecumenical and interfaith vision into practical terms as he intersected Christians, Jews, and peoples of other faiths in a movement to eliminate racism, poverty, and war across the globe. Also in this prayer, King makes clear his acceptance of personalism, a philosophicaltheological train of thought that affirms both the sacredness of persons and the belief in a personal God of love and reason.⁶

"You Have Inspired Men and Women in All Nations": Interfaith Prayer

O God, our gracious Heavenly Father, we thank Thee for the fact that you have inspired men and women in all nations and in all cultures. We call you different names: some call Thee Allah; some call you Elohim; some call you Jehovah; some call you Brahma; and some call you the Unmoved Mover; some call you the Archetectonic [*sic*] Good. But we know that these are all names for one and the same God, and we know you are one.

And grant, O God, that we will follow Thee and become so committed to Thy way and Thy kingdom that we will be able to establish in our lives and in this world a brotherhood. We will be able to establish here a kingdom of understanding, where men will live together as brothers and respect the dignity and worth of all human personality. In the name and spirit of Jesus we pray. Amen. In this prayer, also offered toward the end of King's "Palm Sunday Sermon on Mohandas K. Gandhi" in 1959, the image of the cross in relation to those who commit themselves to redemptive love and nonviolence is once again highlighted. King went on to suggest that the fulfillment of God's purpose in history extends beyond the cross: "But thank God it never stops here. Thank God Good Friday is never the end. And the man who shot Gandhi only shot him into the hearts of humanity."⁷

"We Shall Choose the High Way": Interfaith Prayer

And God grant that we shall choose the high way, even if it will mean assassination, even if it will mean crucifixion, for by going this way we will discover that death would be only the beginning of our influence. This prayer was recited by King on numerous occasions at various church-related events in different locations in the period from 1954 to 1968, and especially during those occasions when he offered benedictions at the end of worship services or when he was either involved in or officiated at funeral services. From all indications, it is one of the prayers that King said most frequently and consistently during his fourteen years of pastoral leadership.⁸ "To the Mountains of Hope": Funeral Prayer

And now unto Him who is able to keep us from falling and lift us from the dark valley of despair to the mountains of hope, from the midnight of desperation to the daybreak of joy; to Him be power and authority, forever and ever. Amen.

PART III

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Prayers in Times of Adversity

MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR., WAS FULLY ACQUAINTED WITH difficult and trying times. He grew up in the Jim Crow South in the 1930s and '40s, with parents who struggled daily to provide for and to protect their children in a society that victimized and exploited them. Young King witnessed the pain on the faces of his people as they stood in bread lines during the Great Depression and as they struggled with the evils of the Jim Crow system. As a civil rights leader, King continued to observe the problems that attended black people's tenacious efforts to survive and prosper, even-as he-struggled, with limited resources and little time, to provide the basic necessities for his own wife and children. Although King was never apt to dwell on the hard times, they undoubtedly influenced both his prayers and his praying. The prayers in this third part, covering the period from King's student years in Boston up to his pastoral experiences in Montgomery, Alabama, must be understood in light of the difficult times that both King and his people endured.

King was and still is a model of prayer for people of faith who face adversity. He understood clearly the challenge and the wisdom of bowing and kneeling in prayer during such times, and the five prayers here support this conclusion. These prayers reach deep into the wells of wisdom, springing forth with words that inspire hope and a willingness to survive and persevere despite life's difficulties and painful contradictions.

Like the prayers in parts 1 and 2, these prayers, when considered as a whole, combine adoration, supplication, confession, intercession, petition, and thanksgiving, but they are more directed toward seeking God's power and guidance in overcoming adversities. The first prayer petitions God's "saving health" in overcoming all sorts of conditions that afflict persons and nations, and it asks for "patience" and the "power of endurance." This prayer rings with a particular relevance today, when people are losing their jobs, homes, and indeed their livelihood due to economic crises and the growing gap between rich and poor.

The second prayer is really a personal cry for God's help in a time of distress. Recited as King sat in the kitchen of his home at 309 Jackson Street in Montgomery in January 1956 with his head in his hands, this prayer emerged out of the conviction that the Lord of history is a way maker who will be with those who stand for truth and righteousness. This "kitchen prayer" speaks to the difficult times King was facing as a leader of the Montgomery bus boycott, and it is a powerful example of King's sacred encounter with God in privacy. Clearly, King had both a faith-filled and a hope-filled approach to prayer that might be instructive in these times when there seems to be a growing distrust of the life-giving and life-affirming capacity of even spiritual leaders and religious institutions.

The third prayer consists of only a couple of sentences, but its expression of reverent homage rendered to God and its request for God's blessings and companionship are nevertheless clear and profound. In difficult and trying times, humans can actually lose themselves in their pains and struggles, but through their own initiative and God's companionship, relief and self-affirmation are indeed possible. This is the lesson filtered through this prayer, especially when, it is considered in relationship to the more general message conveyed in the sermon in which it appears.

The essential point in the fourth prayer is that God has made humans for something "high and noble and good," and that life's problems and challenges should never deprive one of a sense of this "high calling" and "great destiny." It is, a prayer for the will to follow Jesus, who came to show us a higher human and ethical ideal.

The fifth and final prayer in part 3 begins on a note of adoration, with praise for the most High God, while petitioning God for insight and understanding into the nature of God's "ever flowing grace." The point is that divine grace always instills "hope" and provides "a way out," even in times of challenge and peril. It is a prayer for the hopeful in dark and uncertain times.

Those who are driven by adversity to ask searching questions about the meaning of life will find comfort and inspiration in the prayers that follow. They contain insights about how to reclaim real meaning in life. They also suggest how one might give a wise and responsible witness to faith in the midst of adversity. Nothing could be more important in this new century and millennium, when the spirit of no surrender in the face of adversity seems to get weaker and weaker. One of several prayers King gave for a radio broadcast from Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia, July 5–September 6, 1953. These were handwritten prayers that highlighted "confession and repentance in a worship service."¹

"In Whom to Dwell Is to Find Peace and Security"

O God, the Creator and Preserver of all mankind; in whom to dwell is to find peace and security; toward whom to turn is to find life and life eternal, we humbly beseech Thee for all sorts and conditions of men; that thou wouldst be pleased to make thy ways known unto them, Thy saving health unto all nations. We also pray for Thy holy Church universal; that it may be so guided and governed by thy Spirit, that all who profess and call themselves Christians may be led into the way of truth, and hold the faith in unity of spirit, in the (land?) of peace, and in righteousness of life. Finally, we commend to thy Fatherly goodness all those who are in any way afflicted or distressed in mind or body. Give them patience under the suffering and power of endurance. This we ask in the name of Jesus. Amen. Another version of the same prayer that accompanied King's "vision in the kitchen" at 309 South Jackson Street in Montgomery, Alabama.² "But Lord, I Must Confess That I'm Weak Now"

Lord, I'm down here trying to do what's right. I think I'm right. I think the cause that we represent is right. But Lord, I must confess that I'm weak now, I'm faltering, I'm losing my courage, and I can't let the people see me like this because if they see me weak and losing my courage, they will begin to get weak. A prayer offered by King at the end of an address to the Montgomery Improvement Association, the organization brought into being to lead the bus boycott (1955–56). The address was dated March 22, 1956, in Montgomery, Alabama, and King was obviously thanking God for those who committed themselves to the elimination of bus segregation.³

"God Be with Us"

God be praised for you, for your loyalty, for your determination. God bless you and keep you, and may God be with us as we go on. This prayer was published in King's first book of sermons in 1959, and it appears at the end of the sermon entitled "What Is Man?" The prayer speaks to the need for every rational person to pursue the highest moral and ethical ideal in life.⁴ "We Are Made for That Which Is High and Noble and Good"

O God, our gracious heavenly Father, we thank thee for the inspiration of Jesus the Christ, who came to this world to show us the way. And grant that we will see in that life the fact that we are made for that which is high and noble and good. Help us to live in line with that high calling, that great destiny. In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen.

This prayer followed the delivery of King's sermon "Man's Sin and God's Grace." The exact date and location cannot be determined with specificity, but it is believed the sermon and prayer were most likely delivered during King's years in Montgomery, Alabama, perhaps at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in the period from 1954 to 1960.⁵ "Thy Powerful and Ever Flowing Grace"

Oh God, our graciously heavenly Father, help us to see the meaning of this grace, and help us to realize that in our sinful lives there is some hope, there is a way out through Thy powerful and ever flowing grace. In the name and spirit of Jesus, we pray. Amen.

PART IV

Prayers for Strength in Times of Trial

Every HUMAN BEING HAS TRIALS AND TRIBULATIONS THAT he or she cannot handle alone, or through humanly contrived means, and Martin Luther King, Jr., knew and understood this as well as any person of faith. This virtually explains the significance of the fifteen prayers in the fourth part of this book, one of which dates from King's years as a seminary student and the others extending through his years as an established preacher, pastor, and social activist. They are power-laden prayers filled with marvelous pearls of wisdom and spiritual insight, and they evoke striking images of the God who is-the source of all life and a pillar of strength in times of trial, tribulation, and sacrifice.

These prayers actually emerged to some extent out of the pain and anguish caused by difficult situations or conditions in King's own life, but they should strike a responsive chord in the heart's of all people who face life's greatest tests and who know great affliction, trial, distress, and suffering. Marked by attitudes of adoration, confession, supplication, petition, intercession, and thanksgiving, the prayers bespeak a certainty in God's nearness and care, and they can inspire courage and strength when these virtues seem all too illusive.

