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### Emancipation and Human Flourishing amidst Injustice and Racial and Ethnic Divide

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# EMANCIPATION AND HUMAN FLOURISHING AMIDST INJUSTICE AND RACIAL AND ETHNIC DIVIDE

*by Jasmine Fraser*

*The issue of racism involves complex layers that need equal redress to walk in the fullness of freedom.*

*Explanation: Attention is given to the eradication of systemic racism. The issue of internalized racism needs to be addressed with much intentionality to mitigate its adverse effects. Attending to the impact of internalized racism can empower minorities, helping them thrive amidst discrimination and walk in the freedom Christ gives.*

The issue of slavery spanning from biblical history to contemporary times has had a significant adverse impact on many and has generated opposing thoughts and dialogues on the matter. Polarized views of Scripture have been used conveniently as both tools of oppression and liberation regarding slavery. While slavery in the biblical context seemed tolerable for the times then, it is hard to imagine that what has evolved from sanctioning and perpetuating slavery is in keeping with divine authority. The sanctity of every human life embodies the reality that each person, regardless of ethnic distinction, is created in the image of God (Genesis 1:26, 27; 9:6) and is to be treated with respect and dignity.

Today, there is no more giving in to the economic transactions associated with previous acquisitions of slaves. However, the racial and ethnic tug-of-war that remains from slavery seems more ominous than the bartering of yesteryears.

Freedom is fundamental in the salvific biblical narrative. The concept of freedom is at the foundation of Scripture. It was for freedom for all that Christ died (Galatians 5:1). Having taken on the task of saving humanity from eternal ruin, Christ made the universal promise to free all who accept and believe in Him (John 3:16). Now we have the assurance that Christ fulfilled His promise, and there should be no more distinction of persons based on status, gender, ethnic, or phenotypic classifications (Galatians 3:28).

Yet, the tug-of-war of racism ingrained in our society remains a social ill that tampers with individuals' freedom in its most organic state. In the face of racism, ethnic minority populations continue to experience traumatic encounters and ongoing discrimination that not only robs them of fundamental constitutional rights, but also threatens to erode their innate sense of being.

Defined as “beliefs, attitude, institutional arrangements, and acts that tend to denigrate individuals or groups because of phenotypic characteristics or group affiliation,”<sup>1</sup> the issue of racism is complex. It continues to adversely affect the lives of racial and ethnic minorities within the society. Ongoing reports on discrimination and intolerance towards racial and ethnic minority groups continue to incite unrest and increase activism and advocacy. Unfortunately, persons of African descent have experienced perpetuated hostility, and in the recent decade, several African American men have encountered heightened episodes of unnecessary profiling that have had fatal outcomes. And in the wake of a global pandemic, several Asian Americans became illusory targets and were held responsible for the cause and spread of the virus.<sup>2</sup>

### The Complex Nature of Racism

Various forms of racism (e.g., interpersonal, structural, institutional, internalized) are embedded in relational and operational contexts of society. Interpersonal racism is dyadic occurrences between individuals whose interactions are affected by perceived racial and ethnic biases. Structural racism has entrenched historical, cultural, and ideological effects amongst institutions in society. It embodies compounding laws and regulations that favor a majority group while depriving racial and ethnic minorities.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, institutional racism happens in organizations as power structures that engender unfair policies and discriminatory practices in workplaces, schools, and other social entities. These systems of power implement procedures that perpetuate inequitable outcomes for racial and ethnic minorities.

Internalized racism is complex in that it simultaneously involves the subtlety of the privileged majority and the disconcerting awareness of disadvantaged minorities. It undermines minority groups, impacting them interpersonally, intrapersonally, and cross-culturally, thwarting their beliefs and inhibiting a sense of self. It engenders personal beliefs and biases about one’s race that contribute to negative thoughts and attitudes towards self and others in one’s community.<sup>4</sup>

