

When and why did Dr. Martin Luther King visit Ghana?

Dr. **Martin Luther King Jr.** visited **Ghana** in **March 1957** to attend the country's **independence ceremony** on **March 6, 1957**, when **Ghana (formerly the Gold Coast)** became the first sub-Saharan African country to gain independence from colonial rule (British rule).

Dr. King was invited by **Kwame Nkrumah**, Ghana's first Prime Minister and a prominent figure in the Pan-African movement. King accepted the invitation with enthusiasm and saw the event as deeply symbolic and politically significant.

Reasons for the Visit:

1. **Symbol of African Liberation:** Ghana's independence represented a powerful symbol of Black liberation and self-determination, which resonated strongly with King's civil rights mission in the U.S.
2. **Connection Between Anti-Colonial and Civil Rights Struggles:** King believed the struggle against colonialism in Africa and the struggle against racism and segregation in America were part of the same global fight for human dignity and freedom.
3. **Inspiration and Encouragement:** Witnessing an African nation achieve independence gave King renewed hope and resolve to continue the fight for civil rights in the United States.
4. **Solidarity with African Movements:** King's presence also signaled solidarity between African Americans and Africans, reinforcing shared heritage and goals.

Upon returning to the U.S., King gave sermons and speeches reflecting on the trip. He famously said:

"Ghana has something to say to us... It says to us that the forces of the universe are on the side of justice."

His trip to Ghana was a turning point in his international awareness and helped shape his broader vision of social justice and global human rights.

One of the most well-known reflections Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. gave about his trip to Ghana appears in his sermon titled:

"The Birth of a New Nation"

Delivered on **April 7, 1957**, at **Dexter Avenue Baptist Church**, Montgomery, Alabama.

This sermon was preached shortly after he returned from Ghana's independence celebrations, and it's a powerful and moving account of both the historical moment and his personal impressions.

Key Reflections from the Sermon:

1. On Witnessing Ghana's Independence Ceremony:

King vividly described the moment the Union Jack (British flag) was lowered and the Ghanaian flag was raised at midnight on March 6:

“At the stroke of the midnight hour, the old Union Jack was lowered, and the new flag of Ghana was hoisted. A new nation was born.”

He called it one of the most emotional experiences of his life.

2. On the Meaning of Independence:

King drew a parallel between Ghana’s liberation and the struggle of African Americans:

“Ghana tells us that the forces of the universe are on the side of justice. It tells us that right temporarily defeated is stronger than evil triumphant.”

He interpreted Ghana’s independence as part of a global movement toward justice, human rights, and dignity for oppressed peoples.

3. On Kwame Nkrumah:

King admired Ghana’s new leader, **Kwame Nkrumah**, who had spent time in the U.S. and had studied at Lincoln University in Pennsylvania. King said of Nkrumah:

“He stood before his people with profound eloquence and said, ‘We are no longer a British colony. We are free.’”

He emphasized how Nkrumah’s leadership and determination had inspired the people of Ghana to rise up nonviolently and achieve freedom.

4. On the Connection to the Civil Rights Movement:

King brought the message home by connecting Ghana’s struggle to that of African Americans in the U.S.:

“You know, we can look back now and see how we have been aided by the struggles that have taken place in Africa. Just as they are seeking their freedom, we are going to have to seek ours.”

He urged his congregation to draw inspiration from Ghana and to recognize that their struggle was part of a broader, international quest for freedom.

Here is the **text** of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s sermon **“The Birth of a New Nation”**, delivered on **April 7, 1957**, at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama. The transcript is from the Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute at Stanford University.

The Birth of a New Nation" — Martin Luther King Jr. (April 7, 1957)
Delivered at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, Montgomery, Ala.
(from the MLK Jr. Research & Education Institute)

[Opening]

“I want to preach this morning from the subject: ‘The Birth of a New Nation.’ ... It is the story of the Exodus, the story of the flight of the Hebrew people from the bondage of Egypt,

through the wilderness and finally, to the Promised Land. ... This is something of the story of every people struggling for freedom.”