When examined collectively, these prayers are really pleas before God for the values and virtues that make and keep life complete in the midst of personal trials and suffering. They ask for strength and divine guidance in maintaining a healthy and positive sense of self, in keeping a spirit of agape love and genuine respect for other selves, in making personal sacrifices, in following a path of dignity and discipline, and in refusing to be conquered by ill-treatment, disaster, or painful setbacks.

King was always reluctant to speak about his personal trials, tribulations, and sacrifices, mainly out of a concern to avoid self-centeredness, self-pity, self-righteousness, and the appearance of seeking sympathy. But hints of King's own trials, tribulations, and sacrifices filter through the prayers in this section, and the prayers actually convey thoughts of how suffering might be transformed into a creative and redemptive force. Nothing could be more reassuring today or at a time when people, and particularly those whom King called "the least of these," are in need of greater strength and the power of endurance.

Generally speaking, the prayers here expose King's own wounds as a source of healing for all who feel tested by life's trials and who seek sustenance, reaffirmation, and renewal. These prayers are really a blessing, especially for those persons of faith who believe in the possibilities and reality of what King called "divine companionship." They are prayers that warm the reader's heart during the dark days of doubt, and they also brighten the quest for faith, meaning, identity, and community.

This one-line prayer was recited at the end of King's sermon "Mastering Our Evil Selves, Mastering Ourselves," which focused on "the internal struggle between good and evil" that occurs within human beings. Recited in a church setting in Atlanta, Georgia, on June 5, 1949, the prayer is essentially a plea that those who heard this particular sermon would appeal to the very best as opposed to the worst qualities within themselves. At the time, King had just completed his first year of training at Crozer Theological Seminary in Chester, Pennsylvania.¹ "Your Good Self"

God grant that you will choose your good self thereby mastering your evil self.

This is really a pastoral prayer King routinely used in slightly different versions during his years as a pastor and co-pastor. The prayer was recorded in Montgomery, Alabama, in 1956.²

"We Live above Nature"

We thank thee, O God, for the spiritual nature of man. We are in nature but we live above nature. Help us never to let anybody or any condition to pull us so low as to cause us to hate. Give us strength to love our enemies and to do good to those who despitefully use us and persecute us. We thank thee for thy Church, founded upon thy Word, that challenges us to do more than sing and pray, but go out and work as though the very answer to our prayers depended on us and not upon thee. Then, finally, help us to realize that man was created to shine like stars and live on through all eternity. Keep us, we pray, in perfect peace; help us to walk together, pray together, sing together, and live together until that day when all God's children, Black, White, Red, and Yellow will rejoice in our common band of humanity in the kingdom of our Lord and of our God, we pray. Amen. After receiving a telephone call from a white racist who threatened his life, his home, and his family, King said this prayer in the kitchen of his residence at 309 South Jackson Street in Montgomery, Alabama, on January 28, 1956. The civil rights leader was at a critical point in the Montgomery bus boycott and was increasingly facing threats from the white community, most of which opposed the boycott. Sitting in his kitchen at the parsonage of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, which was his residence, King had his "vision in the kitchen" after reciting the prayer over a cup of coffee. In his sermon "Our God Is Able," and in other sources, King would later refer repeatedly to the prayer and the vision, viewing this as a crisis moment or a kind of conversion experience. King recalled that "I experienced the presence of the Divine as I had never experienced Him before," an acknowledgment of immense proportions for one who had experienced the call to preach almost a decade earlier.³

"I Can't Face It Alone"

Lord, 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. After preaching on the subject "When Peace Becomes Obnoxious" at his Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama, on March 18, 1956, King offered this prayer. King and his church were in the midst of a bus boycott in which racial tensions were reaching fever pitch, and it was quite typical of the civil rights leader to give prayers that kept people from becoming cynical or that kept them inspired, motivated, and hopeful. A sense of the depth of the racial tensions in Montgomery can come from a reading of both King's prayers and his reflections on the subject.⁴ "The Tragic Temptation of Becoming Cynical"

Our Father God, who dost overarch our fleeting years with thine eternity and dost undergird our weakness with thy strength, in the midst of the pressures of another day, as we face its vast concerns. Above all else save us from succumbing to the tragic temptation of becoming cynical. This prayer was recited in King's report on the Montgomery bus boycott in New York City in April 1956. The prayer reflected a time when King and many in Montgomery's black community were being persecuted due to their heavy involvement in the boycott. Some blacks were attacked physically, and homes and churches were being burned or bombed.⁵ Strength of Body Prayer

Oh Lord, give us strength of body to keep walking for freedom. (Let us) pray that God shall give us strength to remain nonviolent though we may face death. In the middle of his sermon "Living under the Tensions of Modern Life," delivered at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama, in September 1956, King challenged his parishioners with this prayer, declaring that this should be their "great prayer in life." Reshaping life through the art and exercise of prayer remained for King a most cherished value, as a careful study of his many writings, speeches, and sermons reveal. King often highlighted the need for people to live the most productive and creative lives possible, or what he saw as the high moral life, and this found expression in his prayers as well as his sermons.⁶

Acceptance Prayer

Lord help me to accept my tools. However dull they are, help me to accept them. And then Lord, after I have accepted my tools, then help me to set out and do what I can do with my tools. This short prayer appears in a sermon outline based on the parable of the prodigal son, which King entitled "The Fellow Who Stayed at Home." The exact date and location of the prayer are in question, but it is believed to have been recited in a church setting in Montgomery in October 1956.⁷ "It Is Not Enough to Be Good"

God save us from a stuffed-shirt morality. It is not enough to be good; to be Christian we must be good in a nice way.

A prayer stated at the end of King's speech "Nonviolence and Racial Justice," given in Chicago, Illinois, on February 6, 1957. It is in essence a plea to God that oppressed people worldwide will use peaceful means to achieve peaceful ends and not choose the way of oppressors.⁸

"We Wage the Struggle with Dignity": Nonviolence Prayer

God grant that we wage the struggle with dignity and discipline. May all who suffer oppression in this world reject the self-defeating method of retaliatory violence and choose the method that seeks to redeem. This transcript was taken from an audio recording, dated July 18, 1957. At the request and invitation of Leighton Ford, an associate evangelist with Billy Graham, King gave the prayer at Graham's New York crusade. King ended this prayer with a recitation of the Lord's Prayer, which was typical of him when offering pastoral prayers in churches and other religious settings. The civil rights leader had become known nationally and internationally due to the successful outcome of the Montgomery bus protest in 1956, a year earlier. Even so, King's appearance at the crusade, to say nothing of his involvement, was not well received by many white Christian conservatives who supported Graham, especially in the segregated South. Following King's prayer, Graham himself "preached a sermon that virtually dismissed the structural methods of the civil rights movement in favor of individual conversion." Also, Graham received many letters and telephone calls, some of which were threatening, after King's appearance at the crusade. King never prayed at another Graham crusade, and Graham, concerned about maintaining his white Christian conservative followers and about protecting his access to circles of power at the highest levels of American political life, gradually distanced himself from King. Strangely enough, Graham was not present at King's funeral in Atlanta in April 1968.9

"A Brotherhood That Transcends Race or Color": Given at Billy Graham Crusade

Let us pray. O God, our Heavenly Father, out of whose mind this great cosmic universe has been created, toward whom the weary and perplexed of all generations turn for consolation and direction, we come before Thy presence this evening thanking Thee for the many blessings of life. We come recognizing our dependence on Thee. We also come, O God, with an awareness. The fact that we have not always given our lives to that which is high and noble. In the midst of all of the high and noble aspects of justice, we followed injustice. We stand amid the forces of truth and yet we deliberately lie. We stand amid the compelling urgency of the Lord of Love, as exemplified in the life of Jesus Christ, and yet we live our lives so often in the dungeons of hate. For all of these sins, O God, forgive. And in these days of emotional tension, when the problems of the world are gigantic in extent and chaotic in detail, give us penetrating vision, broad understanding, power of endurance and abiding faith, and save us from the paralysis of crippling fear. And O God, we ask Thee to help us to work with renewed vigor for a warless world and for a brotherhood that transcends race or color. We thank Thee this evening for the marvelous things which have been done in this city, and through the dynamic preachings of this great evangelist. And we ask Thee, O God, to continue blessing him. Give him continued power and authority. And as we look into him tonight, grant that our hearts and spirit will be open to the divine inflow. All of these things we ask, in the name of Him who taught us to pray. "Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name."

This prayer surfaced in the middle of King's sermon "Conquering Self-Centeredness" as he reminded his hearers, at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama, on August 11, 1957, of the importance of giving themselves "to something greater than self." This, declared King, is "the great prayer" that every truly moral and committed person would and should pray.¹⁰ "Help Me to Love My Job"

O God, help me to love my job as this individual loves his or hers. O God, help me to give myself to my work and to my job and to my allegiance as this individual does. A prayer offered by King at the close of his sermon "The Christian Doctrine of Man," which he preached at the Detroit Council of Churches' noon Lenten services in Detroit, Michigan, on March 12, 1958. The prayer clearly hints at the story of the prodigal son as a way of challenging those present to always find their way back to the right path in life.¹¹ "We Are Made for the High Places"

God grant that under the spirit of Jesus Christ you will choose a high way. Eternal God our Father, we thank Thee for the inspiration of Jesus. Grant that we will follow His way and recognize that we are made for the high places. And grant that we will rise up out of the low, far countries of evil and return to the father's house. And now unto Him whom is able to keep us from falling and to present us faultless before our father's throne, to Him be power and authority, majesty and dominion, now, henceforth, and forevermore. Amen. On April 6, 1958, in Montgomery, Alabama, King offered these words as a prayer at the prayer pilgrimage protesting the electrocution of Jeremiah Reeves, a drummer boy in a black band, who had been arrested at age sixteen for allegedly raping a white woman. It was widely believed by King and others in the black community that Reeves was innocent. In any case, this prayers ranks among the most dynamic and meaningful ones King recited in times of great trial.¹²

"Father Forgive Them"

We are still inflicted with economic injustice—Father forgive them. Simply because we want to be free there are those who will threaten our lives, cripple us with economic reprisals, and bomb our homes and churches—but Father forgive them. There are still those hooded perpetrators of violence who will stop us out on some wayside road and beat us, leaving us half dead—but Father forgive them. Right here in Montgomery, in spite of all our efforts, thousands of us are refused the right to become registered voters—but Father forgive them. Our children, merely desiring education, are spat upon, cursed and kicked hither and yonder—but Father forgive them. A prayer that appeared in King's "Advice for Living," a column he wrote for Ebony, the black magazine based in Chicago, Illinois, in December 1958.¹³ Strength and Courage Prayer

God remove all bitterness from my heart and give me the strength and courage to face any disaster that comes my way.