### The Effects of Internalized Racism

Racism in any form has damaging outcomes. The direct and indirect physical and psychological effects are continuous, having impacted many across generations. Many minority groups are often profiled, and individuals have experienced physical assaults because of their phenotypic characteristics and are labeled suspects of phantom and illusory crimes. These lived experiences have both physical and psychological effects. Through the lived discriminatory experiences of fellow beings, members of a minority group are also impacted psychologically and are often subject to bouts of fear, anger, anxiety, or paranoia. The indirect psychological effects of racism are substantive to the direct physical effects. Vicarious traumatic experiences have a similar impact on a person that is like that of lived traumatic experiences.<sup>5</sup>

With ongoing protests and advocacy against inequality, injustice, disparities in the legal system, and inequity in educational and societal institutions, gradual progress is being made in addressing racism. Efforts are being made to address interpersonal, structural, and institutional racism, but not much is done to confront the intrapersonal turmoil embodying internalized racism. The experiences and impacts of psychological trauma are prevailing in the presence of internalized racism. Through advocacy, efforts are being made to restore peace and perpetuate hope and dignity among racial and ethnic minority groups. Though there have been significant studies on the socio-economic effects of racism, very little has been done to address the challenges of internalized racism.<sup>6</sup> Efforts need to be made to manage and



<sup>1</sup> R. Clark, N. Anderson, V. Clark, & D. Williams. “Racism as a stressor for African Americans.” *American Psychologist*. 54 (10) (1999): 805.

<sup>2</sup> R. Polner. Pandemic era sparks both anxiety and activism for Asian Americans. <https://www.nyu.edu/about/news-publications/news/2021/february/AsianAmericanDiscriminationStudy.html>.

<sup>3</sup> The Cambridge Dictionary. <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/structural-racism>. See also S. W. Rowe (2020). *Healing Racial Trauma: The Road to Resilience* [Kindle iOS version], p. 6.

<sup>4</sup> S. W. Rowe (2020). *Healing Racial Trauma: The Road to Resilience* [Kindle iOS version].

<sup>5</sup> See Office for Victims of Crime (OVC). “What is Vicarious Trauma?” <https://ovc.ojp.gov/program/vtt/what-is-vicarious-trauma>, also “Understanding the Impact of Trauma” <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK207191/>

<sup>6</sup> S. Wise. (2020). *Healing Racial Trauma*, p. 3.

mitigate its adverse impact on a person. Finding best practices for addressing internalized racism can help individuals heal and thrive amidst the tug-of-war within other tiers of racism.

### **From Suffering to Flourishing: Healing from Internalized Racism**

As advocates and allies seek redress in the concomitants of injustice, we wait for the walls of interpersonal, structural, and institutionalized racism to be torn down. But how do we adequately address the prevailing debilitating effects of internalized racism? Many have learned to cope by ignoring or suppressing painful emotions, and others have learned to survive by adapting to circumstances. While coping and adapting serve as initial buffers in the existential crises of racism, it is essential to move people beyond coping and surviving to a state of flourishing—a condition whereby individuals become better than they were before a crisis. It is a process in which racial and ethnic minorities become their best amidst discrimination. There is a need to help individuals move through adverse situations to a state of resilience.

In this context, resilience embodies the aptitude to persevere and retain a positive sense of self when faced with pervasive discriminatory hostile experiences.<sup>7</sup> Becoming more resilient involves intentionality. Such intentionality includes awareness of thoughts and feelings that evolve in lived or vicarious traumatic

experiences and finding safe and healthy contexts to work through difficult emotions. Suppression or denial of feelings and emotions is an aspect of internalized racism that erodes a person's sense of self. There is a need to regulate feelings and reactions in lived or vicarious experiences of injustice, but doing so is not synonymous with ignoring or denying painful and discomfiting emotions.

Racial and ethnic minorities can also develop resilience by having intergroup dialogues that address individuals' misconceptions of self and the group's identity. One of the repercussions of internalized racism is the subliminal casteism existing between and within minorities groups. Unfortunately, this type of prejudice among minorities polarizes individuals and weakens efforts to rise above the quagmire of injustice. The quest to mitigate internalized racism between and within minority groups is a necessity. To do so is a way of walking in the freedom Christ gave.



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<sup>7</sup> S. Wise. (2020). *Healing Racial Trauma: The Road to Resilience* [Kindle iOS version], p. 4

