

Analyzing a Primary Source

KEY STANDARD
RH.6-8.1

Why We Can't Wait

Before he was assassinated on April 4, 1968, civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. was jailed dozens of times in his pursuit of racial equality in the United States.

One of those jailings occurred in April 1963 in Birmingham, Alabama. King described Birmingham in the 1960s as “the most thoroughly segregated city in the United States.” Rather than integrate its public parks and playgrounds, the city closed them. And opponents of civil rights for African Americans bombed black homes and businesses.

In the spring of 1963, King and other civil rights leaders converged on Birmingham to organize demonstrations against the inequality and violence. King’s actions landed him in Birmingham City Jail, where he wrote one of the most important documents of the civil rights movement. The 21-page, 7,000-word *Letter From Birmingham Jail* was written in response to a group of white religious leaders who asked African Americans to wait patiently for equal rights.

Read this excerpt from King’s letter, then answer the questions.

Letter From Birmingham Jail, April 16, 1963

My Dear Fellow Clergymen:

While confined here in the Birmingham City Jail, I came across your recent statement calling my present activities “unwise and untimely.” . . .

We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed. . . . For years now I have heard the word “Wait!” It rings in the ear of every Negro* with piercing familiarity. This “Wait” has almost always meant “Never.” We must come to see . . . that “justice too long delayed is justice denied.”

We have waited for more than 340 years for our constitutional and God-given rights. The nations of Asia and Africa are moving with jetlike speed toward gaining political independence, but we still creep at horse-and-buggy pace toward gaining a cup of coffee at a lunch counter.

Perhaps it is easy for those who have never felt the stinging darts of segregation to say, “Wait.” But when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters and brothers at whim; when you have seen hate-filled policemen curse, kick, and even kill your black brothers and sisters; when you see the vast majority of your 20 million Negro brothers smothering in an airtight cage of poverty . . . then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait.

There comes a time when the cup of endurance runs over, and men are no longer willing to be plunged into the abyss of despair. I hope, sirs, you can understand our legitimate and unavoidable impatience. . . .

Yours for the cause of Peace and Brotherhood,
Martin Luther King Jr.

*African American (Once a standard term, *Negro* is now considered dated and often offensive.)

Questions

1. What does Martin Luther King Jr. think *wait* means for African Americans? Cite evidence from the text.
2. What metaphors does King use to describe segregation and living in poverty?
3. Compare and contrast King’s observations of progress in Asia and Africa with that in the United States. What comment is he making about the U.S.?
4. What examples of racial violence does King include in his letter?
5. What descriptive language does King use to show that African Americans were tired of waiting for racial equality?