A prayer uttered after the delivery of King's sermon "Unfulfilled Hopes" at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama, on April 5, 1959. Interestingly enough, history and tradition came together in King's consciousness during this prayer, for he referred to not only "the great saints and prophets" of the ages but also his African forebears, whom he felt had passed on a hope and a faith from which he and others in the freedom struggle had benefited. King often spoke to these issues, thus revealing his great sense of history and his appreciation for both the biblicalprophetic tradition and the traditions of his enslaved ancestors. Both remained critically important for the prayers and prayer life of the preacher-activist, even as he also drew from a range of different theological and philosophical sources.¹⁴

"We Thank Thee for Our Foreparents"

Oh God, our gracious, heavenly Father, we thank Thee for the creative insights in the universe. We thank Thee for the lives of great saints and prophets in the past, who have revealed to us that we can stand up amid the problems and difficulties and trials of life and not give in. We thank Thee for our foreparents, who've given us something in the midst of the darkness of exploitation and oppression to keep going. And grant that we will go on with the proper faith and the proper determination of will, so that we will be able to make a creative contribution to this world and in our lives. In the name and spirit of Jesus we pray. Amen.

King gave this prayer on March 9, 1965 during a march for voting rights that involved persons of different age groups, races, religions, and socioeconomic classes. King referred to the effort as an ecumenical movement or as the beginnings of "a real coalition of conscience." The prayer evokes images of the struggles of the children of Israel in the Exodus, a story that was paradigmatic for King, for he saw his own people moving through "the Egypt of slavery, the wilderness of segregation, toward the promised land of freedom, justice, and equality." In employing this type of biblical imagery, King was standing squarely in the tradition of African American slaves. The Exodus account, along with other stories, characters, and images from scripture, "pervaded the preaching, praying, and singing of the slaves." In this prayer, the sentence "Ain't gonna let nobody turn us around" came from one of the freedom songs of the civil rights movement, "Marching Up Freedom's Lane," which was inspired by Negro slave spirituals.¹⁵

"Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Us Around"

Almighty God, Thou has called us to walk for freedom, even as Thou did the Children of Israel. We pray, dear God, as we go through a wilderness of State Troopers that Thou will hold our hand. We pray, dear God, as we must go through the Valley of the Shadow of Death, that Thou will go with us and strengthen us for the task. Keep us strong. Keep us calm. Help us to love our enemy. And above all, keep the fires of freedom burning in our hearts, so that no matter what happens, ain't gonna let nobody turn us around. Because Thou, dear God, has sent us into this place. Thou has sent us to fight, not just for ourselves, but to fight for this nation so that democracy might exist here for the whole world. Keep this vision in our hearts, and may we one day wake up and find the state of Alabama, where all men might vote, where all children might get a decent education, where every man and woman might have a job according to his (or her) abilities, and where every man and woman might live together as brothers, and violence and bloodshed and hatred and prejudice shall be no more. In Jesus' name, we pray, Amen.

PART V

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Prayers for Uncertain Times

MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR., BELIEVED DEEPLY IN THE possibility of the fulfillment of God's will and purpose in human history. He prayed with this conviction, but he was beset at times by doubts and uncertainties. Clearly, King was an intriguing blend of the incurable optimist and the thoughtful realist, and the fourteen prayers in this section reflect this kind of healthy ambivalence in his soul. The prayers cover the period extending from King's graduate school years at Boston University through his years as a pastor and civil rights activist. They are prayers characterized by a spirit of quiet certainty, but they also address the need for divine guidance in uncertain times.

Although adoration and petition are the dominant features of these prayers, they, when considered as a whole, also include confession, supplication, intercession, petition, and thanksgiving. They are life-affirming and highly prophetic prayers that speak of dissatisfaction with the world as it is, and that find hope in a God who holds and controls the future. They are addressed to a God who protects life against the tragic possibility of death, who sustains the virtuous in their commitment to principle, and who ultimately transforms the painful "midnight of injustice" into a joyous "daybreak of freedom and justice."

King was a man of hope who witnessed the depths of

human misery and despair but refused to surrender to it. The prayers in part 5 provide perhaps the most solid proof of the validity of this claim. They offer a glimpse into the faith that undergirded and sustained King's hope for the future, even as he struggled with occasional doubts, fears, and uncertainties.

People of our time live in an uncertain world. Economic and political realities make life all the more capricious, uncertain, and insecure, and there is an ever-growing need for God's creative and sustaining presence and activity. In such a climate, King's prayers are sure to reverberate in the hearts of readers.

These prayers have something to offer not only people of faith but all who are assailed by doubts and uncertainties. They are food for the spirit and the intellect as well as the soul. Moreover, they embody the gift of fresh hope for those who find themselves disheartened in their daily search for answers to life's contradictions and complexities.

This prayer was part of a series of young King's radio broadcasts from Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia, uttered during the period from July 5 to September 6, 1953. The prayer actually reveals something of the influence of the Social Gospel on King, the Boston University graduate student. That influence had been strikingly evident in his writings since the fall of 1948, when he entered Crozer Theological Seminary in Chester, Pennsylvania, and perhaps even earlier.¹ "A New Earth in Which Dwells Righteousness"

Our loving Father, from Thy hand have come all the days of the past. To Thee we look for whatever good the future holds. We are not satisfied with the world as we have found it. It is too little the kingdom of God as yet. Grant us the privilege of a part in its regeneration. We are looking for a new earth in which dwells righteousness. It is our prayer that we may be children of light, the kind of people for whose coming and ministry the world is waiting. Amen. This short prayer was uttered as part of King's very first speech as a leader of organized social protest in Montgomery, Alabama, on December 5, 1955. The setting was Montgomery's Holt Street Baptist Church and the very first mass meeting held in connection with the bus boycott (1955–56). The prayer is a heartfelt plea for God to use black people as the vanguard in a struggle to humanize and save America and indeed Western civilization.² "Bold Determination"

As we stand and sit here this evening and as we prepare ourselves for what lies ahead, let us go out with the grim and bold determination that we are going to stick together. We are going to work together. . . . And we're going to do that. God grant that we will do it before it is too late. This prayer was delivered at the end of King's sermon "Living Under the Tensions of Modern Life." The setting was Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama, and the date was September 1956.³ "The Tensions of Modern Life"

Grant, Oh God, that we will accept ourselves and accept the realities of life. And learn to come to thee for forgiveness so that we can wash our guilt away, then devote our whole lives to Thee. Grant, oh God, that as we do this, we will rise out of the tensions of modern life. We can live in the world, and yet above it. We can live in the tension, and yet beyond it. In the name and spirit of Jesus, we pray. Amen.

A part of the prayer that King delivered, probably at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in January 1956 after several churches and homes of civil rights activists had been bombed and destroyed by white bigots. The violence came in response to the involvement of King, Ralph D. Abernathy, Robert Graetz, and other very vocal and active figures in the Montgomery bus protest.⁴

Willingness to Die Prayer

Lord, I hope no one will have to die as a result of our struggle for freedom in Montgomery. Certainly I don't want to die. But if anyone has to die, let it be me.

This prayer, like so many others in this volume, was written in Montgomery, Alabama, on February 10, 1957. It speaks to King's vision of the ultimate realization of the beloved community. It was included in a letter King sent to Dr. Clarence L. Jordan, the leader of Koinonia Farm, an interracial Christian cooperative community started in Americus, Georgia, in the autumn of 1942. Jordan had contacted King, complaining of violence against the Koinonia community. Before ending his response to Jordan with a brief prayer line, King assured him that "you and the Koinonia community have been in my prayers continually for the last several months." King actually saw in Koinonia Farm a microcosm, or yet another approximation, of what he had in mind when he spoke of the beloved community.⁵

"The Bright Daybreak of Freedom"

God grant that this tragic midnight of man's inhumanity to man will soon pass and the bright daybreak of freedom and brotherhood will come into being. A prayer recited in the context of King's address "A Realistic Look at the Question of Progress in the Area of Race Relations," delivered at the Freedom Rally in St. Louis, Missouri, on April 10, 1957. King actually solicited God's blessings upon what he often called "a coalition of conscience," which, as he himself defined it, included persons of different racial backgrounds, class brackets, and religious and political persuasions united in the struggle to eliminate all internal (i.e., fear, ignorance, greed, hatred, etc.) and external (i.e., racism, economic injustice, war, etc.) barriers to community.⁶ "Toward the Promised Land"

