

## **Angry Racists**

### **By David Feddes**

Racial hatred is a deadly force. There are white racists who look down on blacks and people of other races. There are black racists who demonize whites and Jews and Asians. Sitting in a Canadian barbershop, I've heard angry racists gripe about blankety-blank immigrants from Pakistan and other places. Buying groceries in the United States, I've heard a checkout clerk complain about the blankety-blank Hispanics who are taking over "our" country—even as she admitted that her own parents were immigrants.

I wish we could say that racial conflict is dead. But it's not. Where race relations have improved, we should be glad. But where conflict continues among different races, tribes, and nationalities, and where racism remains in our own hearts, we must face the problem squarely. As we do this, we must also see the deeper root of the problem. When we're at odds with other people because they're not like us, we're also at odds with God.

How can we have true and lasting harmony among different kinds of people? By getting in tune with the God who speaks in the Bible. In the Bible we meet God the Father who created humanity in his own image (Genesis 1:27). "From one man he made every nation of men" (Acts 17:26). In the Bible we meet God the Son, Jesus Christ, who poured out his blood and "purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation" (Revelation 5:9). Christ's cross destroys barriers and melts hostility among different races (Ephesians 2:14-16). In the Bible we meet God the Holy Spirit who "does not show favoritism" but makes himself at home in the hearts of people of any race who believe the message of Christ (Acts 10:34,44). The Holy Spirit makes us part of one body, the church (1 Corinthians 12:13). In the Bible we find that when we trust Christ Jesus and are baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we "are all sons of God," "all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:26,28). As members of God's family, whatever our racial or national roots, we must "keep on loving each other as brothers" (Hebrews 13:1), eager not to hurt others but to "serve one another in love" (Galatians 5:13).

Serving each other and loving people of all races doesn't come naturally; it must come supernaturally.

### **Too Much to Swallow?**

The Bible changes us by introducing us to a God we hardly know and giving us a whole new way of seeing things. The Bible is no ordinary, everyday book. It doesn't fit comfortably into our natural thought patterns. The Bible says things that may be hard for us to believe. Some things in the Bible are hard to believe because they are so astonishing and out of the ordinary. Other things, though, are hard to believe simply because they upset us.

Take the Bible story of Jonah, for example. Scripture says God rescued Jonah from drowning by sending a great fish to swallow him. Jonah lived for three days and three nights inside the fish. Then the fish vomited Jonah out onto dry land, alive and uninjured. Now, that's not the sort of thing that happens every day, so some people think it can't be a true story. It's too miraculous and supernatural for them to believe.

But the story of the great fish isn't the only part of Jonah that some people reject. The story goes on to tell how God made Jonah go to Nineveh, the capital city of Assyria, his nation's most hated enemy. There, Jonah had to warn the people of Nineveh about God's judgment. The Ninevites repented and begged God for mercy, and much to Jonah's dismay, the Lord "had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened" (Jonah 3:19). Jonah was furious. He snarled, "I am angry enough to die" (Jonah 4:9). This angry racist wanted God to favor him and his people. He was outraged that God would be kind to these rotten foreigners who had a long history of making life miserable for Jonah's countrymen. But God cared about Nineveh. He asked Jonah, "Should I not be concerned about that great city?" (Jonah 4:11). The Bible story of Jonah ends at that point and leaves all of us to ponder God's question: "Should I not be concerned?"

God cares about groups of people we don't like. He cares about them just as much as he cares about us and our group. It may be harder for us to swallow that fact than it was for the fish to swallow Jonah! After all, if God cares about people we hate, then if we belong to God, we are to stop hating and start caring about them too. And that may seem too much to expect. It would be easier just to hang on to our anger and prejudice.

But no matter what part of the Bible story of Jonah we want to reject, every word of it is true. The part about the fish that swallowed Jonah is true, and so is the part about the God who had mercy on the people Jonah hated. If we find it hard to accept a particular part of the story, the problem is with us, not with the Bible. It was no problem for the God who creates men and fish to keep Jonah safe in a great fish's belly; the only problem is if our minds are too small to grasp God's power. Likewise, it's no problem for the loving God who created all people to care about other groups of people as much as he cares about our group; the only problem is if our hearts are too small to love people whom God loves. When we listen to the Bible and believe what it says, God expands our minds to recognize his power and expands our hearts to embrace his great love.

