



## Prayer: Taking Sides

By Cheryl Odden

Some Christians refuse to listen to the stories of the persecuted church. From the physical perspective, they say such stories are depressing. Descriptions of persecution are disturbing, but that's only one side of the story. The other is their spiritual victory — their willingness to suffer rather than deny the lover of their souls, Jesus Christ. The side of their story that we embrace affects how we pray for them.

In his letter to the Colossians, Paul exhorted them to "remember my chains" (Colossians 4:18). Chains are not a pleasant thing to meditate on or pray about (Hebrews 13:3). However, neither is the cross nor the crown of thorns nor the nails that pierced Christ's body. But again, that's only one side of the story. The other side is eternity with and restoration through Christ — what glory!

In Philippians 3:10, the apostle Paul wrote about the power of Christ's resurrection and the fellowship of his sufferings in the same sentence. The two concepts are not contradictory; they are complementary. We cannot have his resurrection without his suffering.

When Jesus addressed the multitudes in the Sermon on the Mount, he related, "But whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also." He was challenging them to return good for evil. But perhaps Jesus was also using this illustration to challenge us to change our focus, to turn our gaze? The Greek word "to turn" means to "turn quite around or reverse." Just a few verses later, Christ said, "and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you." When we shift our focus from the physical things on earth to the "things above" (Colossians 3:2), how does that affect our perspective, and ultimately, how we pray for others, especially those who wish to harm us because we believe in Jesus?

Our prayers can reflect either the "depressing" circumstances that our persecuted family faces in the world, or the "overcoming" victories that they win on behalf of the kingdom. We can pray that while our brothers and sisters are in prison, God will empower them to advance his kingdom. We can pray that their persecutors will fall on their faces in awe of the glory of God. We can pray that as believers sit in a cold, dark cell, they will sing praises to their Christ — "Let the redeemed of the Lord say so!" We can pray believers will increase in boldness when their house church leaders are imprisoned.

Which side are you taking in your prayers? The fearful, physical side? Or the victorious, overcoming side? And which side of the story are you telling others?