God grant that ministers, and lay leaders, and civic leaders, and businessmen, and professional people all over the nation will rise up and use the talents and the finances that God has given them, and lead the people on toward the promised land of freedom with rational, calm, nonviolent means. After sharing with his parishioners his "Thought for Today," based on Romans 12:9–21, King offered this short prayer at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama, on February 13, 1958. In 1957, a year earlier, he had led in the founding of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), a South-wide organization that grew out of the Montgomery Improvement Association, which was brought into being to lead the Montgomery bus boycott. The SCLC became a channel through which "local protest organizations in the South could coordinate their protest activities," and it was also designed "to give the total struggle a sense of Christian and disciplined direction."⁷ "Good Will and Moral Sensitivity"

O God our Father, make us willing to do thy will, come what may. Increase the number of persons of good will and moral sensitivity. Give us renewed confidence in nonviolence and the way of love as taught by Christ. Amen. This prayer closed out King's sermon "Paul's Letter to American Christians" in which he "uses the form of a New Testament Pauline epistle to challenge the American church." The sermon was delivered on June 3, 1958, to the Commission on Ecumenical Missions and Relations, United Presbyterian Church, in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Although King considered the Bible as a whole as an authoritative source, he was primarily a New Testament preacher, and that part of the Bible figured prominently in the shaping of his attitude toward and habit of prayer as well. King quotes Jude 1:24 and 25.⁸

"The Buoyancy of Hope"

And now unto Him who is able to keep us from falling. And now unto him who is able to lift us from the fatigue of despair to the buoyancy of hope. And now unto Him who is able to solve the race problem if we will cooperate with Him. And now unto Him who is able to transform this cosmic energy into constructive force. Now unto Him who is able to transform this midnight of injustice into a glowing daybreak of freedom and justice. To Him be power and authority, majesty and dominion, now, henceforth, and forever more. This sermon also appears in King's first published book of sermons in 1959, and it, too, highlights "the complete life," or the life that involves loving God, others, and self. The prayer is recorded at the end of the sermon "The Dimensions of a Complete Life."⁹ "Help Us to Discover Ourselves"

O God, our gracious heavenly Father, we thank thee for all of the insights of the ages, and we thank thee for the privilege of having fellowship with thee. Help us to discover ourselves, to discover our neighbors, and to discover thee, and to make all part of our life. Grant that we will go now with grim and bold determination to live the complete life. In the name and spirit of Jesus, we pray. Amen. A prayer offered by King at the end of a sermon "The Three Dimensions of a Complete Life," which was preached widely in the United States. The sermon on this particular occasion was preached at Friendship Baptist Church in Pasadena, California, on February 28, 1960. The prayer contained in the sermon is essentially a cry for humans to live life to the fullest and at its best, placing proper emphasis on the love of God, self, and others.¹⁰ "City of Complete Life"

And God grant to those of us who are left to live life, who have kept the vision and decided to move toward that city of complete life in which the length, and the breadth, and the height are equal. King said this prayer as part of a benediction at the meeting of the Detroit Council of Churches in Detroit, Michigan, on March 6, 1961. He had preached earlier at the meeting, using as a subject "The Man Who Was a Fool." This too would become one of King's most popular sermons. King quotes Numbers 6:24–26.¹¹

"Lift Up the Light of His Countenance"

May we pray? The Lord bless thee and keep thee. The Lord make His face to shine upon thee and be gracious unto thee. The Lord lift up the light of His countenance unto thee and be with thee forever and ever more. Amen.

After completing his sermon on "Loving Your Enemies" before the Detroit Council of Churches in Detroit, Michigan, King said this prayer on March 7, 1961. The reference to the need to love "even our enemy neighbors" reflects something of the depth of King's love ethic. As is well known, King's idea of loving one's enemies, clearly based on the life and teachings of Jesus Christ as revealed in the New Testament, was not well received in many circles of the freedom movement. Malcolm X and other young militants rejected the idea, even as it was embraced by many in traditional black churches. King quotes Mark 12:30–31, Psalm 121:8, and Psalm 139:2–3.¹²

"Love Even Our Enemy Neighbors"

Oh God, our gracious heavenly Father, we thank Thee for the inspiration of Jesus the Christ. And grant that we will love Thee with all of our hearts, souls, and minds, and love our neighbors as we love ourselves, even our enemy neighbors. And we ask Thee, Oh God, in these days of emotional tension, when the problems of the world are gigantic in extent and chaotic in detail, to be with us in our going out and our coming in, in our rising up and in our lying down, in our moments of joy and in our moments of sorrow, until the day when there shall be no sunset and no dawning. Amen. A prayer shared at the end of King's sermon "Love and Forgiveness," delivered to American Baptist Convention delegates in Atlantic City, New Jersey, on May 5, 1964. Using Jesus's prayer from the cross—"Father forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34)—as his sermonic text and point of departure, King raised the familiar themes of love, forgiveness, suffering, reconciliation, and community.¹³

"We Are Made for the Stars"

May we pray. Eternal God, our Father, help us to love Thee with all our hearts, souls, and minds, and our neighbors as ourselves. And help us to realize that we have a moral responsibility to be good and conscientious but also to be intelligent. And grant that we will always reach out for that which is high, realizing that we are made for the stars, created for the everlasting, born for eternity. In the name and spirit of Jesus we pray. Amen. Another one-line prayer used by King at the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C., on March 31, 1968. This prayer line, which appears in the middle of King's sermon "Remaining Awake through a Great Revolution," was uttered less than a week before he was assassinated, and it reflects King's great concern over what he saw as America's misadventure in Vietnam. King had come to the point of defining war as "obsolete," in part because of the sheer power of atomic and nuclear weapons and the capacity of humans for self-destruction.¹⁴

Fighting a War Prayer

I pray God that America will hear this before it is too late, because today we're fighting a war.

PART VI

Prayers for Social Justice

MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR., APPROACHED PRAYER AND praying as a practical theologian, which means that he sought inner and outer peace through a total commitment to God and humanity. King always prayed with a sense of the two most basic demands of discipleship, namely, love of God and of neighbor. Thus, he embarked upon both a *vision quest* and a *social quest*, as the prayers in the last section of this volume suggest. A few of these prayers might legitimately be called *movement prayers*, because they were recited in the context of civil rights activities, which routinely united the prayer circle and the picket line. The others are a combination of prayers from King's seminary and graduate school years, pastoral prayers, and sermonic prayers.

These prayers were crafted during a period when King was exploring moral questions concerning race, poverty and economic injustice, and war and peace issues. In most cases, the prayers begin with adoration and include some confession and thanksgiving, but it is essentially the element of asking—petition, supplication, and intercession—that constitutes the core of the prayers. They seek God's help and guidance in eliminating bigotry and intolerance, in achieving a more equitable distribution of wealth, and in creating a world without hatred and war. They are petitions to the God who, through Jesus Christ, reconciles humans to God and each other, and they are also soul-cries for the realization of what King called *the beloved community*, or, in theological terms, the coming of the kingdom of God to earth.

Evidently, King approached God in prayer and practice, insisting that a dynamic prayer life is essential for any social movement. These are the prayers of a peaceful warrior whose faith was never confined to the small world of the self, whose life was literally forged in the furnace of struggle and persecution, who had the sort of serenity that passionately confronted the world of need, who made the quest for freedom his consuming passion, and who challenged the church with a prophetic wake-up call. When King prayed for the fulfillment of God's will and purpose on earth, he was in effect asking God to become a coworker with him and other activists in making justice, peace, and equal opportunity a reality among human beings. King's prayers actually serve the notion that in prayer believers are connected to that divine energy that enables them to act in the interest of the common good.

The practical question is whether prayer makes a difference in social causes today. We still live in a world of conflict and suffering; a world marred by the resurgence of raw racism, the exploitation of the poor by the rich and powerful, the subjugation and marginalization of women and gay people, the neglect of the elderly and the handicapped, and the rise of religious bigotry and intolerance. There are also religiously based violence, organized torture and terrorism, post–Cold War genocide, political assassinations, and the cycles of violence, repression, and reprisal that continue unabated in the Middle East. Obviously, there is still a need for prayers that nurture the soul and also translate into acts of social justice, and King's prayers provide a high standard in this regard. Lessons may be learned even today from the prayers presented here. They are prayers that call activists to a life of such trust in God that their very attitudes toward God's kingdom and humanity are transformed. In other words, they highlight the need to rediscover Jesus's radical and costly call to obedience and discipleship. The suggestion here is that only positive and constructive actions among the poor and the oppressed can truly convey the love of Christ. More social activists must, in the spirit of King, be prepared to leap forward and grasp the joy of losing themselves and their own scruples in order to sufficiently serve both God and humanity.

The prayers here are really a call to both *self-purification time* and *action time*. Put another way, they are living proof of how prayer can become not only a purifying experience for the social activist but also an energizing and empowering force. The prayers speak to King's conviction that prayer without deeds amounts to a meaningless exercise in false piety. Equally important is the suggestion that prayer should never supplant responsibility, hard work, and intelligence.