[African colonial context]

“And prior to March the sixth, 1957, there existed a country known as the Gold Coast. ... This country was a colony of the British Empire ... it is in this spot, in this section of Africa, that we find the Gold Coast, there in West Africa.”

“You also know that for years and for centuries, Africa has been one of the most exploited continents ... And this country, the Gold Coast, was a part of this extensive continent known as Africa. It’s a little country there in West Africa about ... four and a half million [people] ... with its capital city Accra.... Finally, in 1850, Britain won out, and she gained possession of the total territorial expansion of the Gold Coast. From 1850 to 1957, March sixth, the Gold Coast was a colony of the British Empire.”

[Struggle for independence & Nkrumah]

“He (Nkrumah) organized the Convention People's Party ... This was the struggling that had been going on for years. ... And they agreed that on the sixth of March 1957, they would release this nation. This nation would no longer be a colony of the British Empire, but a sovereign nation within the British Commonwealth

[The moment of Ghana’s birth]

“At twelve o’clock that night we saw a little flag coming down, and another flag went up. The old Union Jack flag came down, and the new flag of Ghana went up. ... All over that vast throng of people we could see tears. ... Before I knew it I started weeping; I was crying for joy.”

“And I could hear that old Negro spiritual once more crying out:
‘Free at last! Free at last! Great God Almighty, I’m free at last!’”

[Challenges ahead]

“This nation was now out of Egypt and has crossed the Red Sea. Now it will confront its wilderness. ... For instance, cocoa mainly ... it will be necessary to industrialize. ... Still ninety percent of the people are illiterate ... it is necessary to lift the whole cultural standard of the community ... Now don’t think that because they have five million people the nation can’t grow ... America was smaller than Ghana when it was born.”

[Lessons for the Civil Rights Struggle]

“Ghana has something to say to us. It says ... that the oppressor never voluntarily gives freedom to the oppressed. You have to work for it. ... Freedom is never given to anybody ... Freedom only comes through persistent revolt, through persistent agitation.”

“It reminds us that a nation or a people can break loose from oppression without violence ... Nkrumah says ... ‘When I came out of prison, I was not bitter toward Britain.’ And because of that, this world will be a better place in which to live.”

[Justice stands on the side of freedom]

“The forces of the universe are on the side of justice.”

“An old order of colonialism, of segregation, of discrimination is passing away now, and a new order of justice and freedom and goodwill is being born. That’s what it said ... somehow the forces of justice stand on the side of the universe.”

[Broader reflection & London analogy]

MLK reflects on empire and exile: the grandeur of Westminster Abbey and British monarchy contrasting with the moral emptiness of colonialism. He quotes biblical passages: “Be still, and know that I am God,” and declares that God’s justice ultimately breaks the power of exploitation and empire.

Key Themes & Summary Highlights:

1. **Historical and Spiritual Framing:** King begins with the Exodus allegory—Egypt and Canaan—as an overarching metaphor for liberation.
2. **Ghana as a Moment of Joy and Symbol:** Ghana’s transition from colonialism to independence on March 6, 1957, profoundly moved King. He recounts witnessing the flags change and people weeping and chanting “Freedom!” in what he calls a spiritual fulfillment.
3. **Facing the Wilderness:** King notes that freedom isn’t an endpoint—it marks the beginning of building infrastructure, literacy, economic diversity, and national identity. He draws a parallel with America’s own modest beginnings.
4. **Lessons for the Civil Rights Movement:** Ghana’s struggle teaches that liberation isn’t bestowed—it’s demanded through persistence and nonviolent action. King urges his congregation to continue the fight for rights in Montgomery without bitterness.
5. **Universal Justice:** Most famously, King declares that “the forces of the universe are on the side of justice.” This reflects his belief in the divine arc of morality bending toward equality and freedom.
6. **Empires and Moral Authority:** Drawing on his visit to London, King critiques the legacy of empire and moral hypocrisy. He invokes biblical imagery to show how oppressive systems crumble when confronted with divine righteous judgment.