Jonah was an angry racist. He wasn't just angry at the foreigners he hated; he was angry at God himself for loving those foreigners. But whether Jonah liked it or not, and whether we like it or not, the Lord insists on caring about people of every kind. He cares equally about Serbs, Albanians, and Croats. He cares equally about Arabs and Jews. He cares equally about black and white, about Hutu and Tutsi. God doesn't side with one tribe or race or country against another. With God's help, Jonah finally accepted that fact and wrote it down so we could learn it too. God cares about groups we don't like just as much as he cares about us. The more you read the Bible, the clearer this becomes.

### **Foreigners Included**

Moses, the great leader of Israel, married a woman from Africa. Moses' sister Miriam and his brother Aaron, prominent people in their own right, were upset about Moses marrying a foreigner, and they spoke against him (Numbers 12:1). But God got angry at Aaron and Miriam until they prayed for forgiveness.

In the book of Jeremiah the Bible speaks of a man named Ebed-Melech. The Bible calls him a Cushite, which means he was an African from what we today call

Ethiopia. This man worked for the weak, corrupt king who reigned in Jerusalem. Ebed-Melech was one of the few honest, godly people in the palace. When the prophet Jeremiah was dumped into a muddy pit and left to starve, this brave African spoke out and rescued God's prophet (Jeremiah 38:1-13). The Lord promised this faithful foreigner, "I will save you ... because you trust in me" (Jeremiah 39:18).

Ebed-Melech's story gave me firsthand a taste of how much some racists hate people of African descent. Awhile back, I wrote in a *Today* devotional booklet for the Back to God Hour about Ebed-Melech, and someone sent me a nasty anonymous letter. The angry racist who wrote it promised never again to read anything I write and condemned me for saying that the heroic Ebed-Melech had African roots. But I was just saying what the Bible itself says.

Long before Jesus came to earth, the Old Testament prophesied about him and announced that the coming Savior would save people of every race and nation. God told Abraham that through his offspring (Christ) all nations of the earth would be blessed (Genesis 18:18). Through the prophet Isaiah, God declared that it wouldn't be enough for the Messiah to bless only the people of Israel. "I will also make you a light for the Gentiles," promised God, "that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth" (Isaiah 49:6). Therefore, God went on, "Let no foreigner who has bound himself to the Lord say, 'The Lord will surely exclude me from his people.'... For my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations" (Isaiah 56:3,7). God clearly welcomes and includes people of every race and nation.

With the coming of Jesus, God's inclusiveness became clearer than ever. At the same time, angry racists became fiercer than ever. Many of Jesus' countrymen thought they alone mattered to God, and it made them furious to be told otherwise. One Sabbath Jesus went to his hometown of Nazareth. When he read Scripture and began to preach, people were amazed and liked what they were hearing. But then Jesus touched a sore spot. He said that a prophet is usually honored more away from home than by his own people. He also pointed out that in Old Testament times God's prophets sometimes did miracles for foreigners that they didn't do for their own countrymen.

Back in the prophet Elijah's time, there was a famine, but although there were many widows in Israel, said Jesus, God didn't send Elijah to help them. Instead, he sent Elijah to a widow in the region of Sidon and provided that foreigner with a miraculous supply of food. Likewise, in the time of Elijah's successor, Elisha, many people in Israel suffered from leprosy, and yet, said Jesus, the only leper Elisha miraculously healed was a foreigner, Naaman the Syrian.

Jesus was driving home the point that race and nation don't count for much in God's eyes. You can be born in the "wrong" place and seem like the last person God should care about, and yet the Lord may single you out for special blessings. By the same token, you can be from the same ethnic group as Jesus himself—you can even be from the same town—and still be out of tune with him.

That was not what Jesus' hometown folks wanted to hear. A few minutes earlier, they had been thrilled with their talented hometown boy, but when he mentioned God's kindness to foreigners, they became furious. They stopped listening to his preaching, jumped up from their seats, and formed a lynch mob. They drove Jesus out of town and wanted to throw him down a cliff. But Jesus somehow walked right through the jostling

crowd of angry racists and left (see Luke 4:16-30). That incident is proof that angry racists don't just hate foreigners; they hate the Lord himself for choosing to be kind to foreigners.