These prayers of the soul will touch the heart and stimulate the thinking of anyone who thirsts for accountability, action, and a deeper dedication in daily life. We actually learn from them that discipleship is not so much a matter of what we do but of allowing space for God to live and act in and through us. This prayer was recited at the end of King's message "Civilization's Great Need," which may have been delivered during the summer of 1949 while he was serving with his father, Martin Luther King, Sr., at Atlanta's Ebenezer Baptist Church as an associate minister. He was still a student at Crozer Theological Seminary in Chester, Pennsylvania. One also detects King's early concern for the elimination of racism, poverty, and war, world problems that he, years later as a civil rights leader, would call "the giant triplets."¹

"In the Moment of Difficult Decision"

Eternal God out of whose mind this great cosmic universe we bless thee. Help us to seek that which is high, noble and Good. Help us in the moment of difficult decision. Help us to work with renewed vigor for a warless world, a better distribution of wealth, and a brotherhood that transcends race or color. This prayer was delivered as part of King's radio broadcasts from Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia, in the period from July 5 to September 6, 1953. King was still a PhD student at Boston University, but often spent the summer serving as a co-pastor with his father, Martin Luther King, Sr. King quotes Acts 17:28.²

"Help Us to Work with Renewed Vigor"

Most gracious and all wise God, before whose face the generations rise and fall; Thou in whom we live, and move, and have our being. We thank thee (for) all of thy good and gracious gifts, for life and for health; for food and for raiment; for the beauties of nature and the love of human nature. We come before thee painfully aware of our inadequacies and shortcomings. We realize that we stand surrounded with the mountains of love and we deliberately dwell in the valley of hate. We stand amid the forces of truth and deliberately lie. We are forever offered the high road and yet we choose to travel the low road. For these sins O God forgive. Break the spell of that which blinds our minds. Purify our hearts that we may see thee. O God in these turbulent days when fear and doubt are mounting high give us broad visions, penetrating eyes, and power of endurance. Help us to work with renewed vigor for a warless world, for a better distribution of wealth, and for a brotherhood that transcends race or color. In the name and spirit of Jesus we pray. Amen.

Harold Carter, who witnessed King's preaching in church settings, reports that the civil rights leader typically uttered this prayer while serving as pastor of Montgomery's Dexter Avenue Baptist Church. The spirit and tone of the prayer clearly reflect the impact of the Montgomery bus protest (1955–56) on King, and also the civil rights leader's vision of the totally integrated society. The international implications of King's beloved community vision is made evident in this prayer, thus undermining the common view that King came to address world issues very late in his public life.³

"All God's Children, Black, White, Red, and Yellow"

O God, our Heavenly Father, we thank thee for this golden privilege to worship thee, the only true God of the universe. We come to thee today, grateful that thou hast kept us through the long night of the past and ushered us into the challenge of the present and the bright hope of the future. We are mindful, O God, that man cannot save himself, for man is not the measure of things and humanity is not God. Bound by our chains of sin and finiteness, we know we need a Savior. We thank thee, O God, for the spiritual nature of man. We are in nature but we live above nature. Help us never to let anyone or any condition pull us so low as to cause us to hate. Give us the strength to love our enemies and to do good to those who despitefully use us and persecute us. We thank thee for thy Church, founded upon thy Word, that challenges us to do more than sing and pray, but go out and work as though the very answer to our prayers depended on us and not upon thee. Then, finally, help us to realize that man was created to shine like the stars and live on through all eternity. Keep us, we pray, in perfect peace, help us to walk together, pray together, sing together, and live together until that day when all God's children, Black, White, Red, and Yellow will rejoice in one common band of humanity in the kingdom of our Lord and of our God, we pray. Amen.

This prayer came at the end of King's address "Non-Aggression Procedures to Interracial Harmony," which was shared at the American Baptist Assembly and American Home Mission Agencies Conference in Green Lake, Wisconsin, on July 23, 1956. King prayed that blacks and all freedom-loving people would remain committed to nonviolence.⁴

Nonviolence Prayer

And God grant that we will continue to move on all men of goodwill, and all those who are confronted with oppression in this world will move on with this method. Not with the method of violence, not with the method of retaliatory violence, not with any method that seeks to retaliate, but the method that seeks to redeem. A prayer King offered before giving testimony to the Platform and Resolutions Committee "during six days of hearings" at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago, Illinois, on August 11, 1956. In his testimony, King urged the committee to insist that the federal government "take the necessary executive and legislative action to implement the desegregation decisions of the Supreme Court."⁵

"A Great Nation": The Democratic National Convention Prayer

Oh God our gracious Heavenly Father we thank Thee for the privilege of assembling here this morning. We thank Thee for all of the opportunities of life, and as we stand together today and discuss vital matters confronting our nation and confronting the world, we ask Thy guidance be with us in all our deliberations and help us at all times to seek to do those things which are high, noble and good, and to make our nation a great nation, a nation that follows all of the noble precepts of the Christian Religion and all of the noble precepts of democracy. Grant, O God, that as we move on we will move toward that city which has foundations whose builder and maker is God. Amen. A prayer recited by King after his address "The Birth of a New Age" at the Fiftieth Anniversary Convention of the Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity in Buffalo, New York, in 1956. King was a member of this fraternity, and his prayer echoed many of its concerns as well as his own. King quotes Revelation 11:15.⁶ "The Higher Principle of Love"

God grant that the resources that you have will be used to do that, the great resources of education, the resources of wealth, and that we will be able to move into this new world, a world in which men will live together as brothers; a world in which men will no longer take necessities from the masses to give luxuries to the classes. A world in which men will throw down the sword and live by the higher principle of love. The time when we shall be able to emerge from the bleak and desolate midnight of man's inhumanity to man into the bright and glittering daylight of freedom and justice. That there will be the time we will be able to stand before the universe and say with joy—The kingdom of this world has become the kingdom of our Lord and our Christ! And he shall reign forever and ever! Hallelujah! This prayer was included in a letter dated September 19, 1956, that King sent to a white southerner named Sally Canada, who had staunchly supported segregation on religious grounds in an earlier letter to King. "Why can't the Negro be what the God Almighty made him—a Negro—and stop trying to push in with the whites?" asked Canada in her letter to King.⁷ "In Christ There Is Neither Jew nor Gentile, Negro nor White"

God grant that the day will come when we all can live in this society as brothers and children of a common father on a non-segregated basis. It is still true that in Christ there is neither Jew nor Gentile, Negro nor white, and that out of one blood God made all men to dwell upon the face of the earth. This prayer came at the end of King's sermon "The Birth of a New Nation," preached at his Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama, on April 7, 1957. King had recently returned from the independence celebrations in Ghana, to which he had been invited by Kwame Nkrumah, that nation's new prime minister. Excited about Ghana's freedom from British colonial domination, King prayed that his own struggle in the South and the United States as a whole might benefit from the insights of "this new nation."⁸

"We Are Made to Live Together"

O God, our gracious Heavenly Father, help us to see the insights that come from this new nation. Help us to follow Thee and all of Thy creative works in this world. And that somehow we will discover that we are made to live together as brothers. And that it will come in this generation; the day when all men will recognize the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man. Amen.

In this prayer, which surfaced in the sermon "The Birth of a New Nation," King uses the occasion of Ghana's independence celebration, which he attended, to ask for God's help and guidance in a struggle to overcome the most glaring social evils that afflicted humankind across the globe. The sermon was delivered at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama, on April 7, 1957.⁹ "Break Down the Walls of Colonialism, Exploitation, and Imperialism"

God grant that we will get on board and start marching with God because we got orders now to break down the bondage and the walls of colonialism, exploitation, and imperialism. To break them down to the point that no man will trample over another man, but that all men will respect the dignity and worth of human personality. And then we will be in Canaan's freedom land.

This prayer reveals in powerful terms King's tremendous spirit of humility, which is often overlooked, even by King scholars. Uttered at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama, on August 11, 1957, after a message on "Conquering Self-Centeredness," this prayer undermines any claim that King took more credit than he deserved for the successes of the civil rights movement or that he elevated his own image and symbolic importance while refusing to properly acknowledge the contributions of others. Of the Montgomery bus protest, King once stated, "This is not a drama with only one actor. More precisely it is the chronicle of 50,000 Negroes who took to heart the principles of nonviolence, who learned to fight for their rights with the weapon of love, and who, in the process, acquired a new estimate of their own human worth." "Occasionally you see the name Martin Luther King in the newspaper and occasionally you see his picture," observed King at another point, "but Martin Luther King must never forget that there would not be a Martin Luther King with a picture in the paper or a name in the paper, if there had not been a Rosa Parks and 50,000 Negro citizens."10

"Help Me to See That I'm Just a Symbol of a Movement"

O God, help me to see myself in my true perspective. Help me, O God, to see that I'm just a symbol of a movement. Help me to see that I'm the victim of what the Germans call a *zeitgeist* and that something was getting ready to happen in history. And that a boycott would have taken place in Montgomery, Alabama, if I had never come to Alabama. Help me to realize that I'm where I am because of the forces of history and because of the fifty thousand Negroes of Alabama who will never get their names in the papers and in the headlines. O God, help me to see that where I stand today, I stand because others helped me to stand there and because the forces of history projected me there. And this moment would have come in history even if M. L. King had never been born. King recited this prayer at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama, on November 17, 1957, after preaching on "Loving Your Enemies."¹¹

"Let Us Join Together in a Great Fellowship of Love"

Oh, God, help us in our lives and in all of our attitudes to work out this controlling force of love, this controlling power that can solve every problem that we confront in all areas. Oh, we talk about politics; we talk about the problems facing our atomic civilization. Grant that all men will come together and discover that as we solve the crisis and solve these problems—the international problems, the problems of atomic energy, the problems of nuclear energy, and yes, even the race problem—let us join together in a great fellowship of love and bow down at the feet of Jesus. Give us this strong determination. In the name and spirit of this Christ, we pray. Amen. A statement that takes the form of a prayer at the end of King's speech "Some Things We Must Do," delivered at the Second Annual Institute on Nonviolence and Social Change at the Holt Street Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama, on December 5, 1957. Clearly, the prayer reflects King's vision of a global beloved community, thus refuting claims that the civil rights leader's thought and activities did not take on international significance until after he received the Nobel Peace Prize in December 1964. King's heavy reliance on Old and New Testament passages and images are most evident here, as he quotes Isaiah 2:4, Amos 5:24, Micah 6:8, Matthew 5:44, and Luke 6:27–28.¹²

"Free at Last! Free at Last!"

