



Prayer on the Arabian Peninsula: Incense Pleasing to God

My name is Suad. I'm from the southern Arabian Peninsula, which is the home of the historic Frankincense Trail. This trail stretched from the Dofar mountains of Oman, all the way through Yemen and the vast desert of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, before finally arriving in Jerusalem. From Jerusalem, the frankincense would be picked up by traders and taken all over the world. It was even one of the gifts that the wise men presented to Jesus after His birth.

Still today, we use incense containing frankincense in our homes on the southern Arabian Peninsula. One of our customs is to burn this incense in the house before our neighbors and friends come to visit. This fragrance is so important to us and such a valuable part of our culture, that if we travel outside of the Arabian Peninsula we carry incense with us in case we cannot find it in the place we are visiting.

Now that I follow Christ, I've discovered the Scriptures that describe prayer as incense, like Psalm 141:2, "Let my prayer be set before You as incense." When I read Scriptures like this, I understand that prayer should be something that permeates my home like the incense I burn, which even wafts out onto the street. My neighbors may not see me burning the incense, but the fragrance often reaches them and those who enter my home will walk away with the fragrance on them.

These days, I have a new custom. When I know I have visitors coming over and I begin to burn the incense in the room where I will sit with them, I also pray for them. I pray for their hearts to be open. "Lord, fill me with your Holy Spirit. Lord, touch their hearts as they listen to Your Word. Lord, give them ears to hear and eyes to see."

Another tradition is to have our guests stand over the incense burner so that the frankincense smoke covers their clothes. This is a way to honor them, and the fragrance lingers on their clothes and hair long after. This is a picture for me of how my prayers for my family and friends and brothers and sisters become a covering for them. I can honor them by bringing them before God, and my intercession is a pleasing fragrance to God. It reminds me of the image of incense and prayer I find in Revelation 8:3-4, "³ Then another angel, having a golden censer, came and stood at the altar. He was given much incense, that he should offer it with the prayers of all the saints upon the golden altar which was before the throne. ⁴ And the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, ascended before God from the angel's hand."

When frankincense is harvested high in the mountains, a small shallow cut is made in the bark of the frankincense tree and sap begins to bleed from this cut. Each cut will produce a small amount of sap that is left for a few days to harden on the tree into resin. Once it has hardened, someone has to return up into the mountains where the trees grow to collect the resin. Then it's brought into a cave or a temporary place to store, as it needs to continue drying until it finally turns into beautiful frankincense. Prayer is similar to this process of harvesting frankincense. We must be patient, as Christ's character grows in us and in our brothers and sisters. Although we don't always see the fruit of our prayers, the prayers of the saints do rise up, reaching heaven, and the Lord answers in His own way and in His own time.



Of course, it is also encouraging when we do get to see the fruit of our prayers clearly, like when my believing brother Naser was looking for a job. Naser needed a job badly, and he was praying fervently for God to act on his behalf since the job market was not good. Soon after, the director of a university called Naser and asked him to apply to teach there. The next time our group of believers gathered, Naser shared with us what happened.

"I went to apply at the university," said Naser, "but to my surprise, instead of setting up an interview, they asked me to teach a class that very day. They told me, 'We can see that you really want to teach' and I signed the contract before I left."

Another instance I remember is the time that God gathered us as local church to pray and fast for our sister Dina, the wife of our brother Osam, who needed heart surgery. Her condition was critical and the family was struggling with the news, which they received unexpectedly. They knew the procedure she needed was dangerous, but they committed the situation into God's hands.

"Only God knows the extent to which I felt pain and sadness over the situation that my wife and kids were facing," Osam shared later. "Yet at the same time, I felt a great peace and calmness. I had a deep feeling that God wasn't going to leave me, or my family, and that He was looking upon us in His kindness and mercy."

The day Dina went to the hospital for the surgery, the doctors kept her in the operating room for an hour and then brought her out. They said they couldn't do the operation because of problems with her circulation and because her vital signs were too unstable. They agreed to try again in three days and one of our local church coordinators updated us about Dina's situation. He asked us all to gather at the hospital to fast and pray for her on the day that they would try to operate again, which also happened to be Easter.

When Dina and her family arrived at the hospital on Easter Sunday, they found a large group of us already congregated in the parking lot of the hospital, fasting and praying for her. We stayed there through the entire five hours that Dina was in the operating room. When the doctor finally came out, he told Osam how surprised he was that the surgery went so well, especially after he saw the actual condition of her heart.

A couple of years have passed now, and Osam still reminds our church group about the power of prayer we all experienced that day. "From the doctor's description, we considered that Christ healed my wife," Osam says. "It was also significant to us that God chose for the day of her surgery to be on the day we celebrate Easter. So, it wasn't only a great day of celebrating the resurrection of Christ, but my wife also was restored to us by a successful surgery that saved her life. We even noted how we had to wait three days, with her life hanging in the balance, until she could have the surgery—just as Christ was raised from the dead after three days."

This event really brought our church family together and it was a message from God to us. He chose to raise Dina, full of life, on the same day we celebrate that Christ has risen to defeat death and give us all new life.



Pray:

- Praise God for the growing groups of national believers on the Arabian Peninsula (AP). Pray that both the national believers inside the AP as well as those in the diaspora and the workers partnering with them can continue to be the fragrance of Christ to those around them. "For we are to God the fragrance of Christ among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing." 2 Corinthians 2:15
- Ask God to establish a culture of prayer within the AP church that permeates the culture around them.
- Praise God for answering Naser's prayer and helping him to find a job. Ask that God will continue to provide jobs and livelihood opportunities for believers like Naser, which will enable them to support their families and help them to be more self-sustained.
- Praise God for healing Dina and ask Him to continue using her story to remind believers of the everlasting promises of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Ask that God will use believers to pray effectively for healing as Covid-19 spreads across the AP, so that Christ might be revealed to more AP nationals.
- Pray that the church in the AP would stand on the front lines of the Covid -19 response and preach the Gospel to those facing sickness.

Connect:

- Isolated AP believers can reach out and connect with other believers who are practicing their faith in community on the AP through the CAP Voices Facebook page: https://web.facebook.com/cap.voices0/?_rdc=1&_rdr
- Write to info@dev-ap.com for more information about current initiatives assisting and empowering AP believers to connect, share their faith, and impact the society around them.