

# Smelling Fires of Racism

BY JOSEPH C. PARKER, JR.

**Who today is starting and maintaining fires of racism with their awful smell? In the book of Daniel we find a biblical paradigm to guide our thinking—namely, the story of the siege of Jerusalem, the domination of its people by King Nebuchadnezzar, and the responses of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.**

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## *Daniel 3*

**I** was not yet eleven years old when the following scenes were indelibly burned into my memory. Though the passing years have faded their clarity, their deep impressions remain.

I first smelled smoke from the fires of racism in 1963 in my hometown of Birmingham, Alabama. In May of that year I accompanied my father—a Baptist pastor and leader in the Alabama civil rights movement—to a bombing scene. The home of Reverend A. D. King, the younger brother of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., had been bombed. Smoke was still rising. The odor was strong. The front half of the home was demolished. No one was injured or killed. This was the first time I smelled racism's smoke.

That day we also went to the A. G. Gaston Motel, where another bombing had taken place. Four people were injured. Three house trailers were damaged heavily. I smelled racism's smoke a second time.

In September, I accompanied my father to the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in downtown Birmingham, the scene of another bombing. Four girls near my age, attending Sunday School classes at the church, were killed. Twenty-three other people were hurt. I smelled smoke from a fire of racism the third time.

The people and systems of my city had embraced racial hate. I saw their signs. I heard their words. The god of racism was being worshipped, even by God's people. Racism's fires were being fanned. Its fumes engulfed the people of Birmingham.

Those fires of racism changed me. I can still smell racism's smoke. Though its smell is different and more subdued, my memory is triggered.

The smell is emitted from racially dominated systems and individual actions—even inadvertent—that continue to legitimize bigotry and discrimination. This legitimization can be found in attitudes, behaviors, social structures, ideologies, and the power to impose these on a less dominant race, to paraphrase Margaret Guider's understanding of racism.<sup>1</sup>



Who today is starting and maintaining these fires of racism with their awful smell? In the book of Daniel we find a biblical paradigm to guide our thinking—namely, the story of the siege of Jerusalem, the domination of its people by King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, and the responses of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.

King Nebuchadnezzar would not have called himself a racist. He saw himself as a king protecting and expanding the legitimate interests of his people and himself. Nebuchadnezzar did not have a compassionate focus on the people he dominated; he focused on them only when they (and their things) advanced his interests. But he did not act alone. He put in place systems and representatives that perpetuated these interests. Those who benefitted from these systems took advantage of what was accessible to them, even if they did not recognize the negative impact on the dominated group.

The king probably embraced the notion that self-preservation is the first law of the universe. This myopic mindset is amplified when the dominant group believes resources are scarce or threatened, or when greed is a factor. It is dangerous when the dominant have no spiritual compass or are not guided by it. We should not be surprised by King Nebuchadnezzar. He did not know or serve Yahweh.

But God's people are different: they know God and realize God is jealous, requiring allegiance. They must not embrace a God-defying culture or dress up in its symbols. They must not eat at the table of bigotry and discrimination, or take on a disloyal identity. They must not serve, participate in, or perpetuate God-defying systems. They must actively become firefighters of racism's fires; any delay in doing so makes it more dangerous for them and others because fire spreads and firefighting becomes more difficult.

Racism has a Nebuchadnezzar spirit. It demands God's people to be disloyal and give allegiance to racially disparate treatment. It requires them to displace God and ignore God's requirements. It misappropriates the purpose

of God's human creation – which is to give God glory – and attempts to convert God's creation into a distorted use.

God's people must be loyal to God. They must be sensitive to hearing God's voice and guidance. They must recognize when people and systems entice them to become disloyal and engage in attitudes and behaviors that are offensive to God's nostrils. Racism is a foul smell to God, and should be to God's people. God's people must understand the power of racism's fumes and must not succumb to them.

Nebuchadnezzar expected the people to comply with his demands and perpetuate them. Although some of God's people embraced the culture of the Babylonians, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were committed to being virtuous by doing what is right and avoiding what is wrong in God's eyes. Yet even they wore the system's tunics, trousers, turbans, and other clothes (Daniel 3:21) and entered its service. Perhaps systems like this one have a way of dividing those who are dominated and even make some feel as if they are exceptional. Perhaps some succumb to the Stockholm Syndrome – inadvertently becoming aligned with their captor as they benefit from the system.

Should not God's people today know that the powers defiant to God are prodigals, and they have been captured by God through Christ Jesus? Can we not remember that Christ has "disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in it" (Colossians 2:15)? With Peter and the apostles God's people should proclaim: "We must obey God rather than any human authority" (Acts 5:29).

God's people should act in harmony with one another and be known by God's love. They must give greater control to the fires of unity through God's Spirit that touched those early believers at Pentecost:

They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.

*Acts 2:3-4 (NIV)<sup>2</sup>*



Racism likes compliant companions. Nevertheless, God's people can be delivered from its fires and taken to safety. As racism's fires burn God's people should have in place a "spiritual detector" – someone who is wise in the ways of God; someone who, like a carbon monoxide detector, can identify the poisonous, colorless, and odorless fumes that will kill us.

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego could have been loyal to Nebuchadnezzar's God-defying system. They could have worshipped his Babylonian image (Daniel 3:1-7). They chose to be loyal to God in the face of violence – the threat of being thrown into a blazing furnace.

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego replied to the king, "O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it, and he will rescue us from your hand, O king. But even if he does not, we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up."

*Daniel 3:16-18 (NIV)*

The system now turned on them and used the furnace—an implement of the system likely designed for baking bricks, smelting metals, or disposing of the Babylonian dead by cremation—to hurt them.

The system now had to maintain its integrity. Self-preservation is the first law of the universe. But deliverance was available to Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.

The soldiers, participants in the system who threw Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego into the furnace, got killed in the process. Instead of being harmed, these three faithful disciples were united with another one, whom Nebuchadnezzar thought was a man that looked like a son of the gods. They were saved.

Then Nebuchadnezzar said, "Praise be to the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who has sent his angel and rescued his servants! They trusted in him and defied the king's command and were willing to give up their lives rather than serve or worship any god except their own God."

*Daniel 3:28 (NIV)*



God's people can use fires as places of unity rather than places of division.

I recently talked with a group of young Christian ministers in Austin, Texas. They shared with me a scene that takes place on a regular basis in their predominantly and historically African American neighborhood. It is in a part of the city that is in transition—what many would call gentrification. These ministers are primarily Anglo and Asian.

As they moved into the neighborhood, they were met with suspicion as to their motives. They were seen as representative of a racially dominated system of nonblacks. They began to smell fires of racism, but decided they would dissolve their scent. For some time now, on Friday evenings, these young ministers have literally burned fires in a pit. They and other indigenous people to the neighborhood gather around as those fires burn, telling stories about the area and themselves. They connect with each.

They have discovered that these fires have lowered the walls of hostility (Ephesians 2:14) and observed these fires "had not harmed their bodies, nor

was a hair of their heads singed; their robes were not scorched, and there was no smell of fire on them” (Daniel 3:27, NIV).

The same can happen to us. As we smell the fires of racism, God’s people who are not afraid of its flames or unwilling to succumb to its fumes can experience how good and pleasant it is for brothers and sisters to dwell together in unity (Psalm 133:1). Amen!

## NOTES

1 Margaret E. Guider, O. S. F., “Moral Imagination and the *Missio ad Gentes*: Redressing the Counter-Witness of Racism,” in Laurie M. Cassidy and Alex Mikulich, eds., *Interrupting White Privilege: Catholic Theologians Break the Silence* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2007), 95-126.

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