God grant that right here in America and all over this world, we will choose the high way; a way in which men will live together as brothers. A way in which the nations of the world will beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks. A way in which every man will respect the dignity and worth of all human personality. A way in which every nation will allow justice to run down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream. A way in which men will do justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with God. A way in which men will be able to stand up, and in the midst of oppression, in the midst of darkness and agony, they will be able to stand there and love their enemies, bless those persons that curse them, pray for those individuals that despitefully use them. And this is the way that will bring us once more into that society which we think of as the brotherhood of man. This will be that day when white people, colored people, whether they are brown or whether they are yellow or whether they are black, will join together and stretch out with their arms and be able to cry out: "Free at last! Free at last! Great God Almighty, we are free at last!"

While preaching one of his favorite sermons, "The Drum Major Instinct," at Ebenezer Baptist Church, Atlanta, Georgia, on February 4, 1968, King offered this prayer as an expression of his growing sense of Christian duty and accountability. He was under increasing pressure because of his statements against the Vietnam War, his attacks on the capitalistic system and ethic, and his efforts on behalf of the Memphis sanitation workers and the Poor People's Campaign. King had exactly two months to live, and this sermon would ultimately be heard as his eulogy on April 9, 1968.¹³

"On Your Right or Your Left Side"

Yes, Jesus, I want to be on your right or your left side, not for any selfish reason. I want to be on your right side or your left side, not in terms of some political kingdom or ambition. But I just want to be there in love and in justice and in truth and in commitment to others, so we can make of this old world a new world. One of King's very last public prayers, recited at the end of his sermon "Remaining Awake through a Great Revolution." This sermon was preached at the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C., on March 31, 1968, five days before King was assassinated. King paraphrases Job 38:6–7.¹⁴

"A New Day of Justice and Brotherhood and Peace"

God grant that we will be participants in this newness and this magnificent development. If we will but do it, we will bring about a new day of justice and brotherhood and peace. And that day the morning stars will sing together and the sons of God will shout for joy. God bless you. This is by far the longest prayer in this work. It is said that King "delivered this prayer from a truck bed in the presence of 30,000 marchers and hundreds of others who listened from office building windows." The prayer, given from Chicago's City Hall on July 26, 1965, spoke to King's increasing concern for issues of economic justice, for he was in Chicago to address the greed and inefficiency of real estate agents, slum conditions, and segregated housing. In 1967–68, King would advance this cause to greater heights by becoming involved in both a Poor People's Campaign and the Memphis Sanitation Workers' Strike.¹⁵

"To Build Together a City of Justice": A Prayer for Chicago

Eternal God, our Father, Thou whose wisdom has created us, Thou whose eternity doth overarch our days and whose love doth undergird our lives. We thank Thee that out of the Turmoil of man's struggle for justice and human dignity, Thou hast fashioned for our time and our nation a creative and redemptive nonviolent movement.

Our hearts rejoice when we think of the sometimes dangerous but often triumphant journey we have made along this path in recent years. Through the nonviolent movement, Thou hast taught us anew that Thy kingdom shall come; indeed Thou hast taught us to work and pray for its coming.

We thank Thee that today in Chicago we stand at the gate of a new understanding of the dimensions and depth of our struggle with racial injustice in this country; dimensions not limited by geographic boundaries or adequately addressed by civil rights laws; dimensions clearly symbolized by deplorable conditions in schools, housing, and employment in this great city.

We pause therefore to pray earnestly and fervently for Chicago, a beautiful city, set so impressively by the majestic waters of Lake Michigan, which now finds itself in the throes of a momentous social revolution. The non-white citizens of this city for years have walked through the darkness of racial segregation and a nagging sense of nobodiness, have now seen a great light, and with a sublime scorn for risk and danger they are moving for the bright morning of freedom and human dignity.

Grant, Oh God, that the political leaders of this city will respond to the legitimate discontent and rising expectations of these people with creative and imaginative programs which will rectify the injustices of the past. In these rather turbulent days when the problems of our big cities are gigantic in extent and chaotic in detail, instill the leaders of Chicago with broad understanding, penetrating visions, and unswerving devotion to the principles of freedom and justice. Help them to see that unless socially constructive dams are built to improve the lives of the disinherited children of God, the deep tides of agony and frustration within the Negro community will rise to flood proportions. May the leadership of Chicago rise to the lofty heights of statesmanship. Help them to substitute courage for caution and the socially relevant for the politically expedient.

We pray especially for every white citizen of this great city. Instill in them an awareness of the deep scars, the terrible hurt, and the tragic disappointment that segregation has inflicted upon the Negro. May they, through some powerful act of justice, truly atone for the sins they have perpetrated upon their colored brothers. For those who are still caught in the dark valley of prejudice, we pray that Thou will guide them to sunlit paths of open-hearted good will.

We pray also for every Negro citizen of Chicago. Save us from the patience that would accept less than first-class citizenship, but imbue us with a faith which the forces of ill cannot dampen, a hope that the long night of struggle ahead cannot extinguish, and a creative and redeeming love that will enable us to continue our struggle nonviolently.

For all of us today—citizens and public officials alike,

white men and black men, rich men and poor men, learned men and unlearned men, Protestants and Catholics, Jews and gentiles—we pray for a greater vision of our task in this city; to build together a city of justice where none shall prey upon the weaknesses of others, a city of plenty where greed and poverty shall be eliminated, a city of brotherhood where success is founded upon service, and an honor given for nobleness alone. Amen.

PART VII

Biblical Verses and Christian Sources That Inspired the Reverend Dr. King

MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR., PROVIDED NUMEROUS RESOURCES of prayer for his parishioners and fellow activists during his lifetime, all of which are still useful for persons of faith and religious communities. His personal prayers are included in the first six parts of this book. This seventh and final category includes two other prayer resources, and they all yield additional insights into the content, language, and spirit of the prayers provided in the previous six categories.

First, King's favorite prayer sentences and passages on prayer from the Bible are cited with brief commentaries on each, explaining how King interpreted and made use of these resources in his sermons. These prayer resources from both the Old Testament (Hebrew Bible) and the New Testament, which appear in sermons King delivered at the Dexter Avenue and Ebenezer Baptist churches, are important because they show the impact of scripture on King's understanding and habit of prayer. Of particular importance is King's retrieval of certain prayers from the ancient Hebrew prophets and Jesus.

A second resource comprises the prayers King occasionally quoted from some of Christianity's most celebrated saints and sages, such as St. Augustine of Hippo, St. Francis of Assisi, Isaac Watts, John Bunyan, George Whitefield, and Martin Luther. King's use of prayer sources from the larger Christian tradition, and not merely the black church, speaks volumes about his place as a towering figure in the history of Christian spirituality. Although the content of King's prayers came essentially from Judeo-Christian sources and influences, he was never limited to such sources and influences when it came to his belief in and devotion to the life of prayer. Indeed, he found models of spirituality and of the ideal prayer life in sources like the Hindu leader Mohandas K. Gandhi and the Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh. Thus, King reached levels of spiritual maturity seldom evident among preachers and pastors in the Christian traditions. Biblical Inspirations: Prayers from the Old Testament (Hebrew Bible) King frequently made reference to this passage when speaking on the misuse of prayer, or the tendency to turn to prayer as a substitute for intelligence and hard work. God essentially tells Moses that the answer to the challenges facing the children of Israel does not always involve crying out, that they must take the initiative themselves to do what they are able to do for themselves. In his references to the Exodus account, King was apt to draw on different versions of the Bible, and especially the King James and Revised Standard versions.¹

And the Lord said unto Moses, "Wherefore criest thou unto me? Speak unto the children of Israel, that they go forward." EXODUS 14:15

This statement of prayer from the prophet Nehemiah (9:6) appears in King's sermon "God's Relation to the World" (1948–1954), which he preached repeatedly in the late 1940s and 1950s. King found in Nehemiah 9:6 a prayer of supplication and adoration, or the response of a prophet who humbly encounters the infinite holiness, majesty, and perfection of God the creator. For King, praising God for who and what God is should always be an essential part of prayer and the worship experience as a whole.² Thou, even thou art Lord alone; thou hast made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host, the earth, and all things that are therein, the seas, and all that is therein, and thou preservest them all; and the host of heaven worshippeth thee.

NEHEMIAH 9:6

King viewed this as essentially a prayer by the psalmist, and he recited it in "The Christian Doctrine of Man" (March 12, 1958) and other sermons he wrote and delivered on the question "What Is Man?" or "What Is Humanity?" His point was that humanity, made in the image of God (imago dei), is sacred and endowed by God with a higher calling than other animal forms. For King, inner peace comes as humanity, with God's help, comes to terms with its true calling.³ For thou hast made him a little lower than the angels, and hast crowned him with glory and honour. Thou madest him to have dominion over the works of thy hands; thou hast put all things under his feet: All sheep and oxen, yea, and the beasts of the field; the fowl of the air, and the fish of the sea, and whatsoever passeth through the paths of the seas. O Lord our Lord, how excellent is thy name in all the earth!