Later, after Jesus' death and resurrection and return to heaven, the apostles who spread his message also met resistance from angry racists. The apostle Paul was Jewish, just as Jesus was Jewish. Paul worked hard at calling non-Jewish people to trust Jesus as their Savior. Many of them believed the gospel and rejoiced. Others, though, were extremely anti-Jewish. They wouldn't believe a Jewish preacher telling them about a Jewish Savior. In one city, some of Paul's enemies whipped up anti-Jewish anger and said, "These men are Jews, and are throwing our city into an uproar by advocating customs unlawful for us Romans to accept or practice" (Acts 16:21). City officials joined in the attack, viciously beating Paul and throwing him into prison.

Paul was attacked by non-Jews who despised his Jewishness, and Paul also met opposition from certain Jews who hated him for bringing the gospel to non-Jews and befriending them. Once, Paul was speaking to some fellow Jews in Jerusalem. Paul explained how he had once been a killer of Christians and how Jesus had appeared to him and transformed his life. As he spoke, the crowd listened quietly. But when Paul went on to explain how Jesus told him to go far away and bring Gentiles into the church, the crowd exploded in rage. They threw dust in the air and shouted, "Rid the earth of him! He's not fit to live!" (Acts 22:21-23)

Racism is an equal opportunity sin. It may sound odd to put it that way, but people of every race have a sinful tendency to put their own group above other groups. The Bible shows case after case of this ugly tendency, and Scripture also shows that this is utterly at odds with God's own attitude.

Sadly, even people who claim to believe the Bible can sometimes ignore what it says. At various points in history, and even today, some members of Christian churches have been dreadful racists. They have turned a deaf ear to the Bible's insistence that "God does not show favoritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right" (Acts 10:34-35). When their racism is challenged, they, like Jonah, may be "angry enough to die," or, like the people in Jesus' hometown, they may be angry enough to kill. But no matter how angry the racists become, God doesn't change, and the Bible doesn't change. However, if we listen to God speak in the Bible, we can change.

### **Multiracial Multitude**

What about you? What's your attitude toward people who aren't like you? How do you feel about people of a different country or culture or skin color? If you hate them or look down on them or simply don't care what happens to them, then you are included in the ranks of those who are angry at God and attack Jesus and his messengers. Remember, it's not just other people you're against. You're fighting God himself. And if you go up against the Almighty, you're bound to lose.

Why try to resist God? Why not repent? God will forgive your racism and help you to change if you ask him. Why not be reconciled to God and to God's multiracial family? Trust the Father who made you and every other person in his image. The more you value their dignity, the greater your own dignity becomes. Believe in the blood of

Jesus which can wash away all your sins and which also washes away the sins of people from every tribe and language. The more you treasure what his blood does for them, the more you will treasure what that blood does for you. Welcome the Holy Spirit to live in your heart, the same Holy Spirit who lives in the hearts of Christians from every racial background. Build your life on the truth of the Bible, the Book which shows God in all his goodness and angry racists in all their foolishness. Believe this Book, and it will transform your mind and make you part of Christ's healing peace.

I guarantee you, it's a lot more fun than the sour spirit of an angry racist. I'm not always as sensitive as I should be to cultural differences, and I still have a long way to go in fully appreciating people whose background and personality may be very different from mine, but I can honestly say that I've been enormously enriched by friends who are from different cultures but share the same belief in the Bible and the same love for Jesus. In my student days, my roommates included a Korean citizen and a Chinese American. One of the best summers of my life was spent with Jewish Christians in Israel. At Back to God Hour Ministries, I worked with a board and staff which included brothers and sisters in Christ who were Native American Navajo, African American, French-speaking African, Chinese, Japanese, Indonesian, Hispanic, Russian, Arab, Brazilian, and more. As a professor at Christian Leaders Institute, I interact with Christians from various nations around the world. This many-colored mosaic is a glimpse of heaven.

In order to enjoy heaven, you must enjoy mingling with a multiracial multitude. If you want a place that includes only you and your own kind, you may find such a spot in hell, but there's no place like that in heaven. The Bible pictures heaven as "a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne" (Revelation 5:9). As one hymn of heaven says:

Here from all nations, all tongues, and all peoples,  
Countless the crowd but their voices are one.  
Vast is the sight and majestic their singing:  
"God has the v'ictory: he reigns from the throne!"

*Originally prepared by David Feddes for Back to God Ministries International. Used with permission.*