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Ghana Trip

March 4, 1957 to March 12, 1957

In March 1957, Martin Luther King, Jr., and his wife Coretta Scott King traveled to West Africa to attend Ghana’s independence ceremony. King’s voyage was symbolic of a growing global alliance of oppressed peoples and was strategically well timed; his attendance represented an attempt to broaden the scope of the civil rights struggle in the United States on the heels of the successful Montgomery bus boycott. King identified with Ghana’s struggle; furthermore, he recognized a strong parallel between resistance against European colonialism in Africa and the struggle against racism in the United States.

King was invited to the independence ceremony by Ghana’s new Prime Minister, Kwame Nkrumah. King’s friend Bayard Rustin coordinated the invitation with the help of Bill Sutherland, a civil rights activist and pacifist who was then working for Nkrumah’s finance minister, K. A. Gbedemah. King’s trip was funded by the Montgomery Improvement Association and the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, his congregation.

King arrived in Accra, the Gold Coast (soon to be Ghana) on 4 March and attended a reception where he met then Vice President Richard Nixon. King told Nixon, “I want you to come visit us down in Alabama where we are seeking the same kind of freedom the Gold Coast is celebrating” (“M. L. King Meets”). The next day, King attended the ceremonial closing of the old British Parliament. At the ceremony, the recently incarcerated Nkrumah and his ministers wore their prison caps, symbolizing their struggle to win Ghana’s freedom. King wrote: “When I looked out and saw the prime minister there with his prison cap on that night, that reminded me of that fact, that freedom never comes easy. It comes through hard labor and it comes through toil” (Papers 4:163).

At midnight on 6 March, King attended the official ceremony in which the British Union Jack was lowered and the new flag of Ghana was raised and the British colony of the Gold Coast became the independent nation of Ghana. King later recalled, “As we walked out, we noticed all over the polo grounds almost a half a million people. They had waited for this hour and this moment for years” (Papers 4:159). King’s reaction to the Ghanaians’ triumph was outwardly emotional. “Before I knew it, I started weeping. I was crying for joy. And I knew about all of the struggles, and all of the pain, and all of the agony that these people had gone through for this moment” (Papers 4:160).

Also in attendance at the ceremony were many prominent American activists, politicians, and educators: A. Philip Randolph, Ralph Bunche, Mordecai Johnson, Horace Mann Bond, Senator Charles Diggs, and Congressman Adam Clayton Powell. The honor of inclusion in this impressive group indicated King’s prominence as a civil rights figure both at home and abroad.

Interviewed while in Ghana, King told radio listeners, “This event, the birth of this new nation, will give impetus to oppressed peoples all over the world. I think it will have worldwide implications and repercussions—not only for Asia and Africa, but also for America... It renews my conviction in the ultimate triumph of justice. And it seems to me that this is fit testimony to the fact that eventually the forces of justice triumph in the universe, and somehow the universe itself is on the side of freedom and justice. So that this gives new hope to me in the struggle for freedom” (Papers 4:146).

Despite falling ill for several days, the Kings had a private lunch with Nkrumah and met with anti-apartheid activist and Anglican priest Michael Scott and peace activist Homer Jack. King departed from Ghana for New York by way of Nigeria, Rome, Geneva, Paris, and London. In London, the Kings had lunch with Trinidadian writer and political activist C. L. R. James, who was very impressed by the success of the Montgomery bus boycott.

Footnotes

Introduction, in Papers 4:7–10.

King, “The Birth of a New Nation,” Sermon Delivered at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, 7 April 1957, in Papers 4:155–167.

King, Interview by Etta Moten Barnett, 6 March 1957, in Papers 4:145–148.

“M. L. King Meets Nixon in Ghana,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, 9 March 1957.

<https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/ghana-trip>