PSALM 8:5-9

King quoted this prayer from the psalmist in a paper entitled "The Ethics of Late Judaism as Evidenced in the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs." The paper was written while he was studying at Crozer Theological Seminary, Chester, Pennsylvania, during the 1948–49 academic year. It is a prayer for mercy and empowerment in a period of challenge and soulsearching, but it also expresses a passionate desire to make repayment or return for some friendly act. The passion to be requisite in the face of evil is not consistent with the temperament of the psalmist. The words of the prayer, as interpreted by King, suggest that both evil and good must never be responded to with evil.⁴

Do thou, O Lord, have mercy upon me, and raise me up, that I may require them.

PSALM 41:10

King quoted this prayer in a number of his sermons at different times, and particularly in versions of the sermon entitled "The Death of Evil upon the Seashore" (July 1962–March 1963). The choice of this prayer from the psalmist (Psalm 139:7–12) reflected King's sense of God's omnipotence in the face of human limitations and the inability to escape God's presence. King believed that humans might choose at times to live without God or a sense of God's presence in life, but God is never really "an absentee God," or a God absent from human life and experience. As one who faced the threat of death throughout his public life, the idea of the pervasive and ubiquitous presence of God was immensely comforting and reassuring for King.⁵ Whither shall I go from your spirit? Or whither shall I flee from thy presence? If I ascend up into heaven, thou art there. If I make my bed in hell, behold, thou art there. If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea; even there shall thy hand shall lead me, and thy right hand shall hold me. If I say, surely the darkness shall cover me; even the night shall be light about me. Yea, the darkness hideth not from thee; but the night shineth as day: the darkness and the light are both alike to thee.

PSALM 139:7-12

This one-sentence prayer from the prophet Isaiah appeared in "the earliest known text of any sermon by King." The sermon "A Way Out" was delivered at Ebenezer Baptist Church, Atlanta, Georgia, on May 22, 1949, when King was only twenty years of age. At the time, King was an associate pastor with his father, Martin Luther King, Sr., at Ebenezer. The prayer also appears in other King sermons, among which are "O That I Knew Where I Might Find Him!" (1951-1954), "Why Does God Hide Himself?" (December 4, 1955), and "The Ways of God in the Midst of Glaring Evil" (January 13, 1957). In these sermons, King noted how the prophet Isaiah blended confession, adoration, and wonder in his prayer as he sought to understand God. The point is that God is hidden in the sense that no human can fully grasp who and what God is, but the prayerful heart still offers access to God's presence. King actually defined "the religious experience" as "the awareness of the presence of the divine," and he was apt to make the same point about prayer.⁶

Verily thou art a God that hideth Himself, O God of Israel, the Savior.

ISAIAH 45:15

This prayer resource appears in King's paper "The Significant Contributions of Jeremiah to Religious Thought," which was written for an Old Testament course at Crozer Theological Seminary, Chester, Pennsylvania, on November 24, 1948. King discovered in Jeremiah 12:1–3 not only a prayer of adoration but also a prayer of petition, or asking, not as self-interested begging but as an acknowledgment of the prophet's creaturely dependence upon God for answers to some of the glaring contradictions of life. The prophet has no answer to why the wicked and treacherous prosper, but God, who knows the prophet's heart and mind, does have the answer. This prayer of Jeremiah must have come to mind many times as King struggled with the reality of personal and social evil in a world created and sustained by a just and merciful God.⁷

Righteous art thou, O Yahweh, when I contend with thee; yet would I reason the cause with thee: Wherefore doth the way of the wicked prosper? Wherefore are they at ease that deal very treacherously? Thou art near in their mouth, and from their heart. But thou, O Yahweh, knowest me, and triest my heart towards thee.

JEREMIAH 12:1-3

King pointed to this prayer, in his paper "The Significant Contributions of Jeremiah to Religious Thought," as an example of the prophet Jeremiah's "personal religion." The prophet's recognition of his dependence upon God for every gift of physical life, spiritual grace, and security impressed King greatly and reminded him that the totality of his own life and being rested ultimately in the hands of God.⁸ O Yahweh, my strength, and my stronghold, and my refuge in the day of affliction.

JEREMIAH 16:19

In "The Significant Contributions of Jeremiah to Religious Thought," King described this as Jeremiah's prayer "for healing." King believed in the curative power and purposes of prayer and could identify with the prophet's plea for healing and salvation.⁹

Heal me, O Lord, and I shall be healed; save me, and I shall be saved: for thou art my praise.

JEREMIAH 17:14

Also in "The Significant Contributions of Jeremiah to Religious Thought," King called this Jeremiah's prayer "for help against his adversaries." Although King, in his statement "The Misuse of Prayer," declared that the person of faith should never "pray for God to help you get even with your enemy," he nevertheless found favor with the prophet's cry for a wrathful God to deal with his enemies. This was quite consistent with King's idea of a God who is not only loving and merciful but also judgmental and wrathful.¹⁰ Let them be confounded that persecute me, but let me not be confounded; let them be dismayed, but let not me be dismayed; bring upon them the day of evil, and destroy them with double destruction.

JEREMIAH 17:18

The prophet Habakkuk's prayer is cited in King's sermons "A Way Out" (May 22, 1949) and "Garden of Gethsemane" (April 14, 1957). Jehovah's silence in the midst of the prophet's prayer for immediate help captured King's imagination, reminding him that God never acts in accordance with a human schedule or time line. King came out of a church tradition that routinely affirmed that "God may not come when you want Him to," but "God is always on time," and this prepared King for a certain understanding of Habakkuk's cry before Jehovah. Thus, King could affirm that God answers the pleas and petitions of God's people in God's own time, but God ultimately answers at the right time.¹¹

Oh Lord, how long shall I cry, and thou will not hear?

HABAKKUK I:2

Biblical Inspirations: Prayers from the New Testament King's sermons, speeches, and writings are peppered with this statement on prayer from the Beatitudes and Jesus's Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5. Note, for example, versions of his speech "Facing the Challenge of a New Age" (January 1, 1957) and his sermon "Loving Your Enemies" (November 17, 1957), both of which contend that loving the enemy also necessitates praying for him or her.¹² $P_{ray} \ {\rm for} \ {\rm those} \ {\rm who} \ {\rm despitefully} \ {\rm use} \ {\rm you}.$

MATTHEW 5:44

This was King's most commonly used prayer as a pastor, prayer leader, and prayer teacher, especially in his congregational life. He often reminded his parishioners, at both Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama, and Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia, that Jesus taught his disciples to pray with this prayer. In King's estimation, the Lord's Prayer embraced all of the elements of prayer at its best, including adoration, supplication, confession, petition, thanksgiving, intercession, meditation, and contemplation.¹³

Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen.

MATTHEW 6:9-13

This was one of King's favorite parables in the New Testament, for it reflected the wisdom of Jesus around the whole question of praying in the right spirit, or in the spirit of humility. In King's view, the Pharisee exemplified "self-centered" prayer and "confused ceremonial piety with genuine religious living," while the publican, who was of the lowest order of society, morally speaking, epitomized the power of prayer as adoration, confession, and supplication. King told this story in different versions of sermons entitled "After Christmas, What?" (December 28, 1952), "Pride Versus Humility: The Parable of the Pharisee and the Publican" (September 25, 1955), "The Rewards of Worship" (April 28, 1957), "Conquering Self-Centeredness" (August 11, 1957), "The Christian Doctrine of Man" (March 12, 1958), and "Man's Sin and God's Grace" (1960).14

Two men went up into the temple to pray; the one a Pharisee, and the other a publican. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, "God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men *are*, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican." I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess. And the publican, standing afar off, would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast, saying, "God be merciful to me a sinner." I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for every one that exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted.

LUKE 18:10-14

This prayer of Jesus's appears at numerous points in King's Palm Sunday and Easter sermons, the most celebrated of which are "A Way Out" (May 22, 1959), "Garden of Gethsemane" (April 14, 1957), "Questions That Easter Answers" (April 21, 1957), and "A Walk through the Holy Land" (March 20, 1959). King refers repeatedly to this prayer of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, declaring that it was here "where Jesus faced the most lonesome moments of his life." As one who often retreated to his own sacred space to pray alone, King could identify with Jesus's prayer in "his moment of crisis," noting that "Gethsemane is not only a spot on the map" but also "something that we go through every day." Life confronts the believer with "bitter cups." For Jesus it was "the cross," and King was prone to speak of the freedom movement as "a bitter cup" that he and others had to drink or as "a cross" they had to bear. But the true believer, like Jesus, King declared, must be willing "to make the transition from 'this cup'" to "'nevertheless, not my will, but thy will be done." For King, prayer was essential in making such a transition. King also likened nonviolence to a "cup of love" that the committed one must drink.¹⁵

Then cometh Jesus with them unto a place called Gethsemane, and saith unto the disciples, Sit ye here while I go and pray yonder. And he took with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to be sorrowful and very heavy. Then saith he unto them, my sound is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death: tarry ye here, and watch with me. And he went a little farther, and fell on his face, and prayed, saying, O my father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt.

MATTHEW 26:36-39

This prayer of Jesus's from the cross filters through King's Palm Sunday and Easter sermons, such as "Garden of Gethsemane" (April 14, 1957). According to King, Jesus uttered these words "out of the pain and the agony and the darkness of that cross" that he was compelled to bear. The prayer blends adoration, supplication, and petition. The person of faith who bears life's crosses, King held, sometimes feels that he or she is even forsaken by God, but God remains our strength and refuge.¹⁶ And about the ninth hour, Jesus cried with a loud voice, saying, *Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani*? that is to say, My God, My God, Why Hast thou Forsaken Me?

MATTHEW 27:46

As an advocate of love and forgiveness, King found much in this prayer of Jesus from the cross that spoke to his sense of the ideal Christian life. For King, forgiveness, like nonviolence, is "love in action." This prayer line from Jesus courses through many of King's speeches, and especially versions of sermons entitled "Love in Action" (April 3, 1960) and "Levels of Love" (September 16, 1962), which were often preached by King.¹⁷ Then said Jesus, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do." And they parted his raiment, and cast lots.

LUKE 23:34

King also alluded to these prayerful words of Jesus in his Palm Sunday and Easter sermons, and especially "Garden of Gethsemane" (April 14, 1957), proclaiming that Jesus "keeps his eyes" and "his vision on God," despite the pain of the cross. Jesus surrenders his life to God the Father, and this, for King, epitomized humility. Bearing the cross, then, involves complete faith in and surrender to God.¹⁸ And when Jesus had cried with a loud voice, he said, "Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit." And having said this, he gave up the ghost.

LUKE 23:46

Favorite Prayers and Prayer Sources from the Christian Tradition

This prayer of St. Augustine of Hippo (AD 354–430), the African church father, testified to King's conviction that humans are created by and for God, and that restlessness is the fate of every human soul that seeks life without God. In King's mind, this restlessness translated into the experience of hell. Augustine's prayer surfaces in a number of King's sermons, and especially in "The Three Dimensions of the Complete Life" (December 11, 1960).¹⁹ Thou awakest us to delight in Thy praise; for Thou madest us for Thyself, and our heart is restless, until it repose in Thee.

ST. AUGUSTINE

King regarded this as a prayer every human possibly recites at one time or another. The point is, as he understood Augustine, that even as our souls yearn for virtue, or the ideal life, there is at the same time something within us that resists it. This prayer speaks to the fact that we are all creatures of contradiction. It is cited in "Creating the Abundant Life" (September 26, 1954), "The Christian Doctrine of Man" (March 12, 1958), "Loving Your Enemies" (March 7, 1961), and other sermons by King.²⁰

Lord, make me pure but not yet.

ST. AUGUSTINE

This prayer, from St. Francis of Assisi (1182–1226), the founder of the Franciscan Order in Catholicism, echoed some of King's most precious values, particularly as they related to faith, love, hope, understanding, compassion, and forgiveness. This prayer was also among the most cherished spiritual resources of two of King's major intellectual sources, namely, Howard Thurman and Mohandas K. Gandhi.²¹ Lord, make me an instrument of Thy peace; Where there is hatred, let me sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; and where there is sadness, joy. O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled, as to console; to be understood, as to understand; to be loved, as to love; for it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

ST. FRANCIS OF ASSISI

Interestingly enough, King included these words from the Protestant reformer Martin Luther (1483–1546) in one of his Easter sermons, "A Walk through the Holy Land" (March 29, 1959), which also focused to some degree on Jesus's prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane. Luther's words also appear in King's celebrated "Letter from Birmingham Jail." King saw in Luther's words both a statement of conviction and a prayer in the form of a plea and petition to God. Luther was also, in King's mind, obedient to "an inner law" and to a higher power and not to the institutional Catholic Church.²²

$Here \ I \ stand. \ I \ cannot \ do \ none \ other, \ so \ help \ me \ God.$

MARTIN LUTHER

This prayer by John Bunyan (1628–1688), the English preacher, nonconformist, and author who was repeatedly imprisoned for his religious activity, left an indelible imprint on King's thinking. King often said, as during the voting rights campaign in Selma, Alabama, in 1965, that he would rather die along the roads of Alabama than to "make a butchery of my conscience." King drew on Bunyan's prayer in versions of his sermon "Transformed Nonconformist" (July 1962–May 1963).²³ I am determined, Almighty God being my help and shield, yet to suffer, if frail life shall continue so long, even till the moss grows over my eyebrows, rather than to violate my faith and make a continual butchery of my conscience.

JOHN BUNYAN

The lyrics from the hymn "O God Our Help in Ages Past" by Isaac Watts (1674–1748), the English poet, theologian, and hymn writer, became King's prayer in times of adversity and challenge. It is a prayer in the spirit of adoration and supplication, a stern recognition that human effort is fruitless without God's assistance and guidance. One finds references to the lyrics from Watts's hymn in a number of King's sermons, including "The False God of Science" (July 5, 1953), "Going Backward by Going Forward" (April 1, 1954), "Creating the Abundant Life" (September 26, 1954), and "The Three Dimensions of the Complete Life" (February 28, 1960).²⁴ Our God, our help in ages past, our hope for years to come. our shelter from the stormy blast, and our eternal home!

Before the hills in order stood, or earth received her frame, from everlasting Thou art God, to endless years the same.

ISAAC WATTS

This prayer from the great American revivalist George Whitefield (1714–1774) appealed to King's ecumenical spirit. It supported his deeply held view that God loves and hears the prayers of all who sincerely seek God, regardless of denomination or church affiliation.²⁵ Father Abraham, whom have you in heaven? Any Episcopalians? "No." Any Presbyterians? "No." Have you any Independents or Seceders? "No." Have you any Methodists? "No!" "no!" "no!!" Whom have you there? "We don't know these names here. All who are here are Christians—believers in Christ—men who have overcome by the blood of the Lamb and the word of his testimony." Oh, is this the case? Thus, God help us, God help us all, to forget party names, and to become Christians in deed, and in truth.

GEORGE WHITEFIELD

Acknowledgments

The journey that led to this little volume began in an exchange of ideas with the late Professor Lawrence N. Jones of Howard University's School of Religion back in the late 1980s. At that time, I had reached a critical point in my research on the cultural roots of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Jones suggested that some attention to the role of prayer in the civil rights leader's life would make my scholarship distinctive and innovative. "What did King pray about?" asked Jones, as he posed leading queries for the kind of study in which I was engaged. I have finally gotten around to answering this and other questions about King's experiences with prayer, and I owe a special debt to Jones. He first stimulated my awareness that King's prayers and prayer life had been virtually ignored, even by the most reputable King scholars.

A number of more recent developments have inspired me to bring this long-delayed, edited work to completion. Of particular importance is the publication, since 1992, of the first six volumes of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Papers. This multivolume project has afforded many of the prayers included in *"Thou, Dear God."* A special word of gratitude is extended to Clayborne Carson, the senior editor of the King Papers Project, who has been very supportive of my scholarship over the years. In my judgment, Carson has emerged as one of the world's foremost King scholars. He and his staff at Stanford University should be highly commended for the dedication and ingenuity they have exhibited so far in producing what is an anticipated fourteen volume, chronologically arranged edition of King's sermons, speeches, correspondence, and other writings.

I am also inspired by the dedication of a four-acre site on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., for a memorial to Martin Luther King, Jr. Occurring in November 2006, this event, which brought together major civil rights leaders and politicians, compelled me to seriously consider how I, as a King scholar, might best contribute to fund-raising efforts toward that end. I became a founding sponsor of the Washington, D.C., Martin Luther King, Jr. National Memorial Project Foundation. Also, in addition to my own personal financial contribution, I am hopeful that the proceeds from *"Thou, Dear God"* will be devoted to this very important and muchneeded endeavor.

Yet another source of inspiration has come from Elaine Summers Rich, an elderly white woman I met in January 2007 after delivering the Martin Luther King, Jr. Lecture at Bluffton University in Ohio. In the course of our brief but interesting conversation, Elaine spoke of having met and talked with King at a particularly significant stage in his civil rights campaigns. As she looked into King's eyes, a strange feeling came over her. "I had the feeling that as we spoke, he was actually praying for me," she recounted. Since that time, Elaine and I have exchanged letters about that experience. Her words concerning her encounter with King have remained with me, and they inspired thoughts about the possible impact that King's prayers might have on people of various backgrounds even today.

I am equally indebted to Victor Anderson and Herbert Marbury, two of my colleagues at Vanderbilt University, for support and words of encouragement. Their ideas and farreaching insights were immensely helpful as I conceptualized the project and placed it in a workable, organized framework. We discussed at length the wisdom of organizing King's prayers thematically as opposed to chronologically, or vice versa. I finally decided on a thematic approach, while not completely ignoring the need to be chronological at certain points in this book.

I acknowledge with deep appreciation the splendid assistance and cooperation of the staff of the library and archives of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change in Atlanta, Georgia. Cynthia Lewis and Elaine Hall were especially helpful. Their work over the years is yet another testimony to the power and durability of King's spiritual and intellectual legacy. The same might be said of the staff of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Collection at Morehouse College in Atlanta.

Gayatri Patnaik of Beacon Press deserves a special word of gratitude. I was literally stunned when she suggested that I send *"Thou, Dear God"* to her to be at least considered for publication. Frankly, I had given up on the possibility of this work ever appearing in published form. Gayatri, in conjunction with others at Beacon Press, raised editorial questions and made suggestions that significantly enhanced the quality and appeal of this book.

Many thanks to my wife, Jacqueline, who was my closest conversation partner as I thought through and assembled this volume. She supported this effort wholeheartedly, frequently offering words of critique, advice, and encouragement. She also devoted a lot of time to typing, retyping, and organizing and reorganizing parts of this work. Probably more than anyone else, Jacqueline convinced me of the wisdom of having King's prayers conveniently collected in a single volume. Finally, I am eternally grateful for the many dynamic and heartwarming prayers I heard at small rural churches while growing up in and around Wilcox County, Alabama. In that setting, I had experiences that anticipated, perhaps in strange and subtle ways, my involvement with this project. The prayers of my parents and other elders at the Mount Zion Missionary Baptist Church in Sedan, Alabama, and in other church settings, helped prepare me for this engagement with the prayers of Martin Luther King, Jr.

Notes

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Part VII. Biblical Verses and Christian Sources That Inspired the Reverend Dr. King

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